

# THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

July 28, 2015

Mr. Zach Waymer  
Coordinator for Legal and Government Affairs  
Higher Learning Commission

Dear Mr. Waymer:

This document is in response to your letter dated June 15, 2015, in which you communicated a complaint filed with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) on May 8, 2015 about shared governance at The University of Akron (UA) by the Akron Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (Akron-AAUP). For the sake of context, it is important to point out that The University of Akron has three formal mechanisms to involve faculty in shared institutional governance, namely: (1) Akron-AAUP; (2) Faculty Senate; and (3) University Council.

Akron-AAUP is the faculty union, and as such its rights and those of the administration are delineated in a negotiated collective bargaining agreement. The union contract is primarily focused on terms and conditions of employment for full-time UA faculty (except the Law faculty), but does provide limited formal faculty governance in the selection and review of department chairs, school directors and deans. It also guarantees union member voice in the process of selecting the Provost and the President.

The Faculty Senate is the main venue for faculty involvement in shared governance, as it has been given purview over academic matters by the UA Board of Trustees. These include policies for admissions, grading, curriculum, student conduct, graduation, department/school and college names, and other areas. The President and Provost meet with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee on a regular basis, and also participate in Faculty Senate meetings. The University Council, on the other hand, is a body with representation from various campus constituency groups (faculty, staff, students, contract professionals and administrators) that is involved in strategic planning and budgeting and other major issues that transcend the campus. It is a relatively new structure that seems to be functioning well and providing more voice for many of our constituents.

Specific responses to the Akron-AAUP complaint and HLC's letter are provided in the pages that follow. I hope you will find these helpful.

Sincerely,

Scott L. Scarborough, Ph.D.  
President

## Complaint 1: Development of a New General Education Program

The “GenEd Core” is not a new general education program; it is a two-year pilot to offer a low cost option to our curriculum in a blended delivery mode through a partnership between faculty in the Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences (BCAS) and Wayne College (UA’s only branch campus). The concept was discussed during Wayne College’s portion of the college strategic planning process, which was ongoing during the HLC focused visit. A timeline of this process can be found [here](#) which provides clear evidence of the numerous discussions held by the President and Provost with each college in order to arrive at agreed upon (by consensus or voting depending on the college) [strategic directions](#). Page 57 of this document refers to the 13 general education courses that Wayne College faculty agreed to develop for new modes of delivery as part of their plan.

The GenEd Core concept was also discussed at the Vision 2020 (UA’s strategic plan) Summit meetings, which were hosted by the President to receive feedback as to whether the plan needed to be updated or revised. Leaders of the faculty union were [invited](#) and participated along with representatives of the Faculty Senate, University Council, Graduate Council, Undergraduate Student Government, Graduate Student Government, Student Bar Association, Chairs, Deans, UA Board of Trustees, and the Akron community. The first Summit occurred on February 13, 2015, the week prior to the HLC focused visit, and it is clear from pages 74, 75, 76 and 78 of this [document](#), which has been publically available since that date, that the GenEd Core subject was openly discussed with faculty, student and community leaders in a true shared governance manner.

The [agendas of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee](#) meetings with the President and Provost provide further evidence that the college strategic planning process was regularly discussed with faculty governance leaders, and that by April 2015, the Wayne College GenEd Core pilot was specifically a topic of discussion. It is important to note that all of the 13 courses in the GenEd Core already exist as a part of UA’s general education offerings approved by the Faculty Senate, and 11 of these 13 courses have also been approved for fully online delivery by that same governance body. The remaining two courses are undergoing changes through the standard faculty-driven curriculum approval process through the Faculty Senate. The plan is for six of the courses to be offered in Fall 2015, and the remaining seven to be offered in Spring 2016.

Facilitated by the administration in the form of stipends and instructional design support, and in a true collaboration, faculty from BCAS and Wayne College are jointly redesigning these courses for blended modes of delivery as evidenced [here](#). Faculty have met for Q&A sessions and are working this summer in the context of a [white paper on GenEd Core objectives](#) as well as one describing [support services for students](#). Faculty are partnering with university instructional services to follow the Quality Matters process to help ensure high quality for each course. As expected by HLC, learning outcomes and assessment thereof in each course are held constant, independent of the mode of delivery (face-to-face, blended, or fully online) and location.

