INTERDISCIPLINARY LIBERAL ARTS
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

External Review Summary Humanities: Liberal Arts
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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INTRODUCTION:

I was invited to the UTC campus to assist with an external review of the Humanities: Liberal Arts (B.A.) Program on March 26th and 27th, 2025. The Humanities: Liberal Arts HLA (hereafter) program is housed in the College of Arts and Sciences. Bachelors of Arts programs like this one–generally considered 'open' majors–offer students a highly adaptive and flexible degree experience. During my visit, I spoke with individuals associated with the program key to its success, such as coordinator Dennis Plaisted, Director of Assessments Cindy Williamson, Provost Jerold Hale, the Walker Center for Teaching and Learning Director Victoria Bryan, Library Head Bo Baker, CAS Dean Pamela Riggs-Gelasco and Humanities: Liberal Arts students. I was impressed with the high commitment, enthusiasm, and dedication I witnessed in my interviews with faculty and staff. This is a credit to the program and to the College of Arts and Sciences and UTC at large.

I will be utilizing the following structure for my report in the following manner based on the categories identified in the UTC Academic Programs Reviewer Checklist: (1) General Observations, (2) Learning Outcomes, (3) Curriculum Design/Impact, (4) Student Experience, (5) Faculty, (6) Learning & Teaching Resources, (7) Program Support, and (Summary and Recommendations. I have considered various indicators for each, such as interviews, institutional data, and shared program/university documents. Program Coordinator Dennis Plaisted 2024 Humanities: Liberal Arts Self-Study served as the orientation for this assessment.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

First, I was very impressed with the quality of the faculty and staff here at UTC. In the numerous interviews and conversations I had with key players and the UTC Academic Assessment staff, their commitment, understanding, and expertise were thoughtfully demonstrated throughout the outside reviewer's site visit. In particular, I'd like to point out that Program Coordinator Dr. Dennis Plaisted's program management was very competent, especially given his many other responsibilities. So many of the challenges, limitations, and approaches he has taken–given the resources he is given– are very familiar to those of us managing similar interdisciplinary B.A. programs. One thing that struck me was how efficient Professor Plaisted is in utilizing what is already in place and maximizing the available resources. Interdisciplinary programs such as his are–by nature–very cost-effective because these require ingenuity and creativity in carefully maximizing existing resources. The large diversity and availability of course offerings are impressive, allowing excellent customization and uniqueness of academic experience and career credentialization and preparation. UTC Humanities: Liberal Arts faces considerable challenges, constraints, and resource needs, as many interdepartmental/interdisciplinary-based programs do. However, UTC Humanities: Liberal Arts has a sound foundation that it can expand and build as it strives to fully realize its potential as a considerable benefit to students and the state of Tennessee.

PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Program learning outcomes are structured around five identified outcomes: (1) a Senior Capstone project, (2) an Annotated Bibliography Project, (3) A Rationale document, (4) Demonstrated Articulation of Complex Ideas/Theories, and (5) Critical Reasoning Skills (with a special emphasis on analysis, synthesis, and interpretation.) Student Capstone Projects, Annotated Bibliography assignments, and Degree Reflection essays were used as the outcomes assessment samples. Assessment measures and rubrics were organized around the following skills: articulation of complex ideas, theories, and arguments, critical reasoning, and analytical ability. UTC assessment guidelines ask that programs perform at least once during a 3-year cycle. Although learning outcomes performance targets weren't met in 2022-23, they did come very close (e.g., 75% goal, 66% score). Using this, the program instituted changes in instruction as a result, with an improvement in outcome in 2023-25 to 100% of the performance target goal. This indicates that Humanities: Liberal Arts uses assessment strategically to improve teaching outcomes. As always, developing a reliable and useable assessment program takes time, and given that this Humanities concentration is only a few years old, there is a likelihood that the program is being thoughtful and purposeful in its employment of Learning Outcomes and Learning Assessment practices as a foundational building block for a successful program. Nevertheless, existing learning outcomes appear appropriate, although primarily traditional.

CURRICULUM DESIGN | IMPACT:

Citing the language of the UTC 2021-25 Strategic Plan and the five College of Arts and Sciences curricular goals as my benchmark, there is sufficient evidence (e.g., learning outcomes, curriculum design, anecdotal student experiences) that Humanities: Liberal Arts assists the College of Arts and Sciences in meeting the more prominent university-wide goals by providing 'an essential liberal arts . . . education that prepares students for an increasingly global context and economy." Additionally, the program "promotes human achievement," embraces cultural and intellectual diversity, while also assisting students to fully appreciate their acquisition of knowledge and intellectual ability through exciting and innovative classroom experience. Humanities: Liberal Arts has created a curricular scaffolding of key assignments that both guide and help students realize and utilize their intellectual and personal agency in a manner that prepares them for what is to come after graduation. Although flexible and adaptive in terms of elective course choice, degree requirements are appropriate for this level of undergraduate construction.

