

DKU Educational Context Memo

As part of our broader effort to enhance teaching and mentoring, we are developing a definition to guide how effectiveness is evaluated. This definition of teaching and mentoring effectiveness must be grounded in DKU's unique educational context shaped by its structural, intellectual, and cultural characteristics, and framed within the overarching global liberal arts and sciences (LAS) education model that integrates these contextual elements into a cohesive and aspirational vision. The ideas summarized in this memo draw on perspectives shared by the Teaching and Mentoring Effectiveness Committee (TMEC) members and faculty representatives and highlight key contextual elements that reflect DKU's educational structures, learning community characteristics, and educational aspirations.

1. The Global Liberal Arts and Sciences Education Model

DKU's LAS education model serves as the overarching framework that connects and shapes all other aspects of our teaching and mentoring context. As a global LAS university located in China, DKU offers an education that is marked by intellectual breadth, critical inquiry, individual autonomy, and interdisciplinary exploration. In contrast to the dominant education model in China which often prioritizes specialization and professional preparation, this model represents both a philosophical and cultural shift to an education oriented toward foundational and professional competencies that connect to a wide range of professional careers. DKU's LAS model goes beyond an either/or distinction between liberal and professional learning, instead embracing their integration as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a transformative education.

The diversity of intellectual approaches offered by DKU education requires students to explore and choose freely one's course of study. The Common Core and interdisciplinary majors that offer a rich selection of electives reflect the intellectual diversity and curricular flexibility, encouraging students to practice wide exploration and exercise informed and independent judgment about critical human concerns. Signature Work requirements extend this model by integrating liberal exploration with self-discovery, purposeful learning, and real-world connection.

Ultimately, DKU's LAS education aims to cultivate learners who embody the seven Animating Principles that enable them to navigate complexity and uncertainty with intellectual adaptability and flexibility, integrating durable skills and habits of mind underlying a LAS education and the applied, experiential, and practical engagement and demands across professional and life contexts. The outcomes of our undergraduates, over 85% of whom attend terminal masters' programs in applied fields, is strong evidence of our success in linking a liberal education to successful real-world outcomes. Articulating the distinct value of LAS education is therefore essential to clarifying the purpose and aspiration of teaching and mentoring effectiveness at DKU.

2. Sino-US Education Model

DKU operates as a Sino-American joint-venture (JV) institution. Optimally, DKU integrates Duke University's academic standards and liberal arts ethos with the formal requirements of the Chinese higher education system, leveraging the strengths of both systems and taking advantage of the community and the region in the development of academic life to produce an education superior to both conventional Chinese and American models. In the classroom, DKU's JV model introduces both opportunities and constraints. DKU students are animated by competing and often tension-bound ways of thinking about the world, and so cross-cultural learning and cross-cultural misunderstanding are each likely outcomes; skillful teachers can meet this challenge by leading students to a better understanding of rooted globalism, which provides a sensible framework for navigating differences like these. China, and the Jiangnan region in particular, is important context for the DKU education. DKU faculty have the opportunity to engage student with the region; uneven language ability and competing incentives are barriers to wider adoption of this practice, but teachers should remain mindful of this whenever possible.

Finally, the global educational philosophies brought by a diverse faculty and student body are rich resources for rethinking the purposes and practices of education. Teaching and learning behaviors and practices rooted in and influenced by various traditions lead to productive tensions and dynamics that can become a source of pedagogical innovation. For example, the Confucian notion that the teacher is a moral and intellectual model may be in tension with Western liberal arts traditions that emphasize student autonomy and critical thinking, yet this tension would help reimagine teaching as both mentorship and facilitation of inquiry. Within the Sino-U.S. education model, these dynamic interactions across traditions enable a promising support for an integrated approach to education that neither tradition could support alone.

3. Highest Level of Educational Quality

DKU aspires to the highest level of educational quality, setting a strong value on teaching quality and aiming to be among the best in how it teaches and supports student learning. This commitment ensures that its standards of education is grounded in the science of learning and evidence-based pedagogical practices, and these principles are embedded in both faculty development and evaluation processes at DKU.

Openness to pedagogical innovation among our faculty is a good proxy for high-quality teaching. DKU faculty should remain curious about novel pedagogy and advances in the science of learning. More specifically, this would involve clear learning outcomes coupled to rigorous assessment, maintenance of highly relevant (not necessarily current) content, continued responsive refinement of all course structures and strong student engagement across the course. Therefore, strong course management, in its broadest sense, must be the center of faculty teaching approaches. High quality teaching practices naturally build

on deep mastery of the course content and are strengthened through active engagement in research and reflective practice.

