UNIVERSITY STUDIES

Completion, Implementation, and Assessment

A Progress Report
to
The Higher Learning Commission
of the
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
on
“The Completion, Implementation, and Assessment of the University Studies Program”
Sept. 1, 2006
TABLE of CONTENTS

I. Introduction: Context and Content of the Report 4
II. The Development and Completion of the University Studies Program 8
III. Implementation of the University Studies Program 17
   Course and Flag Approval Process 17
   Course Substitution Request Process 20
   University Studies Website, FAQ, and Updates 22
   Course Expiration and Renewal Process 23
   Transfer Concerns and Policies 24
   Retention and Graduation 27
   Availability and Completion of Basic Skills Requirements 29
   Course Availability and Enrollment 32
IV. Assessment of the University Studies Program 36
   Data Collection, Analysis, and Management 38
   Reporting and Feedback Mechanism 40
   Direct Indicators of Student Learning 41
      Faculty (USP) Area Committees 41
      Collegiate Assessment of Academic Progress (CAAP) 42
      Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) 47
   Indirect Indicators of Student Learning 49
   Evidence of Implementation of the Plan 54
V. Conclusion: Ongoing and Planned USP Activities and Assessment 56
   Demonstrated Improvements 56
   Ongoing Assessment 58
   Innovations in Delivery 59

List of Appendices:
   A. Program Overview and Requirements (PO&R) Document
   B. List of Approved Flag Courses (as per HLC request)
   C. University Studies Program Assessment Plan (USPAP)
   D. Faculty Area Committees Reports: Basic Skills
      1. College Reading and Writing
      2. Oral Communications
      3. Mathematics
      4. Physical Development and Wellness
Editorial Notes:

This report has been prepared to submit to the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, yet we intend for it to be readable and purposeful for any interested audience consisting of faculty, students, staff, administrators, and/or community members.

When submitted to the Higher Learning Commission in September 2006, this report will include each of the appendices listed in the table of contents and referred to elsewhere in the draft. Appendices A (USP Overview and Requirements), B (List of Approved Flag Courses), and C (USP Assessment Plan) are all currently available at www.winona.edu/usp.

Appendices D.1-D.4, the Faculty Area Committee Reports on Basic Skills Assessment, will serve as important additions to the final document. These reports are due to be delivered June 1, 2006.

Special thanks are due to University Studies Subcommittee members Professors Dan Kauffman, Melanie Reap, Chris Buttram, and Terry Price for their contributions to this report, as well as to Susan Hatfield and Theresa Waterbury from the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research for their timely assistance with our requests for data, research, resources, and guidance.

Sincerely,

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on behalf of the University Studies Subcommittee

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This progress report, addressing the Completion, Implementation, and Assessment of the University Studies Program, has been produced in compliance with the Higher Learning Commission’s 2001 Comprehensive Evaluation of Winona State University.

In WSU’s 2001 Special Emphasis Self-Study Report, entitled Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education and compiled in preparation for the HLC’s site visit, the institution described the development and completion of its new University Studies (general education) Program, which was instituted in Fall of 2001 for new entering first-year students and in Fall of 2002 for transfer students.

That Self-Study Report described the multiple improvements of University Studies over the old general education program, which had been a focus of the North Central Association’s concern in the 1991 comprehensive evaluation. The “Plan of Action” which concluded the 2001 Self-Study Report articulated the following proposal to the HLC and the university community:

The University Studies Program, even though it retains some classes and distribution requirements from the previous general education system, promises considerable change and opportunity. While long overdue, its more ambitious scope and academic rigor provide WSU with a unique opportunity: to raise the standard of general education by promoting higher-level learning, by reinforcing basic skills in the upper division, and by preparing students to make responsible decisions and contributions in their future roles as workers, learners, and citizens. The review of courses comprising the program has been rigorous, with faculty and departments expected to make the case for the value of each course to the
greater curriculum: no course has been given a “free ride” by virtue of existing general education or departmental status. The same rigor that has been exacted in the development of the program should then be applied to its assessment as the program is initiated and as it matures.

**Recommended action:**

- Develop a comprehensive assessment plan for University Studies, one that involves teaching faculty, the University Studies Director and Subcommittee, the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, and other key constituencies (e.g. Faculty Development).
- Implement the University Studies assessment plan as the program is implemented over the next four years, in particular tracking student learning and student development as new entering students proceed through Basic Skills, core courses, and upper-division flag courses.
- Report on the progress of University Studies, both to the university community and to NCA, after a period of five years (fall of 2006).

*source: Seven Principles for Good Practice in Higher Education:*

Upon the 2001 site visit, Winona State University’s accreditation was continued for a period of ten years, the maximum allowable by the North Central Association. As the HLC team noted at that time, the University had done “an excellent job of meeting all the concerns of the 1991 comprehensive visit, even through challenging financial circumstances,” and that it provided documentation of patterns of evidence of each of the required criteria.
As regards the University Studies Program specifically, the HLC team complimented WSU on the design of the program and concurred with its Plan of Action:

The newly implemented University Studies Program was designed to respond directly to concerns raised in the 1991 NCA review. Requirements were created that allow students to reinforce basic skills learned in entry classes in upper division classes, generally within the major. Rather than taking a series of courses all aimed at the entry level, students may choose to take two courses in the same discipline which are designed so that the second course builds upon the prior course, thus creating greater depth of study than previously available. The Unity and Diversity requirement allows students to gain knowledge and hone skills in courses that are generally beyond the entry level, and which, in combination, allow the students to integrate knowledge both within and outside of their own discipline. The new University Studies program constituted an identifiable and coherent undergraduate general education component.

[...] The institution's plan for University Studies has incorporated assessment and oversight for the program, and it has been required for first year students entering WSU in the 2001-2002 academic year. The Flag courses need to be identified to complete the University Studies Program, and the extent to which the University Studies Program results in student achievement of the expected outcomes needs to be assessed.

COMMISSION FOLLOW-UP:


The team agrees with the university’s Proposed Plan of Action and recommends a progress report that includes:

• A plan for the assessment of academic achievement of the University Studies program objectives, including both direct and indirect indicators; plans for data collection and management; and a description of the structure for using assessment results to lead to curricular and/or instructional changes which should result in improvement of student learning in the University Studies Program.

• Evidence that indicates that the assessment plan has been implemented including a description of the types of data that have been collected and how they have been used to make changes that should lead to improved learning within the program; along with a list of the changes that have been implemented.

• A list of the courses that are identified to fulfill Flag courses requirements in the University Studies program.

Source: Assurance Section (Section Two) of the HLC's 2001 Comprehensive Evaluation Visit

With this report, then, Winona State University delivers the last of three required progress reports requested by the Higher Learning Commission. In fulfillment of the request, this report details, first, the completion of the program as it was developed in response to the earlier NCA critique; second, the implementation of the program’s administration, oversight, policies, and
processes; and third, the assessment of the program, describing both the plans and processes for assessment and the results of measures implemented to date.

The report concludes with a discussion of new initiatives linked to University Studies. Most of these have been developed under the aegis of the “New University/Winona Experience/Learning in the 21st Century” initiatives begun in 2003. (For more information on what is now called “Learning in the 21st Century” at Winona State University, please see [http://www.winona.edu/L21](http://www.winona.edu/L21).) Some of these initiatives—designed to provide greater intentional, experiential, community-based, and integrative learning opportunities—offer considerable promise for transformative experiences in the University Studies Program.

Appendices to this document include not only the governing documents for University Studies and its assessment, but also the list of approved Flag courses as requested by the HLC and the first results of our ongoing assessment of student learning in USP areas: reports from each of four Basic Skills Faculty Area Committees in the areas of College Reading and Writing, Oral Communication, Mathematics, and Physical Development and Wellness, respectively.
The Development and Completion of the University Studies Program

Developed in part in response to concerns articulated by the NCA during its site visit in 1991 and eventually formally adopted at the start of the following decade, the University Studies Program in existence today is the result of a long and at times difficult process. General education reform is, as stakeholders know, rarely easily accomplished. Yet the efforts undertaken in the 1990s indeed resulted in a program that is designed to satisfy a demanding faculty, challenge its student body, and address the needs of a changing society.

For much of the 1990s, faculty discussed potential revisions to its general education program. During the mid-1990s, two external phenomena—a legislatively-mandated conversion to semesters and the implementation of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum—slowed, rather than sparked, progress on the initiative. Only as the end of that decade drew near did the university begin to reach consensus about the design of the program. For much of the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 academic years, faculty proposed and debated various iterations of a general education revision that would address the concerns articulated by the NCA in 1991.

In its 1991 visit, the NCA’s critique addressed the design, oversight, and details of the existing general education program:

General Education Requirements (45 s.h.)

I. Basic Skills (12 s.h.)
   A. Written Communications (4 s.h.)
   B. Oral Communications (3 s.h.)
   C. Mathematics (3 s.h.)
   D. Physical Education Activities (2 s.h.)

II. Humanities (6 s.h. - 2 departments)

III. Natural Sciences (6 s.h. w/lab - 2 departments)

IV. Social Sciences (6 s.h. - 2 departments)

V. Different Culture (6 s.h. - 2 departments)

VI. Allied Studies (3 s.h.)
Courses have been repeatedly added to the general education program without concern for the overall definition of the program causing it to lack focus, direction, and an articulated set of goals. No office or official appears to have direct responsibility for the oversight of the general education program. The development of a new general education program must be based on themes and concepts reflecting current practice in defining this component of the baccalaureate degree, examining potentials of a core set of courses, prescriptive liberating studies courses and limited electives through upper division course work.

Although the eventual adoption of the program was long in coming, the result was one that addressed each of the NCA's concerns and at the same time anticipated national trends in liberal education—such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities “LEAP” (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) initiative. The oversight, policies, design, and outcomes of the program are all articulated in a University Studies Program Overview and Requirements document approved by the University’s Faculty Senate in April, 2000 and implemented in the Fall of 2001 (Appendix A).

