OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY INITIATIVE

The title of the Quality Initiative for Chadron State College (CSC) is “The Essential Studies Program: A 21st Century General Studies Program and Model in Student Learning.” The goal of the Quality Initiative is to develop and implement a general studies program reflective of faculty synthesis of the recent scholarly literature of teaching and learning and which is designed to serve as a model in student learning and engagement. To achieve the initiative’s desired outcomes, other pivotal goals to integrate and support the Essential Studies Program across campus have been identified:

- The establishment of a Teaching and Learning Center to provide the necessary resources and support for faculty and other instructors teaching courses within the Essential Studies Program
- The streamlining of processes associated with the support of adjunct instructors, especially those who teach courses within the Essential Studies Program, in order to integrate adjuncts into the CSC faculty community of learners
- The formalization of communication lines between Student Services and Academic Affairs regarding a number of issues related to the Essential Studies Program, including but not limited to:
  - The Advising Center
  - Course enrollment lids (or caps) and the adding of new sections
  - Tutoring Services
  - The “Back on Track” program, for students in academic jeopardy
  - The “Early Alert” program to identify and intervene with students with potential academic risk

CSC’s Quality Initiative coincides philosophically with Vincent Tinto’s work, Completing College.\(^1\) In that study, Tinto points out that institutions can intentionally create and coordinate programs that increase learning and promote completion. He identifies four conditions through which institutions can foster this change: Expectations (or Quality), Support, Assessment and Feedback, and Involvement. The Quality Initiative falls under this framework in the following manner:

- Expectations (or Quality): The Essential Studies Program, the Teaching and Learning Center, streamlining adjunct processes, and course enrollment lids
- Support: The Advising Center and Tutoring Services
- Assessment and Feedback: “Early Alert” and “Back on Track” programs
- Involvement: Formalizing communication lines between Student Services and Academic Affairs

This effort was born as a result of CSC’s participation in the Higher Learning Commission’s Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning between fall 2006 and fall 2010. The intention of that effort was to create, implement, and modify an assessment plan for CSC’s General Studies program. CSC was one of the first of eight institutions to complete the Academy. While the HLC Academy assisted CSC in initiating a culture of assessment, the experience (along with other factors) inspired CSC faculty to

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begin reading the current literature on general studies. From these readings and subsequent discussions, faculty came to the conclusion in 2010 that the institution’s General Studies program was inadequate and out of date. In order to formally evaluate the General Studies program at CSC, faculty formed a faculty learning community to analyze further the current literature on general studies and develop a plan to incorporate ideas from the current literature into the general studies curriculum at CSC, thus distinguishing CSC as a leader in general education.

During academic year 2010-11, the General Studies Faculty Learning Community (GS FLC) collaborated to research and compose a focus book on general education at CSC and initiate dialogues with representatives from two other institutions. Members investigated the history, theory, and practices of general (and liberal) education, including at CSC, as well as associated issues like high impact practices, interdisciplinary and integrated learning, assessment, first year courses, cognitive development, and specific areas like health, information literacy, and writing. The GS FLC achieved involvement from across the campus, sought faculty feedback at various points along the way, and used several student and faculty surveys, all in an effort to employ a transparent process focused on consensus building. In fall 2011, the GS FLC submitted a formal proposal for a new general education program to the institution’s Academic Review Committee.

During the 2011-12 academic year, the Academic Review Committee met to examine and debate the proposal. Through these discussions, a modified version of the proposal was formally adopted by the institution. The final version, known as the Essential Studies Program, contains the following elements:

- 42 credit hours (reduced from the 47 credit hours under the old General Studies program)
- 12 new student learning outcomes
- Six credit hours of First Year Inquiry (FYI), followed by a series of courses to address ten student learning outcomes, and six credit hours of Capstone Integration
- FYI and Capstone courses that may be team taught, interdisciplinary, and theme- or problem-based
- FYI courses that will emphasize critical inquiry and creative problem solving, with Capstone courses that will integrate Essential Studies skills, knowledge, and abilities
- The “interior” of the Essential Studies Program that seeks to engage students and assist in developing or enhancing life skills (e.g. communication; teamwork) through various modes of inquiry and an integrative high impact learning experience while also providing strategic flexibility for optimum impact on student learning.

**SUFFICIENCY OF THE INITIATIVE’S SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution for many reasons. First, the Essential Studies Program was born from the faculty, as was discussed earlier in the proposal. Second, the Essential Studies Program is a thoughtful way for CSC to answer the claims levied against higher
education that students are learning very little in college. For instance, in Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s work, *Academically Adrift*, the authors argue that 45 percent of students do not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning during the first two years of college.\(^2\) The authors also claim that students who did show improvement during their first two years manifested only modest gains.

