

Frequently asked Questions about the new University Studies Curriculum

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Questions and Answers:

1. Why does William Paterson need a new GE ?
 - The current General Education program was created almost 30 years ago.
 - It is almost all 100-level courses, taken in any order, at any time, with no development, few connections, no overall theme or direction
 - It was intended to be and became about half of the credits for a degree.

- It left little room for students to select courses outside of GE and major, nor any structure to make connections between GE and their major area of study.
- Over time there has been diminished buy-in from faculty which has led to alienation by students as well
- The program is often thought of as something to “get over” or “out of the way” before beginning the major, which is viewed as the true purpose of college

Current national theory and practice concerning GE now emphasizes several dimensions which our present program does not explicitly include:

- structuring the first year experience,
- critical thinking and writing,
- developing and connecting learning throughout all 4 undergraduate years,
- using student interest to motivate their progress through the curriculum
- helping students express, critique and apply their values
- preparing students for problem solving in a globalized world.

2. How does the proposed University Studies Program (USP) responded to these needs?

The proposed University Studies Framework focuses on four areas of skills, knowledge, and competencies for all students: critical thinking, self, society and values, global connections and effective communication. Their development proceeds throughout the undergraduate experience and strengthens the relation between general education and the major, providing an explicit and coherent structure for liberal arts education at William Paterson.

These areas are addressed in a developmental sequence beginning with an academic First Year Inquiry seminar and the core foundation courses taken in the first year, where students are exposed to critical thinking in the humanities, sciences, mathematics, and social sciences. Building upon these experiences, students learn to critique and apply values in their lives and society and to learn about fundamental disciplines and apply them in examining global issues. Writing-communication intensive courses are also required each year.

The GE Council has extensively researched regional and national trends and consulted with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The USP framework was developed in keeping with applying their principles of excellence for liberal education to our campus. Their website is always worth exploring:

<http://www.aacu.org/resources/generaleducation/index.cfm>

3. Why is this revision good for students?

- Early exposure to a range of disciplines and potential majors through the First Year Critical Thinking Core in the Liberal Arts.
- The strong focus on developing critical thinking and writing/communication skills over four years will provide better preparation for careers and ongoing studies.

- Fewer credits create more electives for students to pursue double-majors and minors or to graduate in a more timely fashion.
- More choice and flexibility for students to explore topics of interest and use this interest to motivate their education and lives.
- Junior level GE courses provide an opportunity for all students including transfers to apply their general education knowledge and skills in “real world” problem solving.
- Provides clear map of progress through the curriculum with clear connections between courses and into the major.
- Explicit transition to college level learning and sequenced development of these learning skills and knowledge.

4. Why is this revision good for faculty?

- All faculty will have an opportunity to become involved in the general education program, at least in the teaching of the First Year Inquiry seminar.
- More student choice increases the likelihood for having students in courses who are motivated and want to be there.
- Exciting opportunity to revise and create new courses for the University Studies Program.
- Early and repeated focus on a strong foundation combining content and skills that is continued into the major should improve the overall abilities of students.
- Increased opportunity for collaboration with colleagues across disciplines and departments and for the sharing of best practices.

5. Why is this revision good for William Paterson?

This unique GE program in our region can attract students, especially undeclared students looking for a structured transition to college, a broad foundation and applications of general learning to their major and beyond. It will help identify the education we offer.

The development and maintenance of the new USP curriculum will foster a more collegial, dynamic and productive culture of GE on our campus. GE will become more integral to the academic life of our campus.

6. How was the new program developed?

In Spring 2007 the Senate decided to review and revise the present GE program and created an expanded GE council to do so. This council has pursued an open process of trying to build consensus by promoting campus discussion of GE issues, educating the campus about options and opportunities present in other GE programs, working to incorporate ideas from our campus into the proposed framework and trying to maintain a balance among the various interests of departments and programs in the context of developing a coherent, attractive and functional program for our students.

Since Fall 2007 this Council has held eight (8) all-campus forums which addressed concerns about the current program, national trends, goals for general education, proposed guidelines for reform (9-08), the evolution of the current University Studies Grid (begun 11-08) and suggestions for implementation. The Council sponsored two series of Four Friday discussions in October 2008 and February 2009 to develop the four dimensions of the University Studies Grid: Critical Thinking, Self, Society and Values, Global Connections and Effective Communication. Council meetings have been open to the campus. The co-chairs of the Council also attended many department meetings to obtain input from all of the Colleges.

