

February 10, 2004

To: All Clark Faculty  
From: UAB  
Re: Review of the PLS

Twenty-five years ago, the Clark faculty approved an innovative curriculum designed to expose students to the broad range of the liberal arts while also preparing them for advanced work in their majors. Rather than endorsing a traditional “core curriculum” or resorting to old-fashioned distribution requirements, Clark’s new Program in Liberal Studies (PLS) adopted a “ways of knowing approach” that encouraged an appreciation for the different perspectives that scholars employed in creating new knowledge. Convinced that an “introductory” label might lead to the “dumbing down” of the PLS, the Clark faculty agreed that students should be permitted to fulfill their perspective requirements as late as the spring of their senior year. Over the years, the PLS has won high praise from Clark students and alums for its originality, flexibility, and breadth. It should come as no surprise that our rather unorthodox curriculum has been one of Clark’s most attractive features for prospective students and their parents.

**1. The Review and Assessment of the PLS.** A quarter century after its inception, the PLS is generally regarded as quite successful. During the mid-1990s, however, observers both inside and outside Clark suggested that the time might be ripe for a review. In the spring of 1995, Clark’s Commission on Undergraduate Education (CUE) raised questions about the bite and focus of the PLS. Later that same year, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) team that oversaw Clark’s reaccreditation recommended that we pay closer attention to assessing learning outcomes in the PLS.

Over the past eight years, UAB has examined various aspects of the PLS. The first step was a review of writing across the curriculum that bore fruit during the 1998-99 academic year with a series of recommendations for some important changes in how Verbal Expression (VE) courses are taught. In the fall of 2001, UAB asked Associate Dean of the College Debbie Merrill to undertake a more ambitious assessment of the entire PLS. She developed a three-part system for evaluating the PLS that utilized data drawn from student focus groups, faculty surveys, and senior exit interviews. Her findings suggest some disagreement between students and faculty as to whether all courses bearing a PLS designation actually meet the objectives of the program. During the past six months, Debbie has arranged informal meetings to discuss these findings with faculty who teach in five of the six perspectives, with the sixth meeting (to consider the Aesthetic Perspective) scheduled for late January 2004.

Meanwhile, Provost David Angel asked UAB early last fall to revisit the questions that CUE raised nearly a decade ago regarding the bite and focus of the PLS to ensure that all six perspectives are closely aligned with Clark’s distinctive intellectual signatures—the synergy between teaching and scholarship, student engagement with the wider community, and an international frame of reference. This long process of review, assessment, and brainstorming has produced some recommendations for modifying the PLS

**2. Realignment.** One of UAB’s most important operating principles can best be summed up in the words of Jimmy Carter’s budget director, Bert Lance, who said: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” With this in mind, UAB has taken a careful look at each of the six perspectives and offers the following observations and recommendations:

**a. Aesthetic Perspective (AP).** Based on student and faculty feedback, UAB sees no need to modify the definition of the AP. Although some students would like to see all AP courses require a creative “hands-on” project, faculty were quick to point out that theoretical discussion of aesthetics was equally important in sharpening one’s critical thinking skills. The perfect AP might incorporate both creative activity and theorizing, but students can develop an aesthetic sensibility without completing a hands-on project.

**b. Historical Perspective (HP).** Based on the assessment data, UAB believes that the current definition of the HP is appropriate. There should be greater emphasis, however, on the use of original historical sources in HP courses, which also need to reflect an appreciation for the past for its own sake as well as understanding of the past’s connections to the present and future.

**c. Scientific Perspective (SP).** Faculty and students probably had more to say about the SP than any of the other five perspectives. After reviewing the assessment data, UAB has concluded that the current definition of the SP is sound. All of the faculty who took part in the discussion of this perspective agree that only courses with a real lab component (as opposed to a workbook) should carry the SP designation and that UAB should be careful in monitoring this in the future. Although there was considerable interest among science faculty in increasing the rigor of this perspective by requiring a two-semester SP sequence, there was also concern that staffing needs for such an enhanced requirement would constrain science offerings at more advanced levels. In the end, UAB decided against this idea because of the additional burden it would create, not only for science faculty but also for students who already have formidable requirements for majors, minors, and concentrations beyond the PLS.

**d. Language and Culture Perspective (LP).** UAB sees no need to modify the definition of the LP. Faculty and students seem to agree, however, that some LP courses do not focus enough on the interrelationship between language and culture. Faculty who attended the open discussion of the LP agreed that all courses bearing this designation must include at least one assignment highlighting the cultural and linguistic insights that come from learning a language. In short, conjugating verbs and parsing grammar are not enough.

