Faculty Senate NEXT GEN USP Response

The following represents Faculty Senate's response to the proposed NEXT GEN USP. We want to first recognize the significant effort made by all those involved to develop this proposal, and we appreciate those efforts. Such efforts are never recognized enough, and we wish to thank all those involved for their dedication and effort to make our degree programs among the best in the country, while serving our dual responsibilities as Wyoming's only land-grant and flagship university. It is also critical to the quality of our USP program that we periodically reassess what it includes and how we provide it, and we appreciate the efforts and opportunity to weigh in on these conversations.

The following response has been formulated after lengthy presentations and discussions of the NEXT GEN USP proposal to Faculty Senate, Faculty Senate Executive Committee and based on feedback not only from members of those two bodies, but from members of the faculty and staff across UW, and personnel in other capacities from across campus. It is framed after consideration of UW regulation 2-105, which provides in Sections I and II:

> *"It is the purpose of a University Studies Program (USP) to establish baseline learning requirements, which all undergraduate students should meet regardless of their fields of study. These baseline learning requirements should be simple, flexible, and transparent. They should easily transfer between collegiate level institutions, such as community colleges, and the University. They must be based on assessable learning outcomes that are clearly stated and made available to all interested parties, including students and instructors."* UW Regulation (2-105.1)

> *"Coursework that fulfills the goals of the USP should involve multiple and diverse disciplines in order to provide students with broad learning experiences and exposure to different viewpoints, as well as provide them diverse skill sets. Coursework should include some or all of the following: knowledge of human culture, the physical and natural world, and U.S. and Wyoming Constitutions; intellectual and practical skills; and personal and social responsibility. Such an education is expected to produce citizens able to function in a complex and changing society."* UW Regulation (2-105.2)

The following identifies five specific areas of concern and a sixth category for some additional considerations and comments regarding the current proposal with corresponding recommendations that Faculty Senate believes can improve the educational experience of all students at UW while fulfilling our responsibilities identified above.

1) **The introduction of an Experiential Learning component to the NEXT GEN USP curriculum**

Recommendation:
We recommend removing the experiential learning component from the proposed USP curriculum unless the concerns described below are adequately addressed.

Concern has been raised that while the goal expressed in the USP proposal regarding experiential learning opportunities is laudable, and the benefits to many students significant, there is a question of whether this proposed requirement fits within the framework, purpose and goals of the USP program as described in University Regulation 2-105 (e.g. such as easy transfer between collegiate institutions), rather than in program-specific curricula. Furthermore, the requirement of such a component may impose undue costs on many students as described below.

Three broad categories can separately satisfy the proposed experiential learning component. Each presents its own unique implementation and assessment challenges.

i) Embedded component within an individual major (e.g. capstone design courses in engineering)
   o For many majors at UW that already have a course in which the E could potentially be embedded, meeting all of the SLOs could add significant additional work that might make it impractical or resource intensive to implement, particularly SLO 4, which requires a substantive reflective component on the experience beyond simply reporting the activity. Not only is the reflective process not rigorously defined, but the assessment of that process by the faculty already involved in leading, say, 60 or 70 students in an iterative design process, would require additional resources for assessment or a reduction in the actual experiential process of iterative design. Additionally, programs that have already shown a preference for including such a course may not want to necessarily accept the USP oversight/SLOs that might conflict with their own existing course objectives.
   o Majors that do NOT have such a course in their curriculum would likely require significant teaching resources to integrate this requirement into their curriculum, which would push their students into the latter two categories.
ii) External discipline-specific component related to the student's major (e.g. major-focused internships, externships, student teaching, or entrepreneurship opportunities with non-profit organizations, businesses, corporations, government, and NGOs). Faculty strongly support and encourage such internship-type opportunities. However, compelling them through a USP requirement introduces serious issues of concern for programs and students:
   o Equity of opportunity and resources. Not every student has the ability to, for example, take a summer off to do an internship – even those that do cannot always find such an internship. Students may find accessing the resources (financial and otherwise) to complete such a requirement very challenging, especially if such an opportunity is not available locally, or cannot be accommodated outside of normal instructional times. It may also be the case that requiring such an external opportunity may be difficult due to other responsibilities students face (for example, raising a family or working to support themselves). We strongly suggest that more resources be provided to our existing career services programs currently housed within the various colleges to increase the **opportunity** for student to participate in internships, externships, and other opportunities, but we do not want to **require** students engage in a internships or coops. Furthermore, it would be optimal if such

opportunities were paid where possible to reduce financial and other burdens on students, such as for those involved in student teaching.

