



**Review of the General Studies Degree Programs
University College
Northwestern State University
Natchitoches, Louisiana**

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**Submitted to:
Virginia L. Crossno, Ed.D.
Coordinator of Special Projects for Academic Affairs
Northwestern State University**

**Submitted by:
Judith B. Wertheim, Ed.D.
Vice President for Higher Education Services
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning**

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Introduction

In February, 2008, as a component of its ongoing efforts to offer students an exemplary General Studies degree program, University College at Northwestern State University (NSU) participated in an external review of the Baccalaureate of General Studies (BGS) and the Associate of General Studies (AGS). The following, a summary of the external review, offers general observations, recommendations for consideration, and a timeline for implementing the recommendations. It is based on readily available written material (available both in hard copy and electronically) about the General Studies degree programs, the University College, and NSU; the Academic Program Review for General Studies (Fall 2007); and a visit to the campus on February 20-22, 2008, which included formal and informal meetings with:

- President Randall Webb
- Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Thomas Hanson
- University College Dean Sue Weaver
- University College staff
- University College students and alumni
- Representatives of the General Studies Council
- Representatives of NSU administrative offices
- Representatives of NSU faculty

At the outset, it is important to note that all sections of the following review are framed by one inescapable conclusion: There is overwhelming support for General Studies and University College-- and particularly Dean Weaver -- among NSU administrators, faculty, staff, and students. University College is regarded as an important, vibrant unit at NSU; and everyone whose opinions inform this review sees a bright future for it.

Academic Program

Personnel in the General Studies degree programs are justifiably proud of the status of the programs as integral parts of academic life at NSU. Academic rigor is an essential aspect of both the BGS and the AGS, which incorporate clearly articulated academic requirements in addition to the university's core curriculum. And the recent inclusion of additional degree requirements once again emphasizes the commitment of University College to provide an academically sound degree. University College admirably fulfills its goal to provide a "broad general education which prepares students for work or further study."

Ironically, a significant strength of the General Studies academic programs is that University College has no full-time faculty of its own. Although the College offers several service courses, available to all NSU students, those enrolled in the General Studies degree programs must take subject area courses provided by other departments. This organization underscores the rigor of the General Studies degrees, their comparability to all other degrees offered by NSU, and integration of General Studies into the academic life of the university. Indeed, if this were not the case and if University College offered its own subject area courses, the degrees themselves would be suspect.

Curriculum

Consistent with General Studies degree programs at other institutions, the programs at NSU require students to complete a core curriculum, complemented by additional breadth. In addition, both programs at NSU require an area of concentration. And the BGS also requires a minor and courses at the junior or senior level. Within a very explicit framework, then, the curriculum for General Studies majors requires students to include a basic core *and* flexibility: adherence to standards set by the university and the College *and* the ability to select courses to meet their individual needs and interests.

A major difficulty, however, arises precisely because students have the flexibility to select courses that meet their individual interests. Given this flexibility, there is no uniform assessment standard or exit exam. **Consequently, it is recommended that the General Studies programs make greater use of the capstone course for students.** In AY07-08, for example, only 37 students registered for this interdisciplinary course. Yet requiring the course of all students will provide them not only with a uniform final academic experience; it will also provide an opportunity to articulate themes and coherence gained in their undergraduate program of study – a boon to their successful next steps in the community and the world of work.

General Studies Council

Clearly, service on the General Studies Council is a labor of love. By performing this important function, Council members serve not only the university community, but also General Studies students themselves. Without doubt, members of the Council deserve praise for their significant contributions to the program and to its students.

Thanks to the increased rigor of degree requirements that the Council has mandated, the reputation of the General Studies programs has noticeably improved over the past decade. The Council maintains academic rigor in General Studies by its periodic reviews of degree requirements and its careful attention to admissions standards. Each extensive, written application to the degree program is reviewed by Council members. And this takes a significant amount of time and effort. It is evident from the minutes of the General Studies Council that evaluation of the applications is not superficial, nor is approval of an application automatic.

It is noteworthy that a wide variety of academic departments are represented on the Council. And the Council's commitment to General Studies is evident in the long service that several members have had in this group. In this regard, **it is recommended that**

attention to the current balance on the General Studies Council be continued: long service vs. introduction to General Studies. Several commentators noted that General Studies is not well understood throughout the university. Consequently, introducing more faculty members from additional academic departments to the Council will familiarize a wider segment of the university community with General Studies programs and practices.

