ASSOCIATION FOR GENERAL AND LIBERAL STUDIES

2015 AGLS Awards for Improving General Education:
Exemplary Program Processes

Award Information and Application:
Co-Curricular General Education Learning

Section #1: Contact Information of Person Submitting Application

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Section #2: Institutional Endorsement Chief Executive Officer or Chief Academic Officer

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Section #3: Application Summary (150 words)

Include a summary of the award application. Please begin the narrative with a brief description of your institution and the time frame for the process. Briefly explain your process and why you think it equates with quality. The summary should not exceed 150 words. The text box may be increased in size as necessary.

The Peer Mentor Program (PMP) in University Studies (UNST) at Portland State University (PSU) is applying for the category of Co-Curricular General Education Learning. PSU is Oregon’s largest state university, and the UNST Peer Mentor Program is one of the largest and most well established in the nation housed in a general education program. In 1995 UNST placed this co-curricular initiative for peer-mentored learning at the center of PSU students’ first and second, years on campus by offering a “peer-mentored” experience as means for optimizing students’ academic and social learning. As UNST celebrates its 20th Anniversary this year, the PMP has flourished, expanded, and deepened its focus on providing a high-quality, evidence-based, and engaging environment for mentors and mentees. This program has documented its double-decade of successes with improved PSU student retention as assessed by UNST’s end-of-term student learning surveys, mentor ePortfolios, and themes from its online mentor support team.

Section #4: Award Criteria

Criterion 1: Supporting Co-Curricular General Education Experiences (2 pages)

An exemplary application should provide a useful description of how an institution and its leadership can demonstrate that it places a high value on co-curricular learning and uses co-curricular outcomes to achieve program goals.

Provide a description of how your institution dedicates itself to co-curricular activities that improve the quality of the general education program and help the institution achieve its general education program goals. How does your institution show its commitment to student learning achieved through co-curricular activities? Address the following issues:

- How your institution aligns its co-curricular efforts with institutional mission and general education program goals
- How the institution communicates its commitment to improving general education program quality and student engagement and learning through the use of co-curricular activities
- Who defines and identifies the expectations for co-curricular general education learning
- Who takes responsibility for providing co-curricular experiences, including how faculty support and collaborate with staff on co-curricular activities
- How the institution communicates to students and other stakeholders the value of co-curricular activities

Please limit your response to two pages. The following text box may be increased in size as necessary.

The Peer Mentor Program exists as a consistent and high-value endeavor in the University Studies general education program. The fact that it has remained central and
critical to the UNST model for 20 years is an institutional statement of commitment, as well as stamp of approval, at the highest levels of the institution.

The UNST PMP program hires up to 90 peer mentors annually, including approximately 37 FRINQ (Freshman Inquiry) undergraduate peer mentors and 53 SINQ (Sophomore Inquiry) graduate peer mentors to serve over 1,300 freshman-level and 5,500 sophomore-level students annually. With 6,800 of PSU’s students annually receiving some kind of peer-mentored, co-curricular, general-education learning experience (UNST Peer Mentored Inquiry Sessions), the impact of the peer is highly significant. With expanding offerings of online learning at PSU, the PMP also supports a growing number of online peer mentors for its general education courses as well. The program is highly visible, has a Web site, a Facebook page, a listserv, and an alumni listserv, which also communicate the work to others.

The UNST Peer Mentor Program is situated centrally as a co-curricular component in the general education curriculum (i.e., every class has a peer mentor and a mentoring component called the “mentor session”). This model was designed to contribute directly to PSU’s outcomes and learning goals based on national research on peer mentoring programs which demonstrates a strong correlation with peer mentoring opportunities and the desired end goals of increasing student retention and curricular engagement (Allen & Eby, 2010; Agee & Hodges, 2012; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Mullen, 2008). The institution aligns the PMP within its core structure to help achieve two defined sets of mission-related goals: (a) the UNST 4 goals (i.e., diversity, critical thinking, communication, and social/ethical responsibility), and (b) the PSU learning outcomes, which include the UNST goals in addition to sustainability, engagement, and disciplinary expertise. PSU also has strategic management and enrollment goals to retain and graduate students with success.

PSU communicates its strong commitment of the PMP by supporting this work in a number of ways. Annual resource allocations from the general education budget and Graduate School offices support the PMP budget, of which over 90% is directly spent on the peer mentors, including scholarships, awards, stipends, and program activities. Their student support is generous and consistent, and for the past 20 years, UNST Peer Mentors have received the same “high-end” package of rewards (tuition remission each term for full-time status, plus an “award” for undergraduates or a stipend for graduate students). This kind of statement translates directly into students and the peer mentors’ recognition of the program as one of the “top” desired programs in which to work or lead at PSU. Its popularity is evidenced at the time of annual mentor hiring when we receive over 230 applications for about 45 – 50 open positions each fall. The institution continues to invest in the program and students seek it out as a peak experience as they work on their leadership pathways in PSU.