The Essential Studies Program is designed to make the first two years at CSC meaningful for students and is intended to demonstrate that students show significant improvement in learning during that period. Third, internal (2006 HLC Academy proposal) and external feedback (observation in 2007 Final HLC Team Report) identified the importance of creating a faculty Teaching and Learning Center. Fourth, the initiative is designed to rectify the current inconsistencies in the support processes of both online and face-to-face adjunct instructors. CSC, unlike many institutions across the United States, still relies on fulltime faculty to teach the majority of courses; however, adjuncts have come to play a greater role with approximately 17% of student credit hours (2011-12) taught by part-time faculty, a growing number at a distance. Finally, the initiative represents a concerted focus to enhance communication and collaboration between Student Services and Academic Affairs. This alignment of efforts is currently an issue and needs to be addressed to foster the success of the Essential Studies Program.

Furthermore, the proposed initiative aligns well with the institution’s history, mission and current strategic priorities. CSC’s roots are as a teaching institution. As a college rather than a university, faculty and staff consider student learning the central focus. The vision statement of the institution is: “Chadron State College aspires to be a premiere institution of higher education in the western High Plains states, innovatively pursuing excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service.” The successful implementation of the Essential Studies Program—along with the development of the Teaching and Learning Center, the streamlining of the adjunct support processes, and the formalization of communication lines between Student Services and Academic Affairs—will affirm the College’s quest to innovatively pursue teaching and learning excellence and play a prominent role in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The Quality Initiative will encourage a nascent culture of inquiry or a culture of self-reflective practitioners.

Since 2010, CSC has also been involved in the Red Balloon Project, a nation-wide undertaking spearheaded by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. As a result of this effort to re-imagine higher education, CSC has developed twenty strategic planning initiatives, which it is carrying out between 2011 and 2014. The following initiatives relate to CSC’s Quality Initiative:

- 1) Revise Essential Learning Program (General Studies)
- 2) Create integrated and interdisciplinary programs
- 5) Create co-curricular experiences that emphasize leadership, engagement, civic responsibility and positive human interaction
- 7) Promote standards of quality for courses and teaching
- 8) Establish a technology-supported, collaborative and creative teaching and learning center to provide appropriate resources and tools to create high-impact learning experiences

13) Establish a deliberate collaborative process to improve communication and effective teamwork across all areas of the college

Therefore, a full 30% of the institution’s strategic planning initiatives are tied into the Quality Initiative.

The intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic core is great. CSC envisages that the Essential Studies Program will have a transformative effect in the lives of students. Through high impact learning experiences, students will engage in learning in ways that create long-lasting connections between wide-ranging knowledge and their role in society. Initial informal feedback from students supports this already. According to one document promoting the Essential Studies Program, “The FYI and Capstone may be thought of as ‘bookends’ to a whole program functioning as a means of helping students explore and understand critical thinking, problem solving, and the nature of inquiry.” It is also anticipated that students will make deep connections between coursework and the complex world around them. Another intended outcome of the Essential Studies Program is that it will serve as a key recruiting and retention tool, distinguishing CSC’s learning experience as exemplary and unique.

CLARITY OF THE INITIATIVE’S PURPOSE

As indicated at the beginning of the document, the purpose of the initiative is to develop and implement the Essential Studies Program, a new general studies program based on recent research in the scholarship of teaching, learning, and assessment. By spring 2016, CSC will have one of the more innovative general education programs in the United States that is designed to maximize student engagement and learning. As a result of this effort, faculty members are helping and will help to position CSC further as a leader in the theory and practice of teaching and learning. To facilitate the success of the program, three important “sub-initiatives” are being tied to the larger initiative:

1. The establishment of a Teaching and Learning Center to offer resources and support for faculty and other instructors teaching courses within the Essential Studies Program
2. The streamlining of processes associated with the support of adjunct instructors, many of whom teach courses within the Essential Studies Program
3. The formalization of communication lines between Student Services and Academic Affairs regarding a number of issues related to the Essential Studies Program, including but not limited to:
   a. The Advising Center
   b. Course enrollment lids (or caps) and the adding new sections
   c. Tutoring Services
   d. The “Back on Track” program, for students in academic jeopardy

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4 “FAQ Regarding the New Essential Studies” document.
e. The Early Alert program to identify and intervene with students with potential academic risk

A team of CSC faculty members, professional staff, and administrators have developed a timeline (found at the end of this proposal) which includes the major benchmarks for success. Each May, annual reports will be submitted to the office of the President, which will include an evaluation of the progress and accomplishments of the Quality Initiative and any necessary adjustments to the timeline due to unforeseen circumstances. It is also assumed that similar reports will be sent directly to the Higher Learning Commission.