To address the NCA’s concerns regarding the oversight and administration of the program, the university provided reassigned time for an appointed faculty director and established a standing University Studies Subcommittee for review of course proposals and other administrative concerns. Dr. Kerry Williams, a full professor in the Department of Psychology, served as University Studies Director from 2000-2003, overseeing both the final adoption of the program and the initial review of course proposals. Dr. Williams's leadership during this juncture was critical to the faculty's adoption of the program and to its initial implementation. Dr. J Paul Johnson, a full professor in the Department of English, has served as Director since 2003 and has recently been appointed to a second term to conclude in 2009 (both Williams and Johnson served on the University Studies Subcommittee since its inception in 1999). The University Studies Director serves a three-year term as an ex officio non-voting member of the University Studies Subcommittee, a standing subcommittee of the university's Academic Affairs and Curriculum Committee, comprised of representatives from each of the five colleges and each of three Basic Skills areas. Members of the subcommittee serve staggered three-year
terms representing their areas, and thus the oversight of the program is one that remains reasonably consistent from year to year, with faculty dedicated to its success.

As noted by the NCA in its 1991 critique, the prior program lacked, among other things, overall definition. In contrast to its predecessor, the design of the University Studies Program is one that combines a modified version of the traditional skills and distribution requirement system (and which is the common structure for general education nationally) with multiple opportunities for civic, intercultural, ethical and upper-division studies both in and across departments. It consists of “course” and “flag” requirements distributed across four main categories of electives, intended to suggest a longitudinal four-year process through the program rather than a simple accretion of lower-level courses.

The University Studies Program Overview and Requirements document (Appendix A) describes each of these requirements in detail. Although the Basic Skills courses (College Reading and Writing, Oral Communication, Mathematics, and Physical Development and Wellness) are retained from the earlier general education program, each now has much more specific goals and objectives.

Redefined with attention to both the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Outcomes Statement¹ and the local faculty’s focus on assigning challenging reading, English 111 is designed

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¹ Available: [http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html](http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html)
to promote students’ “critical reading, thinking, and writing skills” and focuses on critical reading, argumentation, and documentation. Communication Studies 191 teaches students “to become highly competent communicators... who are skilled at expressing their ideas... and interacting with others.” The Mathematics electives “help students develop an appreciation of the uses and usefulness of mathematical models,” while Physical Development and Wellness courses teach students “practical skills in the areas of lifetime physical activity, health awareness and wellness.” In addition, University Studies requires twelve hours of upper-division “flagged courses” that provide additional contexts, opportunities, and feedback for students’ use of writing, speech, mathematics, statistics, and critical thinking in their major fields.

The Arts and Sciences Core provides knowledge of human culture and the natural world with courses featuring study in traditional areas of liberal learning. The Core eliminates what had been an intellectually unjustifiable “Allied Studies” requirement in the old general education and adds instead a requirement in the Fine and Performing Arts—one that fosters the institution’s commitment to the value of creative and performative expression. Except for this addition, the Arts and Sciences Core is a traditional introduction to disciplinary thought and expression. The Humanities classes help students “understand... human experience and... the meaning and value of life by examining its expression in culture.” The Social Sciences courses are designed to have students learn about “perspectives regarding human behavior.” The Natural Science classes acquaint students with the “methods... of scientific inquiry which increases our understanding of the natural world.” It is these requirements that bear the primary responsibility of providing students with the “knowledge of human cultures and the natural and physical world” as endorsed by the AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise initiative.

It should not go without notice that the University Studies Program went so far as to specify departments that could contribute courses to the Arts and Science Core. The language of the PO&R document restricts core courses to those “taught by faculty drawn from disciplines normally identified with those areas,” allowing that “exceptions to the rule are possible, but they are not normative and must be supported by documentation.” Where for instance, in general education the Natural Science electives had included Mathematics and Computer
Science, the new program excluded these departments from such offerings, allowing only for courses to be taught in the departments of Biology, Chemistry, Geoscience, and Physics. Though the purposeful exclusion of some departments from this category was not without its opponents, the intent was to strengthen to quality of student learning in the Arts and Science Core of University Studies. Last, the old “two-department rule”—one requiring students to spread their coursework in a category across two departments—was abandoned, and students are now both allowed and encouraged to complete the core requirements with sequences of courses in a single discipline.

Unity and Diversity electives focus their attention on individual and social responsibility. This area is designed in part to respond to the site visitors' request that WSU faculty consider reflecting upon current national trends in liberal education as they make their recommendations for change. Additionally, this area invites all departments and programs to propose courses to meet its requirements; it further invites courses offered at a higher-than-introductory level of understanding, and thus, offered at any level and potentially requiring prerequisites—both potentialities forbidden by the old general education program.

Again, we note a prescient parallel to the AAC&U’s articulation of *Liberal Education and America’s Promise*, which advocates for fostering liberal education outcomes that address individual and social responsibilities, among them civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and skills for lifelong learning. Though not prescriptively identical to the AAC&U’s outcomes, the University Studies Program’s Unity and Diversity requirements are noticeably similar. The Science and Social Policy requirement teaches students to “improve their understanding of the interrelated concerns of society and the sciences.” Courses meeting the outcomes for Global or Multicultural Perspectives promote students’ understanding of the growing interrelatedness and diversity of nations, people, and the environment. Critical Analysis electives promote logical, ethical, evidence-based reasoning on an array of academic topics. And finally, the last category of courses are those that promote Contemporary Citizenship or Democratic Institutions by providing opportunities and contexts for students to “participate as effective citizens.”
Again, these new sets of courses are consistent with Winona State University’s mission statement, and, additionally, are grounded in contemporary issues. The faculty and administration strongly believe that introducing students to these new issues will make them more aware of contemporary issues and better citizens of our world. Some such courses examine the foundations of democracy, while others—for example, English 211, Writing in Communities; Residential College 150, Insights and Implications; and Women’s and Gender Studies 148, Power, Privilege, and Gender—have provided curricula flexible enough to support service learning initiatives in the local community and beyond.

The last, and most fully integrative, requirement of University Studies is that of the Flag courses. This system is designed to meet one of the other concerns of the NCA site visitors. Flag courses, usually in a student’s major field of study, are designed to reinforce the “basic skills” component of University Studies. In their upper-division coursework, then, students will complete at least two classes that offer an intensive writing experience; one class in which they have to undertake a significant oral presentation, and one class in which they have to demonstrate the use of data or critical thinking techniques in a meaningful way.

These Flag courses demonstrate just one example of how the new program not only permits, but also encourages, greater depth of study. In general education, every course was to be taken at the introductory level; in University Studies, prerequisites are permitted so that a student may fulfill the requirements of a category from a single department. The new program discourages the compartmentalization of liberal education and instead encourages its integration with the student’s major area of study, especially the case in the Unity and Diversity area. For example, students may take their Critical Analysis course within their major or a biology student may take an upper-division major seminar to satisfy the Science and Social Policy requirement; non-specialists, meanwhile, may study similar issues at a more basic level in an introductory course.

Versions of a more fully integrative learning requirement were considered as a part of the new program. Just as the LEAP initiative advocates for integrative learning opportunities that foster students’ capacity to “adapt knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and questions,” so too did WSU’s faculty weigh the potential merits of a general education capstone
experience for University Studies. Ultimately, and for a host of logistical and intellectual reasons, the curriculum adopted did not include such a capstone, and instead the Flag requirements most closely approximate the integrative learning outcome of the LEAP initiative. Future revisions to, experiments with, and assessments of the current USP might benefit from a reconsideration of a more fully integrative learning experience for its students, and the Residential College is currently in the process of developing just such a capstone in its fledgling Residential Scholars Program.

Beyond the structural design of the program’s requirements, teams of teaching faculty collaborated on the articulation of student learning outcomes specific to each area. In some of these areas, as noted above, the outcomes were drafted in reference to those adopted by national disciplinary organization; in others, faculty contributed their own understanding of the common objectives of their disparate courses in, say, the Humanities. The exercise was not without difficulty, and some areas yielded more immediately and transparently assessable outcomes than did others, but the eventual result was that every requirement of the USP identified specific learning outcomes for courses intended to meet the requirement. In turn, every single course approved for the program has been (and continues to be) required to demonstrate the means by which it would promote students’ abilities to meet those outcomes. As of this writing, faculty assessment committees are today in the process of assessing the degrees to which students demonstrate, through direct evidence, accomplishment of these outcomes, beginning with the Basic Skills.

University Studies was implemented for new entering first-year students in the fall of 2001, a date that was precipitated by the scheduled comprehensive accreditation site visit and that also necessitated a midyear catalog supplement. The staff in the Registrar’s, Advising and Retention, and Admissions offices worked to make the transition to the new program relatively seamless, despite faculty qualms about implementing the new requirements midcatalog. Addenda were published and provided to new students during the April and June preregistration advising sessions, and by the implementation date, the University Studies Subcommittee had reviewed and approved over 150 courses (and voted to disapprove a few

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2 All approved course proposals for University Studies are archived and accessible at [www.winona.edu/usp](http://www.winona.edu/usp). Each proposal addresses the stipulated student learning outcomes for its category.
proposed) for the Basic Skills, Arts and Science Core, and Unity and Diversity areas of the program.

The implementation date for transfer students was deferred to fall of 2002. The delay allowed the faculty—and the University Studies Subcommittee—to focus first on the approval of the many 100- and 200-level electives that would constitute the initial slate of electives for incoming first-year students. Transfer students beginning WSU coursework in 2001-02 were advised to complete the existing general education program, while those entering in fall of 2002 or later were placed in University Studies. As a result of this decision, the review and approval of Flag courses—every single one of them “new” to the new program insofar as each would need to be submitted to and approved by the USS—was delayed for a year.