A meeting with faculty members who are not on the Council but who are acquainted with General Studies and its students also indicated support for the programs. Those who know the program and its students speak highly of General Studies. All of the faculty members who spoke with the reviewer reported that they enjoy having General Studies students in class, and they applaud the flexibility the curriculum affords. Yet this is a select group. Involvement of additional faculty via service on the Council will help gain more widespread support.

Learning Environment

An important aspect of any learning environment is the tone set by the personnel in the unit. As noted above, General Studies personnel value academic rigor. Just as importantly, they value student success and continually seek ways to help students achieve. Because General Studies is housed in University College, which also provides Academic Advising and Disability Services, General Studies enrollees have easy access to academic support services, such as academic intervention workshops, tutoring, and the PASS readmission program.

Furthermore, during the site visit students, faculty, and staff reported -- without exception -- that everyone associated with University College is welcoming and helpful. Clearly, the Dean sets the standard for this and often personally advises and follows up with students who seek her counsel. Guided by this example, the entire staff is genuinely concerned about students and their success. All reach out in myriad ways to help students achieve their academic goals.

Accessibility

The welcoming tone set by University College personnel helps substantially to make General Studies accessible. In fact, “accessible” is one of the key descriptors of the General Studies programs.

Both the AGS and the BGS degrees are designed to be flexible. Their chief constituents are students with diverse interests and experiences who otherwise might not find a niche for themselves at NSU. And with graduating classes that represent approximately 20 percent of NSU degrees, the programs demonstrate that they are meeting this goal. Over the past six years more than 1600 students have joined the ranks of NSU alumni with either an AGS or a BGS degree.

Moreover, General Studies frequently serves as an initial home to students who have not yet declared a major. As Vice President Hanson said, it is an effective “incubator,” supporting students until they identify a direction – not necessarily a General Studies

major -- for their studies. The initial welcome and substantive support that students encounter in this first “home” benefit the entire university in its retention efforts.

The NSU courses that can apply to a General Studies degree are accessible, as well. As a part of the university that offers more online programs and courses than other Louisiana postsecondary institution, General Studies accommodates students who wish to earn their degrees at a distance. No doubt, this opportunity will become increasingly attractive as students become more familiar and comfortable with the distance learning option.

In addition, University College staff work hard to ensure that the support services they offer are accessible. For example, information is posted on a Web site; tutors will work with students on weekends; and advising is offered at satellite sites in addition to Natchitoches.

Facilities

The location of the University College offices also helps make the programs it offers easily accessible to students. Location in the center of campus sends an unspoken message about how the university views General Studies. It is important that the programs be located in a central place, near other academic programs, and that the space it shares -- if any -- is academic, not administrative.

The current physical facilities for General Studies are adequate and in good repair, yet **there is an obvious lack of a reception area and a meeting space for students. Such a comfortable space would encourage informal interaction and the development of a community of learning.**

A community of learning can be encouraged by other improvements to the facilities. For example, the computer lab for TRIO students boasts state-of-the-art equipment. However, this fortunate situation does not extend to other areas in University College. **General Studies students, many of whom do not have their own computer equipment, would benefit enormously if there were additional computer equipment and comfortable furniture in a lab accessible to them throughout the day.** Perhaps more importantly, given their other commitments, students would benefit if the computer facilities in Kyser Hall were available in the evening as well. **In addition, when plans for expanded facilities are considered, it is recommended that a designated testing room be included.**

Barriers to enhancing a learning community for staff are also apparent in the arrangement of the offices in Kyser Hall. Most of the University College staff offices are in close proximity to one another, fostering both formal and informal interactions. The notable exception to this is the Dean’s office, which is located on a different floor. If at all possible, **locating all of the offices together will help the unit develop even further its ability to function as a team.** In its current facilities, the staff, thanks to a conscious effort, succeeds admirably in working together. More than once during the site visit, University College staff and others noted that all personnel support one another and work

collegially. No doubt the team could be even stronger if the physical arrangement of offices were more conducive to day-to-day interaction.

Staffing

The commitment and preparation of the General Studies advising staff are impressive. All advising staff members exemplify the ideal of lifelong learning and participate in many professional development activities throughout the year. The staff attends and makes presentations at meetings sponsored by both national and state organizations focused on academic advising and adult learning. All University College personnel value continuous upgrading of their skills and expertise; and in this, they are enthusiastically supported by Dean Weaver.

