Application to the Greater Expectations Institute
June 18-21, 2008
Snowbird, UT

Woodbury University is a 1500-student, private, university that focuses on preparing first-generation, low income, and minority students for careers in architecture, business, media and design. Two campus-wide retreats in 2005 defined six fundamental principles: academic quality, innovation and creativity, transdisciplinarity, communication, social responsibility and the integrated student, as guides for all of our educational practices. We are looking to return to the General Education Institute in order to implement these values in a unique reform of our general education program. In order to undertake the reform we envision, the community believes that we need to formulate general education not as a separate program alongside or supporting a student’s major but as an overall program for the entire university: degree programs, non-degree courses, and co-curricular experiences included. We are looking to create a clear, coherent, valued and thoroughly assessed approach to general education that transcends the usual distinctions among disciplines as well as between general and professional education. We realize that students have to be challenged to see the interconnectedness of knowledge and that a robust, challenging and well-integrated approach to general education is essential for our students’ success. The problem is not the community receptivity to such an approach. This is an agile, interdisciplinary and educationally engaged community. The difficulty is finding where to set foundations, how to build on them, and how to assess the success of our approach.

Our current program, developed in 1999 after we had attended the Asheville Institute on General Education, is modeled on California’s Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum. This distribution model, with several courses designated for specific majors, was done in an era when enhancing transferability of credits was paramount, created a generic rather than a general education and reduced learning to a portable commodity that isolated it from the core of learning at the university. The current general education program, combined with our liberal residency requirements, has helped create more and more ‘swirl,’ students taking significant portions of their general education credits from community colleges even after they enroll at Woodbury. We recently used Assessing General Education: A Questionnaire to Initiate Campus Conversations by Jack Meacham and found that the faculty and staff responding found weaknesses in our not having ‘clear goals for learning’ and in failing to create a ‘coherent educational experience’ or provide ‘clear coordination and
responsibility.’ Overall, the general education program was perceived as lacking both a ‘strong, positive image,’ and a ‘continuing process of assessment.’

Several of our professional academic programs that assess for general education outcomes as part of their accreditation reviews find weaknesses in the transferability of skills and knowledge from non-major to major field learning, especially in the areas of academic writing, historical knowledge, mathematical reasoning and critical thinking. A recent student learning community that focused on general education noted that it was not clearly or directly linked to their major course of study, was often taught by uninspiring faculty, and did not offer enough of a challenge intellectually or creatively. Its generic nature causes it to lack identity, coherence and purpose. While it allowed us to introduce some needed improvements at the time, such as a requirement for a laboratory science, a professional academic writing program using student e-portfolios, and advanced mathematics courses into the curriculum, it has become, like many other general education programs, often considered something to get out of the way, even by faculty advisors.

Beginning in 2005, we initiated a review process of education across the university coinciding with WASC’s reaffirmation process. The faculty senate began by embracing the learning outcomes in Greater Expectations as a general guideline for our efforts. We also conducted the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the spring of 2005 and analyzed the results as part of the Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students (BEAMS) program. We found that although we performed above average in four of the five benchmarks, we were merely at the mean for enriching educational experiences. To explore this finding in more detail, we conducted several student focus groups in 2005-06 to examine the campus culture and its structures. The group formed to undertake this study became the Student Success Task Force (SSTF), a twenty-member group composed of faculty, student development and alumni relations staff, and student leaders, which oversees a number of evaluation and program initiatives, including the reform of general education. This strategic innovation is the first of the areas of our experience with which we can inform and enhance the work of the Institute this summer.

Among other initiatives, the SSTF created three ‘affinity learning communities,’ based on the faculty learning community model developed by Milton Cox at Miami University. The distinct communities, composed of faculty, staff and students respectively, brainstormed to uncover existing knowledge, reviewed the existing literature and reflected on strategies in the context of the university.
Independently for the most part, but collaboratively at the end, the learning communities came to several conclusions in the spring of 2006. Teaching this process, which we are repeating for our general education review, is the second of the contributions we believe we can make to this year’s Institute, especially since the conclusions reached gave the process of general education review important starting points. The communities argued that in order to support our general educational learning goals, we needed to implement and sustain a campus culture that supported innovative teaching strategies and created curricular, co-curricular, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary learning experiences. Our approach to transdisciplinary learning is the third element we can contribute to the Institute.

In addition, we realized that needed to create social and informal learning spaces on campus so that significant learning could occur in the context of relationships that are built outside of the classroom. Given that three-quarters of our courses are taught by adjunct faculty, we had to develop an adjunct faculty program to inform and incorporate them into the community. We were called to develop focused groups or alliances to address common life, community and career issues so that student organizations would function as learning environments. Finally, we were to begin to create affiliations around transdisciplinary issues for all members of the community (students, staff and faculty) that would transcend particular disciplines, professions and established organizations and extend to all involved at the university, regardless of status. It was and remains an ambitious mandate. We have begun to make progress on several of these fronts, but they need to be brought together into a synthetic vision and program that is recognizable one of general education.

