


MEMORANDUM

June 8, 2010

To James Everett, Acting Dean of Arts & Sciences
From Robin Walz, BLA Coordinator 
Cc BLA Work Group
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Re Assessment Plans and Evaluating Student Outcomes for Liberal Studies Programs at Four Northwest Public Universities in relation to the BLA at UAS

The week of May 18-22, 2010, I interviewed directors of liberal studies programs or institutional research at four public universities in Washington and Oregon (Western Washington University, The Evergreen State College, Portland State University, Oregon State University) in preparation for facilitating a workshop with the BLA Work Group on August 24, 2010 to develop the Assessment Plan for the Bachelor of Liberal Arts (BLA).

Preliminary findings from these interviews and survey of assessment plans and student outcomes evaluations at these Pacific Northwest universities reveal:

- The BLA redesign adopted in the 2009-2010 UAS Catalog is solidly in line with the interdisciplinary approach to liberal studies practiced at these public universities.
- Assessment and evaluation rubrics are best used as diagnostic, rather than prescriptive, procedures.
- When a university lacks extensive institutional research and assessment resources, faculty oversight of program assessment should be direct yet manageable.
- Effective faculty participation in program assessment requires that tasks be integrated into routine workloads, departmental procedures, and the academic calendar.
- “Closing the loop” in assessment requires annual review of program outcomes.

- In student self-reporting of learning outcomes, UAS has been innovative in the development of the electronic BLA Portfolio.

What follows is a summary description of assessment, student learning outcomes, and evaluation procedures at the four universities with recommendations toward the usefulness or challenges in adopting such procedures at UAS.

1. Western Washington University (Bellingham, WA)

Contact interviewed: David Curley, Chair of Department of Liberal Studies

B.A. Humanities: interdisciplinary undergraduate degree program

Emphasis Areas: History of Culture, Religion and Culture, Elementary Education

Degree Requirements: core, methods of interdisciplinary study, two senior seminars, thesis.

Number of Degree Students: 36 (16 graduates AY 2009)

Size of faculty: 8

Advising: faculty intensive (for senior thesis)

Succinct “Mission Statement, Objectives, Assessment” pages for the WWU Liberal Studies program are posted online: <http://www.wwu.edu/liberalstudies/about/mission.shtml>.

Liberal Studies Program Summary: Originally the Liberal Studies faculty was charged with delivery of the Western Civilization General University Requirement (GUR) for all WWU undergraduates. They continue to serve this function by delivering GUR courses in Humanities and Class, Gender and Multicultural Studies by world geographic regions. In the 1980s, Liberal Studies developed into undergraduate major and minor programs. Originally conceived of as an honors program, Liberal Studies continues to focus on students with advanced academic skills to complete methodology and seminar courses that culminate in a senior thesis.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes for Degree Majors: Direct assessment of student outcomes is conducted through degree graduate exit interview questionnaires that are reviewed by a small faculty committee. Their findings are reported to the Liberal Studies department. Program learning outcomes are assessed through seven rubric elements for evaluating the senior thesis:

1. Identification of problem and statement of thesis.
2. Quality of conceptual analysis.
3. Evaluation and analysis of primary sources.
4. Identification, evaluation and analysis of secondary sources.
5. Clarity of argument and appropriateness and adequacy of evidence.
6. Clarity of writing.
7. Grammar, punctuation, spelling, and use of correct forms in reference notes and bibliography.

Two faculty members read each thesis and evaluate each of the rubric elements: excellent, good, fair, or poor. The department annually reviews the combined assessment outcomes according to four diagnostic categories: strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats.

Usefulness for the BLA Program at UAS: The brevity, simplicity, and emphasis upon narrative reporting in the WWU Liberal Studies program assessment could be easily implemented at UAS. The number of rubric elements being assessed is limited, and faculty participation in the process is both direct and manageable.

Challenges for implementation in the BLA Program at UAS: A program assessment based on the senior thesis is not directly applicable to our BLA program. However, the application of a similarly limited evaluation rubric to the electronic BLA portfolio as a whole (rather than by individual portfolio items) could be developed.