The review and approval of Flag courses proved slightly more contentious as departments submitted proposals for the following academic year. Not wishing to articulate minimum page or minute requirements for papers and speeches in Writing and Oral Flag courses (in part so as not to encourage a “downward drift” towards the specified minimums), the USS review of proposals for Flag courses focused more on the pedagogical methods employed to foster the outcomes for each category. Faculty proposers were asked to demonstrate to the subcommittee the means by which they would advise students through the process of writing, for instance, and the kinds of feedback they (and others) would provide; they further were asked to demonstrate that the writing assignments would be distributed throughout the semester and comprise a substantial portion of the course grade. To some faculty, accustomed perhaps to the freedoms of employing whatever pedagogical methods appropriate in their own major courses, such questions seemed inappropriate; yet for the subcommittee, these aspects were indeed the very ones that would distinguish a course as a Flag in the University Studies Program.

By the fall of 2002, the initial review of flag courses was complete and each WSU department had, with some exceptions, identified and approved at least enough flag courses in their majors for them to complete their degrees with the requirements in writing, oral communication, and mathematics/statistics or critical analysis met. Over the next few years, the review of flag course proposals would continue, but at this point, the University Studies
Program could be considered fully complete, with a fully articulated set of goals and requirements, a governing document and leadership, and developed processes for course and flag approvals. Beginning in the fall of 2002, every new student, first-year and transfer alike, entered under the auspices of the University Studies Program. And with that accomplishment, WSU could consider its new program completed if not fully implemented.
The implementation of the new University Studies Program was one that was labor-intensive on a number of fronts, from course approvals and substitution requests to advising concerns and assessment. Since the fall of 1999, the University Studies Subcommittee has met nearly every other Wednesday afternoon of the academic year—typically 10-12 meetings—to govern the program. As the initial round of course approvals eventually waned, and the hundreds of courses that comprise the bulk of the program were approved, the focus of subcommittee meetings turned from the approval of courses to the ongoing administration of the program. In particular, this implementation phase brought greater attention to the review of flag courses (and their integration of USP goals with disciplinary content), a procedure for USP course substitution requests, the expiration and renewal of course approvals, communications with faculty and students, transfer issues, course availability, and assessment of the program. Each of these features of the program’s implementation is discussed in further detail below.

Course and Flag Approval Process

Since the inception of the program, the University Studies Subcommittee has reviewed literally hundreds of courses proposed for inclusion in the program. The design of the program invites every department “to explore Unity and Diversity” and requires every department to provide its majors with at least four Flag courses; as a result, the program requires a substantial number of electives for completion, and each and every Course and Flag proposal has been reviewed by the USS. Each of these approved proposals has required the following of its proposers:
1. Documentation of Course Requirements and learning activities designed to meet the course outcomes specified for the area.

2. A course description that clearly identifies the course as a University Studies Course and the Course Requirement which it satisfies.

3. Information directed to the student which clearly identifies course activities and assignments that address the course outcomes.

With some exceptions, the review process for courses requirements has been successful. There have been occasional misunderstandings and disagreements about the depth and quality of the material required for approval, but these have been infrequent, and increasingly so over the years, as the program has matured. Most course proposals for the Basic Skills and Arts and Science Core areas, with few exceptions, have been approved as proposed: as one might imagine, these areas being the most traditional of the program, courses in these areas have historically been provided by a fixed number of departments with offerings in traditionally prescribed areas. (Even while the PO&R document allows for “excluded” departments to propose courses in the core, no such department has requested the opportunity to do so as of this writing.)

The Unity and Diversity area, less defined by traditional disciplinary boundaries, has proved a slightly more contentious ground for course approval. Since for this category, as the PO&R document indicates, “any academic program or department may explore Unity and Diversity and may propose courses to meet the requirements,” neither the USS nor the faculty can rely on existing notions of disciplinarity to determine a course’s appropriateness for a category, the merits of each proposal can be discussed only in terms of its ability to promote the student learning outcomes specified for the area. Thus the degree to which a given course promotes those outcomes—if such can be demonstrated at all—has proved the primary determinant of a course’s chances of approval.

As a result, some courses proposed in Unity and Diversity have been recommended for disapproval, on the grounds that they simply did not evidence sufficient science for a Science and Social Policy requirement or sufficient multicultural content for one in Multicultural
Perspectives. In other cases, proposers made significant revisions to courses as proposed before gaining the subcommittee’s recommendation, and in still others, proposers withdrew their proposals rather than make such revisions. Of course, we note, these disapprovals, revisions, and withdrawals pale in comparison to the number of those proposals, in this area and the others, that have been recommended for approval as promoting each of the outcomes stipulated. And the program has not suffered for the absence of any individual offering, as a sufficient array of electives has been approved and instituted for each requirement in the program.

While establishing a sufficient number and variety of course requirements for the USP was accomplished within the first couple of years of the program, it took longer for the full set of flag requirements to be proposed by faculty and reviewed by the subcommittee. The design of the program, with its requirement that every student complete four flag courses—two in writing, one in oral communications, and a last in either mathematics/statistics or critical analysis—essentially required that every WSU major propose at least four courses to USS for these flags. As the program was implemented, faculty from English and Communication Studies offered faculty development sessions on developing and teaching Writing and Oral Flag courses, with topics attending to the concerns of responding to student writing or the characteristics of second language learners in such classes. In many departments, multiple courses were proposed, so that students could choose from electives carrying the flags. The result has been that literally hundreds of courses—by this writing, 104 for writing, 71 for oral communication, and 45 for mathematics/statistics or critical analysis—have been approved for USP flags.

Determining the kinds of courses most appropriate to carry the flag designation was less simple than initially perceived. In the review of flag proposals, the USS has abided by the language of the PO&cR document that suggests that while the it “cannot veto department designation of flagged courses,” at the same time “departments will need to demonstrate to the University Studies Subcommittee that the courses in question merit the flags.” This particular language—designed to respect the academic freedom of individual programs and faculty yet protect the integrity of the University Studies Program’s goals—has governed the review and approval of the flag courses. The USS has not recommended disapproval of any flag course, and in only one
case has it forwarded a proposal with comment to the Academic Affairs and Curriculum Committee that resulted in its disapproval.

The more common actions taken by USS have been either recommending for immediate approval or suggesting revisions to the proposal for later reconsideration. The subcommittee notes that in almost every instance of the later, suggested revisions seem to have been received in the cordial and collegial spirit in which they were offered. Though proposing these courses for inclusion in the program has been labor-intensive—as has been instructing them—WSU faculty have done so literally “for the good of the team.” Given that there are no other tangible incentives for proposing or teaching the flag courses, which frequently require a greater workload in terms of paper load and feedback than others, the faculty deserve credit for shouldering the burden of curriculum and instruction in reinforcing the basic skills through these courses.

Integrating the flag requirements with departmental staff and curricula has been, from our perspective, occasionally problematic. In a few cases, courses were proposed for writing flags that were regularly taught by faculty ill prepared to address the outcomes for the flag; in a few other cases, departments elected to remove flags from previously-approved courses because their content (too broad) and/or enrollment (too high) prohibited success with the outcomes. There still may exist a very few courses whose content is too broad or enrollment is too high for sufficient attention to student writing or presentation concerns; however, these are exceptions. Indeed, many departments have had the opportunity to implement, refine, and improve their flag offerings. And, it must be said, most of the faculty proposing flag courses have articulated clear, compelling, and commendable practices that reinforce the program’s basic skills—exactly as the program’s designers had intended.

Course Substitution Request Process

In 2003, the USS formalized a Course Substitution Request Process by which students could request that a transfer or WSU course not approved for the USP might fulfill requirements. The process, as approved by USS, A2C2, and Senate in 2003, is designed to protect the integrity
of the program and yet allow some occasional flexibility for ‘highly unusual circumstances.’
The approved Request Form and Guidelines for Substitution are available at www.winona.edu/usp, as is a FAQ regarding the process. Student proposers are required to explain clearly (1) why they are making this request and (2) how the proposed course should substitute as a University Studies Course in the category requested by addressing each of the outcomes for that category separately.

The approved guidelines governing the request process include this language: “University Studies Requirements are met ONLY by courses currently in the University Studies Program. The University Studies Subcommittee will not consider requests for substitution of any USP course for a different USP area. Only under highly unusual circumstances will a WSU course not listed in the University Studies Program be considered as a substitution.”

These guidelines are strict so as to preserve the integrity of the faculty governance of the program. The USS respects the right and the responsibility of the faculty—and only the faculty—to propose courses for the USP. Given these guidelines, the kinds of ‘highly unusual circumstances’ that have led to recommendations for approval have been these:

- Inaccurate information provided by official WSU documents describing program requirements.
- Ineffective technologies for communicating program requirements or changes to students.
- (In the case of transfer students) Inexact correlations between other institutions’ programs, departments, courses, or requirements.

In the absence of “highly unusual circumstances” such as these, the USS has been consistent in recommending for disapproval the substitution of WSU courses not listed in the program. Since the list of approved courses has been published accurately since the inception of the program, and since students have ample opportunity to elect to complete any of the dozens of strong courses already approved for the category, the USS does not view such requests as ones that would warrant substitution.
Since the development of the program and the approval of the request Guidelines and Process, the USS has committed considerable effort to ensure that the request process is fair to students and yet preserves the right of the faculty to discern what courses will fulfill those requirements. Given the hours faculty have invested in developing, proposing, and reviewing courses for the program, the USS encourages students to complete the program as it has been approved by completing elective courses in the categories for which they have been approved.

University Studies Website, FAQ, and Updates

The University Studies website was developed and published during the 2003-04 academic year as a means of communicating with the university community and archiving forms and minutes. The site, accessible from each of the relevant pages on the main WSU web (Academics, Faculty/Staff, Students, Registrar, Departments, etc.), includes the following information and forms as indicated at right, including both the full Program Overview and Requirements document and a set of answers to Frequently Asked Questions.