The Academic Policies Committee of the Faculty Senate has a subcommittee of faculty that will track and analyze data to gauge the efficacy of this pilot. This analysis will be based on information such as incoming student academic preparation and at-risk factors, and student progress in the GenEd Core courses (e.g., attendance, grades, retention, learning assessment, success in sequential/follow-up courses, etc.) vs. what would be predicted based on past and current UA students’ success in the same courses

offered face-to-face and completely online. To date, 455 students have signed up for GenEd Core courses, a number consistent with this being a pilot endeavor (we have 20,000+ undergraduates). The total costs for the course redesigns include about \$80,000 for faculty stipends and \$40,000 for instructional design personnel time. This is a small expense if we can show that changing the delivery mode of these courses using Quality Matters can lead to enhanced student learning and better student retention and success, which will then improve our overall enrollments which have been on the decline in recent years.

The [pilot](#) was approved by the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents ([signed document](#)) as being aligned with a state-wide effort to improve access to higher education while at the same time lessening the financial burden on students and their families. UA had to formally request this approval in order to charge a lower tuition for these specific course offerings. Information on the GenEd Core courses and costs, along with frequently asked questions, are publicly available here: <http://www.uakron.edu/core/answers.dot>.

It is clear from the evidence and discussion above that appropriate governance processes have been and are being followed with respect to the GenEd Core pilot initiative. The University of Akron asks that the HLC focused visit team and the Institutional Actions Council recognize these facts in their deliberations on the matter.

## Complaint 2: Rebranding the Institution as a Polytechnic University

The polytechnic concept was discussed at the first Vision 2020 Summit, as indicated on page 108 of this public [document](#) dated February 13, 2015, the week prior to the HLC focused visit. The [comments](#) collected from attendees (which included all major governance bodies at UA and community members) following that first Summit meeting, and the [notes from discussion groups](#) reporting out by attendees at the second Summit held on February 27, 2015, indicate that the topic continued to be openly vetted in a true shared governance manner. It is also clear from the [agendas of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee meetings with the President and Provost](#) that the Vision 2020 Summits and polytechnic marketing campaign were part of these discussions as well.

As a matter of fact, an historic occasion in shared governance occurred at UA on May 7, 2015 - the day before the faculty union's letter of complaint was dated. After concluding its regular business, the Faculty Senate moved into closed session where the President, with the participation of four UA Board of Trustees members, discussed the polytechnic idea with the entire Faculty Senate body for about two hours. This exchange contributed to shaping the formal [announcement](#) of a new marketing campaign on May 15, 2015 at the City Club of Cleveland. Explanations and testimonials that emerged from the series of Summit meetings form a significant part of the marketing strategy (<http://www.uakron.edu/polytechnic/>).

Therefore, the faculty union's supposition that this marketing/rebranding initiative has contributed to shrinking the role of faculty in shared governance at UA is not supported by the evidence. None of the marketing or "tag-line" initiatives in UA's recent history involved so much direct effort and transparency by the administration to involve faculty and all other constituency groups. The evidence, therefore, indicates that the process of deciding to utilize a polytechnic marketing campaign has actually expanded the voice of faculty through the Faculty Senate, in particular, in shaping institutional strategic directions.

## Issues Raised in HLC's Letter

Criteria and other issues raised in the letter from HLC are addressed below.

*Criterion One, "the institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations."*

The mission of UA has not been affected by the polytechnic idea. In fact, the language used in the marketing campaign (<http://www.uakron.edu/polytechnic/faq.dot>) mirrors the rule that describes UA's mission (<http://www.uakron.edu/dotAsset/1344142.pdf>).

*Criterion Three, Core Component 3.A, Subcomponent 3, "the institution's program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as dual credit, through contractual or consortial arrangements, or any other modality)."*

As noted above, the GenEd Core pilot is based on pre-existing courses, the majority of which are already offered in two delivery modes at multiple locations. The fact that we have faculty from two campuses working together using Quality Matters to redesign these courses for blended mode delivery will strengthen the quality and consistency of these offerings in all formats at all locations. The GenEd Core redesign represents the most robust, deliberate and coordinated effort that UA has ever used within our curriculum process.

*Criterion Three, Core Component 3.B, Subcomponent 2, "the institution articulates the purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess."*

The purposes, content and learning outcomes of the general education program at UA have not been altered by the GenEd Core pilot.

*Criterion Three, Core Component 3.C, Subcomponent 1, "the institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services. The institution has sufficient numbers and continuity of faculty members to carry out both the classroom and the non-classroom roles of faculty, including oversight of the curriculum and expectations for student performance; establishment of academic credentials for instructional staff; involvement in assessment of student learning."*

The same faculty involved with the current face-to-face and online versions of the courses in the GenEd Core pilot are redesigning them for blended modes of delivery. The number of students in the pilot is very small as planned, and the pilot has not caused a need for hiring additional faculty or staff.