This USP proposal reflects input from all of these activities. **It is not meant to be a static document; rather it presents a framework for developing the knowledge, skills, connections and habits of learning to provide our students with a productive and engaging undergraduate experience.** The GE Council believes that this framework provides a strong foundation for the renewal of general education at William Paterson.

7. What are the principles behind the proposed changes?

The GE Council has been committed to open discussions and WPU community involvement throughout the development of the USP. Shared principles evolved (September 2008 Guidelines) and have guided the development of the program. Key among these are:

- Intensive Focus on the First Year
- Critical Thinking Liberal Arts Core provides a foundation for higher level courses
- Developmental approach to knowledge and skills across all four years
- Explicit emphasis on knowledge and skills essential to lifelong learning
- Make education more transparent to students and them more intentional toward their education
- Encourage student interest through choice and flexibility within a structured program
- Reduction in the number of credits
- Broad exposure to a variety of disciplines to help students select a major
- The integration of literacies such as technology and information into foundational areas,
- Recognition that different degree requirements may lead to variations on the model. For example, BFA, BS, BM, teacher certification programs have specific credit concerns that must be accommodated. Basic skills and transfer needs are also considered.

8. Is this proposal consistent with the University mission?

The WPU Mission Statement declares our intention to “maintain a tradition of leadership in general education.” Most of the elements in the proposed USP have been tried and proven on

similar campuses elsewhere, but their construction into the proposed program is singular in our region and would contribute to our identity.

Other themes from the WPU Mission such as multiculturalism, lifelong learning, diversity and equity, productive citizenship, critical thinking, personal growth, global problem solving, technological abilities, and high expectation levels of intellectual and professional accomplishment are explicitly developed in the USP proposal.

9. How does the USP connect to the major?

The USP Framework is divided between “Foundations” and “Applications.” Foundations are taken primarily during the first two years of a student’s education, with Applications intentionally continued within the major.

The development of critical thinking begins in the first year and continues through research and capstone experiences in the major. Effective communication, both written and oral skills, is also addressed throughout the four years of study. The sequencing of USP courses permits upper-level courses to build upon a common foundation. All students will have had certain experiences as defined by the sequence of the course topic areas.

Majors will address critical thinking through research and capstone courses, continue to work with students on discipline specific written and oral communication and have the option of including junior-level courses in “ethics and social responsibility” and “Global problem solving.”

10. How many credits are required in the proposed University Studies?

The number of credits in Foundations for most students will be about 43 with a range from 34 to 52. This is a large difference based upon placement in foreign language, double-counting writing intensive courses, and whether the junior-level courses are claimed by the major. 43 credits assumes two terms of language, one junior-level course and all double counted writing courses. For most majors the number in Applications will be 9 including double counting the writing/communication courses and one of the junior-level courses. The range again is large 6-18, but the upper-limit would only be in cases where it is desired.

Our existing GE program was constructed within the context of instructions from the NJ Dept of Higher Education that GE should constitute about one-half of an undergraduate degree. The current national norm for GE programs is closer to one-third or 40-45 credits. We are working within a range of 40-45 in the US Foundations, which is the part comparable to the current GE.

11. What are the total GE credits at the other New Jersey state universities?

Determining the total number of GE credits at a university is often not straightforward. To the best of our ability, here are the total GE credits at the other NJ State Universities:

TCNJ - 15 courses times 4 credits each = 60 credits
Ramapo - 44
Montclair - 48-54 (depends on computer and second language proficiency)
Rowan - 42-54 for BS and 51-60 for BA
Stockton – 36-48
Jersey City – 66
Rutgers - 36
Kean - 52

12. Why is the curriculum presented in a Grid framework? Isn't it confusing?

The Grid gives students and faculty an overview of all the parts of the USP curriculum, a sense of how the parts connect and also the pathway through these course areas that all students will follow. It is an orientation to this education; a way to find one's place and direction of travel.

The Grid shows the connections a student will experience: between the first year and all that follows, between the first two years and the major, between writing and the rest of the curriculum, between learning disciplines connected to global issues and applying this learning to these issues, between critical thinking and all of its various uses, abuses and variations among the disciplines.