As the University Studies Program Assessment Plan matures, the USP website will archive faculty area committee reports, data sets, and this and other external reports. Beginning in 2005, the USP Director initiated the practice of providing the university community with email updates announcing various USP policies, procedures, resources, practices, and initiatives.
Course Expiration and Renewal Process

The North Central Association’s 1991 critique of the prior general education program also addressed the fact that courses had been added repeatedly to the program without concern for its overall definition. As a result, as the University Studies Program was developed and approved, the Program Overview and Requirements document included the following language:

Courses will receive approval for a fixed period. Approval will automatically expire if the course is not submitted for review before the end of that fixed period. In order to stagger workload, in the first round of review the length of the fixed period will vary from 4 to 6 years. Thereafter, the fixed period will be 6 years.

As the program was implemented, the minutes for the initial meetings of the USS Course Approval Process indicated that Basic Skills were courses to be approved for six years; Arts & Science Core courses for five years; and Flag and Unity & Diversity Courses for four years. However, following those early meetings, and in the midst of review of literally hundreds of courses, the specifics of the expiration dates and renewal process for courses were not addressed. While it was clearly the intent of the language to determine a regular rotation of the course review, discouraging the unsupervised proliferation of unnecessary courses, the document did not provide clear direction for the process.

For instance, the PO&R document did not clarify from what moment the period of approval for a USP course was to commence—nor how the implied renewal process would take place. University Studies Subcommittee minutes, though complete, noted only the original date of USS approval of each course, and not of final administrative approval. As a result, tracking the expiration of individual courses from a date of their initial approval would be next to impossible. Additionally, if enacted from date of administrative approval, the entire renewal process would be dependent upon the whims of proposal submission dates, rather than upon programmatic concerns. Last, a complete re-undertaking of the full course approval process for every USP course would be inefficient and exhausting for departments and USS and A2C2 members. The USS, after reviewing the situation, concluded that the renewal process instead
should be tied to programmatic concerns and should expedite renewals of already-approved courses.

In the fall of 2006, the University Studies Subcommittee recommended amending the PO&R document language quoted above with the following:

> All approved courses will be reviewed on a regular and systematic basis that follows the scheduled rotation of review in the University Studies Program Assessment Plan (USPAP). Existing approval of courses in each USP area will automatically expire if the course is not submitted for renewal by December 1 of the calendar year as indicated. Departments may seek renewal of USP approval by completing the USP Renewal Request form provided by the University Studies Director.

The USS proposal regarding the Expiration and Renewal of Course Approvals was approved by A2C2 and Faculty Senate and accepted by Administration during the 2005-06 academic year. As the approved schedule for assessment and expiration below is enacted, approved courses in the Basic Skills area will be scheduled for review during the 2006-07 academic year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses in ...</th>
<th>USPAP reports due</th>
<th>Renewal deadline</th>
<th>Expiration Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Skills</td>
<td>June 1, 2006 (+4)</td>
<td>Dec. 1, 2006 (+4)</td>
<td>end of Fall, 2007 (+4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Science Core</td>
<td>June 1, 2007 (+4)</td>
<td>Dec. 1, 2007 (+4)</td>
<td>end of Fall, 2008 (+4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity &amp; Diversity</td>
<td>June 1, 2008 (+4)</td>
<td>Dec. 1, 2008 (+4)</td>
<td>end of Fall, 2009 (+4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag Courses</td>
<td>June 1, 2009 (+4)</td>
<td>Dec. 1, 2009 (+4)</td>
<td>end of Fall, 2010 (+4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transfer Concerns and Policies

The Minnesota Transfer Curriculum has proved another implementation concern of the University Studies Program. The Minnesota Transfer Curriculum is a cooperative transfer program in which all the public colleges and universities in Minnesota participate. Winona State has had, like each of the universities in the MnSCU system, to balance its ownership and design of its general education curriculum with the system-wide governance of the MnTC. Though the design of the USP parallels many of the features of the MnTC, the two are not exact.
If Winona State University certifies that a student transferring to another participating college or university has satisfied all ten areas of emphasis of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, then the other school will give the student credit for fully satisfying their general education requirements. The ten areas of emphasis are written and oral communication; critical thinking; natural sciences; mathematics/symbolic systems; history and the social/behavioral sciences; the humanities—arts, literature, and philosophy; human diversity; global perspective; ethical and civic responsibility; and people and the environment.3

Clearly established protocols built into the original design of the University Studies Program have made most transfer issues relatively easy to resolve. Winona State’s Undergraduate Catalog informs students of the following relevant policies:

- Transfer students who have satisfied specific goals of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum will be considered to have satisfied the equivalent components of the University Studies Program.

3 Information about the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum is available at www.mntransfer.org.
• Transfer students who have received an Associate of Arts degree from a community or technical college have automatically satisfied the Basic Skills, Arts and Sciences Core, and Unity and Diversity components of University Studies but must, nevertheless, complete the University Studies Program Flag requirements at WSU.

• Transfer students who have received an A.S. or A.A.S. degree from a community college or university can usually anticipate that they will meet the WSU University Studies requirements once they have completed 40 or more semester credits. Those 40 hours must include humanities, the natural sciences and social sciences (as defined by WSU) and course work equivalent to the courses required in the basic skills.

The Flag requirements of our University Studies Program have proved more of a concern for students transferring to WSU. These requirements apply to all transfer students, regardless of whether or not they have completed the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, an A.A. degree, or other significant general-education related coursework. Transfer students have three options for completing the Flag requirement(s).

(1) They can enroll in courses that carry the Flags they need to complete.

(2) They can approach their major or minor department for a Course Substitution for Major or Minor. If they have completed a non-WSU course that is equivalent to a WSU course carrying the desired flag, this Course Substitution would satisfy their requirement. OR

(3) They can complete a University Studies Course Substitution Request.

A final concern regarding transfer students and the University Studies Program regards a recent MnSCU Chancellor’s Office decision to exclude introductory world languages from the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, effective for students whose initial enrollment is Fall 2006 or later. As the USS had, by 2006, approved over a dozen such courses—in Chinese, English as a Second Language, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish—for inclusion in the Humanities area of the Arts & Science Core, we found the MnSCU decision regrettable. After deliberation and discussion with the Foreign Language Department, Liberal Arts Dean, Registrar, and Transfer Coordinator, the USS affirmed its approval of such courses, and took efforts to ensure
that students completing these in the future courses understand that they may not transfer as Humanities courses at other institutions. This information will be published in our 2006-08 Catalog, our Web Registration and Degree Audit Reporting System modules, and to students enrolling in these courses.

Retention and Graduation

As the University Studies Program reached maturity, with the first cohort of students beginning the program in Fall of 2001 reaching graduation status in the Spring of 2005, retention and graduation rates provide indications of degree to which the program had been successfully implemented.

To examine the effect of the implementation of the USP on retention and graduation rates, we compared WSU rates with national data compiled by NCHEMS (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems). The comparison provides a reference frame for WSU information. For example, 74.5 percent of the Fall 02 NEF (new entering freshmen) at WSU returned for their sophomore year.4 For 2002, the NCHEMS composite value retention rate for four-year colleges and universities in Minnesota was 80.2% and for the U.S. was 73.6%.

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4 Data provided by WSU Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, 12/2005.
Retention and graduation rates relative to the University Studies Program provide additional, if not conclusive, insight. We compared the available data for sophomore, junior, and senior retention rates at WSU under the old general education program with those under the new USP. We note that our comparison may suffer from an admittedly small sample size (only four years’ worth of data available for USP versus thirteen for general education). Our informal analysis suggests that retention rates have increased slightly, concurrent with the implementation of the USP. We do not infer from this data a directly causal relationship, but merely take them to mean another indication that the USP was implemented with sufficient efficiency so as not to jeopardize retention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore retention (mean)</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior retention (mean)</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior retention (mean)</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NCHEMS, we note, suggests a more comprehensive approach to assessing retention rates. Noting that the data is lacking across states, they suggest that within a state, retention rates depend on a host of variables—high school courses taken, ACT scores, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity, among others—and we note the possibility of the university referencing retention rates against other variables. For the purposes of our ongoing review of the implementation of University Studies, we are confident that, to say the least, the implementation has had no discernible deleterious effect on retention at WSU, and it may be possible that its redesign has contributed to a slight increase, at least insofar as direct comparisons with the general education program suggest.

Comparing WSU graduation rates to NCHEMS data is more complicated. Winona State graduation rates are reported after four, five, and seven years with rates associated with the starting year. NCHEMS reports six-year graduation rates of bachelor’s students with the year selected as representing the end of six years—thus the starting date is six years previous. A fairly meaningful comparison can still be made, however. For example, at WSU 45.4 percent of the Fall 98 NEF graduated in five years, and 50.9 percent graduated in seven years. The data provided by WSU Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, 12/2005.
NCHEMS six-year graduation rate for 2004 (which refers to a cohort group starting in 1998) is 57.2 percent for Minnesota and 55.3 percent for the nation.

As we have very little data regarding the graduation of students who began under USP in 2001 and later, it is too early for us to conclude what impact, if any, its implementation has had on WSU graduation rates. And the implementation of the USP has not seemed to impact retention rates in any discernible way, except for a very slight increase, and one which at that may be attributable to other phenomena.
Availability and Completion of Basic Skills Requirements

During the years in which the University deliberated reforms to its general education program, one consistently pressing concern was the availability and completion of that program’s general education requirements. This concern was highlighted in a 1998 “Excluded Managers” retreat:

"... Data from institutional research indicates that basic skills courses in both speech and English serve only about 60 percent of first year students. In addition, we know that only 40 percent of all students complete the English and speech general education requirements during their first year on campus."

The University Studies Subcommittee is especially concerned with the availability of courses in the Basic Skills areas of English, Oral Communication, and Mathematics, since the PO&cR document suggests that such courses ought to be taken early in students’ careers—and since these courses serve as prerequisites to the Flag requirements in each of the relevant areas.