As with implementing any ambitious initiative, potential challenges and issues should be noted. For instance, CSC has experienced a turnover of 49% of its faculty between fall 2006 and fall 2012. In other words, for that same period the institution has had an average annual turnover rate of faculty of 8+% due to death, departure, and retirement. What this means is that new faculty will need to be instructed each year in the Quality Initiative. The faculty turnover rate affirms the necessity for establishing a Teaching and Learning Center, which will provide materials and resources associated with the scholarly literature of teaching and learning to faculty and adjuncts who teach courses within the Essential Studies Program. Another possible challenge is associated with funding issues during this era of the “New Normal.” The institution has devoted several different budgets to the Quality Initiative. Components of the Quality Initiative, including the Teaching and Learning Center and high impact learning experiences, cost money. If the nation dips into another recession, budgets might be threatened.

EVIDENCE OF COMMITMENT TO AND CAPACITY FOR ACCOMPLISHING THE INITIATIVE

The level of support for the initiative by stakeholders is strong. This effort has been ongoing for over two years, affirming that it has the support of administrators, faculty members, and professional staff. In March 2012, at the HLC annual conference, two administrators and three faculty members began formulating the Quality Initiative, including its timeline. The Vice President of Academic Affairs and the deans have mapped out a plan, now 80% complete, to reorganize office assistants and professional staff in Academic Affairs, which will facilitate implementing the Quality Initiative. Adjunct compensation will increase, beginning fall 2013. During summer 2012, the interim president authorized the creation of a new Essential Studies Presidential Committee, which was charged with the following:

- Facilitate the continued development of the Essential Studies Program such as working with Deans, Academic Review Committee, and Faculty Learning Communities
- Coordinate and implement the Essential Studies Program
- Develop and submit to the President (by May 15 of each year):
  - A sustainable plan to encourage interdisciplinary and high impact course development, implementation, and improvement
  - Viable rotation of courses for online and campus-based courses for each outcome
  - An assessment plan that includes “closing the loop”
5-year timeline (through 2017) that delineates milestones for achieving progress

- As appropriate, incorporate plans, timelines, and other related materials within the CSC Quality Initiative for the HLC as well as the HLC 2017 visit.

The Essential Studies Presidential Committee is assuming a major role in orchestrating the Quality Initiative. The committee is chaired by one dean and one faculty member. Its current composition includes two deans (the Dean of Teaching and Learning and the Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement), one professional staff, and seven faculty members representing diverse disciplines.

Other groups and individuals across campus are also participating heavily in the effort. For instance, the director of the Teaching and Learning Center (who is also the Dean of Teaching and Learning) and the assistant director of the Teaching and Learning Center are spearheading the creation of the new Teaching and Learning Center. The Student Affairs Interim Director of Student Life and the Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement are working together to build permanent lines of communication between Student Services and Academic Affairs. In addition, a new Project Coordinator is assisting in developing the processes associated with supporting adjunct instructors. The Faculty Senate Academic Review Committee will continue to examine items created by the Essential Studies Presidential Committee, evaluate new courses for the Essential Studies Program, and formulate a schedule for an online version of the program. Finally, the President and Vice President of Academic Affairs, who are fully committed to the Quality Initiative, consider it a vital element in achieving CSC’s intentional initiatives and positioning CSC in the New Normal.

The institution has committed additional resources to this Quality Initiative. For academic year 2012-13, the institution has funded the following budgets:

- $25,000 for the Teaching and Learning Center
- $45,000 for faculty and student groups travel (to support high impact learning experiences)
- $50,000 for initiatives partially associated with the Essential Studies Program

A process has already been established and used for evaluating and funding proposals with these preceding budgets with the Essential Studies Program. These budgets should continue to be funded in similar amounts, barring unforeseen circumstances. From this process, faculty members have already requested and secured funding for guest speakers, field trips, conference attendance, and class materials.

