

# BACCALAUREATE REVIEW TASK FORCE

DISCOVERING WHAT NIU GRADUATES  
SHOULD KNOW, VALUE, AND  
BE ABLE TO DO



**NIU**

NORTHERN  
ILLINOIS  
UNIVERSITY

**PUBLIC REPORT**

**September 2009**

## BACCALAUREATE REVIEW PUBLIC REPORT

During the Spring 2009 semester, the Baccalaureate Review Task Force set out to develop and propose university-wide student learning goals. Listening to a wide range of opinions and ideas, we arrived at the “Three Cs” which are broadly defined as critical thinking, communication, and context. The rest of this report describes how we reached those goals.

### Who serves on the Baccalaureate Review Task Force?

The current working group includes 15 steering committee members and 29 task force members (see Figure 1). Faculty, staff, and administrators from all undergraduate colleges are represented.

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\* = Steering committee member

Figure 1. Task force membership

### Beginning a journey to improve NIU's undergraduate education

In May 2006, NIU President John Peters initiated a strategic plan “firmly grounded in the embrace of academic excellence.” He sought to begin a campus-wide discussion designed to improve student learning outcomes. The university should do a better job teaching students, both in and out of the classroom. Our baccalaureate curriculum should be designed to teach what we believe students should learn.

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### Initial destination: Improve the General Education Program

Reforming the university's general education program was proposed as the first step toward improving the undergraduate curriculum. There is general agreement among faculty members and students that the general education program at NIU can be enhanced.

A strong, distinctive general education program has multiple benefits. It enhances the identity of the institution and serves as an example of what the university values. It makes the university more attractive to prospective students and has a strengthening effect on alumni loyalty—and thus support. It also provides a framework to enhance assessment and accreditation efforts. In addition, well-educated graduates are more employable and able to function across a variety of work settings. Perhaps most importantly, general education should help students become better people and lead more fulfilling lives.

In early 2008, a steering committee was assembled to address the general education program. In June 2008, seven of the members attended a weeklong "General Education Institute" sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The key lesson learned at the Institute was to base general education reform on widely held and supported baccalaureate goals.

### Revising our destination: Determining baccalaureate goals

On return from the Institute, the steering committee faced a dilemma. We could not move forward without having general agreement about NIU's baccalaureate goals. Unfortunately, the last time the goals were reviewed was 1983. At that time, Ronald Reagan was president, "portable computers" weighed 25 pounds, and the Internet did not yet exist for the general public. Clearly, 26 years later, it is time to review and reaffirm our baccalaureate goals.

Another obstacle we identified was a general lack of awareness regarding NIU's baccalaureate goals. They are not widely known among students, faculty, or staff. This is problematic because the university's baccalaureate goals should drive undergraduate education, academic planning, and decision making. Baccalaureate goals should be incorporated throughout students' undergraduate experience in association with the general education program, major/disciplinary concentration, and co-curricular activities. (see Figure 2).

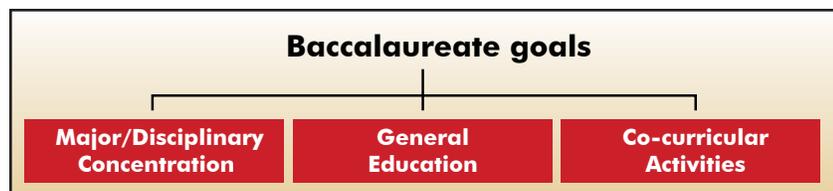


Figure 2. Support for baccalaureate goals

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Recognizing the need to change direction, the steering committee moved away from general education. Instead, the committee worked toward developing a plan to identify baccalaureate learning goals. Once endorsed, these goals can provide a basis for later general education reform.

It should be emphasized that faculty, staff, administrators, and students are members of the academic community. Reviewing baccalaureate goals and developing a meaningful curriculum is a way to honor the institution of higher education. We recognize our privilege and obligation to better society. Our current effort is designed to improve students' educational outcomes by developing goals to guide planning and decision making. This review is an opportunity to make our work with students more meaningful.