2. The Evergreen State College (Olympia, WA)

Contact interviewed: Laura K. Coghlan, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment

B.A. and B.S.: all fields

Emphasis Areas: individualized degree programs for each student

Degree Requirements: university core and major design

Number of Degree Students: 4,400 students; 148 graduates (AY 2008-2009)

Size of faculty: all Evergreen faculty

Advising: students and faculty advisors collaborate on degree program designs

The Evergreen State College annually reports an extensive and comprehensive “End-of-Program Review Assessment”: <http://www.evergreen.edu/institutionalresearch/eprassessment.htm>.

Liberal Studies Program Summary: Since 1971, The Evergreen State College has gained a national reputation for its innovative approach to individualized, interdisciplinary and collaborative programs of academic study fashioned by each student. In consultation with faculty advisors and faculty departmental planning units, students explore a central idea or theme of interest, toward the goal of developing critical tools that address real-world issues. The student’s degree program includes lectures, labs, readings, seminars, and research projects that build upon knowledge and skills gained from previous quarters toward degree culmination.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes for Degree Majors: Each year, Evergreen compiles an End-of-Program Review (EPR) that correlates university academic areas with all courses taught across all planning units. Twelve academic areas, which I have organized under four headings discussed during the interview, provide the rubric elements for assessment:

The Liberal Arts

1. Art
2. Natural and Physical Sciences
3. Humanities
4. Social Sciences

Skills Areas

5. Math/Quantitative
6. Writing

7. Information Technology Literacy

8. Critical Thinking

Values

9. Addressing Oppression, Privilege, and Difference

10. Sustainability

11. Community-based projects/Service learning

Narrative Integration

12. Compelling Intellectual Experiences and Successful Pedagogical Practices

The 9 Planning Units (instead of traditional academic departments) at Evergreen are:

- Core (1st-Year Program)
- Culture, Text and Language (CTL)
- Expressive Arts (EA)
- Environmental Studies (ES)
- Evening and Weekend Studies (EWS)
- Interdivisional Area (IA)
- Scientific Inquiry (SI)
- Politics, Behavior and Change (SPBC)
- Tribal: Reservation-based Community Programs (TRI)

Program Coordinators for each Planning Unit collect information from instructors for every course to report which of the twelve academic areas were addressed in each according to:

- Extent (Extensively, Moderately, A Little, Not at All)
- Academic fields that applied in the course (multiple disciplines for most courses)
- Content levels delivered (Introductory, Intermediate, Advanced)

Evergreen's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment compiles the reported information.

As a summary evaluation each term, instructors write student evaluations as evidence of Narrative Integration. With degree completion, both the faculty advisor and student write comprehensive narratives about what has been accomplished in the student's degree program.

Each summer, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment offers financial compensation to faculty who volunteer to participate in annual Faculty Assessment of Teaching and Learning. The activities include annual evaluation of the End-of-Program Review, funding mini-grants for faculty research and assessment, and writing reports on those findings. All of these activities are supported by financial compensation during the off-contract period, as this level of faculty participation in administrative activity is considered beyond the bounds of the regular academic year faculty workload, which emphasizes academic instruction, research, and service.

Usefulness for the BLA Program at UAS: Evergreen has taken what UAS broadly calls "competencies" and "learning outcomes" and has delineated the twelve academic areas that can be subdivided into Liberal Arts, Skills, Values, Narrative Integration. Interdisciplinary and individualized BLA learning outcomes could be reorganized into similarly broad categories. Evergreen also has a comprehensive system for reporting exactly how the academic areas apply in each course, for diagnostic rather than prescriptive purposes of ongoing assessment. Narrative student and faculty evaluation could be applied to the electronic BLA Student Portfolio.

Challenges for implementation in the BLA Program at UAS: The comprehensive End-of-Program Review requires extensive resources devoted to Institutional Research and Assessment, which UAS lacks. The system works because Administrative bears the burden of collecting, compiling, reporting, and evaluating the effectiveness of the assessment of teaching and learning. In Evergreen's model, faculty assist in these assessment evaluation processes during the off-contract period, which are viewed as above and beyond the regular faculty workload responsibilities of the academic year. UAS lacks resources for such a comprehensive process.

