Welcome by Dr. Dan Thorp
Dr. Thorp welcomed those in attendance to the workshop. He has been teaching at Virginia Tech for about 25 years. He currently works half time with the Department of History and since August half time in his new role as the Director of the Curriculum for Liberal Education. One of the reasons he undertook this new role is because of the assurance that we were really going to make some changes with the Curriculum for Liberal Education (CLE) this time. This is one of the reasons we are here today. It is going to take sometime and must involve faculty and advisors for all seven colleges. Dan introduced Dr. Wubah, Vice-President and Dean for Undergraduate Education.

Welcome by Dr. Wubah
Dr. Wubah thanked everyone for coming to the workshop. Dr. Wubah stated that he had now been on campus a little over 24 months and that when he arrived on the campus one of the issues that got his attention had to do with general education or what we call Curriculum for Liberal Education. Many institutions are in a similar situation to Virginia Tech with the CLE but that does not mean that we want to stay in this situation. I started thinking about ways we could work collectively to enhance our CLE.

When I think of general education I think it is the most critical part of a students undergraduate experience. If you take students who come to Virginia Tech the CLE is one of the most common threads that all students share. So we have to pay attention to the CLE. I believe we are at a point now where it is time for a change.

We are very fortunate to have Dr. Paul Gaston with us today who is one of the nations top experts in general education to spend the afternoon with us to share ideas. I have expressed to Dan my commitment to him and to the CLE and making changes.

Introduction of Dr. Paul Gaston
Dan introduced Dr. Paul Gaston who is the Trustees Professor at Kent State University. This appointment calls for him to teach in at least two colleges. He also has a very long and successful career in higher education. We are delighted to have him here this afternoon. We have asked Dr. Gaston here today to talk about one of the challenges confronting the university, which is the integration of general education requirements with those of the academic major.
Dr. Paul Gaston

Connecting
General Education,
Liberal Learning
& The Major
at Virginia Tech
Time for a Change?

(Slides 2 -13) - Top Ten Indicators That It May be time for Today's Discussions Dr. Gaston began by asking if the statements on the slides were familiar. This may address our question as to whether it is time for a change and to think about whether the question mark should be an exclamation point.

He went on to say if more than a handful of the issues are familiar then perhaps the questions mark could be removed and a period or exclamation point put in. It is an interesting time to be having this discussion in Virginia. No state is really immune from the kinds of pressure but Virginia has had a harder road than some other states. Virginia seems to be embracing higher education through opportunities that it provides higher education as an economic engine so it may be a very good time to be talking about making higher education more effective, more efficient, more cost effective and more productive generally.

(Slides 14 and 15) These slides have comments, which many may have seen from the corporate community, and government, which says this, is the time Virginia needs to invest in higher education and in itself because that is the most secure platform for a successful future and for the Commonwealth.

These comments are encouraging but also suggest a kind of challenge for us this afternoon (Slide 16). It is a matter of harnessing the interest in higher education as an economic engine and at the same time working with that interest to strengthen your commitment to general education and that will not be an easy task but it will be meaningful.

(Slides 17 and 18) Dr. Gaston showed two slides with the priorities and the approach for the afternoon. He stated that we would not solve problems today but would hopefully create a point of departure for meaningful discussions.

Dr. Gaston said that we should begin by taking stock in where we are both as a way of educating him and one another about our views of where Virginia Tech stands at present. This has to do with a climate for change, in what was is the climate favorable and in what was is it not favorable? He showed slide 20 and asked everyone to take 5 - 10 minutes to discuss the slide in small groups and bring back the ideas to the full group.
What factors may inhibit scrutiny and possible reform of undergraduate education at Virginia Tech – and what factors should encourage scrutiny and possible reform?

- Can not have change without good communication

- Like to see more emphasis from administration on the emphasis of undergraduate education. It is not just the content of the course students need to be engaged. Dr. Gaston said it may be a lack of support or it may be a lack of visibility of that support. If it is a priority on undergraduate education there are effective ways it can be communicated.

- It is interesting as a front line advisor to see how many students arrive at Virginia Tech with AP transfer credit or dual enrollment credit and put that together with transfers and because of that many students go by our CLE requirements because of there entrance. We want them to take advantage of these things but perhaps a 3000 level CLE course would allow us to have a sort of junior level CLE experience. Dr. Gaston said he has several models, which see liberal education as vertical rather than horizontal.

- Another thing we see is that students do not connect the CLE to the major and how it fits together and often refer to it as free electives. We need to better communicate to student.

- Different values of the degree.

(Slide 21) Dr. Gaston then went over the five “Epiphanies.” He went on to say that the epiphanies all bear on our primary issue today. They all have to do with the alignment between liberal learning and the major in both directions. None of the epiphanies can be accomplished without that kind of alignment. (Slide 23) The epiphanies on the left side all relate to the expectation of the institution on the right side. Those values cannot really be accomplished unless these institutional strengths are in place.