### Developing a plan

There are many roadmaps available. Many other colleges and universities have gone down this path before. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) recently reported that 89% of its membership was in "some process of general education review, discussion, and/or implementation of change." AAC&U is a strong proponent for liberal education as a framework for the baccalaureate degree and NIU is a member institution. We attempted to learn from others' mistakes and model their successes.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from other institutions was the value of inclusiveness. Plans developed by groups with limited input, no matter how well intentioned, frequently fail. As such, we tried to provide multiple avenues for input.

### How did we get input?

We used focus group interviews and an online survey to identify potential baccalaureate learning goals. During the Spring 2009 semester, task force members led 29 focus group interviews with faculty, administrators, staff, employers, commissions, and cultural centers. Students enrolled in a marketing class conducted an additional 16 focus groups with other students (see Figure 3). Student-led focus groups were seen as more likely to generate open and honest interviews.

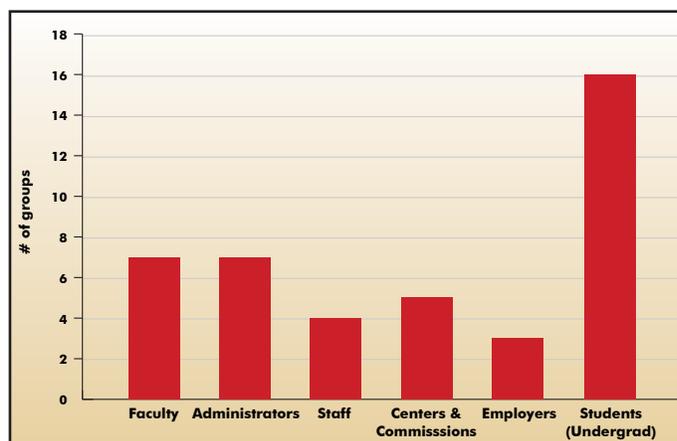


Figure 3. Focus groups by constituency group

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The *online survey* was available from early February 2009 to May 1, 2009 (see Appendix A for the complete survey). During this three-month period, 929 people responded. Over half also provided a written response. Participants identified themselves among the following groups: student, faculty, staff, employer, alumnus, parent, administrator, and community college personnel (see Figure 4).

The survey included 26 questions structured to identify the knowledge, skills, and values expected of baccalaureate graduates. Participants were asked to rate questions using a four-point scale (1 = not important, 2 = helpful, 3 = important, 4 = essential). See Figure 5 for a graphic representation of the survey's structure.

In addition to asking people to rate potential goals, online participants were given the opportunity to provide written feedback. They were specifically asked to answer the following three open-ended questions:

- What do we want NIU students to know?
- What do we want them to be able to do?
- What kind of individuals do we want them to become?