PSU also seeks and sustains cross-campus grant partnerships, nationally-searched staff talent, full-time program leadership, and direct support to the PMP’s efforts, which are all overseen in policy and practice by the University Studies program teams, including the UNST Council (an elected body of faculty and staff from across PSU), the UNST Core Faculty group (UNST’s dedicated, full-time faculty), and the UNST Leadership Team (administrative faculty and staff). Additionally, there is an ongoing relationship between the PMP and Student Affairs, which share knowledge and leadership across program areas. Collectively, these groups communicate and evolve program initiatives and contribute to decision making in the PMP or when feedback is sought.
The PMP is presently staffed with a 1.0 FTE Program Director with front-desk support from UNST staff and a program GA (0.49FTE). Additionally, with two years of AmeriCorps VISTA program funding, the PMP created a 6-person support team called MAPS (Mentors Advocating & Promoting Success) and is comprised of six experienced UNST Peer Mentors. PSU recently awarded the PMP with a 2-year “Provost’s Challenge” grant to create an online mentoring presence in the form of a Web button for accessing experienced UNST mentors in online courses. In addition to the PMP director and student leaders, all 90 of our FRINQ and SINQ faculty work directly with the mentors who are “assigned” to work with them and the students in their courses. The mentors are also supported directly by UNST and PSU faculty to meet and work on their co-curricular portion of the program (e.g., the “mentor session” plans and additional outreach or campus activities).

The institution places high value on communicating with external and external stakeholders as well through its own future planning efforts. Recently PSU supported the Dean’s of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Office in leading (2012-13) an institution-wide Strategic Planning activity related to documenting the breadth, focus, and outreach of Peer Mentoring Programs at Portland State University. This effort resulted in a program map (chart) of PSU’s wide range of peer-led, co-curricular offerings, of which the UNST Peer Mentor Program Director was the Co-chair with the Dean of Student Life. The group released the report with recommendations about PSU’s peer mentoring efforts and impact, and currently this work continues to hold a priority in ongoing PSU planning efforts with current work being started on the possible linkages between peer mentor programs, led by the UNST Peer Mentor Program. This was the first campus-wide communication among disparately placed peer mentoring initiatives at PSU, and the work of the planning effort will continue in future years as recommendations are pursued by the campus.

Criterion 2: Engaging Students in Co-Curricular Learning Experiences (2 pages)

An exemplary application should include fresh insights into a process for using co-curricular learning to accomplish general education program goals. In addition, the application should describe a creative, effective, systematic process for co-curricular programming that can be used by other institutions.

Describe how your institution engages students in co-curricular general education learning activities. Address the following issues:

- Which general education outcomes are emphasized through your co-curricular activities
- What co-curricular learning activities or programs your institution offers to students
- Who defines and develops these expectations, including the role faculty, administration, and students play in developing the expectations
- Who participates in the design and organization of these activities
- Who leads these activities and in what situations and venues, including collaborative activities with faculty inside or outside the classroom
- What resources (financial, human, space) your institution offers for co-curricular learning activities

Please limit your response to two pages. The following text box may be increased in size as necessary.
The UNST Peer Mentor Program at PSU is one of the most innovative and creative programs for co-curricular learning of its kind and size in the nation, and it continues to improve, express, and define its work via a dynamic cycle of leadership, mentor development, and assessment that is replicable for any institution that would be interested in developing a general-education, peer mentor program at this level or scaled to a smaller (or larger) size. As a UNST Faculty member once said publicly at a campus event, “Mentors were our best idea!”

The PMP general education outcomes include the 4 UNST goals of (a) critical thinking, (b) diversity, (c) social and ethical responsibility, and (d) communication. An important additional learning outcome for PSU is also “engagement,” which is precisely why our peer mentors were brought to the campus as a central program in our general education division. Because PMP Peer Mentors lead “mentor sessions” outside of the main UNST FRINQ and SINQ courses (the courses for which they are assigned to serve as a co-curricular peer mentor), they align themselves directly with these goals to support the students and faculty. Additionally, depending on the “theme” that is assigned to each FRINQ or SINQ (examples: Popular Culture, Sustainability, Gender & Sexualities, Families and Society, and many more), the peer mentor also aligns with, enhances, and works with the faculty member’s course goals and outcomes to deliver the co-curricular mentor sessions. A unique aspect of these peer mentors is that they are positioned to offer a co-curricular experience that emphasizes the value of the “peer” connection to the curriculum through role modeling what it means to be a successful student, how to access community and off-campus resources, and ways to become enfranchised in a large university. With over half of all our students in UNST being of first-generation status, peer mentors are even more valuable as one of the first linkages a PSU student has to a peer who is knowledgeable and able to translate academic norms from day one of the students’ experiences on a large campus. The mentor session is the dedicated space to help students bridge the academic curriculum and their social communities.