Equally, it should be noted that the degree requirements structure (e.g., curriculum mapping) provides students with–possibly–the most significant degree of individualized customization, allowing students to fine-tune and focus their career

accreditation in infinite ways. Most noticeable is the efficiency of credit utilization. When a student's focus or interest changes, there is no loss in the value of credits earned toward graduation because of the designed flexibility inherent in the Humanities: Liberal Arts degree requirements. So—unlike when a student changes majors—no academic credit is left behind or underutilized. Future curricular plans shared with me understand the need for a clearer sense of academic purpose and design that utilizes an interdisciplinary critical approach as the 'centerpiece' of the degree experience. Given that students in the program can take courses from all of the liberal arts departments in the college, there is a wealth of classes available in 13+ core disciplines. It appears rare that a Humanities Liberal Arts student can't find or register for a course suitable for their degree completion.

The design of the current curriculum is such that students are "virtually guaranteed to be exposed to a variety of pedagogical methods, technological innovation, a diverse intellectual environment, and learning experiences that help them master key career skills, such as critical thinking, written & verbal communication, fact-based research/ argumentation, adaptive agency, and project management. UTC Humanities: Liberal Arts' curriculum more than meets the expectations identified in the UTC 2021-25 Strategic Plan & the CAS curricular goals.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

In evaluating student experience, I utilized several measures, including student interviews, reflection essays, and course survey data. The student experience in a program such as Humanities: Liberal Arts differs somewhat from traditional majors. Given that HLA students take classes from any of the 13+ core Liberal Arts disciplines and have only one specific HLA-required senior capstone course, there is little opportunity for students enrolled in the major to interact. In your typical majors, where students take similar courses and have the exact required courses degree requirements, students come to know each other and form a sense of major identity. HLA majors are primarily isolated and forced to study as individuals rather than as 'majors.' One advantage of this is an unavoidable skill independent students acquire: adaptive agency. Whereas—for example-literature students—develop a shared familiarity with 'how literature is taught,' HLA students must navigate many different disciplinary approaches, disciplinary cultures, and a wider diversity of intellectual and academic understanding. Whereas lit majors learn to think like lit majors, HLA majors learn to think in multiple disciplinary thinking modalities. HLA students learn to be adaptive and are able—by necessity—to shift intellectual or professional environments when most of their upper-division coursework is scattered across a consortium of core disciplines.

One of the key benefits of a program such as HLA—confirmed in my interview with a student—is its flexibility and accessibility, especially for older students or those

returning to complete their degree working full-time and/or raising families. The student I spoke with loved that she could take classes in several different career field interests while also allowing her to utilize coursework she had already completed. Most importantly, it allowed her to meet the demands of her 9-5 day job. She cited the diversity of choice, individual mentoring from the program coordinator, and the accessibility of online course offerings as specific benefits of the major. Another advantage is the greater flexibility and diversity of opportunities for experiential learning outside of the classroom. The HLA program allows students to work with research or internship experiences and take study-abroad courses that they receive credit toward their HLA degree. Averages in student course surveys in all of the significant areas of student satisfaction and learning from 2019-2024 showed that students across the board were satisfied with the courses they were taking and that both instructor presence/feedback and course content/work were expected. Key measures were highly favorable in the following areas (e.g., instructor willingness, classroom engagement, timely feedback, communication, and instructor expectations. In summary, HLA (and UTC) provides students with a credible and meaningful undergraduate university experience.

FACULTY:

In my consideration of faculty, because the HLA program has very few faculty directly associated with the program, my remarks here are mainly about the quality and expertise of the CAS faculty in general. Existing structures for faculty evaluation and promotion seem both robust and efficient. Teaching loads and service expectations appear reasonable and on par with peer universities. Again, this is primarily based on conversations with a limited number of faculty members and, as such, can be better substantiated in individual department program reviews since nearly all of the faculty members who teach courses that serve the humanities programs are housed in regular departments. One clear advantage of a program that utilizes faculty from an entire college is that students have access to a high rate of tenured and lecturer faculty with considerable academic accomplishment.

LEARNING & TEACHING RESOURCES:

The impressive set of resources for learning and faculty teaching excellence available to HLA is a testament to UTC's commitment and investment in student and faculty success. UTC utilizes a hub-based advising structure where assigned professional academic advisors serve students, providing a first tier of student success. HLA also requires that students meet individually with their program mentor at least once every semester. This serves as a second tier for student success while giving students some sense of belonging in their program. Of course, one clear advantage of a program such as HLA is the considerable palate of additional learning opportunities outside the classroom, such as guest lectures, events, film screenings, internship opportunities, essay contests, student achievement recognition awards/events, research &

publication opportunities, service learning courses, and faculty-led study abroad programs/trips. One centerpiece for student success is the Center for Academic Support and Advisement, which offers students a wealth of resources and support, such as tutoring, academic exploration, peer-academic coaching, and tips for academic success.

