

University Studies Program Narrative (Draft 2-25-09)

“When we try to pickup anything by itself, we find it attached to everything in the universe.” – John Muir

State of Purpose

We live in a time of rapidly changing technology and communication that has both created and revealed new connections between us and with the world we live in. An education for the 21st century has to prepare students for responding to the problems that will arise in this constantly evolving environment. There is great potential for not only improving our own lives but those of the six billion fellow citizens of our planet. There is also a humbling and disturbing potential for great harm as advanced political, economic and military systems are developed and used, as well as the effects of human interactions with nature from bacteria to the rainforests.

Our students must be able to confidently face these issues, empowered with an education that helps them to recognize the important questions, identify relevant and valid information, examine their own values and those of others to help see how some of these problems arise and can be addressed, gain knowledge of the large natural and human systems that connect our world and be able to express their ideas thoroughly and forcefully. Critical thinking is the foundational skill for this century, the capacity to thoughtfully develop, examine, express and apply our ideas and beliefs and to critically examine the ideas and beliefs of others. “Critical” here does not mean to find fault with but to find the value in something.

The University Studies Program at William Paterson seeks to develop graduates who are such informed, critical thinkers empowered by the knowledge, skills and dispositions essential to life-long learning. They will be more able to recognize and act upon their political, social, economic, ethical and environmental responsibilities as citizens within their local, regional, national, and global communities. Moreover, graduates will understand and know how to understand better the interdependencies and events that impact and continually transform these communities and their personal roles in effecting positive change.

The University Studies Program (USP) develops skills for learning both in general and major college courses but also beyond in the several job changes most students will encounter. Interdisciplinary approaches provide an opportunity to explore potential majors as well as the connections between majors. The four dimensions of the USP aims to equip students with the critical thinking, writing, valuing and connecting knowledge and skills enabling them to meet the evolving challenges in their future careers and/or further academic pursuits.

The Grid of Course Topic Areas

The new **University Studies Program** believes life-long learning begins with college-long learning, that is, developed and reinforced throughout all four years of the undergraduate experience—two years of **University Studies Foundations** and two years of **University Studies Applications in the majors**. The four educational dimensions that are addressed are ***Critical Thinking; Self, Society, and Values; Global Connections; and Effective Communication***. Within each of these competency areas, a developmental sequence of course topic areas has been designated as shown on the University Studies Curriculum Grid. Each course topic area is open

to a variety of courses that fulfill the Student Learning Outcomes and course area description. Students will have choices among courses for most course topic areas and flexibility in scheduling when courses are taken, with clear linkages between USP offerings and their majors. Major departments will have the option of developing Applications course topic areas in their major or directing their students to other selected courses.

Our campus discussions last year and research of General Education reforms in similar universities led to the focus on these four dimensions of the curriculum. Writing and Critical Thinking are repeatedly described on our campus and elsewhere as the two skill areas most essential to success both within and after college. The other fundamental areas, “Self, Society and Values” and “Global Connections”, are also the two most commonly described general competency areas both on our campus and on others, as well as by employers. The WPU Mission Statement already describes the skills and knowledge connected with these areas. This proposal has used the publications and advice of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) to follow many of the issues in current GE reform, and our proposed program is in keeping with their recommendations.

The grid that has been presented to the WPU Community is designed so that connections can be seen both vertically and horizontally. Moving vertically down a column illustrates how skills build year to year and move from early USP Foundations into later Applications in a student’s major. Viewing the grid across rows allows both faculty and students to get a better understanding of a student’s program year to year—i.e., what level of a skill is intended for the first semester (fall) of a student’s experience compared to the second year second semester for that student. Also the possibilities for the clustering and linking of courses within a semester will be more apparent. Note that the first year is designed to give students both academic structure and choice, providing a variety of critical thinking experiences in the liberal arts areas of the curriculum to help define the beginning of their undergraduate careers.

It is essential to keep in mind the developmental connections both within each competency area and across each semester building into the major. In addition it is helpful to show in a list the proposed areas and credits throughout the undergraduate experience. Some areas (e.g., writing/ communication intensive) are open to “double counting.” In these cases one course fulfills the requirements for two skill topic areas, and thus both requirements can be satisfied. Students may be delayed entering specific courses in the Grid if they have Basic Skills requirements or they may skip parts of the Grid due to proficiency testing (e.g., second languages) or Advanced Placement testing etc. The need to take major requirements early may also move USP courses into later semesters.