The Peer Mentor Program offers a range of learning activities in its UNST “Mentored Inquiry Sessions” (12 to 15 students led by the peer mentor), which either precede or follow the primary “main” class session (all 36 students led by faculty). These mentor sessions may include diverse kinds of opportunities, such as writing instruction, project and assignment development, outreach activities, support for community-based learning objectives, class discussions, and opportunities to learn about campus and community resources that extend beyond UNST or PSU. The kinds of learning that are highly valued and encouraged are active learning strategies, creative idea development, writing as a process and means of communication, social justice-oriented activities, group projects and discussions, and ways of knowing that honor diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds. This would look like “hands-on” learning or experiential learning on many days, and other days might include a more “traditional” workshop or class discussion on required course texts. Ultimately, the learning becomes quite individualized and changes according to what the peer mentors learn about their mentees.

Mentors often report that their own development is enhanced by serving as peer mentors; that is, they are growing as much as their students as a result of this kind of engagement. To foster this growth, the peer mentors participate in a required professional development cycle, which is constructed as a year-round series of learning activities and opportunities for the peer mentors. The PMP Director, the program GA, UNST faculty, the
mentors themselves, and UNST program staff members take leadership on offering and designing these activities throughout the year. This includes a robust and ongoing framework for supporting and developing the mentors as general education peer leaders: (a) a Spring Training course (4-credits at the UG and GR levels) for new hires, (b) a 4-day Fall Mentor Training Conference for all new and returning mentors (prior to the start of school), (c) monthly Mentor Retreats (fall, winter, and spring), and (d) opportunities for independent study credits (optional) on mentor projects. Mentors also take leadership on offering and developing two kinds of in-house training, such as: (a) ED Talks, short instructional sessions on key topics of mentors, and (b) workshops on writing, teaching and learning, or other topics. Mentors are also required to complete and exchange a Mentor ePortfolio two times per year with other peer mentors in the program to learn about their work together. This is all called the "Cycle of Mentor Professional Development," which is a model that is sharable and replicable for other campuses.

The primary physical "home" for the Peer Mentor Program is the Mentor Office (Cramer Hall 163) and the UNST main offices (CH 117). The mentors share a modest office that has a room with a fridge and table for socializing; a room with computers, a copier (used also by faculty), and a shared table stocked with teaching supplies; and a "library" or quiet space with a computer and chairs for more private work. For mentor sessions, the peer mentors use the UNST FRINQ and SINQ technology labs, which were designed for hosting mentor sessions with A/V and computers for all students in the space, including a central table for bringing them together in discussion or project-based work. Many of the mentors also accompany their faculty and mentees to other off-site, community-based locations where much of the class work is occurring, such as the Learning Gardens, the art museum, the landfill, or wherever their project works takes them. Painted across one of the PSU bridges is this favorite motto that conveys this ultimate co-curricular campus mission: "Let knowledge serve the city." Mentors provide this bridge in UNST.

PSU has offered significant to "high-end" resources for the PMP (see Criterion 1), including 12 credits of remission (not including fees) per term and a leadership "award" for undergraduate peer mentors. For its graduate peer mentors, it offers a formal GTA-ship, which offers 9 credits of remission per term (not including fees) and a monthly stipend for .25FTE (10 hours per week) of work. In a raw formula of dollars-only, over 90% of all financial resources that PSU puts into UNST for offering PMP directly supports the students (peer mentors) themselves, and very little in this endeavor is put into the personnel and infrastructure of the program. It is highly cost-effective as a way to support student directly without spending inordinate amounts on core staffing. Again, the "rewards" of the position for student mentors are known as the "top" among other PSU programs, which results in our high levels of interest (applications to become mentors), retention (of peer mentors who stay, serve more than 1 or 2 years, and graduate, or go on to GR school), and engagement for mentors and mentees in the program’s activities. The concept of "I-could-also-become-a-peer-mentor" is also fostered in mentor sessions as PSU students are shown how being successful and engaged at PSU could lead them into such a highly coveted and valuable position in the institution.

