

The Development of Themes within the General Education Curriculum

The General Education curriculum at UNC Charlotte currently consists of three primary activities: first year writing & mathematics; Science and Social Science introductory courses; and Liberal Studies courses. Students find it difficult, throughout the General Education curriculum but especially in the Liberal Studies courses, to consistently engage with the material and articulate its relevance. In short, students do not see how Liberal Studies courses provide a solid foundation for undergraduate education nor do they see how Liberal Studies requirements support their quest for a specific major. If this QEP is chosen for further development, we plan to quantify the extent of the problem.

We believe that the skills learned in Liberal Studies courses, critical thinking and the application of a diversity of perspectives, are important ones, and seek to improve the ability of these courses, as a set, to impart these skills to students by developing clearer connections between differing courses. We propose the development of themes within the General Education curriculum, which would span disciplines, in order to assist students in connecting the material from the various courses in a meaningful way and to ensure that they are developing the skills desired.

The development of themes would begin with a discussion with faculty currently teaching the Liberal Studies courses. We envision that one or two ideas, such as sustainability or social networks, would initially percolate to the top of the list of potential themes based on what faculty members are already doing in the coursework. (Eventually, we imagine that a total of four or five themes would emerge.)

Once identified, we would create a designation for certain sections of the Liberal Studies courses that focus on a theme. Students could then take a series of the Liberal Studies courses that each pertain to the same theme but that address thematic issues from differing vantage points. Thus, we create a more consistent “big picture” for students, in which they can see the relevance of the coursework. Such pedagogical coherence will foster stronger engagement on the part of the students and they will better be able to develop a variety of perspectives on various issues and think critically about those issues.

At first, we would develop one or two themes across the General Education curriculum. Eventually, we would increase the number of themes to four or five. As the themes and courses are developed, a clear curricular path will emerge, which will enable students to see how differing course contribute to a holistic academic path. We plan to develop this as a concentration within the General Education program that would appear as a designation on the transcripts of students who complete a sufficient number of course within a theme.

The improvement of the General Education curriculum in this way is important to UNC Charlotte as a considerable amount of resources are spent in the production of these courses. All students must satisfy the General Education requirement, and most do so through enrollment in the activities listed above. If students do not see the value of this curriculum, we must change that. If LBST could be made relevant to other disciplines — if a clearer foundation could be associated with the LBST courses - then possibly the value of the coursework would rise in the

student marketplace. Research shows that required courses outside of a student's major receive the lowest course evaluations.¹ We believe that teaching evaluations may also translate to evaluations of the course content as well. Statistics that indicate that students typically feel less engaged with required courses that do not seem to address their interests or majors. (As noted above, if selected for further development, we will attempt to quantify this as it relates to General Education courses.) We hope that this plan would help by allowing students to choose General Education coursework related to their interests.

This QEP represents a new endeavor for improving General Education and engaging students in the process of idea generation, application, and evaluation.

¹ Siminoe, Kathleen, David Cadden, and Angela Mattie. (2008) "Standard Of Measurement For Student Evaluation Instruments." *Journal of College Teaching & Learning* Vol. 5 (12), p. 46.