For the Basic Skills requirements in English and Mathematics, students are recommended to complete the courses “as soon as possible, preferably in their first year and certainly no later than their third semester”; for the requirement in Oral Communication, students are advised to complete the requirement “during their first two years.”

We reviewed two cohorts of students: New Entering First-Year students from the fall of 2002 and from the fall of 2003. The percentages of students who completed each of these requirements by their first, second, and third semesters is indicated in the table below. Please note that these tables compare the entire entering class of first-year students with the set of students who complete (and not merely enroll in) their Basic Skills requirements. And, of course, readers should take into consideration normal rates of attrition and retention for new entering first-year students, as described above.

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As these data indicate, the University has greatly improved the accessibility of these courses, especially compared with the data from the 1998 retreat cited above. When before, only some 60 percent of students completed either first-year English or their Oral Communication courses in their first year, our more recent data suggests that in University Studies, that percentage has risen to over 75 percent. And when before, only 40 percent of our students completed both the English and Oral Communication requirements, we can now report that that nearly 54 percent of our students not only complete both of these, but their Mathematics requirement as well, by the end of the first year.

In fact, as our data indicate, each of the three of their Basic Skills requirements—English, Oral Communications, and Mathematics—is completed by approximately 80 percent of new entering WSU first-year students by the third semester of enrollment. The percentage of students who have completed all three of these requirements is 61.8 percent of the new entering students in our sample.

Yet we note the obvious: that not every new entering first-year student is one who remains at WSU for his or her sophomore, junior, or senior years. In fact, WSU typically graduates approximately 25 percent of its new entering first-year students in four years, and retains, at highest, approximately 75 percent of its students from the first year to the sophomore year.

Of those students in our sample set who indeed eventually completed their Basic Skills requirements, nearly all of them had done so by their third semester at WSU, as the bottom row of the table above indicates. Of those eventually finishing the requirement, over 98 percent of these students had completed the English requirement by the third semester; over 96 percent the Mathematics by the third semester; and over 93 percent the Oral Communication.

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7 Data provided by WSU Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, 12/2005.
requirement by the third semester. And last, of the students in our data set who had eventually completed all three of these Basic Skills requirements, nearly 93 percent had done so by the end of their third semester on campus.

To our thinking, these data suggest that the departments offering these courses are doing so in great enough number and availability to allow students to complete them in a timely fashion, as the design of the program intends. Additionally, many major programs (Nursing and Education, to name two among many) articulate the successful completion of some of these courses as prerequisite to program entry, thus providing an additional incentive for early completion. And, of course, we credit academic advisors with ensuring that even the undeclared student understands the importance of completing these requirements within their first few semesters.

Also crucial to improving the rates of completion in this category were a curricular change (moving from a six-hour, two-course sequence in English to a single four-hour semester course) and an increase in new faculty hires in these departments that coincided with the implementation of the new program. While the factors that impact the completion rates of these courses are many, to our incoming first-year students, the message is clear: complete these courses early in your degree program, and other benefits will follow. The degree to which students in these courses demonstrate accomplishment of the learning outcomes specified for each, finally, is discussed in Appendices D.1-D.4, our Faculty Area Committee Reports on the Basic Skills areas of University Studies.

Course Availability and Enrollment

As the University Studies Program lists and requires the promotion of certain learning outcomes of its students, the availability and enrollment patterns in USP courses provides an indication of the ability of certain courses to provide such opportunities for its students. Enrollment patterns in USP suggest a wide variability in the number of seats filled by students. The average class size across all categories is 30, with a maximum class size of 480 (MCOM 100) and a minimum class size of just four (SPAN 402 and GERM 403).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Studies Area</th>
<th>Avg. # enrolled</th>
<th>Max # enrolled/ course section</th>
<th>Min # enrolled/ course section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading/Writing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Communication</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37 MATH 110</td>
<td>25 MATH 165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Dev/Wellness</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>78 PER 134</td>
<td>21 PER 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>80 MUSC 109</td>
<td>8 ENG 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>79 SOC 150</td>
<td>27 CMST 287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>176 BIOL 117</td>
<td>12 PHYS 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine &amp; Performing Arts</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>107 MUSC 241</td>
<td>8 MUSC 247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>85 PHIL 110</td>
<td>8 PHYS 223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Social Policy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>176 BIOL 104</td>
<td>14 ENGR 390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global/Multicultural Perspectives</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>76 HIST 165</td>
<td>4 CHIN 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship/Democratic Institutions</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>480 MCOM 100</td>
<td>13 ECON 420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Flag</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44 MGMT 325</td>
<td>5 THAD 331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/S or CA Flag</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>70 MCOM 300</td>
<td>4 SPAN 402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Flag(^8)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>65 MCOM 405</td>
<td>7 BIOL 460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 ENG 402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 MTED 420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 SPAN 302</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The greatest variability is seen in the Contemporary Citizenship/Democratic Institutions category, but this data is skewed by the presence of MCOM 100, a “mega-course” regularly enrolling nearly 500 students per section. The least variability is seen in the Mathematics category. Several departments offer USP courses in large sections (defined here as 70+): Music, Philosophy, Mass Communication, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Physical Education and Recreation, History, and Sociology. The table below outlines average enrollment across courses and the maximum/minimum class enrollment for that category.

Based on our review of average class size and enrollment in University Studies courses, we note the following:

- Enrollment is tightly capped in sections of English 111 and CMST 191, thus prohibiting any significant variance in class size.
- Low-enrollment courses can be located in every area requirement of the University Studies Program. High-enrollment courses available in some areas of USP serve the

\(^8\) EDST 460-467 (Student Teaching) are not listed under Oral Flag courses.
function of supporting the availability of lower-enrollment courses in other areas where greater student-faculty contact is necessary.

- The average class size across USP areas is kept at a reasonable number.

- The University Studies Subcommittee remains concerned about class size and enrollment options in the Fine and Performing Arts and Critical Analysis categories, both of which require student performance (in the former, that they compose or perform artistic works; in the latter, that they construct arguments). The student learning outcomes prescribed for these categories would seem to mitigate against large sections, though in some cases (such as Symphonic Wind Ensemble), enrollment data may be misleading.

- A few flag courses enroll students in numbers greater than the design of the program intends. The design of these courses is, as the PO&CR document suggests, that their enrollment allow for them to promote the prescribed outcomes. Large sections, for the most part, do not allow for the kinds of feedback, guidance and mentoring that the flag courses are designed to provide.

As of this writing, then, the University Studies Program has been fully and completely implemented. Its design and outcomes are publicly stated in its Program Overview and Requirements Document, and it is required of all students in all major programs at WSU. Its faculty has designed and overseen the program since its inception and continues to do so. Courses have been approved through a process of rigorous peer review in sufficient number and range for students to graduate; policies and procedures and been approved to allow for occasional substitution and periodic review of approved courses; departments and programs have implemented flag offerings within their own majors and minors; and transfer polices and advising practices now govern students’ completion of the program. We have also had sufficient time with the program to examine its implementation’s effects on retention and graduation. As a result, we believe we are fulfilling the goals of our accrediting body’s “Statement on General Education”:

Regardless of how a higher learning organization frames the general education necessary to fulfill its mission and goals, it clearly and publicly articulates the purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of the general education it provides for its students. It also shows its commitment to the
centrality of general education by including an appropriate component of general education in all undergraduate programs of substantial length, whether they lead to certificates, diplomas, or degrees. Moreover, the organization’s faculty exercises oversight for general education and, working with the administration, regularly assesses its effectiveness against the organization’s stated goals for student learning.\footnote{Higher Learning Commission, “Commission Statement on General Education,” 21 February 2003. Available: \url{http://www.nchigherlearningcommission.org/}.}

With the University Studies Program having been fully implemented, we are left only with the last question of the program’s assessment: to what degree and to what extent are our students demonstrating their accomplishment of the program’s outcomes? The following section details the University Studies Program Assessment Plan and its findings to date.
Assessment of any academic programming can be, simultaneously, both a difficult and a rewarding undertaking. And the greater the complexity of the educational undertaking, the greater the complexity of its assessment. Even the assessment of what would appear on the surface to be a simple undertaking—for example, that of student writing in the Basic Skills—is one that requires deep knowledge of disciplinary practice and ethics, careful attention to local curriculum and pedagogy, sufficient resources for training and materials, considerable work hours spent in designing and implementing instruments, substantial “buy-in” among participants, and a means of reporting results that can lead to curricular and pedagogical improvement. Yet at the same time, such an initiative is made easier by the fact that the assessment is limited to a single department’s sections of a single course: though the students enrolled may number 1,500 in a given year, the department’s faculty are bound to share a knowledge of disciplinary content and methodology as well as a vested interest in its results.

Contrast such an effort with one designed to assess the entirety of a general education program. At WSU, University Studies engages all 42 academic departments and reaches through over 500 courses to every single one of its over 7,500 students, each of whom completes at least 20 separate electives at varying levels of complexity as they move through both the program. Given the range of students’ major programs, that of the faculty’s expertise, and the near-infinite variety of curricular choice such a liberal education allows, no single “one-size-fits-all” measure can be adequately implemented to “assess” such a program, at least with any degree of certitude.
Yet at the same time we recognize that crucial to the success of any academic program is its ongoing assessment, and to this end, we have developed an assessment plan for University Studies that aims for the careful, deliberative, and ongoing review of its requirements and offerings. Our plan outlines the principles underlying the mission of assessing University Studies; the resources available to support the mission; and a plan for its implementation and reporting procedures. The University Studies Program Assessment Plan (USPAP) was developed and approved during the second full year of the program’s implementation, the 2003-04 academic year, and implemented beginning in the fall of 2004.

The assessment of University Studies is, we have noted, a complex undertaking, yet it is a design that will be, in accordance with the Higher Learning Commission’s recent “Statement on Assessment of Higher Learning,” one led by faculty, informed by our mission, and focused, ultimately, on improving student learning.