The consensus (slides 24 - 26) speaks to learning objectives embedded in the essential learning outcomes and the LEAP objectives are embedded in the latest of the efforts to define what degrees mean that has just appeared by the LUMINA foundation.

Many of the phrases will strike you as familiar. How do the students gain these goals? They gain them not only by being in the classroom with a gifted teacher but also through experiential learning.

(Slide 27) shows a model of integration looking at the major and minor in accomplishing the liberal education goals.
Now it is time for another consideration. Are there issues you see on campus, which we have not already touched on already, that may reflect the lack of adequate integration in the major?

(Slide 28)

*At Virginia Tech, what issues arise from inadequate integration of general education and the major?*

- Student lack of esteem for general education as “something to get behind you”?
- Assumption that liberal arts offer noble but less relevant skills and knowledge?
- Little attention within majors to the university’s liberal education objectives?
- Little esteem for professional education conveyed through general education?
- Complaints from those focused on majors about inadequate preparation of students in general education?
- Perplexity of students whose majors may not lead directly to related employment?

- Are General Education and Liberal Education interchangeable?
  Dr. Gaston – no they are not. He drew a dimple diagram to show this:

```
Liberal Education

Majors

Out of Class Experiences

General Education
```

- All of these seem to be true at Virginia Tech.

- Because students arrive with AP credits they are able to circumvent the CLE requirements. How can we ensure they are achieving the education outcomes we believe they should have?
  Dr. Gaston stated that one part of the answer is to clarify what the expectations are. LUMINA has made a concerted effort to define the
baccalaureate in operational terms. What should a student who has earned a bachelor’s degree be able to do? It is not about the credits it is about the competencies. By clarifying the objectives it takes the issue off the table.

Now we are going to look at some of the examples of linking general education and the major (slides 29-43).

We have looked at a number of principles and examples but the question is: are there some of these ideas that might be points of departure for your discussion when this discussion gets down to practicalities? These are some of the principles. The framing of the university wide goals or the clarification of those goals that exist that point clearly to integration of liberal education in the major. A focus on competencies in both areas asking that majors come and declare themselves as liberal learning majors regardless of what they are. Looking at the vertical rather than the horizontal model.

The kind of tiering that we saw at Arizona and at Rice, collaboration between the majors and general education faculty and the overarching priorities where these come together. Making sure that there is an awareness of different ways of knowing and that students gain an awareness not only that they have experienced the different ways of knowing but also they have the abilities to recognize them and to appreciate them. And, then the Monterey Bay, Cincinnati and Mary Washington idea that if you are clear enough about the goals you can, in effect, give your students some latitude in the how they accomplish them.

Dr. Gaston asked that everyone take 5 – 10 minutes to agree on one or two ideas that might be part of the discussion that goes forward.

(Slide 45 and 46)

Which of the principles shown in these examples might be worth considering at Virginia Tech?

- Framing university-wide learning goals that explicitly involve both general education and the major?
- Focusing on the achievement of competencies in both general education and the major?
- Asking majors to clarify their “liberalizing” intent?
- Replacing the “two and out” model with general education “throughout the curriculum”?
- Ensuring learning in depth in general education through tiering?
- Supporting closer collaboration between faculty in the majors and those focused on general education?
- Identifying overarching priorities and areas of convergence?
- Emphasizing broad experience with different “ways of knowing”?
Now we will draw some of the discussions together to see what your reflections are on possible elements in a reform agenda. Things that you would like to see at the end of the effort embedded in what you accomplish as you look at making general education in the major. Should some of these elements be embedded or are there others on this slide which should not be there and are there other which do not deserve consideration at all?

- Is dealing with alternate paths possible without adequate advising resources?
  Dr. Gaston said that it would be difficult without clear alternate paths and without giving students some kind of choice along those paths so they could sort of self advise. Most of what we are talking about is difficult without adequate advising. It is a challenge for all of our institutions. Anything we can do to enable our students to make more intentional choices whether it is though more intrusive advising or an orientation program that clarifies the different avenues, or through publications or workshops to show them the choices. Those are the right conversations to be had; students will benefit. We all agree we can do a better job.

- Parallel to resources for advising is incentivizing faculty.
  Dr. Gaston – there was a point made at another table about aligning the reward structure. If it were part of the culture so that when a faculty member sits down with the department head for his/her annual review the department head asks “what have done for liberal learning at the university?” If that were part of the culture at the university it would be a wonderful world.

- We probably have greater agreement on framing university wide learning goals that explicitly involve both general education and the major? Than we know but we don’t talk university wide. This then leads us to talk more about – Focusing on the achievement of competencies in both general education and the major?

- Does anyone know if there a program on campus that uses something like the tiering system where there is a conscious decision that general education or liberal education is to continue through the four years and not be something that you get done in the first year before you go on to serious stuff? One major has courses spread out on the checksheet.
  Dr. Gaston said that there are faculty with very good intent who believe that a general education program should allow considerable freedom of choice. That is the student’s opportunity to break out and do something generally liberalizing that is fun and does not bear on the major. That is not what I am
talking about today. What I am talking about today is the use of general education in a way that enables that student to prepare more effectively for study in the major and better enables the major to reinforce what has been accomplished in general education.