**APPROPRIATENESS OF THE TIMELINE FOR THE INITIATIVE**

Below is the timeline for CSC’s Quality Initiative.
CHADRON STATE COLLEGE QUALITY INITIATIVE TIMELINE

2012-13:

Hired Dean of Teaching and Learning (Director of the Teaching and Learning Center)

Hired Assistant Director of the Teaching and Learning Center

Held FYI Summer Institute, May 15
• Collaborative effort by faculty facilitators of the Teaching and Learning Center to develop draft of learning outcomes and rubric for FYI courses

Interim president approved creation of the Essential Studies Presidential Committee

Held Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 17
• Discussion on FYI learning outcomes and assessment rubric
• Discussion on FYIs and Student Services
• Discussion on General Studies and Tk20
• Discussion on Essential Studies Program, student learning outcomes, and syllabi

Initiated Essential Studies Presidential Committee
• Facilitate the continued development of the Essential Studies Program such as working with Deans, Academic Review Committee, Faculty Learning Communities, and Teaching and Learning Center
• Coordinate and implement the Essential Studies Program
  • Develop student survey of FYIs (just for fall 2012 and spring 2013) and gather data
    o Use data for further refine FYIs courses
    o Develop direct measures of FYIs to assess FYIs in fall 2013 and thereafter
  • Develop and submit to the President (by 15 May 2013) the following:
    • A sustainable plan to encourage interdisciplinary and high impact course development, implementation, and improvement.
    • Viable rotation of courses for online and campus-based courses for each outcome.
    • An assessment plan that includes “closing the loop.”
    • 5-year timeline (through 2017) that delineates milestones for achieving progress.
  • Begin to create curriculum map for FYIs, spring

Continued to assess old General Studies Program (Reports due September 14)

Launched FYIs and new Essential Studies Program

Hired Project Coordinator to assist with streamlining support processes for adjunct instructors and to coordinate assessment processes for the Essential Studies Program in TK20
Academic Review Committee to:
- Evaluate new courses and Capstone courses for Essential Studies Program
- Create and refine policies related to the Essential Studies Program and to evaluate policy suggestions made by the Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Examine FYI learning goals and rubric

Teaching and Learning Center to define its role in regards to Essential Studies Program
- Refine concept of Capstone/FYI Summer Institute
  - Interdisciplinary teaching support
  - Team teaching support
  - Course design and development
  - Drafting and/or refining student learning outcomes

Teaching and Learning Center to:
- Establish physical space
- Develop uniform programming
- Develop a library of resources
- Assess its own effectiveness
- Work with Academic Affairs and START Team to support high impact practices in Essential Studies Program and other classes

Student Services (including Student Life) to begin to define its role in regards to Essential Studies Program
- Define Early Alert
- Work with Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement to create system for course caps
- Begin to formalize lines of communication between Academic Affairs and Student Services
- Communicate the following to new faculty (through Teaching and Learning Center) and students in Essential Studies Program courses the following:
  1. Tutoring Services
  2. “Back on Track” program
  3. Early Alert (just to new faculty)
- Explore potential roles and interactions with Academic Affairs and Teaching and Learning Center in supporting high impact practices in Essential Studies and other classes
- Explore collaboration with Teaching and Learning Center on practices for first year and other new students

Project Coordinator, Dean of Teaching and Learning, and Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement to create specific expectations of adjunct instructors in Essential Studies Program courses and other courses

HLC Annual Conference, April 5-9

Summer Institute for Capstones and FYIs, May
- Develop SLOs and rubric for Capstones
2013-14:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 16
- Update from Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Update on Tk20 Status
- Update on HLC Conference
- Prepare for HLC virtual visit
- Determine assistance needed

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Carry out all duties as found under 2012-13
- Refine direct measures of FYI to assess FYIs
- Develop direct measures to assess Capstone courses
- Begin to create curriculum map for other elements of ESP
- Examine role of OER (Open Educational Resources) within Essential Studies Program
  - Examine course clusters and/or paths/tracks
- Examine role of Tk20 in housing data for Essential Studies Program

Continue to assess old General Studies Program and Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 13)

Academic Review Committee to:
- Evaluate new Essential Studies Program courses and Capstone SLOs and rubrics
- Create and refine policies related to the Essential Studies Program and to evaluate policy suggestions made by the Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Develop a draft plan for ending old General Studies courses in the Essential Studies Program

Teaching and Learning Center to provide resources and programming related to:
- Course design, delivery, and improvement
  - Interdisciplinary course design
  - Incorporation of high impact practices
  - Incorporation of Open Education Resources
- Support for adjunct faculty
- Teaching and pedagogical issues
  - Teaching of first year students
  - Team teaching
  - Pedagogical aspects of high impact practices
- Assessment
  - Develop drafts of student learning outcomes in FYI and Capstone Summer Institutes
  - Information about VALUE rubrics and others, and assess fit with Essential Studies Program
  - Assessment of impact of high impact practices
  - General course and program assessment
Student Services (including Student Life) to refine its role in regards to Essential Studies Program