- o Implementation and assurance of SLOs. For any internship experience, the experience will be led by someone outside the university that may or may not be focused on meeting all of the SLOs. As it stands, it is possible that the student would expect to receive an E-credit for an internship but not receive it because a faculty member could not ascertain whether a particular internship met the prescribed SLOs.
- o Assessment. A process for each internship would have to be conducted individually, likely AFTER the internship was completed (particularly for SLOs 4 & 5). This would place a significant burden on faculty to conduct a substantive individualized reflection exercise and assess the reflection prior to the student being awarded credit for the internship. Again, this would put a significantly increased burden on faculty, particularly because teaching resources are already near a critical minimum.
- o Resources. It will be necessary to manage and maintain relationships necessary to provide adequate opportunities in this category to satisfy student demand, which will increase significantly (and it will be the institution's responsibility to satisfy such demand) if this is a mandatory requirement. Resources to maintain and manage such opportunities occur inconsistently across colleges and programs. They will require substantial investment if such experiences are expanded as intended in NEXT GEN USP. Furthermore, each college and program involved in such efforts may have already made significant investment and developed procedures and practices optimal for their programs. Such differences should be respected, and any attempt to standardize experiential outcomes may increase the resources necessary to achieve desired outcomes. If resources are to be provided to expand experiential learning, they should be deployed to support existing efforts rather than to create new structures to provide them. We are unconvinced the proposal adequately addresses resource needs and integration with existing efforts.

iii) Co-curricular experience that may or may not be related to a student's major (e.g. study abroad, local volunteer work, etc.)
- o All the issues with the major-focused internship are also present here.
- o In addition, it's not clear that SLOs 2 & 3 would be satisfied in experiences unrelated to a student's major – how does volunteer work involve critical questioning, investigation, and/or experimentation?

In addition to these broad categorical concerns, additional issues have also been raised.

- *Substitutability and Purpose of external experience.* Currently, President Seidel has suggested that he would like UW to provide a paid internship experience to all students at UW. The purpose of this experience is to enhance student preparation for the workforce, and to ensure that regardless of major a reduction in the probability of underemployment after graduation (see Strada report). Such an effort is also intended to increase the return on a university experience and education,

while better preparing students for the Wyoming and national workforce as part of our land-grant mission. The proposal does not address whether there are preferred pathways to gain "direct hands-on engagement in immersive real-world experiences". The broad goals stated to justify the experiential component differ from those specific workforce goals President Seidel has expressed could be achieved. Furthermore, not all of the proposed experiential learning pathways may be equal in achieving the goals President Seidel has expressed. As proposed, the experiential component could lead to inequitable student outcomes regarding the achievement of the goals he has expressed. At a minimum the proposal should be clearer in how it addresses President Seidel's initiatives and how it is consistent with the goals he has described.

- *Suitability of students for external experiences and risks to UW reputation.* Not all students are suited for an external experience. Others may be challenged by such experiences for other reasons that impose significant cost on faculty or partners providing such experiences. Resources would be needed to ensure students are placed appropriately, given their abilities, maturity, interest and other considerations to ensure the greatest possibility of maximizing the benefits of such an experience without harming external constituents' respect or support for UW. Again, finding the resources required to ensure that all students are ready and able to demonstrate appropriate standards and expectations in the areas of professionalism and dedication, for example, while also coordinating the optimal fit of students to experience will be difficult without significant investment at the current time.

- *Other concerns.* Faculty have concerns that the proposed experiential requirement may be fulfilled without credit hours being incurred. This may unintentionally suggest to some students and external constituents that the experiential component may not be as important as other elements in the proposal. The flexible credit hours potentially earned with this option also creates potential management and advising confusion, as well as questions regarding the comparative benefits of different options to complete the requirement as proposed.