4. Educational Innovation and Experimentation

DKU's founding vision establishes it as a distinctive institution dedicated to advancing high-quality education through innovation and experimentation. It was created not to replicate Duke or other models, but to serve as a site for designing and demonstrating better models of higher education. This purpose is central to the Duke-China partnership, which envisions DKU as leading rather than following, and responds to a global need for universities that can effectively address the complex challenges of the future. This aspirational identity makes educational distinction a matter of institutional relevance and sustainability.

To fulfill this vision, our path is necessarily sequential and integrated. The essential first step is to ensure that the highest quality of education is universally embedded in our development and evaluation. This requires a foundational commitment to the science of learning and the consistent implementation of evidence-based pedagogical practices in every classroom, every advising and mentoring session, and every extra-curricular activity. Achieving this baseline is not separate from our innovative mission; it is the critical prerequisite that gives it credibility and direction.

Innovation and experimentation, therefore, are not a replacement for foundational quality but a natural extension of it. Once effective practices are in place, DKU's institutional identity calls for building upon them to navigate and reconcile the varied expectations of our stakeholders and the complex challenges of the 21st century. This work is central to our continued relevance.

Advancing this dual goal within an emerging Sino-U.S. joint venture presents distinct challenges, including tendencies toward familiar academic structures, differing risk tolerances, and the pressures of complying with multiple educational systems. Navigating these dynamics requires that we embrace innovation as a disciplined process of learning and adaptation. Ultimately, sustaining this vision depends on fostering an institutional culture that deeply values pedagogical quality, actively welcomes new ideas, and promotes shared ownership of the university's innovative mission.

5. Interdisciplinary Curriculum

DKU majors are structured around disciplinary intersections that bring together distinct approaches to knowledge, research, and practice. At the center of each major is a set of courses that explore these intersections, and which all students in each major must take. The design of the DKU curriculum attempts to integrate these various approaches into a set of core courses that will define the field of study for a given major. Beyond this core, students also choose a major track that focuses on specific disciplinary fields of knowledge, research, and practice. The tracks serve to deepen disciplinary competency while the core serves to broaden the view of disciplinary intersections. This structure of the DKU majors is a central feature of the DKU teaching and mentoring context.

Faculty have stressed the importance of defining “interdisciplinarity” in the context of the DKU curriculum. Some institutional effort has been made to offer relevant parameters for curricular design. These include the document “Design Principles for Interdisciplinary Curriculum” as well as conversations that take place regularly within major conventions, Faculty Assembly committees, and as part of curricular revision processes. These conversations and documents are a key context for DKU’s exploration of “interdisciplinarity” and its bearing on teaching and mentoring.

6. Undergraduate Research, Signature Work and Real-World Connections

Undergraduate research is a central element of a LAS education. It encompasses collaborative projects between faculty and students, independent research projects led by students, the involvement of student research assistants into faculty’s research projects and labs, the integration of research practice, skills training and the faculty’s own research into courses, and the requirement of Signature Work in the junior and senior years of the student. It enables students to extend their learning beyond the classroom, engage with open and important societal and scientific problems, develop a more authentic relationship with the subject of their study, and gain valuable preparation for graduate schools and a professional career.

More specifically, the requirement of a Signature Work (SW) embodies the LAS model’s commitment to integration and connection. The Signature Work project builds on the integration of thematic courses, capstone courses and active mentorship by faculty advisors to create scholarly output or a creative/design project. In this culminating project, students independently pursue a question or problem of personal and societal relevance and integrate knowledge and skills acquired in their coursework and experiences. Faculty emphasize the value of connecting academic learning with application to real-world issues and research frontiers, frequently drawing on China’s local context while preparing students for global challenges. The diverse student background at DKU gives rise to creative and scholarly projects that address problems from around the world and require faculty to be culturally sensitive and take a global perspective. Signature work as a curricular feature reflects DKU’s commitment to integrative and student-centered learning that fosters independence, curiosity, connection, problem-solving, and self-discovery that are essential for learning and growth beyond undergraduate education.

7. Mentorship

Mentorship is a distinctive feature of the DKU educational experience, shaping how students, faculty, and staff engage with learning and with one another. It is embedded across the academic, co-curricular, and professional aspects of community life, fostering relationships that support intellectual curiosity, personal growth, and a sense of belonging. Within a liberal arts and sciences context, mentorship links individual learning experiences to the university’s broader mission of cultivating reflective, engaged and purposeful learners.

Mentorship at the university carries multiple, interconnected dimensions. At its core is the faculty-student relationship. Through which students receive guidance on their academic pathways, personal development, and professional aspirations. Faculty advising, supervision in research and creative projects (e.g., SRS, SW, and independent studies), and engagement through experiential programs (e.g., Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Community Based Learning) provide students with opportunities for close interaction with faculty mentors.

