To: SVCAA&SL Murray

From: First Year Task Force

Debbie Bridges, Chair; Rick Larsen (Residential and Greek Life); Gail Zeller (Interim Dean of Student Life); Daryl Kelley (Sociology); Sylvia Asay (Family Studies); Daren Snider (Director of General Studies); Mary Daake (Academic Advising).

Re: Recommendations for First Year Program at UNK

The First Year Task Force was formed in the spring 2008 semester and charged with evaluating the feasibility of continuing the existing First Year Program at UNK, consider possible alternatives for providing the essential elements of a First Year Program to a greater number of students, and submit its recommendations to the SVCAA&SL by October, 2008.

To complete its charge, the First Year Task Force met regularly throughout the spring and into the fall 2008 semesters. To aid us in our task, members considered the following information and data:


- Faculty Senate Minutes, March 1, 2002. Discussion of the First Year Experience Committee's report.

- FY Self-Study report for the APR conducted in February, 2008. Excerpts included Mission, Goals and Objectives, and Effectiveness.


- The UNK Experience: Proposal for First Year Courses – guidelines for developing course for inclusion in UNK’s First Year Program (2002).

- College Student Expectations and Experiences Questionnaires, 2002-04 Summary (available on UNK Academic Affairs web-page).

- EBI Residential Survey results (November 2007).

- Transition options offered by Academic Success.

- Data on freshmen enrollment in GS courses (fall 2007).

In addition to the above information, the First Year Task Force developed and administered a survey to UNK faculty in spring 2008. The objectives of the survey were: 1) to gauge faculty’s understanding of the existing First Year Program; 2) identify what faculty perceived as important elements to include in First Year courses; 3) identify perceived problems with the existing First Year Program; and 4) identify potential solutions to the problems identified.
The Task Force met in early September, 2008 to review the survey results and to further refine its recommendations. Some of the important findings from the survey:

- some evidence that “one size fits all” criteria for FY isn’t acceptable to most, whether it is class size or inclusion of different objectives and topics
- identify issues faculty believe they should not be doing as part of academic classes

However, this does re-open the idea of a variety of options for freshmen that are designed to increase student success and retention, and may very well be a foundation for setting some guidelines for any class designed to increase student success and retention.

- identify objectives and issues that faculty support outside the FY concept or think all students should be able to do, but are not excited about teaching (e.g., community building, socialization skills, etc.)
- general lack of awareness/knowledge of the program
- for those faculty that had an awareness of the First Year Program there seemed to be a general consensus that the current program has some problems, but few ideas of how to solve those problems
- existing program was not the result of a grassroots faculty initiative, but rather the result of a few dedicated individuals working to initiate an idea

After careful deliberation, the First Year Task Force makes the following recommendation:

Suspend the current First Year Program for one year (at least) and then bring the program back in a modified form that makes full use of available campus services and resources in providing the services to aid student transitioning into college.

An important component of the revised First Year Program is the implementation of a new fall convocation for students, geared towards new-incoming freshmen but open to all students. The convocation would provide a forum to explain to students what will be expected of them in college, what types of experiences (opportunities) they might have, and provide the first step in engaging students in campus life at UNK. Having the Chancellor speak with students, presenting teaching awards, or providing students with a UNK pin are possible activities. Implementing a convocation would be a way to develop rituals specific to UNK and foster a sense of community among incoming students.

The structure of the program envisioned by the Task Force is a hybrid approach, in which the program begins with fall orientation and convocation, continues on through the fall semester with regular meetings for the students (either through designated First Year courses or 1 credit hour seminar courses offered through the colleges), with programming that provides a blending of faculty / student life or student success professional staff, and prepares students to enter a “portal” type course in the spring semester. Utilizing a common time for scheduling the 1 credit hour courses would
allow opportunities to bring the entire freshmen class together periodically throughout the fall semester and help build the sense of community on campus.

Regardless of the final form the revised program takes, it is imperative that the program builds upon the elements of academic success and sense of community introduced in fall orientation 2008 and serves to reinforce those ideals. It is also important that any element included in the First Year Program be based on identified “best practices.” Deliberate cooperation and collaboration between the academic side and student life is also essential to the implementation of the first year program.