*Criterion Four, Core Component 4.B, Subcomponent 4, “the institution’s processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect good practice, including the substantial participation of faculty and other instructional staff members.”*

The overall process of assessing student learning at UA has not been affected by the GenEd Core pilot. However, since the involved faculty are following a robust Quality Matters approach, and the Academic Policies Committee of the Faculty Senate will be tracking the data, it is highly likely that these 13 courses will be some of the best assessed across both campuses.

*Criterion Five, Core Component 5.B, Subcomponent 2, “the institution has and employs policies and procedures to engage its internal constituencies—including its governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and students—in the institution’s governance.”*

The evidence provided in the preceding pages clearly indicates that UA has followed its shared governance mechanisms with the appropriate constituency groups in the context of both the GenEd Core pilot and the polytechnic marketing campaign.

*Criterion Five, Core Component 5.B, Subcomponent 3, “administration, faculty, staff, and students are involved in setting academic requirements, policy, and processes through effective structures for contribution and collaborative effort.”*

The Faculty Senate is an effective and collaborative mechanism through which academic matters are vetted at UA, and has clearly been involved in both the GenEd Core pilot and the polytechnic marketing process.

*Criterion Five, Core Component 5.C, Subcomponent 3, “the planning process encompasses the institution as a whole and considers the perspectives of internal and external constituent groups.”*

The evidence provided above concerning the college strategic planning process, the Vision 2020 Summits, and the involvement of Faculty Senate clearly indicate that UA meets this subcomponent of the criteria for accreditation.

*The UA AAUP expressed concerns with the lack of stakeholder involvement in the creation, planning, and implementation process for the new general education program and for rebranding the University as a polytechnic institution. Please explain what the general education program and rebranding campaign are; what process was used to create, design, and implement them; and how faculty will be involved going forward.*

The preceding pages provide this requested explanation.

*Further, the rebranding efforts warrant additional comment from UA with regard to Mission. How does the rebranding of the institution relate to the mission of it?*

The University of Akron's mission is consistent with our definition of a polytechnic university, as described previously.

*The UA AAUP also expressed concerns with the lack of faculty involvement in the curricular design and delivery of the new general education program offerings as well as the teaching capacity and capability for the same. Please explain how faculty will be involved in the new general education program with its ongoing design, delivery, and assessment.*

It is clear from the evidence provided previously that faculty are appropriately involved in all aspects of the GenEd Core pilot, which is not a new general education program.

*Further, what policies and procedures are in place with regard to faculty involvement in the assessment of student learning as well as with curricular design and pedagogical methods for the new general education program?*

Faculty will assess student learning in the GenEd Core courses like they already do in the same courses offered in different modalities. However, as noted previously, the Quality Matters approach and additional oversight by the Academic Policies Committee will probably enhance the assessment of all 13 courses overall.

*What plans are in place to involve faculty in quality assurance for the new general education program?*

As noted above, a subcommittee of the Academic Policies Committee of the Faculty Senate will track the success of the GenEd Core courses more rigorously than any other courses at UA.

*Since this is a new general education model, please share what budget planning, marketing campaigns, and enrollment projections are being used to ensure that the program is sustained.*

This information has been provided above in the text and hyperlinks. The GenEd Core is a small scale pilot by design, not a new general education program, and is being used to convert 13 pre-existing courses into blended modes of delivery and track their impact. These flexible offerings will provide greater access to introductory courses at UA at a lower cost to the students. This can best be sustained if the data indicate that more students are attracted to and/or retained at UA because of the new versions of these courses, thereby increasing overall future enrollments that will offset the loss of revenue due to the low tuition being charged in the pilot.



*Finally, describe the institution's current model of shared governance and any changes to it over the past year as well as any changes forthcoming.*

As noted previously, UA has three formal mechanisms to involve faculty in governance, namely: (1) Akron-AAUP; (2) Faculty Senate; and (3) University Council. Akron-AAUP is the faculty union, and its contract with UA is primarily focused on terms and conditions of employment. The Faculty Senate is the main venue for faculty involvement in governance, in particular on academic matters. The University Council has a broader representation and scope, and is involved in strategic planning and budgeting and other major trans-campus issues. No changes have been made over the past year. As noted in our [institutional response](#) dated May 11, 2015 to the HLC focused visit draft team report, the UA Board of Trustees has engaged with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) to assist them in reviewing and revising (if needed) our governance structures and policies. This process will transpire this coming academic year.