A second dimension is peer mentorship among students. In classrooms, residential settings, and student organizations, students learn with and from one another by sharing experiences, insights, and strategies for success. This peer-to-peer engagement builds community, promotes collaborative learning, and reinforces the culture of mutual support that underpins the university's learning environment.

A third dimension consists of the institutional networks and programs designed to foster and sustain mentorship. Units focused on academic advising, career development, intercultural engagement, wellness, and student success offer structured resources that complement faculty and peer mentoring and scaffold students as they navigate their academic and personal journeys.

Mentorship also extends to faculty-to-faculty engagement as an important aspect of professional collaboration and pedagogical development. Through conversation, classroom visits, peer observations, and joint work on curriculum and teaching initiatives, faculty learn from one another in ways that support continuous improvement and strengthen the collective teaching community.

Together, these four interrelated layers of mentorship illustrate how DKU cultivates a learning community grounded in connection, reflection, and mutual support. Mentorship not only shapes the student and faculty experience but also reflects the values and practices that underpin our shared commitment to effective teaching and mentoring.

8. The Seven-Week Term Structure

The seven-week term is one of DKU's most distinctive structural features, shaping its approach to teaching, learning, and mentorship. Each academic year includes four seven-week terms and one one-week mini-term. Students usually take two courses per term, totaling about 8–10 credits. Faculty typically teach up to half of a full-time load per term, ensuring no one teaches more than this in a session.

The intensive structure fosters active and inquiry-based learning, frequent feedback, and close faculty–student interaction. It allows focus concentrated on fewer subjects, encouraging deep, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning. At the same time, the pace and workload pose challenges that DKU continues to examine through the ASLI plan, which studies best practices in intensive learning environments.

9. Close-Knit Learning Community in Varied Classroom Contexts

As a small and close-knit residential community, DKU is characterized by frequent, sustained interactions among students, faculty, and staff. Students often encounter the same faculty/staff members/peers repeatedly across courses, Signature Work supervision, research projects, and co-curricular activities. This density of contact fosters strong faculty–student relationships, close peer networks, and a sense of belonging that students were widely recognized as a defining feature of their DKU experience and of liberal arts and sciences education more broadly. In this context, “teaching” is not confined to what happens in class meetings; it extends into advising, informal conversations, co-curricular engagement, and the broader intellectual life of the campus.

At the same time, disproportionate student interest in some areas/demands on divisional foundation courses mean that classroom contexts vary widely. Effective teaching in a class of 40 will differ from effective teaching in a class of 8 or 18. Faculty efforts to structure their classrooms to exhibit best practices require more intention and institutional support than a lower-enrollment course. Smaller courses may lend themselves more readily to intensive discussion, problem-based learning, iterative feedback, and field- or community-based activities that capitalize on the surrounding region. Larger courses may appropriately rely more on structured lectures, carefully designed use of instructional technology, and intentional use of breakout groups, TAs, and other mechanisms that create interaction at scale.

10. Diverse, Multicultural, and Multilingual Student Body

Students at DKU bring diverse cultural perspectives, language proficiencies, and academic preparations that make our classrooms dynamic yet pedagogically complex. As of Fall 2025, DKU enrolls a total of 1,892 undergraduate students representing about 70 countries. Approximately 70% of the students are from Mainland China, 10% from the United States, and 20% from other parts of the world. The diverse student population enriches classroom discussions and fosters cross cultural learning but also requires faculty to navigate wide variations in communication styles, academic expectations and prior educational experiences.

Many students, particularly those from educational systems that emphasize exam performance and disciplinary specialization, enter DKU with expectations shaped by competitive academic cultures and strong external pressures to achieve measurable success. The resulting GPA-oriented culture influences can at times discourage risk taking and intellectual exploration, shaping learning behaviors that may limit deeper engagement or interdisciplinary curiosity at DKU.

Educating such a diverse and ambitious student population at DKU therefore requires thoughtful, adaptive and inclusive pedagogy. Faculty should balance the cultivation of liberal learning, intellectual curiosity, resilience and self-directed exploration with an awareness of the cultural, linguistic, and social factors influencing student expectations and engagement. A strong emphasis on language acquisition and multilingual competency is essential in fostering deeper cross-cultural understanding and equipping students to

navigate an increasingly interconnected world. Effective teaching and mentoring at DKU therefore entail creating a learning environment that is culturally responsive, intellectually challenging, and supportive of students' holistic development within the global liberal arts and science model.