In addition to upgrading their skills, the staff works hard to upgrade their programs. Analysis of data collected by the university continually leads to new initiatives, such as revised orientation and academic advising programs and Freshman Interest Groups. Based on all available evidence, University College personnel move forward with the data available to them to analyze existing activities and initiate new ones. There are undoubtedly many other areas for improvements that would be based on data –if that data were available. **Consequently, it is recommended that University College articulate and maintain a research schedule, either in cooperation with other offices of the university or on its own. A financial investment by the university administration in this research will yield a return that will unquestionably increase the effectiveness of the advising for General Studies and other students at NSU.**

When announcing its Quality Enhancement Plan, Academic and Career Engagement (ACE), the university cited an American College Testing Program finding that “college students named ‘inadequate academic advising as the strongest negative factor’ in their college experience.” Thus, in an effort to attract, retain and graduate students, NSU administrators have initiated a carefully developed plan to provide high quality counseling. For a model of such counseling, they would do well to look to the services provided by the staff in University College.

Indeed, advising in University College currently is more than simply a model for the rest of the university: University College staff members already provide significant support services to NSU students. Data show, for example, that only 13 percent of students visiting the academic center during the past three years were University College students; the remainder came from other academic units. The staff also has responsibility for advising exploratory students, students who have not formally declared General Studies as their major, and those who identify themselves as disabled; conducting the Summer Bridge program, the Majors Fair, and the Early Warning System; and teaching for 25 percent of their time. Recently, with the addition to the university of students in the CALL program, the ratio of students to University College staff has dramatically increased. When the CALL program gains momentum – as it surely will – the advising load for University College will surely increase as well.

With the recent addition of an advisor, University College now has 4.2 FTE advising positions. As welcome as the new advisor is, however, the current burdens on University College advisors, coupled with the prospect of an increasing burden, threaten in very real ways its established success as an exemplary counseling resource. In fact, NSU advisors may soon be overwhelmed by their own success. Even NSU colleagues who work outside the University College are aware of the need for a more reasonable student: advisor ratio, observing more than once in interviews, that the “advisors are overloaded.” **Given this workload, it is imperative that any advising vacancies be filled as soon as they occur.**

Support in intake and tutoring functions by undergraduates and graduate students is a helpful and cost-effective way to involve students in valuable internship experiences. Yet reliance on students – even short-term reliance on them -- is risky. Turnover is high; there are ongoing costs of re-training new cohort groups; and supervision must be rigorous. While engaging students as temporary personnel has its advantages – both for University College and the students themselves – it is not an adequate substitute for increased staff, especially when superior academic and career counseling is a priority for the university. Consequently, **it is strongly recommended that the job descriptions and responsibilities of the advising staff be reviewed, the organization of the unit and its relationships with other units be modified, and additional advising positions be added so that University College can continue to provide exemplary counseling.**

Use of Technology

Is technology ever used to its full capacity? This question is rhetorical; given time and resource constraints, it is no doubt impossible to use technology to its full capacity. Yet, the General Studies programs can profitably consider additional uses of technology.

Obviously, the opportunity to earn the degrees online – and the resulting increase in graduates -- points to effective use of technology by the programs. Nevertheless, there are still other **areas in which special attention to the possibilities of technology is recommended for the future:**

- **Additional computer equipment that is available at convenient places and times for students**
- **Encouraging academic departments to increase their online course inventories even further**
- **Additional online innovations in advising for students. Some of the time spent in face-to-face sessions can be saved if more advising resources were developed for online delivery**
- **Additional online tutoring opportunities**
- **Online collaborative and record-keeping packages for advisors**

Libraries

Like all students at NSU, General Studies students have access to the libraries and related facilities. During sessions that orient them to the university, General Studies may particularly need help with using the library. Many of them have been away from school for a number of years, and many of them may not have been familiar with using any

library in the past. Fortunately, the Director of Libraries serves on the General Studies Council. His strong support of students in these programs ensures that they will receive the help they need to maximize their use of the library. Nonetheless, **it is suggested that a plan be developed so that use of the libraries by General Studies students is formalized, rather than dependent on a unique relationship.**

Community Service

University College provides several opportunities for community service by students. In addition to internships, students can participate in the American Humanics Student Organization, CAN-DO, Helping Hands, and a service learning course. Some of these programs have received university and national recognition. Furthermore, students in the General Studies program have opportunities to participate in community service projects sponsored by other units of the university. They also have the opportunity to earn, in conjunction with their degrees, certificates that help them participate in the life of the community. Clearly, in supporting the mission of NSU, the College is preparing its students to become productive members of society.