- Reexamine definition of Early Alert
- Continue to work with Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement to refine system for course caps
- Assess lines of communication between Academic Affairs and Student Services
- Communicate the following to new faculty and adjunct instructors (through Teaching and Learning Center) and students in Essential Studies Program courses the following:
  1. Tutoring Services
  2. “Back on Track” program
  3. Early Alert (just to new faculty and adjunct instructors)
- Reexamine potential roles and interactions with Academic Affairs and Teaching and Learning Center in supporting high impact practices in Essential Studies and other classes
- Reexamine collaboration with Teaching and Learning Center on practices for first year and other new students

Dean of Teaching and Learning and Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement to re-examine role of adjuncts within Essential Studies Program

Faculty members to teach first Capstone courses, spring

HLC Annual Conference, April 11-15

Summer Institute, May
2014-15:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 15
- Carry out all duties as found under 2013-14

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Carry out all duties as found under 2012-13 and 2013-14
- Refine direct measures of FYI to assess FYIs
- Refine curriculum map of Essential Studies Program
  - Examine existing ESP courses for linkages, skills that are emphasized throughout courses (e.g. presentations; writing) and ways to assess those skills, student stumbling areas (e.g. from concepts to courses having difficulty), and skill/knowledge that is less developed than would be preferred. Evidence will be collected in order to determine what students are learning
- Refine role of OER (Open Educational Resources) within Essential Studies Program
- Refine role of Tk20 in housing data for Essential Studies Program
- Reexamine Capstone courses
  - Refine direct measures to assess Capstone courses

Assess old General Studies program (for the last time) and Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 12)

Academic Review Committee to:
- Evaluate new Essential Studies Program courses
- Create and refine policies related to the Essential Studies Program and to evaluate policy suggestions made by the Essential Studies Presidential Committee

Teaching and Learning Center to continue to provide resources and programming related to items discussed under 2013-14

Student Services (including Student Life) to refine its role in regards to Essential Studies Program, as discussed under 2013-14

Dean of Teaching and Learning and Dean of Curriculum and Academic Advancement to re-examine role of adjuncts within Essential Studies Program

HLC Annual Conference, March 27-31

Summer Institute, May
2015-16:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 21
   • Carry out all duties as found under 2013-14

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee
   • Carry out all duties as found under previous years
   • Assist in preparation for HLC visit
   • Assist in composing and submitting final Chadron State College Quality Initiative report to HLC

Assess Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 11)

Academic Review Committee to carry out duties as found under 2014-15

Teaching and Learning Center to continue to provide resources and programming related to items discussed under 2013-14

Student Services (including Student Life) to refine its role in regards to Essential Studies Program, as discussed under 2013-14

HLC Annual Conference, April

Submit final Chadron State College Quality Initiative report to HLC, spring
2016-17:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 19
- Carry out all duties as found under 2013-14

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Perform same functions as previous years
- Assist in preparation for HLC visit

Assess Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 16)

Academic Review Committee to carry out duties as found under 2014-15

Teaching and Learning Center to continue to provide resources and programming related to items discussed under 2013-14

HLC Annual Conference, April

HLC Visit, spring
2017-18:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 18
- Carry out all duties as found under 2013-14
- Update on HLC visit

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee
- Perform same functions as previous years
- Assist in responding to any appropriate areas of improvement from HLC regarding the Essential Studies Program

Assess Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 15)

Academic Review Committee to carry out duties as found under 2014-15

Teaching and Learning Center to continue to provide resources and programming related to items discussed under 2013-14

HLC Annual Conference, April
2018-19:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 17
  • Carry out all duties as found under 2013-14

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee
  • Perform same functions as previous years
  • Assist in responding to any appropriate areas of improvement from HLC regarding the Essential Studies Program

Assess Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 14)

Academic Review Committee to carry out duties as found under 2014-15

Teaching and Learning Center to continue to provide resources and programming related to items discussed under 2013-14

HLC Annual Conference, April
2019-20:

Hold Annual Essential Studies All Faculty Work Session, August 16
  • Carry out all duties as found under 2013-14

Continue Essential Studies Presidential Committee (Set up regular meetings for fall and spring)
  • Perform same functions as previous years
  • Assist in responding to any appropriate areas of improvement from HLC regarding the Essential Studies Program

Assess Essential Studies Program (Reports due September 13)

Academic Review Committee to carry out duties as found under 2014-15

Teaching and Learning Center to continue to provide resources and programming related to items discussed under 2013-14

HLC Annual Conference, April