This model for engaging students (mentees) and mentors has been documented extensively in our Peer Mentor Handbook and on the Web site and is often shared with other organizations as a model for this deep pathway for engagement in a general
education program. This AGLS award would also allow us to share these practices even more broadly and connect with other national programs.

Criterion 3: Evaluating Student Co-Curricular General Education Learning (2 pages)

An exemplary application should describe evaluation methods and tools that are simple but effective, and that can and should be considered by others. The processes described to collect and evaluate evidence on the impact of co-curricular learning activities should be clear, replicable, and effective for identifying the importance and value of adding co-curricular programming in order to enhance general education learning.

Describe how your institution assesses student general education learning gained through co-curricular activities. Address the following issues:

- How your institution evaluates its student general education learning goals achieved through co-curricular activities, including the tools used and activities assessed
- What processes are used to gather and analyze the results
- Who evaluates the results and how the results are communicated to others
- What the results reveal about the impact of co-curricular activities on general education learning, and what activities and/or areas were targeted for improvement
- How the institution communicates the results of its evaluation processes

*Please limit your response to two pages.* The following text box may be increased in size as necessary.

The University Studies program gathers data on student learning and experiences using several methods, including the impact of the mentor program on students and mentors. Formative and summative course evaluation questions, ePortfolios for both students and mentors, and research into student success and retention all play a role in evaluating the mentor program and identifying areas for improvement or focus. The UNST Web site contains all program assessment data from past years.

The University Studies program has an Assessment Director who gathers annual data from student learning surveys and compiles reports for the programs. The Peer Mentor Program utilizes the data from the “end-of-term” surveys that are distributed in FRINQ and SINQ courses in the last week. One section of questions on the survey specifically relates to the students’ experiences and learning activities in mentor sessions. These survey results are shared with faculty and mentors in those courses to continually improve their own teaching and mentoring for future terms. Additionally, informal surveys are offered to students in a “mid-term” survey that is distributed voluntarily by faculty to gain early feedback, and this is widely used as well. The Program Director and Assessment Director support the development of mentors by providing opportunities to discuss ways to become even more effective in supporting their students’ needs based on the data.

Overall, students report that their mentors take an interest in their learning, provide spaces that encourage active engagement, and support their success in the course. When sophomores are asked to name programs, practices, or people that have contributed to their freshman-year success, mentors are identified by a large number of students as critical to their success.
The Mentor ePortfolio provides another means of more informal evaluation, providing opportunities for feedback, practitioner reflection, and peer-to-peer sharing in the Mentor Program. The assignment is on the Mentor Web site where there is a “mentor-only” side with detailed information about how to put together this kind of document. Two times per year (winter and spring terms) mentors are required to add new “elements,” which are reflective documents such as a teaching philosophy or sample lesson plan, to their ePortfolio to capture some of their mentoring work for an external audience. They are also required to share via email or personal conversation with two other randomly assigned mentors. The purpose of this evaluation is related to the theoretical work on ePortfolios as a tool to deepen engagement, practice, and self-reflection for educators. It can also be used by the Program Director to gather themes, insights, and anecdotes that convey the value of mentoring to the mentors themselves. This informal kind of feedback for the program administration frequently shows that peer mentoring is a high-impact co-curricular practice for both the peer mentors and the students.

More recently, UNST and the PMP have identified assessment questions related to online mentoring and student learning as areas for exploration and improving general-education, including: What does the data tell us (gathered from student end-of-term surveys) about the impact of the student experience in the online environment? What does the data say about the role and impact of mentors and mentor sessions (or activities/presence) online? What kinds of issues are students having in their online classes, and what kind of mentoring support do they require? With the expansion of online offerings in the UNST curriculum and the increasing presence and role for peer mentors serving in those courses as well, we are using this data to improve the student experience, which is showing a fairly significant increase in the “D, W, and F” grades occurring for students in the online SINQs. The Program Director and Assessment Director are investigating the role mentors can play and determining new pathways for contacting students in a more personal manner in these courses to continue to improve student retention and grades.

Overall UNST shares its data widely on the PSU campus, at national and regional conferences, and via its Assessment Web site. Our Assessment Director actively converses with faculty, staff, and administration about the impact of our learning environments on our students’ learning and successes at PSU.

**Criterion 4: Improving Co-Curricular Learning Processes (2 pages)**

An exemplary application should detail improvements that will help other institutions more quickly and effectively establish co-curricular programs and show other institutions what is meant by a full-loop of assessment.