Given faculty support for improving experiential learning opportunities, we welcome additional resources for helping to achieve that goal. Thus, we suggest that **existing entities that have been doing this work for many years be further resourced**, instead of creating an Office of Experiential Learning (OEL). In the event than an OEL was created, the following should be considered:

- Because this office would be administrative and not reside under the purview of Faculty Senate, it should not be the authority regarding curriculum or assessment, nor should it dictate to existing entities already within individual colleges.
- It should: work to provide design support for courses, work with and learn from existing offices at the college level to help better connect students with opportunities, and work to strengthen local, state, national and international external partnerships.

Overall, we feel a more productive approach to creating and expanding experiential learning opportunities on campus and maximizing their benefits for students would be achieved by investing first in those existing areas that currently attempt to fulfill this mission. Further, the challenges to providing such opportunities and benefits will differ across programs and colleges, and we recommend further consultation with those units offering such opportunities to determine how resources could be best allocated and best practices, which may differ by program. To identify such procedures and practices in programs without such opportunities, the creation of pilot programs may be a crucial first step. While UW's goal to provide an experiential learning opportunity for every student as described in the proposal is laudable, we believe the best approach would be to slowly develop and optimize such programs before making them required across campus. Assuming that is possible, then we might have a conversation regarding whether such a requirement is consistent with the goals of the USP program as described in UW Regulation 2-105.

Finally, the experience of the FYS component in USP 2015 is important to remember. This component was resource intensive and added to USP with the best of intentions. The result, however, was that due to both an underestimate of the resource burden and unexpectedly adverse budgetary conditions, the program was paused. In the end, the cost to other programs due to the resource tradeoff the implementation of FYS as envisioned in USP 2015 created led to the pause and later, cancellation of that component. The disruption this experience caused should be a lesson for the future. Before we commit significant resources to a new USP element like the proposed E component, we owe it to the institution and our students in all programs that we ensure the benefits of the decision are worth the costs and that the funding is sustainable.

2) The introduction of a Digital Literacy component to the NEXT GEN USP curriculum

Recommendation:
Modify and clearly describe its purpose and the specific content it will provide, or rRemove digital literacy from the proposed USP curriculum., or modify and clearly describe its purpose and the specific content it will provide.

Rationale:
The importance of understanding how to use digital tools and their impact on society is undeniable, but it is unclear what problem the current proposal solves in this regard. Are there deficiencies with some graduating students that would make this requirement necessary? While digital literacy could, depending upon its definition and implementation, meet the stated purpose and goal of USP curriculum based on UW Regulation 2-105, as currently written the proposed requirement's efficacy with respect to its intention in addressing potential student learning deficiencies is not clear. All programs on campus either require the use of digital tools and technologies or they teach their use. It is unclear in the current proposal why this requirement is necessary in this context.

If the issue were better defined, for example ensuring informational literacy in a digital world – if the ability to evaluate and identify the validity of information in the digital

world (and elsewhere) for example, were the stated objective, this might be a more easily understood requirement. As currently defined almost any program should be able to identify courses that meet this goal. Given this, is the requirement necessary? Furthermore, what does it add to existing requirements where digital information and technology may be experienced – for example in the other areas in the proposed USP program (specifically, in N and Q areas, or even in the W, O and A communication areas)? Given the proposal's prohibition of double-designations, and the fact that other USP required classes may include or imply a digital literacy component, is the inclusion of a separate USP component as described necessary? Further justification of this new element is needed, including what it is meant to achieve, why this is necessary, and why there is concern it won't be covered by existing programs already.

We suggest further consideration to refine and define the focus and purpose of this component as it cannot be supported as currently described. SLOs should then be defined more specifically with respect to these goals. For example – we suggest that information literacy in a digital environment (or just information literacy) might be one possible way to focus the purpose of this component to justify its addition to the USP curriculum.

3) Omission of Critical and Creative Thinking (previously FYS) component from the USP curriculum.

