

LIBERAL STUDIES

Liberal Studies Revision FAQ

Frequently asked questions about the Liberal Studies Revision Project

What is the updated timeline for the project?

Please see the [Timeline Document](#) (MS Word).

Why is it necessary to revise the current Liberal Studies program?

Every program should be reviewed with an eye towards improvement. The current curriculum was designed in 1987 and has been in place since 1989. While it served as a model of general education at that time and was lauded in 1995 by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education site visitors as a "star in the crown at IUP," it is evident seventeen years later that some essential knowledge, values, and skills are not addressed in the current curriculum. Well-respected academies in higher education as well as our own regional accreditor, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, expects that baccalaureate graduates achieve a degree of proficiency with content related to global awareness, information literacy, oral communication, and values and ethics. These concepts and skills are not emphasized in the current Liberal Studies curriculum. To continue to hold fast to a curriculum that is a familiar friend but that fails to address these areas in a deliberate manner short-changes the students we are educating for a world where these proficiencies are expected as necessary, not ideal.

A revised curriculum can address these areas of essential knowledge, values, and skills.

Educational research related to student retention suggests that a well-conceptualized and operational first-year experience is a factor that contributes to positive outcomes in the area of student retention. Many universities have implemented very successful first-year experience programs that can serve as models. While our current curriculum was planned with an intentional first-year experience, the concept was not embraced universitywide, and for a number of reasons it failed to be sustained over time.

A revised curriculum can address the area of student retention by incorporating a first-year experience and by creating intentional bridges with the student affairs division to help actualize the experience.

The outcomes that relate to general education or liberal studies should be achieved by students across the curriculum, not just in isolated courses. The current literature on general education issues suggests that general education programs are often structurally and philosophically disconnected and separate from the major; as a result, the faculty-at-large perceive this component of the students' educational experience as someone else's responsibility. Student comments suggest that they experience a chasm between liberal studies courses and major courses when they state that liberal studies courses have little or nothing to do with the knowledge and skills they need in a particular field of study.

A revised curriculum can be created with intentional bridges between liberal studies and the major. Finding ways to make an explicit connection between a liberal education and a student's place in the workplace and society can help to make the education more seamless, relevant, and coherent. The adoption of a set of university student learning outcomes is one such first step.

The increasing number of requests for exceptions to the requirements in the current curriculum suggests that the foundational beliefs and assumptions that underlie the current liberal studies program may not be espoused by the majority of people who are in positions to support and rule on exceptions.

A new curriculum is timely when there is evidence to suggest that we no longer fully support the philosophical and academic rationale of the current program.

It is clear that faculty members are concerned about the whole notion of outcomes assessment. In the present academic environment, the requirement for institutions to examine the evidence that reflects the degree to which students are achieving predetermined outcomes is no longer debatable. Having in place a systematic plan for assessment that is meaningful and feasible for informing the faculty about student learning is required by the PASSHE and by our regional accreditor, Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Written over seventeen years ago, the current Liberal Studies goals were written with evaluation strategies in mind, but the plan for assessment was not comprehensive enough to meet the current expectations for assessment, and the measurement tools relied too heavily on self-reported data. In fact, a lack of direct evidence about student learning was mentioned in the recommendations from the 1995 Middle States site visit. At that time, it was recommended that we move towards more direct measures that provided evidence of students meeting LS goals.

In summary, a universitywide assessment plan for determining whether IUP undergraduates achieve the proficiencies associated with what is expected of a liberally educated person is not in place, and the current plan we follow fails to adequately meet the requirements for outcomes assessment—that is, that academic decisions be based on evidence, not whim. To attempt to impose an assessment plan on the existing liberal studies program would not be the best use of faculty time and energy, especially when there are areas of the curriculum that need revisited and revamped, and some areas that need to be added.

A revised curriculum will be designed with an associated assessment plan. The revised curriculum and assessment plan will be faculty driven rather than imposed from above or outside.

Assessment is an activity that all faculty members conduct in every course they teach; a systematic plan that is designed to examine student learning more broadly across the curriculum rather than in isolated courses is a concept that we trust faculty members will embrace rather than reject. Feeling coerced to conduct specified assessment activities often leads to invalid assessment data and an attitude that negates the primary purpose of assessment. It is the belief of the LSRSC that the collective faculty at IUP can create and endorse an assessment plan that is reasonable and feasible. It is a worthy goal to develop a plan that examines authentic student work at various points across the curriculum for the purpose of understanding where students are in relation to the overall outcomes expected at graduation.

A new curriculum provides an opportunity to create a relevant and coherent program in liberal studies with an assessment plan that makes sense and is useful to faculty and students.