UNIVERSITY STUDIES

University Foundations: 37-49 credits (courses may “double count” in some places)

Critical Thinking: 5 classes (16 credits)

1. First Year Inquiry
2. Critical Approaches to Thinking in the Humanities (list is alphabetical, any order OK)
3. Critical Approaches to Thinking in Mathematics
4. Critical Approaches to Thinking in the Sciences (with lab)
5. Critical Approaches to Thinking in the Social Sciences

Self, Society, and Values 3 classes (12 credits)

1. Personal well-being
2. Identity, Diversity and Equity
3. Aesthetics
4. Ethical perspectives (may be in major)

Global Awareness and Skills 3 classes plus 0-2 classes in language (9-15 credits)

1. Second Language and its cultural contexts (placement testing)
2. Second language and its cultural contexts (students must demonstrate level of proficiency)
3. Approaches for Understanding Global Issues I
4. Approaches for Understanding Global Issues II
5. Big problems concerning Global Issues

Effective Communication 3 classes (9 credits) (**Intensive courses may double count**)

1. University Writing
2. Writing Intensive Course
3. Writing or Communication Intensive

University Applications: 6-15 credits (within the major or directed by the major)

Critical Approaches to Reasoning: 2 classes (6 credits)

1. Research course in the major or directed by major
2. Capstone course in major or directed to interdisciplinary course

Self, Society, and Values and Global Connections – recommended one experience (0-3 credits)
Values in Action

Effective Communication 2 classes (6 credits) (**Intensive courses may double count**)

1. Writing intensive in major
2. Writing or communication intensive in major

University Studies Program Foundations comprises the first two years (in most cases) of the new common curriculum. It includes courses from the four educational dimensions organized in the Grid to be 3-5 courses per semester. Students needing to take major courses or basic skills during this time will rearrange their USP requirements accordingly. Vertically, the sequencing of the two middle columns (Self, Society, and Values and Global) is strongly recommended. The order of the “Critical Approaches to Thinking” courses in column one is open to student choice.

Horizontally, the first year is the most fixed of the course arrangements with fall term: First Year Inquiry, plus the first of the “Critical Thinking” courses, Personal well-being, Second Language and University Writing and then spring term: the other three “Critical Thinking” courses, the second term of language and the WCI course all strongly recommended. Not all students will complete all of the USP Foundations courses during the first two years, just as they do not complete the current GE requirements within this time frame. Majors will have to determine how best their students can meet these requirements.

Connecting courses within a semester by recommending courses to be taken at the same time (links) or team-teaching (clusters) is encouraged, especially with the First Year Inquiry seminar.

University Studies Program Applications occur during the Junior and Senior years (in most cases) of the new common curriculum and will take place primarily in each student's major. Each major will have the choice of adapting or creating new courses in the major to meet these requirements or directing students to courses outside the major to fulfill them.

Explanation of the Four Educational Dimensions and the Course Topic Areas (the boxes)

I. Critical thinking (7 courses total, 5 Foundations and 2 Applications)

Critical thinking is the starting point and context of the entire University Studies curriculum. Critical thinking is what differentiates the college from the high school educational experience. It is a nexus of skills and practices that creates the potential for students to continue lifelong education beyond attaining their university degree. It is taking an active and deliberate approach to problems as they arise. It is designed to foster a sense of curiosity, imagination and engagement reinforced by the capacities to find and process relevant information and to articulate personal beliefs and arguments in order to participate in more effective personal and public decision making and action. It includes becoming proficient in a variety of approaches to thinking along with an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, their limits and abuses. Critical reasoning is the repeated and deliberate practice of thinking so that one has a variety of thinking strategies available, can respond more rationally in a crisis, as well as evaluate the thinking processes of oneself and others. Critical thinking is the ability to make judgments of value that can be explained, acted upon and assessed for effectiveness.

First Year Inquiry (FYI)

This seminar will be an introduction to the undergraduate academic experience. Faculty will select an issue or topic from their discipline for an inquiry that they feel serves this introductory function. Faculty will have the opportunity to teach the material they love at an appropriate level for beginning the college careers of new students. A portion of the course will specifically address issues of problems with and strategies for dealing with clarity of thought, expression and argument. Another portion will incorporate some of the adjustment to college material from the current First Year Seminar course, such as understanding the curriculum, effective study practices, time management, etc. Developing effective writing and speaking will also be a course emphasis. Connecting the First Year Inquiry with other courses within a semester through recommended related courses (links) or team-teaching (clusters) is encouraged.