3. Portland State University (Portland, OR)

Contact interviewed: Robert Mercer, Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

B.A. and B.S. Liberal Studies: interdisciplinary program

Emphasis Areas: Arts & Letters, Science, Social Sciences, Liberal Studies

Degree Requirements: 81 upper-division credits (quarters) from any 3 academic disciplines within or between Emphasis Areas, plus either Writing 323 or Writing Intensive Course

Number of Degree Students: 102 Liberal Studies graduates, representing 36% of B.A./B.S. degrees conferred by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (CLAS) (AY 2007-2008)

Size of faculty: All CLAS faculty

Advising: delivered by the CLAS Office of Academic Advising

Guidelines for Program-Level Assessment in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Portland State University: <http://www.pdx.edu/clas/handbook-program-assessment>.

Liberal Studies Program Summary: the B.A. or B.S. in Liberal Studies is the primary degree choice of transfer and non-traditional students at PSU. Unlike B.A. and B.S. degrees in Arts & Letters, Science, or Social Science, students who pursue Liberal Studies do not have to complete University Studies requirements. (Note: University Studies is an integrated first-year General Education program at PSU, with follow up requirements in the second and fourth years.) The Liberal Studies major completes 85 upper-division credits (quarter-based) in lieu of the combination of University Studies and the upper-division requirements for other CLAS majors.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes for Degree Majors: Although PSU has program-level guidelines for assessment, placing responsibility upon department chairs to collect, analyze, and report assessment data, in practice this has not occurred in the Liberal Studies program, which lacks both a department and chair. No formal assessment review or reporting process has been established. Faculty participation in assessment is practically nonexistent beyond the activities of CLAS Office of Academic Advising. The only survey of interdisciplinary majors to date was completed by a student as a senior research project (Spring/Summer 2009).

PSU has identified eight assessment rubric elements for all baccalaureate degrees, including Liberal Studies:

1. Disciplinary Expertise
2. Creative & Critical Thinking

3. Communication
4. Ethics & Social Responsibility
5. Diversity
6. Engagement
7. Internationalization
8. Sustainability

Specific outcomes have been articulated for the first six rubric elements, but not for the final two. How these outcomes are measured has not been determined.

PSU also has two online planning systems available to students and advisors. Degree Audit Reporting System (DARS), similar to DegreeWorks, permits advisors to develop an individualized degree plan for students. The Registrar routinely accepts these plans. ATLAS is an integrated planning program that cross-references uniform requirements and courses between all public colleges and universities in Oregon.

Usefulness for the BLA Program at UAS: The Liberal Studies degree at PSU has little to offer the BLA at UAS, other than the recognition that our programs face similar circumstances. Liberal Studies constitutes the largest percentage of undergraduate student enrollment and graduates at PSU, but like at UAS it is poorly integrated into the College of Liberal Arts and Science (our School of Arts & Science). The program also lacks an assessment plan and method of measuring student outcomes. Such program deficiencies may be easier to address at UAS, however, where the size of the student population, the number of academic options, and number of faculty are only a fraction of what is available at PSU.

Challenges for implementation in the BLA Program at UAS: In many ways, UAS is ahead of PSU in terms of addressing these issues. At UAS, a systematic program review of the BLA has been completed. The degree has been redesigned that includes interdisciplinary core courses, and culminates with a capstone experience. The degree program is coordinated by BLA Coordinators on the Juneau campus and via distance from Ketchikan, and it is supported by a joint Humanities and Social Science faculty in a BLA Work Group. A faculty-based advising system for students has been implemented with supportive online resources, including DegreeWorks and BLA website pages. A workshop has been scheduled to develop an assessment plan. In sum, we have already begun to address challenges still facing the Liberal Studies degree at PSU.