We are used to seeing GE requirements in a list because there are no connections to be represented. The new USP emphasizes these connections and the Grid is a picture or a map of these.

13. How should the grid be understood?

Each column in the grid indicates a developmental sequence of one of the 4 goals, first the Foundations and then Applications. The Foundations portion is what is currently expected during the first two years of a student's college experience. The Applications portion is intended to reflect the expectations of the major departments. ***Each department will manage how their students can best make the connections from the Foundations in the major.***

When viewed ***vertically*** throughout the 4 undergraduate levels, each competency area develops from the foundational courses through the applications in the major. For example, critical reasoning is explicitly and intentionally developed in the First year and again in the junior and senior years. These sequential courses will also serve as means of assessing the development of critical reasoning skills over the course of a student's academic career at William Paterson.

The grid can also be viewed ***across*** the competency areas. The GE Committee believes this "horizontal" perspective is essential, especially in outlining what takes place during the first year (freshman year). It is understood that not all students will complete the same areas and requirements at the same point during their first two years of study due to Basic Skills, major

requirements and other necessities, but all students will be expected to follow the general sequence of USP courses. Students will be exposed to and practice basic ways of knowing before pursuing more advanced areas of study.

The grid can't illustrate all of the complex interconnections and linkages that will be encouraged to occur in this program, such as themed cluster courses including a first year inquiry or a thematically sequenced set of courses in the global awareness category.

14. Do the boxes on the grid represent distinct courses? What is a drop down box?

Interested faculty will develop a variety of courses that will address the student learning outcomes and other course requirements in each course topic area (aka "box"). Each box will contain 1-3 courses (to start) from each participating department. Students will then be able to access these through a "drop down box" listing all of the approved courses for a particular term.

15. Why not replace the middle columns of the Grid (Values and Global) with more fundamental knowledge courses?

The courses in the middle two columns of the Grid are fundamental knowledge courses that have been arranged in a thematic sequence to give students a greater sense of the connections within their education. The "Values" and "Global" themes were chosen as already having a significant presence on our campus and also being two of the most frequent connecting themes nationwide. Students may choose from different disciplines to fulfill most of the boxes but will be having the same general experience of the course topic area designated in each box, such as "values in the arts" or "diversity and equity." The two "approaches to global issues" course areas include the general knowledge needed to understand global issues in such areas as anthropology, economics, history, environmental science and political science. The sequencing of course topic areas in these two columns gives students a structure for the acquisition, practice and application of knowledge.

16. The new program claims to be multidisciplinary but why not disciplinary or interdisciplinary?

The discipline-based approach of our current GE has created a list of 16 courses lacking connections, structure or direction. The new USP emphasizes the connections between disciplines, a multidisciplinary approach, as opposed to an interdisciplinary approach that teaches the disciplines from some united standpoint. Most of us were trained as specialists in our disciplines, with little preparation or incentives for participation in interdisciplinary areas. Some of our neighboring universities have attempted to solve the lack of connections in a discipline-based curriculum by requiring interdisciplinary courses, but since few of us are trained for this, they found serious trouble staffing them. We decided to take the middle way; building upon our strong disciplinary programs. have students first experience the training in

fields and then how these fields combine to work together. That critical thinking is an activity that both varies with disciplines and also incorporates contributions from each discipline illustrates this approach. A multidisciplinary approach respects the disciplines and then makes them work together, which is what the students must do outside the university. We also do offer opportunities for developing interdisciplinary approaches but do not feel that all faculty are able to or should have to teach within them.

17. How can skills be developed without content? The content of these areas is not clear to me.

Comments from our campus and others early focused the Committee's attention on explicitly developing the skills of critical thinking and writing across all four years. No one ever thought these could be taught free of content, but this emphasis on skill development is foreign to our current discipline based GE. We have tried to achieve a balance of these approaches. The first year Critical Thinking Liberal Arts Core develops this skill in and through four experiences in the Liberal Arts. The First Year Inquiry is a themed course following the faculty's content interests. The writing intensive courses are in and through regular content disciplinary courses. The Committee has no interest in free floating skill development, rather the goal is to make this development a keystone of all university work by focusing on it in the first year and then to make it more explicit and transparent in all of our classes.