In line with this effort at synthesis, several members of the Student Success Task Force attended the summer BEAMS workshops in 2006 and 2007, the latter with an invitation to present about our process. Part of the effort at these workshops centered on creating a Woodbury-specific general educational experience that is an essential rather than tangential experience for students, faculty and student development staff. We began to find ways to integrate explicit co-curricular, professional and personal development elements with academic curriculum and degree completion to educate the entire student for whatever their futures hold, as far as possible. We know that we need foundational courses, courses threaded in majors, and capstone experiences that connect students with the capstone experience in their major. We have considered organizing this curriculum around a central concept and identity. Moving forward with these ideas is one of our primary tasks at the Institute.
Along these lines we have accomplished several things and begun a few more. We have developed a vision of general education based on the outcomes from *Greater Expectations* and our own six learning principles discussed above. This vision is currently being translated into concrete outcomes and a specific evaluation rubric to be used this spring to assess a selection of degree program capstone courses for evidence of general education learning outcomes by examining syllabi and student projects. Two applications are under consideration. The first would be to collect a random sample of past syllabi and projects from across the university and conduct a day-long rating session to see strengths and weaknesses in student performance. The second option would be to conduct a cross-case study of six current capstone courses, their syllabi and their students’ work from the School of Architecture and the School of Business respectively. These students would be from those identified by the faculty of these schools as their best students, the ones most likely to demonstrate the outcomes of general education and the university as a whole. After assessing their capstone projects, including the oral presentation of that work, students’ transcripts and attendant course syllabi would be analyzed to look for learning outcomes related to general education or lack thereof. Interviews with students in focus groups would further probe for the sources student learning.

This assessment, along with data mining from the ongoing professional accreditations for general educational outcomes results, is being coupled with a second series of affinity learning communities. These communities, which will be finished with their process at the end of spring, are been looking at how to make the curriculum more relevant, stimulating and engaging by examining their own experiences, the relevant literature, and various models form other colleges and universities, including James Madison University, CSU Sonoma and CSU Monterey Bay, Emerson College and Mills College, to name a few. Across the institution, and especially in general education, we realize that we need to accomplish several things. Outcomes of sequential courses have to be integrated so that the learning of one is essential for success in another. Other courses have to be consciously designed so that the goals of general education are explicitly required and demonstrably used in the student performance. Students who begin their college education at the university have to be introduced to a process that genuinely integrates the overall educational goals of the university with those of their specific program. Transfer students have to be brought into the university’s general education program in more than a purely instrumental manner of credit counting and requirement fulfillment and students may have to
complete courses that are unique to the culture and practice of the university no matter where they transfer from.

Our team is composed of five university leaders who have been intimately involved in the process so far and are positioned to effect significant change upon our return. Led by Dr. Douglas J. Cremer, Director of the Institute of Transdisciplinary Studies and Professor of History, we will be bringing Dr. Nageswar Rao Chekuri, Chair of the Department of Mathematics and Natural Science, a twelve-year faculty member and Professor of Physics, Mr. Paul Decker, Executive Director of the Institute for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Dr. Anne Ehrlich, Dean of Students, Dr. Will McConnell, Assistant Professor of Academic Writing and Prof. Behnoush McKay, Assistant Professor of Graphic Design. These individuals represent the spread of disciplines at Woodbury: architecture, design, humanities, natural and social sciences, but in the unique way we combine and recombine these competencies and illustrate the new approach to general education, one transcending the disciplines and divisions of the university, that we are trying to realize. All have long-standing and deep relationships with faculty (both regular and adjunct), staff and students across the university and their influence on the future of the institution is profound. All are deeply involved in the review and reform of general education at the university and committed to its successful completion. What we need is the time, space and advice to bring these threads of vision, outcomes, assessment and imagination together, to find the holes and gaps we have not adequately seen, and to develop a plan for development and implementation of our general education reform.

We are looking forward to the Institute’s focused learning and working environment. Much of our progress to date would not have been possible without the BEAMS workshops of the past two summers, but much remains to be done. We know what it means to participate in such an intensive enterprise and are ready to commit ourselves, share our experiences, both successful and not, and avail ourselves of the assembled resources of the Institute. All three curricular tracks promise to have valuable lessons for us, especially as we look to move from general outcomes to specific pedagogies and courses as well as to develop implementation and continuing assessment strategies. We feel that the time is right for us to come to the Greater Expectations Institute and continue our work with your collaboration.