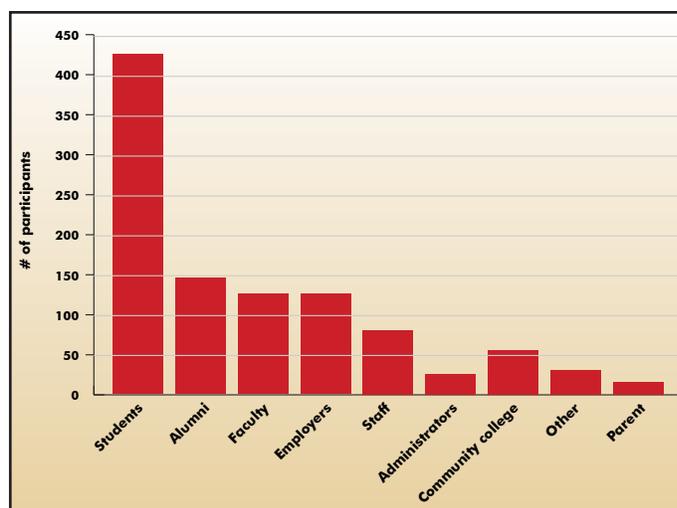


Figure 4. Online survey participation by affiliation to NIU

Broad Educational Aims	Examples from the Survey
Promote a literate society	Exhibit information and quantitative literacy Access and critically use various information sources
Contribute to a democratic society	Demonstrate civic knowledge and engagement Follow ethical reasoning and action
Value the interdependence between people and nature	Understand the scientific method Demonstrate global awareness and environmental sensitivity
Advocate for diversity both locally and globally	Demonstrate multicultural sensitivity Understand how societies and cultures develop
Continue learning about the world and themselves	Engage "big questions" Use inquiry, critical, and creative thinking skills
Create, transfer and preserve knowledge	Understand the intellectual processes, perspectives, and methodologies implicit in one's major. Appreciate creative forms of production

Figure 5. Online survey structure

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### How were the data analyzed?<sup>1</sup>

Qualitative data included focus group reports and written responses to the online survey. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using a “grounded coding process” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland et al., 2005) wherein data are sorted into meaningful categories, which emerge from the data itself. The researcher takes notes on the data, giving each note a label and working definition. The labels themselves are called “codes.” The software HyperRESEARCH was used to facilitate this coding process.

Quantitative data were obtained by analyzing the importance ratings assigned to each question from the online survey. Ratings of 3.0 or higher indicated that participants viewed the goal as important, if not essential.

### What did people say?

Qualitative data analysis indicated broad agreement among constituency groups. There were no meaningful differences between groups. For example, students viewed baccalaureate goals in much the same way as employers and faculty. The quantitative data showed a similar pattern of agreement across constituency groups. In addition, 21 of 23 proposed goals were rated 3.0 or higher. Clearly, participants felt that the proposed goals were minimally “important.”

Across all groups and both strategies, there was strong support for the “Three Cs” (see Figure 6). The baccalaureate curriculum should be known for producing graduates who are critical thinkers, possess strong communication skills, and understand the role of context. These goals are meant to have broad applicability across majors and co-curricular activities.

- a. Critical thinkers are literate and reflective, understand how to gather and analyze information, and demonstrate ethical behavior.
- b. Students with strong communication skills will have mastered written English, know a foreign language, use technology to facilitate communication, and collaborate well with others.
- c. Students who understand context see themselves as part of the larger picture of society. They have a historical perspective and view the world in a global context. Diversity is expected and appreciated. They recognize a duty to take responsibility and give back to society.

The Three Cs include additional skills and content areas as shown in Figures 7-9

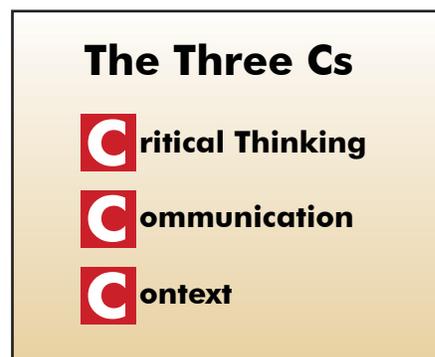


Figure 6. Proposed Baccalaureate Goals

<sup>1</sup> Qualitative data analysis was conducted by Professor Kristen Meyers, NIU Department of Sociology.

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**Critical thinking** was the most cited goal among the participants. Critical thinking involves the following: literacy, reflectivity, and understanding how to gather and make sense of various forms of information. Many courses at NIU could be used to promote critical thinking. Examples include, but are not limited to, courses in chemistry, economics, education, engineering, geology, health sciences, mathematics, physics, and psychology.

**Literacy:** Although generally defined as being able to read and write, literacy is much more encompassing. Literate graduates are those who not only can read, but do read. They understand the content of what they read, as well as what they write.

**Reflectivity:** Reflective graduates are able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. Reflective students do not just learn; they reflect on what their new-found knowledge means to them. They develop a sense of personal pride in acquiring knowledge.

**Information skills:** Graduates should know how to find quality information. Graduates should not only know how to find quality information, they should also know how to process data analytically and use mathematical language and methods and scientific methods when appropriate.