Recommendation:
Explain why this component and the associated learning outcomes have been removed and are no longer considered necessary in NEXT GEN USP. Alternatively, define ways the previous USP 2015 Critical and Creative Thinking goals and outcomes can be maintained in the NEXT GEN USP curriculum. We suggest one possibility may be to include previous FYS course goals and outcomes in a revised D component, or by the requirement of an additional H or S elective, possibly using the guidance that was provided after the FYS pause was implemented in 2023 regarding how a USP Elective can be used to replace the previously required FYS component.

Rationale:
USP 2015 included the Critical and Creative Thinking (FYS) component for the first time. Because of the resources required to implement this component, and resources constraints on campus, this component was paused in September 2023 and has not resumed. In its place, a USP elective was recommended that included the student learning outcomes previously defined for FYS courses. The information literacy, information evaluation, and critical thinking outcomes in that course were of value and are not included in the current NEXT GEN USP SLOs. Furthermore, they were consistent with the purpose and goals of the USP program as defined in UW Regulation 2-105. It is not clear why these are no longer included in the USP curriculum, as the implied value and benefits of these learning outcomes must have been high given the level of resources the institution originally required to be allocated to provide them in USP 2015.

We recommend that adequate justification be made why the goals and outcomes the FYS option previously provided are either no longer justified or superseded by more important goals and outcomes. Alternatively, the proposal could identify where previous FYS goals and outcomes could be delivered under the current proposal.

In addressing this deficiency, the USP committee may have an opportunity to better define other parts of the proposal already identified as incomplete. For example, is this an opportunity to more specifically define the purpose and goal of the Digital Literacy component? Further, are there opportunities here to achieve these goals in other elements of the NEXT GEN USP proposal? Could addressing this issue also address other potential shortcomings in the NEXT GEN USP proposal? For example, could the goals of the previous FYS component be addressed in an additional H or S component, which would also address some faculty concerns that NEXT GEN USP overemphasizes some course content (N or Communications components) with greater credit hour requirements than required for Fine Arts and Humanities (H) or Social and Behavioral Sciences (S)? In the current proposal should we presume that the perceived need for a Digital Literacy component was deemed more important than an FYS component, and if so, can the reasoning for this decision be explained?

Overall, the faculty are supportive of the general goals and outcomes that were included in the FYS component of USP 2015. The problem was never the content or learning outcomes, only the prescribed resources necessary to deliver that content under the requirements of USP 2015. The result of how FYS was implemented in USP 2015 led to what were deemed unacceptable resource tradeoffs. NEXT GEN USP provides an opportunity to reduce those tradeoffs while still achieving the goals and outcomes FYS content was intended to deliver, while also addressing additional concerns regarding the relative levels of required disciplinary content in the current proposal. We suggest as a possible alternative that the humanities, fine arts and social sciences provide an opportunity to restore FYS content, while possibly also achieving the goals the proposed D component would provide.

4) Absence of mMinimum grade fulfillment reduces USP program rigor

Recommendation:
Restore the requirement of minimum grades across some, or an average grade across all, courses in the NEXT GEN USP proposal.

Rationale:
USP 2015 required that 12 of the 30 credit hours required be completed with a grade of C or better. This requirement was deemed "inconsistent" in the NEXT GEN USP proposal and was apparently dropped in favor of only requiring only a D as a passing grade in all USP courses (D is considered a passing grade at UW unless program requirements deem a higher grade is required). This has created faculty concern. Minimally, it suggests to students that the USP requirements may not be very important. Such an assumption on behalf of even some students would undermine the goal of achieving a well-rounded education as described in UW Regulation 2-105. To avoid such a perception, we

recommend an average grade requirement be reintroduced across USP courses that is above a D to reflect the importance UW has placed on the benefits of a well-rounded education through the implementation of the USP program.

One solution would be to reintroduce the minimum grade requirements on specific courses as USP 2015 did. A drawback of that approach is that it suggests some courses are more important than others. An alternative would be to provide a minimum average grade of C across all USP classes. This would incentivize students working harder in courses they may be better able to achieve higher grades in to offset any D grades earned in courses they were personally challenged by, struggled in, or where they may have had trouble meeting a C grade due to events outside their control. This would increase the required rigor and the potential success of the USP program in achieving its goals due to the greater student effort than might occur if a lower minimum passing grade is implemented.