18. What about information and technological literacy?

Developing critical thinking abilities is emphasized in the USP as one of the distinguishing features of a university versus a high school education. Other literacies, such as information, technological and quantitative competencies, are also significant to develop and must be integrated across the undergraduate experience. All of the first year critical thinking courses will have information and technological literacy components in their requirements. The Learning Literacies Strategies Team has worked for several years to develop outcomes and assessment rubrics for information literacy, critical thinking and technological literacy and is currently working on the issue of quantitative literacy.

19. How will courses be selected to fill each box represented in the grid?

The GE Committee is suggesting that four subcommittees of the GE Council (one for each development area or vertical column on the Grid) work with interested faculty and departments to

- develop the final criteria for each course topic area (fall 2009),
- work with faculty to develop new courses or adapt current ones (F 09 to Sp 2010),
- and then approve courses following the outcomes and requirements agreed upon (Sp 2010 and after).

The subcommittees will have several GE Council members plus several non-voting experts in the relevant area from the faculty. A procedure will be developed to rotate the experts in this process over time. It is meant to be an inclusive and transparent process. Other universities have also taken this approach of approving the general framework and then

within this orientation having faculty more fully flesh out the criteria for each course content area.

Some of our current GE courses will be adapted to fit into the new connections presented by the USP proposal, but there will be a shift from the routine of the same few courses offered every term. Departments will be able to expand their GE offerings, with many departments able to participate in more than one box. Courses other than 100 level introductions will be able to be considered. Courses in the second and third year will be taught at second and third year levels. All faculty will be able to develop academic courses for the First Year Inquiry.

20. How do students in high credit majors proceed through the Grid?

All of the USP courses are sequenced in one series, so that students who must take major courses (or Basic Skills, etc.) in their first year will fit in their USP courses in the order of this series. Most students will be able to complete their first 9 USP courses (the First Year Experience) in the first three semesters.

21. How will we address the issue of transfer students?

The greatest power of the new program will be for our first-year students. We will make arrangements for transfers, but should emphasize that the program is most effective when taken for all four years. This should be an attractive dimension of the experience we offer.

Transfer students would be expected to pick up the sequence of USP courses at the point where they enter, depending upon their previous experience. The new courses may have a particular emphasis but are still similar to courses elsewhere.

Many of our transfer students come to the University without the AA or AS degree. It is clearly within the interest of our students for the University to work closely with the community colleges to insure a proper transition for these students. The new curriculum uses courses still based in departments and readily identifiable for transfer in or out.

For students with the AA or AS degree, 45 credits is the number of GE credits set by the new NJ state transfer agreement. The credits we will require in GE beyond the first 2 years are not covered by the NJ Community College Transfer Agreement. As these apply GE in the major, it should also be able to be attractively promoted as uniting the students' education.

22. What is the difference between the proposed First Year Inquiry course and the present First Year Seminar?

The First Year Inquiry seminar will be a 3 credit introduction to the undergraduate academic experience. Faculty will have the opportunity to teach an issue or topic they love at an appropriate level for beginning the college careers of new students. A portion of the course will specifically address Critical Thinking issues concerning clarity of thought, expression and

argument and strategies for dealing with arguments. Another portion will integrate some of the adjustment to college material from the current First Year Seminar course, such as understanding the curriculum, effective study practices, time management, setting high expectations, etc. Developing effective writing and speaking will also be a course emphasis. Connecting the First Year Inquiry with other courses in the first semester through related courses (links) or team-teaching (clusters) is encouraged. It is desirable to have mostly fulltime faculty teach this course.

Students will select their FYI seminar according to their interests. Some seminars could appeal to students already 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. (Smaller departments may be given preference in having this exposure to potential majors.) 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.

23. In these times of fiscal crisis, does it make sense to implement something new?

The proposed revisions will not be ready to begin implementation until Fall 2011. The GE Council has been encouraged by the Provost to address curricular reform and to move forward on this important effort designed to make our program more competitive for students and our students more competitive in the world. The University will have its Middle States accreditation visit, and we should present a vital, coherent and functioning GE program.

The GE Council does not know the full extent of how the fiscal crisis will impact programming on campus. The initial effort to design and redesign courses need not be costly but will require time. Courses can be developed on an “as needed” rolling basis, with the first year courses for Fall 2011, the second year for 2012, etc.