The Commission appreciates that effective assessment can take a variety of forms and involve a variety of processes. However, faculty members, with meaningful input from students and strong support from the administration and governing board, should have the fundamental role in developing and sustaining systematic assessment of student learning. Their assessment strategy should be informed by the organization’s mission and include explicit public statements regarding the knowledge, skills, and competencies students should possess as a result of completing course and program requirements; it also should document the values, attitudes, and behaviors faculty expect students to have developed. Moreover, while strong assessment should provide data that satisfy any externally mandated accountability requirements, its effectiveness in improving student learning relies on its integration into the organization’s processes for program review, departmental and organization planning, and unit and organizational budgeting. [... An] organization committed to understanding and improving the learning opportunities and environments it provides students will be able to document the relationship between assessment of and improvement in student learning.10

The USPAP (presented in full in Appendix C) was designed to articulate both a confirmation of the institution’s commitment to assessment and a plan for the collection, interpretation, and reporting of assessment data:

Any academic assessment plan must protect the academic freedom of faculty, attend to concerns of data privacy, and articulate clear goals and methods. Winona State University’s “Position Statement on Academic Assessment Programs” is quite clear in maintaining that the purpose of academic assessment programs is to “support and improve student learning” and that assessment data “will not be used for faculty or staff evaluation and, in particular, will not be used in making retention, tenure, and promotion recommendations or decisions by supervisors or administrators”—a point which the North Central Association, along with other professional disciplinary organizations, confirms.11

The primary goal of the USPAP is to articulate a means of collecting, interpreting, and making decisions based on data relevant to the University Studies Program in ways that will ultimately improve student learning in the program. The design of the USPAP is one that focuses its primary efforts (collection, analysis, and reporting of data) on a cyclical plan that attends to each of the program’s requirements. Each cycle includes two full years’ worth of concentrated attention. In some instances, data collected during one full phase of the cycle (e.g. in the first year of Basic Skills: College Reading and Writing) may be used as baseline data for comparison with other data sets (e.g. in the Writing Flag).

Concurrent with this scheduled, ongoing, and cyclical assessment, the University’s Office of Assessment and Institutional Research administers two related instruments, the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Progress (CAAP) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), both of which are designed to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of student learning. The aims and results of these measures are discussed in separate sections below.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Management

The University Studies Program Assessment Plan details the means by which data will be collected, analyzed, and managed. Each USP Area (e.g. “Basic Skills: College Reading and

11 University Studies Program Assessment Plan, Appendix A; available www.winona.edu/usp.
Writing”) is assigned its own Faculty Assessment Committee, comprised of faculty from courses offered in the area, who are responsible for ...

- review and discussion of student learning outcomes in the area,
- identification or development of mechanisms for data collection,
- collection of data (using both direct and indirect measures) relevant to the outcomes,
- analysis of the data, and
- reporting the results of their efforts to the USS and to program area faculty.

The chairperson of each committee is provided reassigned time in compensation for the task of leading the charge and drafting the final committee report. So as to disperse the work of assessment across disciplinary boundaries and a reasonable timeframe, we have established a schedule for focusing USP assessment efforts on each area as indicated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>USP Area/Cycle</th>
<th>Faculty Area Committees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Skills</td>
<td>College Reading/Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phys. Dev. &amp; Wellness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-06 (&amp; 2008-10)</td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences Core</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fine &amp; Performing Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-07 (&amp; 2009-11)</td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity &amp; Diversity</td>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Science &amp; Social Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glob./Multicult. Persp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-08 (&amp; 2010-12)</td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag Requirements</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics/Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-09 (&amp; 2011-13)</td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We recognize the value of direct evidence of student learning obtained from course-embedded assignments, even as we acknowledge that such may not be available (or assessable) in every instance. With each of these separate undertakings, the committees’ collection of data may include ...

- authentic artifacts culled from classroom activities,
- artifacts created specifically for assessment purposes,
- standardized exams or activities (e.g. the ACT Assessment of English Writing), and/or
- instructor-specific exams or activities.

The USPAP further advises that while committees may choose to analyze any kind of artifacts (from brochures to memoranda to performance) relevant to the area, they should nonetheless
note that the traits of the artifact being assessed must remain constant. With the committees formed and assigned to date (as of this writing, those for the Basic Skills and the Arts and Science Core), the University Studies Director and Director of Assessment and Institutional Research have provided orientation sessions, materials, and consultation to help ensure consistency and reliability in data assessment.

Last, each of the committees is assigned the task of delivering a report at the conclusion of each two-year cycle, which is expected to address the following:

- a synopsis of improvements or actions implemented based on previous assessments (if any);
- the number and percentage of students involved;
- a description of the process of data collection and analysis;
- results of the current-year assessment; and
- suggestions for improvement or action based on the results.

Our plan is designed with the advice of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ “Ten Tips for Better Assessment.” The design of this program of assessment is one that divides the labor yet shares the responsibility; that makes assessment ongoing and cyclical; and that will ultimately “tell the whole story”—or as much thereof as we can learn in our efforts. Furthermore, we have advised our faculty area committees to prioritize their tasks, to look for evidence of learning, to focus on improving the quality of learning, to build on what is already occurring, and—especially as regards each of their own separate efforts to assess student learning in a given USP area—to “not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.”

**Reporting and Feedback Mechanism**

Each assessment committee’s final report is delivered, upon completion, to the University Studies Subcommittee and Director, with electronic copies to faculty teaching in the area of the USP. The University Studies Director then, upon final receipt of each area report, compiles a

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Each of these reports, beginning with the first set due June 1, 2006, will be posted on the USP website for any interested party to review. (The reports from the Basic Skills area committees are further included as appendices D.1-D.4 to this report.) Upon its receipt, the University Studies Subcommittee will review and discuss each report, making (if necessary) curricular or other recommendations as appropriate. Furthermore, the “expiration date” of courses approved for each area follows by approximately one and one-half years the receipt of each area report; these reports will assist departments as they apply for the renewal of USP approval for each of their courses.

This mechanism for reporting and feedback is designed to provide all stakeholders with a means by which our assessment efforts can be used towards their ultimate goal: improving student learning in the program. In the assessment of University Studies, both direct and indirect indicators of student learning are reviewed, as discussed below.

**Direct Indicators of Student Learning**

*Faculty (USP) Area Committees*

Eight committees have been formed to date (four each from the Basic Skills and Arts and Science Core areas). Committees assessing the Basic Skills areas of University Studies have been at work since October of 2004, and have submitted multiple reports and updates on their progress. The first set of formal reports from these committees are due June 1, 2006. These reports will included as appendices D.1-D.4 in the final version of this report; they will also be discussed and reviewed in USS meetings, forwarded to chairpersons and teaching faculty in each respective area, and considered as the Basic Skills courses come up for renewal in 2007.

We expect that these committee reports, which will examine enrollment patterns and course-embedded assessments, will provide a detailed analysis of student learning in each relevant area.
Collegiate Assessment of Academic Progress (CAAP)

To date, the University Studies Subcommittee has reviewed seven years of data from the University’s administration of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Progress. The CAAP is designed for students who have completed 45-70 credits, and so students who take the test are, as a rule, either second-semester sophomores or first-semester juniors. At WSU, about a third of eligible students take the test on Assessment Day.

In each of the five modules administered—Writing, Critical Thinking, Mathematics, Scientific Reasoning, and Reading—WSU students taking the tests performed slightly better than students whose scores constitute the national average. (The only exception to the foregoing is the 2002 WSU Reading score, which was very slightly below the national average.)

Nevertheless, in all five areas, the 1998 percentiles were greater than the 2004 percentiles. Yet in all cases, the aforementioned difference is less than two percentile points, and in Writing and Math, the difference is statistically negligible. More noteworthy is the pattern of decline, relative to national scores, in the category of Reading.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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13 CAAP Results provided by WSU Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, 11/05. No data exists for Reading, Critical Thinking, and Scientific Reasoning Modules for 2000.
A more detailed look at WSU scores compared to national averages reveals the following:

- **Writing**: No pattern vis-à-vis the national average is readily apparent unless one characterizes the pattern as decline, increase, decline, and increase—yet all within a range of 1.3 percentile points.

- **Math**: The only pattern that may be said to emerge vis-à-vis the national average is one of decline, increase, and very slight decline holding steady—yet all within 1.2 percentile points.

- **Critical Thinking**: If there is a pattern here, it is one of slight decline in performance over the national average—yet all within 2.1 percentile points.

- **Scientific Reasoning**: The pattern is one of slight decline until 2004, when WSU scores crept back to within 0.7 percentile points of the 1998 margin above national scores—yet all of this has occurred within the narrow range of 1.8 percentile points.

- **Reading**: The WSU scores’ edge over national averages in this area have dropped from 1998-1999. The decline is very little to 2001, but then more dramatic to 2002, a year in which the WSU scores were below the national average. In 2003 and 2004, only an iota of improvement has occurred in this regard. Though the WSU scores for these years were not below the national average, they were only negligibly above it. The pattern that emerges is one of slight decline.

Viewing the WSU scores without reference to the average national scores offers a different perspective on the data, but the conclusions to be drawn in this regard run parallel to those summarized above. In other words, the data for all five areas reflects no dramatic shifts. Indeed, in Writing, Math, and Science Reasoning, the 1998 and the 2004 scores are virtually the same, and the variation in others are negligible. A more detailed look at WSU scores in reference to WSU scores of other years reveals the following:

- **Writing**: After a slight dip in 1999 (and despite another in 2002), the WSU scores overall rose slowly: the 2004 score is the same as that of 1998.

- **Math**: The WSU scores dipped slightly in 1999 and 2000, peaked in 2001, but have otherwise remained fairly consistent.