It has been suggested that “tinkering with” or “tweaking” the current curriculum should be sufficient. The problem with this approach is agreement on which components require change and which ones stay intact. Such an approach is destined to misdirect faculty energy from creating something new and fresh to turf protection and defending why their contributions to the current curriculum should remain untouched. A piecemeal approach to curriculum revision is likely to create division rather than synergy and result in winners and losers.

A fresh, innovative curriculum with everyone re-examining expected student learning outcomes, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment will take IUP forward with a renewed commitment to ensure a liberal education for all students, regardless of major.

What is the rationale for labeling the outcomes “University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes?”

This is not a new idea that has been introduced recently into the process.* The idea of an overarching set of outcomes that all baccalaureate graduates should achieve is consistent with trends in General Education, Middle States Commission on Higher Education standards, and the Association of American Colleges and University’s Greater Expectations document. That is, one of the assumptions underlying the revision process is that faculty members share the responsibility for producing university graduates who are liberally educated.

In addition to the courses that are eventually designated as liberal studies courses, an intentional building on the proposed student learning outcomes as students progress through the major should result in a higher degree of proficiency in our graduates. For instance, a student taking a single course in public speaking cannot be expected to graduate with effective oral communication skills unless this same outcome is addressed throughout his/her education. So, in this sense it requires faculty commitment across the curriculum to ensure that students graduate with the capabilities that are described in the proposed University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes. While this approach requires a shift in our thinking about general education, it is probable that the majority of our departmental programs are already designed to help students achieve some of the same student outcomes, i.e., critical thinking, communication, inquiry, problem solving, and information literacy.

In the Middle States Commission on Higher Education Accreditation standards as well as in the current literature on higher education, it is clear that faculty cannot assume to graduate liberally educated students by having these students complete a selection of courses in the arts, humanities, and sciences; a truly liberal education occurs across the span of the curriculum. A set of overarching University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes provides a road map for all faculty members as to what we espouse for all graduates. If adopted, programs (majors) could then focus their assessment of student learning to discipline-specific outcomes, allowing the program assessment process to be streamlined.

Adopting broad, overarching liberal education outcomes creates shared accountability. Our present curriculum makes it easy to point fingers and blame others when students can't think, read, do math, or research—and the brunt of the blame is placed on the faculty members who teach a Liberal Studies course. In reality, we should recognize that it is unfair and unreasonable to expect that faculty members teaching liberal studies courses can accomplish the goal of providing every student with all the elements of a liberal education in a few courses offered during the freshman and sophomore years.

Therefore, reconceptualizing a curriculum that is coherent, relevant, and meaningful for students, and implemented by faculty members who support the idea that expected liberal education outcomes occur over time and across the curriculum, can result in a wonderful educational experience for students at IUP. A set of University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes, ones that transcend disciplinary boundaries, can provide a shared vision for aligning educational experiences in both Liberal Studies and in major coursework.

*See e-mail dated November 1 from Mary Sadler and the January 31 Senate Agenda at the [Senate website](#).

Will departments be expected to map all department course objectives to these University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes?

No. While it is an assumption of the LSRSC that there are courses in the student's major that will continue to foster student achievement of several of the outcomes associated with the proposed University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes, it is not anticipated that individual department course objectives will be mapped in this way. The assessment plan for Liberal Studies will not affect faculty members who are teaching non-Liberal Studies courses.

However, faculty members or departments that propose Liberal Studies course offerings for a revised Liberal Studies curriculum will be expected to identify how the course outcomes, assignments, and/or learning activities support the achievement of the University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes. Faculty members and departments will be expected to play a participative role in the assessment of student learning that relates to specific liberal studies courses and the associated University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcome(s).

It is a premise of the LSRSC that a coherent, relevant, and meaningful curriculum can be achieved when university faculty members embrace the notion that students are liberally educated not just by taking a distribution of courses in the arts, humanities, and sciences, but rather by an intentional sequencing of relevant courses and experiences across the span of the curriculum.

Utopia is achieved when faculty members recognize the benefit of contributing towards the achievement of the Student Learning Outcomes over the entire curriculum, are eager to articulate how particular courses support this effort, and willingly participate in gathering evidence of this student learning.

How will a revised liberal studies curriculum impact a departmental/program assessment plan?

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education asks for evidence that students have achieved general education goals at the time of graduation. Interestingly, a number of the outcomes proposed for a revised curriculum are ones that many departments already espouse for their students (critical thinking, communication, inquiry, problem solving, information literacy, etc.).