**e. Comparative Perspective (CP).** Many faculty and students regard the existing CP as the vaguest and most undefined of the six perspectives. Indeed, the definition of the CP seemed so elastic that almost any course in the social sciences (and many in the humanities) could fit. A quick look at the roster of CP courses listed on the Student Records website confirms that the range of offerings here is perhaps the broadest in the entire PLS. The current description of the CP reads as follows:

*Comparative (CP): Comparative perspective courses introduce students to comparative analysis by highlighting human diversity in politics, economics, religion, culture, class, race, gender, or ethnicity. They provide students with the tools for analyzing human experience by examining similarities and differences within and across societies.*

As UAB worked through its review of the PLS, the CP emerged as the perspective most likely to align closely with Clark's "international signature." With that goal in mind, UAB recommends the following definition for a revised and renamed perspective, which will be presented to Faculty Assembly later this academic year for approval:

*Global Comparative Perspective (GP): Global comparative perspective courses introduce students to comparative analysis by exploring the cultural, political, or economic aspects of human diversity in an international context. They provide students with tools for analyzing human experience by examining similarities and differences within and across national borders.*

To ensure consistency in the implementation, the UAB will employ the following internal criteria to determine whether courses should receive the new GP designation: First, students can compare and contrast aspects of cultural, political, and economic diversity at both local and global levels. Second, students can analyze human experience based on this examination of similarities and differences among and within societies.

**f. Values Perspective (VP).** UAB's assessment data suggest that although faculty believe that they are meeting the objectives of the VP, students would like their VP courses to explore more fully the moral values embedded in personal behaviors, public policies, and institutional structures. Furthermore, Clarkies and the faculty who teach them are self-proclaimed "agents of change" who are proud of "making a difference" in the community and "changing our world." By ensuring a better fit between the VP and our "engagement" signature, we can help recruit and retain more and better students whose aspirations coincide with Clark's mission. With all this in mind, UAB proposes that following new definition and criteria for the VP, which will be presented to Faculty Assembly later this academic year for approval:

*Values (VP): Values perspective courses examine the moral dimension of human life as reflected in personal behavior, institutional structures, and public policy in local and global communities. Courses taught from the values perspective focus not only on the systematic formulation and analysis of moral and ethical claims but also on how moral decisions affect both the individual and society.*

To ensure consistency in the implementation, the UAB will employ the following internal criteria to determine whether courses should receive the revised VP designation: First, Students will be able to identify the moral values that are embedded in personal behavior and public policy. Second, students will be able to analyze ethical issues, formulate reasoned evaluations of moral and ethical claims, and appreciate how individual choices make a difference in the community.

**3. Formal Analysis (FA).** UAB also reviewed the FA requirement for the first time in twenty-five years. Faculty teaching FA courses in mathematics, the social sciences, and philosophy recognize the important role of logic, and in particular of deductive logic, in the FA courses. Other common aspects of FA courses include: abstraction; the employment of a formal, symbolic language; the interpretation of real world situations in that language, that is to say, modeling; the development of theories using deductive logic and/or mathematics; and the interpretation of the results of the analysis back to the real world. In essence, an FA course should teach students how to use abstract symbolism and deductive logic to advance knowledge. With this in mind, UAB proposes the following new definition, which explains more effectively what the broad range of courses that currently meet this requirement have in common. This proposal will be presented to Faculty Assembly later this academic year for approval:

*Formal analysis (FA): Formal analysis courses include the use of a formal, symbolic language as appropriate for a specific discipline, rules of logic for that language, and the use of that language for modeling the subject matter of the discipline.*

**4. Verbal Expression (VE).** Although we discussed the VE requirement, we did not undertake a full review, largely because UAB established a task force which prepared a full-scale study of writing across the curriculum during the late 1990s. Rather than reinventing the wheel, UAB will take a close look at this task force's final report, which was completed in May 2000. Then UAB will discuss with Anne Geller, the Director of the Writing Center, how best to improve the teaching of writing at Clark.

**5. Periodic Review of PLS Courses.** UAB believes that the best way to ensure quality and coherence in the PLS is to encourage faculty to reexamine regularly whether those courses carrying a perspective designation actually meet the objectives spelled out in the catalog. Once each year, UAB will host a forum on each of the six perspectives at which faculty can share thoughts and trade ideas. On a rotating basis, faculty teaching perspective, FA, and VE courses

will be asked once every four years to prepare a retrospective report spelling out why their course should continue to carry a particular designation and showing how their course meets the goals and objectives of the PLS. The idea here is not to create more paperwork for everyone but rather to encourage faculty to align their teaching with the broader objectives that are central to the PLS and the Clark curriculum.

**6. The Bottom Line.** The proposals outlined above are the product of more than three years of review and reassessment of the PLS conducted by UAB. The committee's goal was to preserve what was working well, to repair what was broken, and to align the PLS more closely with Clark's distinctive intellectual characteristics—the synergy between teaching and scholarship, student engagement with the wider community, and an international frame of reference. UAB hopes that our faculty colleagues will consider the proposed changes to the PLS in that spirit. We are well aware that some faculty may regard these proposals as far too modest while others may regard them as far too drastic. We are also well aware that additional work remains to be done in key areas, such as the teaching of writing. Faculty approval of this package of reforms, however, will mark a very big and very important first step toward providing our students with the 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum that they deserve.