Students will select their FYI seminar according to their interests. Some seminars could appeal to students in or considering a particular major. Some could include a service or civic engagement component. Some could help departments make contact with potential majors through topics of mutual interest. The First Year Experience office will maintain a website with descriptions of each section, permitting students to select their top 5 choices and be placed into one of these.

“Critical Approaches to Thinking” courses

There are four distinct academic approaches for identifying and evaluating problems and applying reason in working toward their solution, those practiced in Humanities, in Mathematics, in Science and in Social Science. These could approximately be described as focused upon but not limited to interpretation, quantification, scientific method and norm-based method respectively. Experiencing how practitioners in each area exercise their reasoning will be a major aspect of each course. Each course will give a broad overview of the variety of disciplines in its area and some discussion of the variety of thinking strategies and methods within this approach that these various disciplines and interdisciplinary efforts use. Strengths and weaknesses of each approach will be discussed along with current debates concerning this type of thinking – both in the profession and in current events. Each course may be taught from the perspective of one discipline or one thinker working in this area or may be a joint effort among the disciplines. It is not so much an introduction to the discipline for majors as it is to reasoning in the discipline (or several) and its general academic area.

The four courses can be taken in any order, with the possibility of more than one in a semester. Connecting courses within a semester through sharing the same students in parallel teaching (links) or team-teaching (clusters) is encouraged.

Critical Approaches to Thinking – Humanities

Critical Approaches to Thinking – Mathematics

Critical Approaches to Thinking – Science

Critical Approaches to Thinking – Social Science

Research in Major or directed by Major

Many majors already have a discipline-specific research course working with the application of critical reasoning in their field. All majors will be encouraged to provide such a course or to direct students to a higher-level experience in critical thinking. Such courses could include rhetoric, statistics, logic, etc.

Capstone in major or Interdisciplinary option

Most majors now have a capstone course for all of their students, and all majors will be encouraged to provide such a culminating experience for their students. For students in majors without a capstone experience, there will be an option of an interdisciplinary culminating experience to bring together their undergraduate career through applying what they have learned to problems in the post-graduate world.

II. Self, Society and Values (4 courses total, 4 Foundations and 1 Applications-optional)

The capacity to articulate and discuss issues of value is an essential prerequisite to effective and satisfying personal, professional and citizen participation in a democracy. The developmental trajectory of this column begins with a focus on the self and the information, beliefs and values the individual uses to manage his or her life, as well as the serious consequences these can have for ourselves and others. These consequences will then be examined further in the broader context of how issues of race, class, and gender impact the rights and experiences of others. This examination of the role of values in our lives then explores the variety of ethical and aesthetic values and belief systems across history and across cultures in today’s world. This study of the relationships of values in self and society will prepare students for selecting and articulating the values and beliefs that best reflect their interests, lead to a better understanding and respect for others, and motivate them for more effective citizen participation locally and globally.

Personal Well-being

Our values, beliefs and habits have consequences both for our own well-being and, through this, for those around us. Discovering and maintaining personal physical and mental well being is a difficult task amid the competing claims of personal and cultural habits, advertisements, peer groups, popular culture, urban legends and an overload of unregulated information from the internet. Courses in this area will provide opportunities to critique information, examine values and beliefs that govern personal behavior, and develop skills to enhance one's physical and mental life.

Identity, Diversity and Equity

We each identify ourselves through membership in many different groupings, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, neighborhood, area of study, etc. All of these identities have had and will continue to have consequences in our lives. The relations among these groups may not always be transparent, especially where one group enjoys advantages over or oppresses another. Courses in this area will examine such dominant relationships both in the United States and the world, promote an open discussion of the consequences of these advantages, and examine ways to achieve greater group and personal equality.