Two areas of additional resources dedicated to student learning are the UTC Library and the Walker Center for Teaching and Learning. HLA students have access to a robust set of library-based learning resources, such as individualized access to librarians, assigned program/departmental liaisons, and a considerable array of library materials (databases, audio-visual materials, journals, books, E-books, etc..). Students have access to special collections that provide access to local cultural heritage resources. They host the Writing & Communications Center, which offers students help with meeting writing and research assignments. UTC Library makes a wide range of current visual-audio and digital technologies (equipment, studio production space, 3D printing, etc.) accessible to students through the UTC Library Studio. Computer notebooks, scientific calculators, and multifunctional printing, copying, and scanning equipment are available to every student. The library coordinates with the Disability Resource Center, providing dedicated space and special accessibility resources. Most telling was the high commitment to student success library personnel voiced in several conversations during my visit to the UTC Library.

The Walker Center for Teaching and Learning serves as the university foundation for teaching and learning and offers a wide array of services key to student and faculty success. The center offers numerous workshops and teaching effectiveness resources for faculty through several units, such as the Teaching and Learning Institute, iDEAs Certification Services, and the Instructional Excellence Conference. It also provides support and resources for faculty who use the campus Canvas online learning management system.

Finally, it should be noted that the efforts of the HLA program Director, Dennis Plaisted, should be acknowledged as a vital resource that supports learning and teaching within the program. Again, this is achieved in addition to the number of other duties and responsibilities Dr. Plaisted has to his home department outside of the HLA program.

PROGRAM SUPPORT:

Interdepartmental/interdisciplinary programs often operate on little or almost nonexistent budgets, and the majority of program support is usually cobbled together through existing departments having some tangential relationship with the program. Program Coordinator Plaisted is strategic, thoughtful, and practical in utilizing the limited resources available to his program. The HLA program receives a modest

budget for essential program needs such as recruitment, program marketing, promotion of events and activities, etc. Dr. Plaisted has utilized and maximized their little budgets with admirable efficiency. Equally, Dr. Plaisted has devoted extra time and effort to the everyday small but necessary tasks that always need to get done and are so often an additional load on a faculty's time, such as attending recruitment events, making themselves available to help students and parents understand the value of their programs, and the assisting with the creation and promotion of posters and flyers featuring and publicizing their programs.

Space is always one of the most 'painful' realities of every university environment. Having a space that is recognized as the Humanities Program space is vital for any long-term success. So often, interdepartmental or interdisciplinary programs exist in a void, drifting here and there, never enjoying any actual space they can call home. Programs need an actual space to survive and flourish, a space where students can come to, where faculty, no matter how few, can be found, and where others on campus do recognize as specific to the Humanities Programs. Actual dedicated program space is essential for program identity, community, affinity, and credibility. Although there are plans to transfer the departments associated with the Humanities Program to one building, which is a good step, an actual space devoted to each of the tracks should be a priority, no matter how small.
Finally, successful programs require support staff. Currently, the administrative assistant housed in the Philosophy and Religion department assists with the HLA clerical needs. Given the current size, this may be the more efficient use of existing administrative support resources. Still, if program growth is a future goal, administrative staff unique to the HLA should be considered.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

In summary, I am impressed with the HLA program as it exists now—in that it has a solid foundation, its curriculum is strong and strategic for student success, its current leadership is strong, and the program operates successfully. Everything seems to be there that a program needs fundamentally to succeed over time. The past several years have been utilized as a successful birth, and now it can grow, but only if additional strategic resources are provided. Program growth requires upfront expenditure, which requires time before one sees a return. I believe programs such as HLA are invaluable for a certain kind of university student and for people who want to return and finish their degrees. The HLA program is substantive, beneficial, and of great value—not only to the students who graduate from these programs but also to the State of Tennessee.

Please consider the following recommendations as you consider the future of the Humanities: Liberal Arts program.

- Consider bringing all humanities programs under some unifying name (e.g., Integrative Studies). This would provide more students with a sense of community and program identity.

- Program campus visibility. This is an ongoing struggle, getting the word out among students that the program exists and has value in the academic experience it provides and how it prepares students with the skills needed for a vast range of careers.

- Consider expanding curriculum skills beyond traditional skills (critical thinking, problem-solving) to include more digital media, graphical-visual information, etc.

- Think about developing a specific Program Identity and Purpose, such as Integrative Humanities or Interdisciplinary Studies)

- Develop—if possible—a spine/core course structure (e.g., Junior & Senior Seminar) that helps students better understand and utilize the courses taken in a set of learning outcomes that focus on key career skills (e.g., fact-based argumentation, verbal communication, graphic/visual communication and writing communication. Create a scaffolding of seminar assignments where students practice and master career skills (critical writing projects, lit reviews, research posters, and podcasts).

- Discuss the possibility of expanding the Humanities: Liberal Arts Program as a fully online degree completion that provides students across the state of Tennesee with greater access to completing their degrees. This would undoubtedly meet the state's needs.

- Begin to build—if possible—a core faculty/coordinator's full-time position dedicated to the Humanities: Liberal Arts Program. The administrative/service workload that any successful academic program requires is huge—especially if growth is one of the program goals. Faculty with other full-time department responsibilities often burn out after a couple of years. Do be careful of this reality.

- Build on the existing student self-study/academic rationale process as a potential spine experience for the major.

- Develop—or retool an existing—general education courses as a pipeline into the major.