Alignment with University Mission

Northwestern State University is a responsive, student-oriented institution that is committed to the creation, dissemination, and acquisition of knowledge through teaching, research, and service. The University maintains as its highest priority excellence in teaching in graduate and undergraduate programs. Northwestern State University will prepare its students to become productive members of society and will promote economic development and improvements in the quality of life of the citizens in its region.

At every level, the priorities of University College are congruent with the mission of NSU. Certainly, the college is student-oriented and committed to excellence in teaching undergraduate programs. As mentioned earlier, it prepares its students to become productive members of society.

Even more directly, the mission of University College is related to the new Quality Enhancement Plan, ACE. More specifically, since its inception, General Studies has required all students to include in their application for admission a statement relating their educational plans to their career goals. The unit also offers the interdisciplinary capstone and internship experiences. Thus, students are continually reminded that their course selections are integrally linked to their post-graduation plans. And as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning discovered in its identification of the nine principles of effectively serving adult learners, linking life/career planning to education is essential both to recruiting and retaining these students. **Those most familiar with General Studies and its initiatives can productively advise NSU as it moves forward with the ACE program. A danger, however, looms in the possibility that additional burdens to implement ACE will fall on the already burdened University College staff.**

In its recognition that learning may be acquired both in and out of the classroom, ACE and CALL can profitably refer to the prior learning assessment (PLA) process overseen

by University College. The opportunity to earn credit for prior learning has long been a hallmark of the General Studies program. Here, too, the program has been ahead of the curve and can share its experience and expertise with other programs that will now adopt a Prior Learning Assessment option.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude as it began, this report especially notes the strong support among administrators and University College students for the unit and its programs. University College and General Studies are an integral part of the university and are particularly vital to its success in meeting its goals to prepare students who become productive members of society.

In order to strengthen University College over the next five years, the following recommendations are made:

In the unit: (It is important to note that even though this section is separated into “unit” and “university” categories, all of the recommendations will require support – both tangible and intangible -- from the university administration.)

Organization/Defining Responsibilities

It appears that a major problem of University College is a blurring of the boundaries of staff responsibilities for the university as a whole and for its General Studies students. Advisors particularly seem to wear too many hats to be comfortable. As noted earlier, they

- Provide all university students with tutoring, academic support, disability services, the Early Warning System, a Majors Fair, the Summer Bridge Program, a readmission program (PASS), and special orientation/retention programs
- Serve students who have declared General Studies majors with careful advising and monitoring
- Serve exploratory students who have not yet declared a General Studies major
- Advise CALL students
- Teach 25% FTE

The boundaries among responsibilities and units frequently blur, and the workload becomes overwhelming. Even in this review, it is often difficult to separate “University College” from “General Studies.” Yet University College encompasses much more than General Studies. Consequently, it is recommended that the position Head of the Department of General Studies be established. The focus of this position, linked to academic advising, will be on General Studies students, strengthening ties between General Studies and other academic units, research, marketing, and growing the unit. It should be separated from responsibilities for Disability Services.

In addition, the unit would do well to add the positions of administrative secretary and receptionist. Relying on students for ongoing support is problematic, as noted earlier. Furthermore, adding these two professional positions to University College will allow

advising and administrative personnel to focus on the responsibilities for which they are best suited, as well as helping the work and the student traffic to flow smoothly.

The university administration is encouraged to provide financial support for these new positions. Given the documented success of the University College and its advising programs, as well as the large number of non-University College students it serves, investment in its future via additional personnel is an investment for the entire university community. Similarly, for the benefit of all university students, any vacancies that occur among the advising staff in University College should be filled as soon as they occur.

Online Capabilities

As noted earlier, it is recommended that online solutions for tutoring, advising, maintaining records be explored. These uses of technology will not only permit personnel to use their time more efficiently. They will also allow sharing and storing of information and a more robust knowledge-management system.

Marketing

Although General Studies speaks of itself as a degree for the mature student, current marketing material and practice do not reflect this. Indeed, the average age of students in the program is not markedly different from that of traditional-aged students at NSU. Consequently, it is recommended that marketing materials reflect older students, that the program be marketed extensively along with the CALL program. Whereas all CALL students are adult learners, not all adult learners are CALL students. And it appears that there are many adult students for whom the unique features of a General Studies degree would have great appeal.