Aesthetics

This area offers students a broad understanding of the role of the arts, of the personal and cultural values reflected in a variety of forms - from visual art to music, theater to film, literature to dance – across a wide range of time periods and cultures. The ability of the arts to both engage with and reflect upon their own historical moment and the contemporary world is uniquely useful in helping students to think, write, and speak thoughtfully about the world around them, and how that world has been perceived and interpreted by other cultures and earlier generations. Courses in this area combine an examination of the visual, written and performing arts – through direct contact with works of art, music, literature, theater, and film – with an emphasis on thoughtful and creative written and spoken communication. There could develop interdisciplinary courses spreading the focus among several or all of these areas.

Ethical Perspectives

Courses in this area will give students a broad experience of the variety of approaches to understanding ethical values throughout history and across various cultures today. Understanding the variety of beliefs and actions that people call ethically good and their reasons for doing so will help students ground their own ethical values as well as better understand and be able to articulate and discuss the values held by others

Values in Action

In this recommended course the examination of values and their consequences reaches its fruition in the application of one's values in various personal, professional and civic life situations either within or outside of one's major. Many experiential educational opportunities are encouraged, for example internships, study abroad, civic engagement, service learning, etc. Majors may organize projects for the consideration of value issues in the application of the discipline's skills to real career situations. If the major so chooses, students may select an interdisciplinary approach to these issues combining several disciplines on a common project. Credit bearing courses will include a discussed and written reflective component.

III. Global Connections (3 courses total, 3 Foundations and 1 Application- optional)

Second language requirement (0-6 credits)

All students will take a placement test and be placed in their appropriate level from Basic-I through Intermediate-I. Successful completion of the Intermediate-I level fulfills this requirement. Students who place at the Intermediate-II level will be encouraged to continue their language studies but will not be required to do so.

The University is considering whether proficiency in a second language will be a graduation rather than a USP requirement. Pending resolution of this issue, these credits may not be included as part of the University Studies Foundations.

Approaches for Understanding Global Issues – I

Many global issues today are deeply interdisciplinary with complex histories of lands and peoples, political systems and religions, economies and culture, mixing with the natural distribution of resources (or the lack thereof) and the local applications of technology to create dozens of different stories on almost any issue that is raised. Understanding as many of these dimensions as possible of an issue is necessary in order to be an active participant both in the workplace and in our social and political lives. Students will select two of these foundations for greater competency and then apply these approaches to two different global big problems as described below.

Approaches for Understanding Global Issues II

This is the second of the two required foundational approaches for understanding and working upon major global issues.

Big Problems concerning Global Issues

There are many Big Problems in our world today, which span both national and disciplinary borders. This course area will use the foundational skills students have previously acquired and practiced to examine how such issues can be approached, why they are resistant to resolution and what sort of strategies might work in the future. Courses in this area will use a number of approaches in the examination of its topic problem beyond the home discipline of the instructor. Majors can choose to offer this course within the major or not.

IV. Effective Communication (5 courses total, 3 Foundations and 2 Applications)

The development of this category is based on building effective communication skills through repetition and practice. Courses will explicitly address writing and communication requirements. All writing and/or communication intensive courses after the first term University Writing course can be double counted, that is, combined with another course in the US curriculum to fulfill two requirements with one course. This can happen both with the two Intensive courses in the Foundations section and the two in the Applications section in the major. Intensive courses will be defined by the amount of time on task both in terms of class time and student productivity. Faculty must spend the equivalent of at least 15% (4 sessions = 300 minutes) (??) of class time on writing issues and students must produce at least 20 pages of reviewed material for the course. Similar requirements will be developed for the communication intensive courses.

University Writing

This is the first semester English composition course. The material used for writing assignments in this course could vary with the teacher's interests, so long as the primary emphasis is on developing students' skills to make them better writers. Thus interested and trained faculty from any discipline could teach this course.

Writing Intensive

This course could be offered through any discipline and could also be a course that meets one of the other USP requirements. Any course determined to be writing intensive must meet the standards identified for that designation, including requiring a commitment to drafts, rewrites, and timely feedback.

Writing and/or Communication Intensive

One Intensive course at the foundations level may also include broader issues about communication, either in connection with writing or by itself. Such issues may include oral forms of communication, the use of communication technology in presentations and other career situations, etc.

Writing and/or Communication Intensive in the Major

One Intensive course at the applications level may also include broader issues about communication, either in connection with writing or by itself.

Writing Intensive in the Major

For many majors this may be the capstone course with the requisite amount of class and student time involved with writing issues in the major and its media of communication.