4. Oregon State University (Corvallis, OR)

Contact interviewed: Robert Mercer, Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

B.A. and B.S. Liberal Studies: interdisciplinary major (on-campus, e-campus)

Emphasis Areas: self-design, or pre-structured themes and options (transcript visible)

Degree Requirements: University Baccalaureate Core, College of Liberal Arts Core, Plan of Study (45-60 credits, 27 minimum upper-division), Writing Intensive Course, internship (recommended), GPA minimums (2.0 or better overall, 2.3 or better in major)

Number of Degree Students: 850 Liberal Studies majors (325 New Media Communications option, 100 Pre-Education option, with the balance of students spread across disciplines and locations on the OSU campus, via e-campus, or at the Cascade campus in Bend, OR).

Size of faculty: All College of Liberal Arts (CLA) faculty at OSU

Advising: Department of Liberal Studies Advisors (staff)

Liberal Studies Learning Outcomes at OSU: http://oregonstate.edu/cla/liberal_studies/liberal-studies-learning-outcomes

Liberal Studies Program Summary: A 30-year-old program at OSU, Liberal Studies was originally conceived as an honors program, but over time devolved into General Studies. Reorganized as the Liberal Studies major, students design a thematic interdisciplinary plan of study by mixing and matching courses for any combination of the 13 departments in the College of Liberal Arts. In some cases, transcript visible pre-structured programs are available: New Media Communications, Pre-Education, Asian Studies, Chinese Studies, European Studies, and Japanese Studies.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes for Degree Majors: The Liberal Studies program has identified 9 rubrics for assessment, with specific learning outcomes identified for each:

1. Manage information
2. Design and plan
3. Research and investigate
4. Communicate
5. Management of interpersonal relationships
6. Think critically
7. Manage and administer
8. Apply values
9. Develop a successful career and personal life

These content and skill areas are addressed through the development of each student's Liberal Studies Degree–Plan of Study:

- Listing all Lower-Division and Upper-Division Courses in the 45-60 credit plan, including a Writing Intensive Course, signed by the student and approved by the Director of Liberal Studies.
- Student submission, and Director approval, of a three-page personal essay articulating the student's goals and challenges in completing the theme of study.
- Handout of Liberal Studies Learning Outcomes signed and dated by the student.

Upon degree completion, student self-assessment is done on-line through a Liberal Studies Undergraduate Exit Survey. An optional face-to-face meeting may be arranged with the Director of Liberal Studies. The Department of Liberal Studies reports aggregate data on graduates to the OSU Assessment Office.

Usefulness for the BLA Program at UAS: In many ways OSU's Liberal Studies degree most closely parallels the redesigned BLA at UAS. The Liberal Studies Degree–Plan of Study, Learning Outcomes handout, and the academic and personal goals and challenges essay could be

easily adapted for inclusion in the HUM 200 Orientation to the Liberal Arts and HUM 210 BLA Portfolio Review courses. The New Media Communication major could provide a model for reorganizing the BLA Designated Emphases in Communication and Language Arts.

As an end-of-program assessment tool, the BLA could benefit from an exit survey similar to the one developed at OSU. However, the electronic BLA Student Portfolio at UAS surpasses the exit interview at OSU in terms of student self-reporting of learning outcomes.

Challenges for implementation in the BLA Program at UAS: At OSU, the Department of Liberal Studies is a stand-alone program with its own Director, advisors, and support staff, working in tandem with but independently of other departments and degree programs in the College of Liberal Arts. Also, hundreds of course offerings are available to undergraduates at OSU every term. In comparison, the limited academic departments, course offerings, and faculty at UAS requires that the integration of all aspects of the BLA degree program occur across departments in the School of Arts and Sciences. The interdepartmental and cross-campus BLA Work Group, working in tandem with their disciplinary colleagues, may be the best way to address this at UAS. The stepped advising system developed for the BLA – Student Resource Center for BLA Premajors, individual orientation for new majors with the BLA Coordinator, assignment of a faculty advisor upon admission to the major, developing a working relationship between the student and faculty advisor in the required HUM 210 BLA Portfolio Review course – also helps toward this integration.