

NORTHLAND COLLEGE

Office of Academic Affairs

July 2011

RE: STARS Innovation Credit – Northland College Connections Program

Dear AASHE Representative,

Increasingly, individuals in the United States, and other cultures as well, experience themselves as fragments. Separated from natural ecosystems by urban and industrial infrastructures and from one another by communications media that provide pervasive links without substantive connections, individuals struggle to establish fulfilling relationships and to understand how they might contribute meaningfully to the communities in which they live. Unfortunately, the pursuit of a college degree can contribute to this fragmentation because often it requires geographical moves that further separate students from the natural and human communities that sustain them and because many students experience college curricula as a series of discrete, disciplinary-bound courses.

To address this challenge and to empower students through experiences of connectedness, Northland College faculty designed and implemented the *Connections Program*—a general education program that supports integration across the disciplines and that engages students in sustained studies of complex systems.

Typically, general education programs are organized along disciplinary lines, and students fulfill their general education requirements by completing individual courses that are representative of the traditional humanities, social science, and natural science disciplines. In these programs, students are exposed to different disciplinary approaches, but the programs do not demonstrate the importance of bringing multiple, disciplinary perspectives to bear on complex systems, nor do they guarantee that students recognize and come to appreciate both the strengths and limitations of various disciplinary approaches. Thus, typical general education programs tend to provide recruiting opportunities for disciplinary majors, rather than opportunities for students to develop integrative ways of knowing.

The primary innovation of Northland's *Connection Program* is that it organizes student learning around complex problems and integrated groupings, or blocks, of interdisciplinary courses, rather than around traditional disciplinary boundaries. As a consequence of this structure, students begin their college studies with a focus on climate change, food systems, or watersheds, rather than a focus on English, biology, or sociology. In addition, they come to know their faculty members not only as English teachers, biologists, or sociologists but also as members of multi-disciplinary teams dedicated to helping them to develop holistic understandings of real and complex topics of study.

Ultimately, Northland College's *Connections Program* models the integrative ways of knowing that are essential precursors to individuals and communities making effectual decisions about how to live and act sustainably within the complex relationships that characterize life in the twenty-first century.

Sincerely,



Alan Brew

Interim Dean of the Faculty

& Associate Professor of English

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