To create a revised Liberal Studies curriculum that is relevant and cohesive for students and faculty, it is expected that departments (programs) will identify which of the University Undergraduate Student Learning

Outcomes are addressed within their own outcomes. This exercise is beneficial not only because it articulates how a particular curriculum builds on prior learning with Liberal Studies courses as the foundation, but, more so, it will help to identify the knowledge, values, and skills that are emphasized throughout the four years and can alert us to areas of learning that get less attention across the curriculum. Information such as this can lead to course or program improvement.

The assessment plan for liberal studies that purports to measure the achievement of the proposed University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes should not directly impact a department's assessment plan. However, the department plan should be congruent with or complement the University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes. Our challenge at IUP is to find ways to streamline the assessment process, create feedback loops, and build communication links between and among departments so that we can make sound academic decisions based on evidence.

How will the proposed University Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes be measured?

When Barbara Walvoord, consultant from Notre Dame, visited IUP in Fall 2004 to lead workshops for faculty groups, she urged us to keep all assessment plans "simple, cost efficient, and useful." The committee will try to adhere to these principles.

The Student Learning Outcomes work group that was chaired by Mary Ann Raloth offered the following as examples of tools that might be used to measure the student learning outcomes: aggregated course assignments; standardized tests; course grades based on explicit criteria that are tied to learning outcomes; rubrics for critical skills; performance and products; capstone projects; recitals; senior class reports or theses; practica ratings; graduate surveys; employer surveys; and student self-reports.

In addition, we will consider ways to better examine student success across the curriculum with essential skills such as critical thinking, writing/communication, problem solving, and information literacy. There are a number of strategies that could be used to more directly assess student progress on learning that is expected to occur across the curriculum.

Some of our colleges have assessment plans in place that rely primarily on direct evidence from student work to inform them about student learning, e.g., Education and Educational Technology and Health and Human Services. We can benefit from this experience with assessment as to which measures have proven to be successful and which ones are less meaningful as it relates to informing faculty members about student learning.

Assessment, as it relates to measuring student learning, should be authentic; it should also be meaningful to the faculty for making course or program improvement decisions. We will strive to create an assessment plan for student learning that faculty members can embrace, and one that is based on the principle of Keep It Simple!

Who are the members of the subcommittees drafting criteria for the categories and recommending curriculum requirements in the proposed Liberal Studies curriculum revision?

A universitywide call for volunteers was sent out in April 2007 asking for members to serve on one of eleven different subcommittees that would write inclusion criteria for courses, categories, core requirements, and competencies-across-the-curriculum in a revised Liberal Studies curriculum. With an eye toward having broad-based representation from across campus, the Liberal Studies Revision Steering Committee (LSRSC) assigned the nearly 140 volunteers to the subcommittees. The [list of subcommittee members](#) (Excel spreadsheet) was forwarded to APSCUF for review and input.

A member of the LSRSC was assigned to call meetings of each of the eleven subcommittees and serve that group as a liaison and resource person. The LSRSC member was asked to convene the first meeting before the end of September 2007. The timeline for the work of the subcommittee includes an opportunity for feedback based on the following timeline:

- Draft subcommittee report posted on line for feedback by November 16, 2007
- Feedback accepted until December 7, 2007

- Revise report in response to feedback
- Deadline for submitting final report to LSRSC on or before January 30, 2008

What is the role and responsibility of these subcommittees?

Each subcommittee is charged with essentially the same responsibilities, those responsibilities being to write criteria for their assigned area and to make recommendations related to the required content for courses being submitted for inclusion in that category, requirement, or competency-across-the-curriculum. A [sample subcommittee charge and report form](#) (MS Word) is available.

What will happen with the work of these subcommittees?

As indicated in a previous question, the work of the subcommittees will be posted on the Liberal Studies website for review and comment. Once subcommittees have made final revisions to their recommendations, their reports will be submitted to the Liberal Studies Revision Steering Committee for final review before being forwarded through the curriculum process via the Liberal Studies Committee and the Universitywide Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. Once approved by those bodies, the criteria will become part of the overall proposed Liberal Studies curriculum and be forward to APSCUF and the Senate for action.

How will new or revised courses become part of a revised Liberal Studies curriculum?

All courses that are proposed to become part of a revised Liberal Studies curriculum will go through IUP's approved curriculum process. Every existing Liberal Studies course and all new courses must address some aspect of the approved Expected Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes. While no course is expected to meet all the approved outcomes, all courses are expected to identify outcomes appropriate to the course content and to identify how those outcomes will be met in the course. Revised existing courses and new courses submitted for approval will be forward to the Liberal Studies Committee, UWUCC, APSCUF, and the Senate for action.

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