Describe your institution’s plans to use its data to mature its co-curricular learning processes. Address the following issues:

- What new goals (if any) for co-curricular learning have been identified as a result of the evaluation process

- What data-driven co-curricular improvement projects your institution selected or is planning that are intended to improve co-curricular learning or assessment of the learning
• Who collaborated to identify and plan the improvements

• What level of institutional support exists for the improvement projects

• What plans exist to follow up on targeted improvement projects to check for continuing or improved ownership

• What results, if any, have been collected to date following the improvement efforts

• What lessons were learned from the improvement process

*Please limit your response to two pages.* The following text box may be increased in size as necessary.

The Peer Mentor Program is fortunate to be housed in University Studies as a co-curricular learning opportunity for all first-, second-, and transfer students to gain access to a mentored experience while fulfilling their general education requirements. Within PSU, all the UNST data is utilized broadly for improvement across units, specifically related to retention, which is a driving goal for all departments. While PMP is just one part of the larger whole of UNST’s overall general-education picture, the Peer Mentor Program engages with ongoing data-driven opportunities for improvement of student learning. Related specifically to the Peer Mentor Program’s assessment results, a project that has grown out of the research has been to formulate additional mentored responses to student needs, especially in their FRINQ and SINQ courses where issues such as personal crises, mental health issues, financial literacy needs, cultural navigation, and other student life challenges interact negatively with their desires to learn, advance, and graduate from PSU. A key project that PSU supported, among many projects in the Provost’s Challenge was reThink Project #113, a mentor-designed project to increase direct outreach and support from a group of experienced UNST Peer Mentors for all students in FRINQ and SINQ courses, especially targeted at online students in SINQ classes.

This project is evidence of intentional and deep investment by PSU into the work of PMP and the goals of general education in UNST, utilizing the known impacts of peer mentoring on student learning and increasing funding to add an online “tool” the MAPS (Mentors Advocating & Promoting Success) widget, which is an online button for students to click and access the support of UNST Peer Mentors. This also extends the work of an AmeriCorps project that PSU supported based in the Peer Mentor Program, for which UNST has sustained funding for peer mentors to continue to work collaboratively as an advisory and student support team during the year to offer support, advice, outreach, and resources. As a result of these projects, the Peer Mentor Program is now gathering and reporting on its final data from the above projects in a report to be titled: *Rethinking Student Support via the MAPS online Widget* (in progress to be posted on the PMP and UNST Web sites in July 2015).

The lessons that have been learned in the areas of online mentoring, student support, and outreach from the MAPS team in these areas of data collection and analysis are plenty. Primarily, we have been able specifically now to identify actual “themes” and categories for what exactly our students need in addition to their peer mentoring in the co-curricular mentor sessions and in their general-education main classes. These themes
sharpen the focus and deepen our institutional and programmatic understandings of the nature of students’ lived experiences beyond the general parameters of our focus on successes in the academic realm. Themes such as “vulnerability,” “access,” “sexuality,” “food insecurity,” “grief,” and “academic support” give us a much more clear sense of the edges of the work of general education, peer mentoring, and student learning at PSU. With the ability to track the thematic threads along with the quantitative measures of success in online courses (e.g., D, W, F grades; GPA; and student satisfaction measures), peer mentoring in the Peer Mentor Program can be improved to create a well-supported, co-curricular layer to “hold” our students positively and encourage them constructively onward into their future work and toward their end goals of becoming a PSU graduate.

On the institutional level, PSU continues to support strategic planning, and the PMP will likely play a significant leadership role in enhancing and increasing the impact of all the peer mentoring sites at PSU, which are currently dispersed across the large campus to serve more specific needs in these programs. With the knowledge PMP has gained over two decades on campus, it will be able to provide support and collaboration as PSU continues to improve student learning in the future utilizing the co-curricular practices of peer mentoring.

The Peer Mentor Program in University Studies is one very important, intentionally focused, co-curricular aspect of PSU’s general education program. The work of PMP is supported by administration and campus initiatives, and this benefits all students. Additionally, the final “story” we will continue to explore is the power of peer mentoring for the Peer Mentors themselves, which also appears to contribute to an increase in student graduation and continuation of our mentors into graduate and professional schools. These are the future areas of study for the PMP, and we will continue to grow from our data and share the results with PSU and UNST.

After 20 years of existence, the Peer Mentor Program is an exemplary and self-reflective model for general education. We hope to share our model widely, and this award recognition would be instrumental in touting our diligent work that is accomplished with a small, dedicated, and highly trained team of administration, staff, and students in University Studies whose goal is continuous improvement.