- **Scientific Reasoning**: After 1998, the WSU scores show a slight decline, then a slight improvement, then another slight drop, and then in 2004 a small jump up to within 0.2 percentile points of the 1998 score.
Critical Thinking: The WSU scores fell slightly in 1999 and 2001, and slightly more in 2002 and 2003, but 2004 shows a small increase: the 2004 score is the same as that of 1999; both of these years’ scores, though, are below that of 1998.

Reading: In this area, a trend does suggest itself. The WSU scores from 1998-2001 vary little from one another, and they together contrast rather favorably with the scores of 2002-2004. Even as the 2003 scores show a slight increase from 2002, the scores for 2002 and 2004 represent a decline of 2 percentile points from 1998 (2.1 from 1999).

If one were to use these tests as a direct indicator of WSU students’ proficiency in these five areas of general education, one would likely conclude that relative to the national average, WSU students are doing as well as or slightly better than students across the nation who are taking the test.

One would also probably conclude that WSU students’ general-education aptitude (insofar as these tests register this aptitude) has held fairly steady over the past seven years.

However, the patterns that are perhaps discernible in this data occur in such narrow ranges that these patterns may not, after all, be patterns: rather, they may instead be a set of merely minor fluctuations stemming from variables beyond the scope of subjects connected to WSU’s (prior) general education or (new) University Studies Programs.

The five CAAP test modules that WSU administers correspond only partly to USP requirements. The most correlative categories are arguably Writing and Critical Thinking: we have the Basic Skills: College Reading & Writing and two Writing Flags in USP, and we have a Critical Analysis category and a Critical Analysis Flag in USP. Although English III does address college-level reading skills, the objectives of the course pertain greatly to writing; we have no other USP category and no USP flag for reading (presumably because students read a lot in all classes). The CAAP Reading module, then, tests for a skill that USP does not officially include, aside from the inclusion of reading skills in English III. As regards the CAAP Math module, it does correlate to the USP basic-skills requirement in Math, but that is the only correspondence. And as regards Scientific Reasoning, the USP does require two science
courses, but whether enough CAAP-criterion students have indeed completed these courses by the time that they take the CAAP is open to question.

When and at what pace the USP replaced the former general-education program also raises certain questions regarding the WSU CAAP data. Students who entered WSU under the new USP would not have had the opportunity to take the CAAP until Spring 2003, and students who entered in the second year of USP’s inception would not have had the opportunity to take the CAAP until Spring 2004—the last testing for which CAAP scores are complete. As a result, the most recent WSU CAAP data available to USS represents two groups of students whose first years concurred with the first years of the USP. Since these first couple of years, USP has approved many different courses as ones that satisfy either a USP category or flag. One might well say, therefore, that CAAP data since the inauguration of USP must be understood in light of the fact that USP had only just begun and, it follows, had not yet reached maturity.

Of course, when the CAAP was implemented, one could legitimately assume that eligible students—those having completed 45-70 hours—had completed general education. (The old program was a simple 45-hour requirement, sans prerequisites or integration with a major.) Yet the USP does not encourage students to complete its core requirements prior to undertaking a major, and in many cases and instances, USP is designed to complement major programs: a student may complete three of four Unity and Diversity requirements, and all of the flag requirements, in his or her home department. The assumption that a student who has completed 45 credits has completed general education is, given the design of the new program, less warranted than it had been, though still an important distinction to be made in the examination’s administration.

Just why USP was instituted should also be considered when one approaches the WSU CAAP data and attempts to discern any patterns from 1998 to 2004. The University Studies Program was designed to replace the prior general education program for reasons that have little to do with WSU students’ performance on CAAP tests or their proficiency in general-education areas. The USP was developed to remedy certain problems and enhance students’ learning experiences in certain ways that address a scope of concerns much broader than whether or not WSU students fare well on standardized general-education tests.
This concern regarding the viability of a standardized test is one that is under discussion nationwide:

*Given the new emphasis on standardized testing in the schools, many observers are asking whether such testing should now become the gold standard for quality assessment in higher education. On educational grounds, AAC&U has taken a stand against the view that standardized tests are the best way to assess students’ learning gains and level of accomplishment over their several years of college.*

The AAC&U’s position allows that such tests may be helpful as a supplement to, but not a replacement for, curriculum-embedded assessments. The best evidence of students’ level of achievement on liberal education outcomes, they note, will come “from assessment of students authentic and complex performance of their most advanced studies.” Yet they note that standardized testing has, at best, a supplementary role in the assessment of student learning, one that may be helpful in determining readiness for college work or comparing local results against national norms.

Since the administration of the CAAP was implemented for reasons that are only tangentially related to the design of the USP, and since the instrument itself correlates only incidentally with the requirements of the USP, we can conclude that the instrument has not yet served the purpose of assessing University Studies well enough to continue its administration for that purpose alone. (We note, however, that it may provide more fruitful data in the years to come, and that its continued administration may well serve other purposes of value to the institution.) The subcommittee is exploring the possibility of other standardized exams that might play a functional supplemental role in USP assessment, but has come primarily to recognize that any such instrument will be of limited value. After seven years of implementation of the CAAP, we have learned that our student test-takers perform about as well as, and often slightly better than, their peers nationwide on that instrument. Data from the 2006 implementation of the CAAP exam was made available just as this portion of the report was completed. Initial review of those results suggests that the 2006 performance on all modules was lower, slightly (by one-tenth to eight-tenths of a percentile range), and within the range of fluctuation seen both in the 1998-2004 results and following slight deviations in national norms.

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15 Data from the 2006 implementation of the CAAP exam was made available just as this portion of the report was completed. Initial review of those results suggests that the 2006 performance on all modules was lower, slightly (by one-tenth to eight-tenths of a percentile range), and within the range of fluctuation seen both in the 1998-2004 results and following slight deviations in national norms.
same time, these results do not lead towards the ultimate goal of assessment: improving student learning.

**Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)**

In the fall of 2005, WSU undertook participation in the Council for Aid to Education’s Collegiate Learning Assessment, sponsored by the Lumina Foundation, with a sample of first-year students from selected orientation sections participating in the initial round of assessment. Then, in the spring semester of 2006, randomly selected seniors were invited to complete the assessment; participating students were paid for their efforts.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment, according to the Lumina foundation ...

begin with conceptions of collegiate quality that are based on improvements in student learning, with three key elements serving as the project’s foundation: the institution, value added, and campus comparisons.

**Institution**: The CLA uses the institution (rather than the individual student) as the primary unit of analysis. This means that the focus is on how the institution as a whole contributes to student development. Therefore, the CLA does not present another high-stakes test for individual students, but rather it aggregates the information to better understand the institution’s role in promoting learning.

**Value Added**: The CLA focuses on the value added provided by colleges and universities. When institutional quality is based solely on the students’ scores on entrance examinations, there is no way to know what was learned after they matriculated; again, when student ability is only measured upon graduation, there is no way to determine the students’ relative growth without knowing their starting point. It is only by comparing what students know when they start college with what they know when they finish that it is possible to assess the learning that actually occurred while in college.

**Comparisons**: This approach also allows for inter-institutional comparisons of overall value added.
CLA results can be combined with institutional data to determine factors that promote student learning and growth.16

As of this writing, results from the Fall 2005 examination of first-year students had just been received from the Council for Aid to Education. The results place our students at the range of “the same as what would be expected given (1) their SAT scores and (2) the general relationship between CLA and SAT scores at other institutions.”17 As the CLA is intended as a longitudinal study, however, and one we have only very recently initiated, we will need to see patterns of data emerge from the instrument before taking any action based on the results provided. Further, we are at present uncertain of either the value or the future of the CLA on campus, especially as regards the assessment of University Studies. It may well be, of course, that we learn from its findings information that could be potentially relevant to our assessment of University Studies. At the same time, the instrument itself—as well as students’ motivations for completing it successfully—is one that will need to be examined closely. Most of the literature on the assessment of writing, for instance, cautions against making inferences based on works composed in single settings or short periods of time (a condition our own local assessment of writing has foregone), preferring instead either multiple measures or embedded assessments produced over a period of time. Whether or not the CLA will be able to provide us with reliable, purposeful data regarding our students’ writing abilities—or their critical thinking or analytical reasoning abilities (the others measured by the test)—remains to be seen.

The direct indicators of student learning likely to provide the greatest detail of insight into our students’ learning are likely to be those examined and reviewed by the Faculty Area Committees working on specific USP area requirements under the auspices of the USP Assessment Plan. The value of direct indicators such as the CAAP and CLA, both intended to provide more summative assessments of student learning related to liberal education outcomes, remains for now uncertain.

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17 Council for Aid to Education, Collegiate Learning Assessment: Interim Institutional Report for Winona State University, p.8.
Indirect Indicators of Student Learning

While indirect indicators of student learning are likely to surface as a result of the Faculty Area Committees working to assess the various USP requirements, our Office of Assessment and Institutional Research has traditionally administered surveys to our students with items addressing their general education experience at WSU.

Among the many surveys and other assessment instruments administered, along with the CAAP and the CLA on Assessment Day, is a set of questions regarding the development of skills and the quality of instruction. These questions further ask students to compare their perspectives on skill development and instructional quality between their selected major and their general education experience, as the tables below indicate. The number and percentage of responses indicated as those presented as “Significant”: the strongest response available to students in the four-item scale (students respond as “Slight”; “Insignificant”; “Moderate”; or “Significant”).

While the survey questions can be used to consider a wide range of programming, well beyond the scope of University Studies, they do provide insight into students’ perceptions of their learning, especially as regards the Basic Skills area of the program. These indirect indicators of student learning are not intended to suffice as evidence themselves of “what our students know,” but merely instead a reflection of their professed knowledge and abilities.

The general information collected from students on Assessment Day via the survey questionnaires is self-reported and, as such, is approached for the purposes of this report from a qualitative perspective rather than a strict quantitative perspective. We have chosen to focus on those indicators most directly relevant to Basic Skills coursework. Seven of the 25 responses in the “General Education” section showed a “trend up” from 2001 through 2005 (see below18). Three of those responses directly relate to University Studies Basic Skills coursework: 1) College Reading and Writing; 2) Oral Communication; or 3) Mathematics and Statistics.