The hiatus would provide time to put all the necessary pieces in place, make any needed adjustments to curriculum offerings, inform the faculty and receive feedback, and work out the details of cooperation between academic affairs and student life. The hiatus also offers the opportunity for a review of resource requirements for funding the program. Recognizing that any program is going to require financial and administrative support, the hiatus also offers the opportunity to review and develop the needed support for a revised program. Input and support needs to be solicited from administration, faculty, professional staff and others who will be integral to the success of a new program. Additionally, a new program must coordinate with existing and developing programs to provide a seamless integration into University life for new students.

The following discussion provides an overview of the process the Task Force used in developing its recommendations.

Prior to having the survey results to consider, the Task Force identified three alternatives available to UNK, which are discussed below:

1) Continue current program with existing structure (designated First Year courses, faculty and Student Peer Leaders)

2) Coordination of existing components of first year type activities (e.g., FY courses, Education courses, Honors program and Student Life) and filling in the holes (after have been identified).

3) Develop a hybrid program utilizing a tiered approach in delivering experience: combination of select designated First Year Courses with faculty and Student Peer Leaders, use of University Foundations course, and use of existing GS courses and the utilization of RAs to provide some of the bridge activities between classroom and campus life.

Common theme in all alternatives is the recognition for coordination and cooperation between academic affairs and student life; faculty/staff development and training on providing a student friendly environment; and identifying what the real need of today’s students in terms of transitioning to college life.

Upon reviewing the survey results, the Task Force carefully considered the pros and cons associated with each of the above alternatives. This discussion, summarized below, allowed the Task Force to further refine its recommendations for the future.
1) **Continuation of current program with existing structure is fiscally infeasible.** The Task Force reviewed data on the diversity of courses designated as FY, number of sections, and enrollment for the 2002-2007 period. Under the current structure, enrollment in FY courses is capped at 25, Student Peer Leaders receive a $1,000 stipend, and faculty receive a $1,500 stipend. Given these parameters, the First Year Program would have had to have 40 sections in order to provide a First Year course experience for all in-coming freshman in fall 2007 (based on an enrollment of 996). It is evident that costs associated with continuing the existing structure become prohibitive, especially if the goal is to provide a first year experience for every incoming freshmen.

In addition to resource constraints, the Task Force expressed concern about the feasibility of recruiting enough faculty/courses to meet the needs of all incoming freshmen under the existing program structure. There were 11 First Year designated courses in fall 2007. Since 2002, the number of courses has fluctuated between 7 (in 2002) and 17 (in 2004 and 2005). These numbers suggest that even if the existing program is continued unchanged, it is unclear if enough sections would be recruited to provide the program to all in-coming freshmen.

Another concern voiced by members of the Task Force relates to the diversity of course offerings with the existing program and the need for faculty stipends. Review of the course offerings suggests that there is a core group (e.g., ENG, SOC, PE) of courses designated as First Year every fall, but little evidence of increasing diversity. An observation was also made regarding the variation between courses in terms of the types of first year experiences being incorporated. The Task Force concluded that there did not seem to be a logical rationale for continuing the use of faculty stipends in the future.

2) **Coordination of existing components of first year type activities and filling in the holes.** While this approach has merit, it still is problematic in its implementation. The first step to be completed would be a complete census of available type activities. The second step would be to identify deficiencies and develop programming elements to fill the void. The final step would be to piece the program together in a manner that would fulfill program goals and facilitate the assessment of the program. However, the success of a program of this type would rely on the continuation and cooperation of all the individual pieces. The Task Force felt that such a piecemeal approach is less than desirable.

3) **Develop a hybrid program utilizing a tiered approach in delivering experience.** The Task Force recommends the pursuit of this type of structure. As visualized by the Task Force, the program would begin with the fall orientation (mandatory) as offered fall 2008. The program would then build upon this experience by providing / utilizing a combination of select designated First Year Courses with faculty and Student Peer Leaders, use of University Foundations course, and use of existing GS courses and the utilization of RAs to provide some of the bridge activities between classroom and campus life.