### CRITICAL THINKING

#### Literacy

- Value reading and understand high-level content
- Write clearly
- Pursue life-long learning

#### Reflectivity

- Demonstrate personal awareness
- View learning as an ongoing cycle
- Reflect on and apply new-found knowledge

#### Information skills

- Find and evaluate information
- Make logical arguments
- Use reasoned thought and learning (scientific method)

**Critical thinking was the most cited baccalaureate goal from all groups**

#### Comments from the focus groups and online survey:

*"Read and understand substantial and possibly complex documents (as opposed to living in a world of factoids and soundbites)"*

*"Ability to see 'the big picture' and 'the forest through the trees.' Appreciate the larger importance of education"*

*"Quickly assess data, draw conclusions, and act upon it."*

*"Critical thinkers understand the consequences of their choices. They take risks, develop intellectual curiosity, and become stakeholders in the educational process."*

Figure 7. Critical Thinking

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**Communication** is a central concept, highly valued by faculty, staff, students, and employers. Communication hinges upon the mastery of basic skills, such as language, technology, and collaboration. Many courses at NIU could be used to promote communication. Examples include, but are not limited to, courses in art, communications, computer science, English, foreign languages, music, and technology.

**Language:** Graduates should master the English language, which is a skill set that most subjects thought was lacking. The students themselves thought there should be a stronger foundation in English writing, and that those introductory courses should be more challenging. In addition to mastering English, subjects thought that graduates should be able to communicate in foreign languages. The importance of foreign language was mentioned repeatedly in the survey.

**Technology:** Communication frequently requires the use of technology. As such, graduates need technological skills for facilitating communication.

**Collaboration:** Being able to work well in a team is becoming increasingly important in work environments. Collaboration, or "team work," depends upon successful communication. Subjects including faculty and students called for an increased emphasis on group work in NIU courses to better prepare graduates.

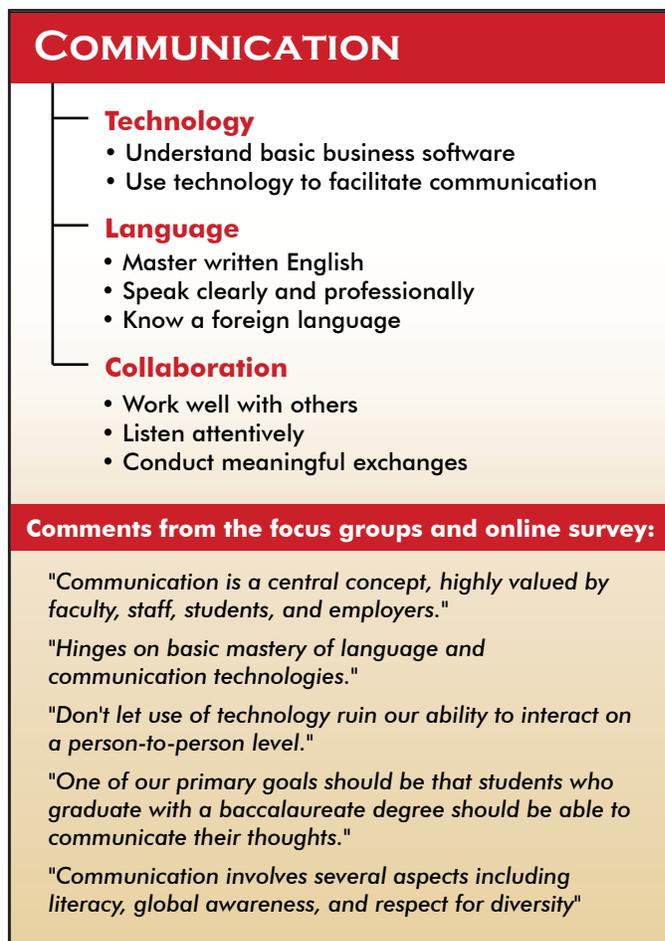


Figure 8. Communication

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**Context** involves what we know and what we do with that knowledge. It is affected by the world around us. That is, our knowledge is contextual. For students to understand context, they need familiarity with history and its impact on modern society, the relationship between our society and others around the globe, and the interactions among diverse cultures within our own society. Being aware of context fosters a student’s sense of responsibility. Many courses at NIU could be used to promote understanding of context. Examples include, but are not limited to, courses in anthropology, Black studies, history, music, political science, psychology, sociology, theater, and women’s studies.