5) Specific resource requirements for certain classes

Recommendation:
The Faculty Senate recommends that USP requirements do not include specific resource requirements implied by maximum class size requirements.

Rationale:
Previous USP 2015 requirements imposed maximum class sizes on specific classes (Communications classes and the FYS courses). These requirements led to the elimination of the FYS class. They continue to impose resource constraints on programs and colleges to maintain maximum class sizes in COM classes. The justification for these requirements has been based on research regarding student outcomes and class sizes, but the class caps are somewhat arbitrary (why 24 and not 28 or 20?). They may also be based on aspirational pedagogical preferences among other reasons where the cost of such efforts has not been properly considered. While the best possible student outcome should always be our goal, the reality is that we are constrained by available resources, and such constraints lead to tradeoffs. Evaluation of such tradeoffs to determine whether the costs are worth the benefits is lacking in this proposal (and past ones). Resource requirements should be determined by college and instructors, not general assumptions or preferences over how classes should be offered without consideration of such tradeoffs. There is often more than one way to meet certain goals or outcomes that is less resource intensive or that incurs more acceptable tradeoffs (there is more than one way to skin a cat). Furthermore, new technologies may allow such classes to be offered in ways that reduce workload per student while achieving similar student focus and course outcomes. For example, new AI implementations or alternative teaching methods may enable larger classes to achieve similar student outcomes in USP communications classes, thereby allowing resource deployment elsewhere in programs or colleges to improve overall instructional delivery. At a minimum, any suggested class size cap must be better justified in terms of the expected benefit, and greater flexibility needs to be considered so that in a worse-case scenario we do not have to relive the FYS experience. We should strive to maintain flexibility in

~~resource requirements where possible to ensure the best possible outcome for all students and programs, recognizing that choice of methods should be welcomed over prescribed ones, especially when they can reduce resource constraints across campus.~~

~~6)~~5)   Additional concerns

- *Discipline-specific outcomes needed.* It has been brought to the attention of Faculty Senate that the NEXT GEN USP proposal relies on SLO's to define student outcomes and does not justify or describe specific content outcomes that may also be implied or desired. This may be problematic, as student outcomes described for N courses could be achieved in non-science-based classes, for example in social science classes that employ the scientific method. This suggests that if it is the intention of USP to ensure students are exposed to specific and well-rounded disciplinary content, as suggested in UW regulation 2-105, content-based outcomes need to be defined. The regulation states that USP curriculum should include *"knowledge of human culture, the physical and natural world, and U.S. and Wyoming Constitutions"* (UW Regulation 2-105.2). Consideration of required baseline knowledge may also be useful to justify why some areas of the USP proposal (N for example) have a greater credit hour requirement than others, or it may suggest that the USP proposal would be better served if it were redesigned to allow greater disciplinary content flexibility (for example – a minimum course discipline requirement in each area, say three hours minimum in each area across N, S or H with a requirement of 12 total hours).

- *Lack of overarching framework for justifying requirements in specific areas.* A related concern is that the USP program as a whole and how its components fit together, do not appear to have been considered. For example – do we drop the idea of the D class or include in it the FYS elements missing in this proposal? Do we consider creating an elective structure in USP – we have four required topic areas – 6-8 credit hours of N (two classes – that both are intended to result in the same learning outcomes, causing students to achieve them twice – why?), 3 credit hours of S and 3 credit hours of H. What if their combined 12 hours could be achieved by taking one course in each category and having an open elective where students choose an additional class from the three components (N, S and H). This would address concerns regarding the arbitrary nature of Science content being elevated above Humanities (and Fine Arts), and Social and Behavioral Sciences.

- *Lack of overall assessment framework for USP as a program.* We also suggest that an overall assessment of the USP program be initiated. For example, can we define the Purpose, Goals and Outcomes the USP program as a whole is intended to achieve? Then, a mapping of how the components (existing and proposed) map into the Purpose, Goals and Outcomes could be clearly articulated. Can we then assess those component outcomes and the overall program as a whole? Currently, we do not have this data to consider how improvements to the program could be implemented. Such data would be useful in assessing USP 2015 and the potential of improving it under the NEXT GEN USP proposal. Does any data exist? If not, should we assess the program before we change it?