Once you have created a plan of reform, what are some of the problems you will encounter, how can you surmount them, what are some principles to keep in mind in terms of engaging the entire university community? In Slides 47 – 58 Dr. Gaston suggested six tactics to keep in mind at a time like this Principle of Reform that may be useful:

1 Raise Compelling Questions
2 Understand the Realities
3 Identify Existing Resources That Might Be Better Used
4 Expand the Use of Existing Communications Structures
5 Stand On “The Assessment Platform”
6 Frame Compelling and Politic Goals for Curricular Reform

Take 5 minutes to come up with one question at each table that would attract your colleagues to this discussion.

(Slide 50)

*What are the compelling questions at Virginia Tech that should prompt and support discussion of baccalaureate education?*

- Are you confident that every student at graduation would thank you for the work you have done?
- Would you take the majority of our undergraduate students as a graduate student or an employee?

(Slide 51) Knowing at the beginning that any plan is entertained within the university can not be pie in the sky nor can it be intellectually unconvincing there have to be both elements. Being aware of the constraints and being willing to work around them and. So understanding what the realities are and then recognizing that there may be more than one way of accomplishing what you want to accomplish and exploring with your administration what those are in terms of those realities. If you had to take on one of these between you and your goal which one from your perspective would be the one you would need to be aware of as you move into the genuine reform effort?

(Slide 52)

*Which of these realities is likely to be most pressing at Virginia Tech?*
The consensus of everyone was number 4. Dr. Gaston said that it makes very clear that one of the priorities for people seeking to effect change is to bring back to others a broad understanding of the reasons why; the discussion we have had today needs to be extended to the university at large. Southern Illinois University had a one-day moratorium on classes and invited all faculty to the ballroom to talk about curricular change. It may not be the best approach at Virginia Tech. The discussion has to start in some way even if it is to go back to your department and tell them about what you heard today.

(Slide 53) When looking at existing resources one good way is looking a middle steps. Imagine what you are already doing that might be done a little more intently and effectively. It is not always about doing new things it is in some cases about doing what you do with an intent to educating your students and educating your faculty and by bringing on board people who might have no other opportunity in the course of the year to hear the liberal education goals of the university articulated.

(Slide 54) Shouldn’t all of our course syllabi tell our students what we expect them to gain from the course and shouldn’t our liberal education syllabi explain to students the applicability of what they are learning to what they may be pursuing as a major.

We are not dreaming up a new structure, we are using the structure in place to be more intentional, open and communicate more effective.

(Slide 55) Are there resources and communications structures at Virginia Tech that might be used more effectively to define and promote undergraduate educational objectives?

- The university is fairly electronic and we do receive a daily email from the university but undergraduate education is not the typical topic you see addressed.

- Each college leads a college orientation session for new students but we do not have a general set of learning objectives for the university that anyone is aware of.

- The First Year Experience (FYE) Pathways to Success program has learning objectives and goals. Perhaps as it continues to develop it could be used as a vehicle.
Dr. Gaston said the paradox of our lives as academics – is that as individual scholars there is not one of us who would undertake the writing of a scholarly article or undertake a research project in the laboratory without a very clear sense of what the anticipated objectives are and a very clear sense of the strategy that we will use to obtain it. If we bring to our classroom and to our curriculum the same level of intentionality that we apply as scholars we would be home free, but there seems to be some kind of divide that as faculty we just assume that what we are teaching will lead to the objectives that we think we want to obtain. One fundamental level of discussion that should be had whether anything ever happens or not is what is the institutional meaning of the bachelor's degree.

(Slide 56) The assessment of learning outcomes is all about improvement. It is a faculty driven process that enables faculty to assure the learning of their students and to be more effective in the classroom.

(Slide 57)

What might the university do to make assessment more useful for the faculty?

What might the faculty do to make greater use of assessment in improving learning?

- Faculty do not have much direct input working with the electronic system. Assessment has improved over the last five years from what it was. We have a good Assessment Office and mechanism in place.

Dr. Gaston mentioned Peggy Mackey a national assessment scholar who says that if you want to build a culture of investment you also have to build instruments that only work within the classroom, that the professor uses only for the sake of improvement that do not lead to results that are collected and sent off to SACS. One of the techniques she introduces at the general education institute is called a 1/3 mini evaluation – a short evaluation conducted one third of the way through the semester to gauge what is working or not working in the class.

(Slide 58) If you get to the point that you are willing to say to your colleagues this is what I think we should do, the goals should have these characteristics. They should promise genuine change. They should be jargon free and easily understood by students and by editorial writers. They should reflect what is generally understood as good practice in liberal learning. They should be assessable and measurable, not just we want our students to integrate different crumbs of knowledge. They should show that we are aware of who we are and of what employers seek from our graduates. And they should show that we are not floating something that is unrealistic but that we have, in fact, taken reality into account.

Due to a lack of time the remaining slides were not discussed.