**Historical Context:** To make sense of today’s world, we have to look to our past. Our graduates should be able to use history to understand the present. Graduates need a working knowledge of major social systems such as the economy, government, family, and the ways that they have and will change over time.

**Global Context:** NIU graduates should be able to place events in a global context and recognize the interconnections between the United States and other nations. Graduates should develop an understanding and appreciation for the complexities of living in a diverse society.

**Diversity:** Because the United States—indeed, the NIU campus—is a “melting pot” of different cultures, graduates need to be able to respect differences. As many participants explained, diversity is a broad category. It includes race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability, and economic differences. Diversity in the United States is obviously linked to global diversity.

**Responsibility:** Once students understand the importance of context, they will develop a sense of individual responsibility. Participants thought that students should learn to take responsibility for their own actions. They also thought that graduates should demonstrate a sense of responsibility to their communities. The notion that NIU graduates should “give back” to society was very important for most participants.

### CONTEXT

- Historical**
  - Use history to understand the present
  - Understand major social systems (economy, government, family)
  - Know current events (considered in a historical context)
- Global**
  - Recognize interconnectedness between nations
  - Understand America's role in the world
  - Appreciate multiple valid perspectives
- Responsibility**
  - Take individual responsibility
  - Demonstrate initiative
  - Give back to society:
    - Make a difference, Build a work ethic, Become a productive citizen
- Diversity**
  - Respect differences
  - Understand privileges and limitations
  - Gain first-hand experience

**Comments from the focus groups and online survey:**

"What we know and what we do with that knowledge is affected by the world around us. That is, our knowledge is contextual."

"For students to understand context, they need familiarity with history and its impact on modern society; the relationship between our society and others around the globe; and the interactions among diverse cultures within our own society"

"Appreciate the complexities of living in a diverse society"

"Understand the complex interdependence among people across diverse geographic locations."

"Once students understand the importance of context, they will develop a sense of individual responsibility."

Figure 9. Context

## **BACCALAUREATE REVIEW PUBLIC REPORT**

### **Where will we go from here?**

We encourage the university community to embrace this moment in history. NIU needs to redefine what we teach and consciously develop a meaningful baccalaureate curriculum. Baccalaureate education is the responsibility of all NIU faculty, staff, and administrators. We are charged with the responsibility to prepare graduates for the future.

The online survey and focus group data provide strong support for establishing the “Three Cs” as the foundation for NIU’s baccalaureate student-learning goals. We want to give students a unique NIU experience focused upon mastery of critical thinking, communication skills, and understanding of context.

The learning goals that have been identified will require further review and discussion. They are presented here as tentative, yet reflective of what was said. They will be discussed throughout the university and refined during the Fall 2009 semester. The goals will then be offered to university governance for approval.

If the goals are endorsed, future task force activities will likely include the following:

- Develop measureable student learning goals and objectives
- Identify potential assessment strategies
- Review teaching practices, supports, and reward structures
- Consider approaches to integrate general education and baccalaureate goals with the major
- Discuss how the general education program is managed.

In closing, we ask you to imagine how NIU would look if we all agreed on essential baccalaureate goals and worked to ensure that students gain them. The task force acknowledges that change is difficult. There will likely be potholes along the way. Reform is an evolutionary process. Let’s share this journey together.

If you are interested in learning more about the university’s baccalaureate review process and general education reform, please go to the Baccalaureate Review home page ([www.niu.edu/bacreview/index.shtml](http://www.niu.edu/bacreview/index.shtml)). This site contains a variety of reports, readings, and links to other universities doing similar work.

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