Moreover, despite its history of success, the General Studies program is still not widely understood. The on-site meeting with faculty representatives pointed to many examples of the importance of highlighting how General Studies is closely related to careers and community. More marketing is needed to address this unpublicized strength.

A marketing campaign for General Studies would also profitably include the establishment of academic special honors and awards for General Students. These honors, truly competitive and based on academic criteria, will enhance the status of General Studies both within the university and beyond. More “outsiders” will see the degree as a valued option, rather than a catch-all for undecided students.

Research

One way to point to the clear relationship between a General Studies degree and a career is to pursue and publicize research on alumni. What do they do with a General Studies degree? Did they pursue further education? Would they be willing to act as mentors to current students? What is their advice to General Studies students? What are the tangible and intangible rewards of having earned an AGS or BGS?

Such research would not only help to involve alumni – and potential donors – with the ongoing life of the university. It would also provide useful data when publicizing the benefits of the program.

Additional research, part of an ongoing research plan for General Studies, will also help to identify strengths and challenges for this unit. Such a research program will help inform the marketing messages; and it will also guide new initiatives, as well as the evaluation of those initiatives.

In the university:

As the CALL program grows, University College and CALL need to work out their evolving relationship and individual responsibilities. Currently the two units enjoy a collegial relationship and meet frequently to discuss concerns and individual students. Yet their roles need to be more clearly defined. As noted earlier, the implementation of the CALL program has resulted in increased advising loads for University College personnel. How can this matter be addressed so that the units will work in a coordinated way to help returning students? Additional formal, ongoing meetings are needed to elucidate and strengthen the relationship.

Similarly, as the ACE effort develops, the relationship between this program and University College must be clarified. How will the activities already in place in University College for General Studies be incorporated into the ACE efforts? How can University College personnel contribute to the ACE efforts without becoming further overburdened?

Also within the university, mechanisms for cooperation and coordination between University College and other units need to be reviewed and re-worked. For example, it is currently possible for students to believe that they have declared a General Studies major and yet not be fully admitted to the program. The registrar's office has one set of information; the General Studies advisors another. And the "victim" is all-too often the student who may have some rude surprises when it comes time for graduation.

In another area, it is recommended that General Studies personnel explore with other units expansion of opportunities for areas of concentration or certificates, such as the nontraditional route to a teaching credential. Developing additional concentrations or certificates can only benefit both departments.

Related to cooperation with other units at NSU, it is recommended that the university, the unit, and the General Studies Council review the viability of the Associate of General Studies degree. First, students often make a commitment to the General Studies program only after having completed 60 hours, when they submit their BGS applications. Second, with the presence of Bossier Parish Community College (BPCC) on the NSU campus, unnecessary duplication of advising and planning may occur. Third, the close cooperation between BPCC and NSU in launching the CALL program sets a precedent for cooperation and cooperation that may extend to other associate and baccalaureate degree programs.

TIMELINE

Year One

- Review organization of University College
 - Establish new position: Head of the Department of General Studies
 - Add administrative support staff: an administrative secretary and a receptionist
- Conduct research on General Studies alumni
- Develop a long-range research strategy
- Use unique expertise to help NSU implement university-wide initiatives, such as ACE and PLA

Year Two:

- With appropriate NSU personnel, develop a marketing plan for the degrees
- Ask the General Studies Council to review the viability of the AGS degree, additional areas of concentration, certificates, and the capstone course as a BGS requirement
- Identify ways to make General Studies more adult focused – e.g. extended computer lab facilities and hours, marketing directed toward adults, closer working relationship with the CALL program
- Investigate computer applications to enhance advising capabilities
- Develop a strategy to encourage academic departments to develop additional online courses

Year Three:

- Implement computer enhancements to advising capabilities
- Review the balance of the membership on the General Studies Council

Year Four:

- Investigate additional space for student meeting rooms and testing rooms
- Investigate opportunities to consolidate space for administrators and staff

Year Five:

- Review and evaluate changes that have occurred since the 2008 review
- Continue planning for the next long-range goals – e.g. a master's degree program in Interdisciplinary Studies

It is clear that over the years the General Studies degree programs have served students, the university, and the state well. Administrators and staff have constantly sought ways to respond to the needs of students and the state, while furthering the mission of NSU. All signs point to their continuing to do so and embodying the strength and mutual support symbolized by the Millennium Arch. The next five years will, indeed, be exciting ones for General Studies!

Judith B. Wertheim
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