18 Data provided by WSU Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, 11/05.
An additional three responses were identified as skills that should result from the USP Basic Skills courses. The data demonstrated an overall trend up with a “dip” in either year 2002 or 2003. This data would suggest that the student’s perception of his/her abilities with respect to a number of basic skill indicators has increased over time.

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<th>Students’ Perceptions of Skill Development: General Education</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Students Reporting “Significant” (Highest of 5 Choices) Development of Skill</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Writing skills</td>
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<td>Presentational skills</td>
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<td>Math and statistical reasoning</td>
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<td>Draw conclusion from weighing facts</td>
<td>96</td>
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<td>Scientific knowledge and skills</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>18.5</td>
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<td>Computer and info. tech skills</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keep an open mind to new ideas</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>26.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locate, review, organize info</td>
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<tr>
<td>Think and reason creatively</td>
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<td>26.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical listening skills</td>
<td>89</td>
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Since a major goal of University Studies is to reinforce the Basic Skills of writing, speaking, analysis, and mathematics in upper-division coursework, the same ten responses provided by students in the major were examined in the table below. The student population responding to this portion of the survey was at a different classification level than that of the students responding to the general education survey, and it is not possible from this data to determine when the students responding to the “Major” survey actually had completed the USP requirements. Nonetheless, we did observe upward and downward movement in the data provided by the majors that was not present in the data provided by the students in the general education survey: this movement was, interestingly, a feature of all ten of the responses. This movement may simply be attributable to variation within the data and ultimately may not
indicate any type of result which could be validated. However, emerging patterns may provide insight into future data collection preferences.

<table>
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<td>2001</td>
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<td>Q1 Writing skills</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Q2 Presentational skills</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q3 Math and statistical reasoning</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
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<td>Q4 Draw conclusion from weighing facts</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Q5 Scientific knowledge and skills</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
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<td>Q6 Computer and info. tech skills</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
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<td>Q8 Locate, review, organize info</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
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<td>Q9 Think and reason creatively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number Responding</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
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<td>Q10 Critical listening skills</td>
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<td>Number Responding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In an effort to unveil any possible trend the response percentages (Q1-Q10) were graphed as a function of year reported (see chart below). Interestingly, all responses have the same general shape over time. This is the type of curve one might expect if a system is trying to come to an “equilibrium” state. The integration of the basic skill components into the major courses is a difficult and complicated process. Restructuring curriculum in new and semi-consistent ways to provide students across the entire university the opportunity to have strong, coordinated educational experiences is an undertaking of significant scope, and one might reasonably surmise that the curve indicates a period of adjustment to the implementation of USP requirements in both the Basic Skills and the Flag courses intended to reinforce them.
The ten questions examined may be grouped into two categories: Group 1 (Q1 Writing skills, Q3 Math and statistical reasoning, Q5 Scientific knowledge and skills, Q6 Computer and information technology skills); and Group 2 (Q2 Presentational skills, Q4 Draw conclusion from weighing facts, Q7 Keep an open mind to new ideas, Q8 Locate, review, organize information, Q9 Think and reason creatively, Q10 Critical listening skills).

Our analysis of Group 1 may indicate that two of the basic skills (Writing Skills and Math and statistical reasoning) are not being as explicitly integrated into the major’s curriculum from the student’s perspective as was envisioned by the University Studies Program. This question is one we will continue as the Faculty Area Committees report on these areas in the near future.

On the other hand, our analysis of Group 2 may indicate students are reporting greater confidence to express their thinking and increased presentational skills. One question that comes to mind immediately is: What is the substantive level of this new willingness to talk relative to the content? More importantly, is such confidence a function of the Basics Skills
courses, one of the Flag courses, of both, or of other causes? Such concerns may be ultimately unresolvable but nonetheless provide one of the key questions for our ongoing assessment of University Studies and its integration with the majors.

With respect to the data at hand, although there appears to be an overall downward trend initially, the data for the next two to three cycles might determine if this “pattern” continues or if it is revealed instead simply as “background noise” in the data. In addition, it may be important to major programs to understand what factors may be influencing their majors’ perceptions of their skills development. For example why was there the relative increase in 2003 or the decrease in 2004? What factors could have contributed to these shifts? Why are students feeling more confident in expressing their thinking, but less confident in what they have to say or what they write?

As we conclude our short review of the indirect evidence of student learning in University Studies, we observe the potential of this data to affirm—or complicate—our findings from the Faculty Area Committees and other direct indicators of student learning. Its value lies primarily in its ability to supplement other, more direct evidence, of student learning, rather than as data that demonstrates by itself the quality or extent of such. Future assessment will need to address the fact that these surveys do not provide any points of comparison with other institutions or national trends, such as those indicated by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

A second concern is that the local survey design aims to contrast “general education” with the major, a point of contrast that may be unnecessary. Our model of liberal education (like that promoted by the AAC&U’s LEAP initiative) requires both of the baccalaureate degree and aims to integrate, at least to some extent, one with the other. As such, direct comparisons between the two, given the overlap of requirements and the design of the program, may foster a notion of competing interests rather than one of coordinated efforts. Still, there exist patterns of data that suggest areas of concern: for instance, a number of indicators relative to the quality of instruction pale for general education in comparison to that of the major. And a consistent disparity in the study habits between male and female students in general education courses has been observed as well. As we continue our ongoing assessment of the program, it will be
our task to examine more closely the results of the surveys, to re-examine their design, and to consider potential alternatives.

Evidence of Implementation of the Plan

As evidence of the implementation of our assessment plan for University Studies, we list the following accomplishments:

- USPAP approved and implemented, 2003-04.
- CAAP administered, 1998-.
- USPAP faculty area committees formed for Basic Skills, 2004-.
- Basic Skills assessment underway with progress reports, 2004-.
- CLA administered, 2005-.
- USPAP faculty area committees formed for Arts & Science Core, 2005-.
- USS review of AIR data on CAAP, CLA, availability, retention, and other indirect data, 2005-.
- Compilation of this report, 2006.
- Receipt of Basic Skills reports, (scheduled for June) 2006.

We recognize that assessment of general education is an ongoing, complex, and important undertaking, and with that in mind, we foresee the following as the next steps in our continued assessment of University Studies:

- Review and discussion of Basic Skills reports, 2006-.
- Arts & Science Core assessment underway, 2006-.
- Receipt of Arts & Science Core reports, 2007.
- Expiration and renewal of Arts & Science Core courses, 2008.
- Continued review of AIR instruments and data, 2006-.
- USPAP faculty area committees formed for Unity & Diversity area, 2007-.
Beyond these most immediate and required goals for our continued assessment of the University Studies Program, though, we intend also to review and monitor the sources of data we describe above, in particular, our AIR surveys of students, the CAAP exam, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment. None of these has been instituted at the behest of the University Studies Subcommittee, integrated within its original design, nor, to our thinking, wholly purposeful as a measure of our students’ learning within the program. As we have reviewed the data from each in preparation of this report, we have begun to question both the efficacy of the data culled and the investment of resources they require of our institution. It may well be the case that at best, each instrument can answer only a part of the question “How well do our students learn?” As we begin and continue to receive reports from Faculty Area Committees examining each of the area requirements in University Studies, it will be to our advantage to examine the inter-relationships between the data and conclusions of these reports and those of the other instruments we employ.
Conclusion: Ongoing and Planned USP Activities and Assessment

As we conclude this report, we note, first, the number of demonstrated improvements made, based on available evidence, in the design and implementation of the program; second, the schedule and purpose of ongoing assessment of the program; and third, recently proposed and/or implemented new innovations in the delivery of the program.

Demonstrated Improvements

After review of the available data, both from the years immediately prior to and those concurrent with the implementation of the University Studies Program, we are confident that the new program features numerous improvements over its predecessor.

The design of the program itself is intended to ...

- parallel national trends and initiatives in liberal education outcomes;
- articulate student learning outcomes both for the program and for each of its requirements;
- provide both traditional disciplinary knowledge and contemporary thematic electives;
- encourage depth of study as well as breadth;
- include numerous opportunities for advanced learning;
• integrate basic skills with a major field of study;
• require a rigorous proposal and review process for all included courses;
• include both a cyclical plan for assessing student learning and a renewal process based on the results of that plan;
• provide continuity in leadership and oversight;
• and coordinate purposefully with the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum.

We note also that every one of these improvements was implemented, as detailed in Section III of this report, without jeopardizing retention or graduation rates, course availability, student performance on available assessment instruments, or basic skills completion rates. (Indeed, much of the available data suggest that the implementation coincided with slight gains in these areas.) Redesigning a program whose scope includes every department, nearly all faculty, a vast number of administrative and student support staff, and—most importantly—every WSU student is no simple undertaking, and the university community deserves credit for the successful redesign and implementation of the new curriculum.

The results of our Faculty Area Committees dedicated to assessing each of the course and flag requirements are not scheduled to provide results until later this year (beginning in June of 2006). As a result, we cannot yet point to curricular or pedagogical improvements based exclusively on this particular avenue of assessment. Yet we eagerly await the receipt of these reports and anticipate the potential improvements they predict. And we nonetheless observe some substantial improvements based on other data.

Foremost among these improvements has been the proposal and offering of new electives designed explicitly to foster the outcomes of the University Studies Program. To name but a few, Mass Communication 115, Photography Appreciation; English 211, Writing in Communities; Chemistry 190, Forensic Chemistry; Biology 109, Microbes and Society; and Communication Studies 291, Topics in Multicultural Communication, are all new courses designed for inclusion in the categories of Fine and Performing Arts, Contemporary Citizenship, Critical Analysis, Science and Social Policy, and Multicultural Perspectives,
respectively. We recognize and appreciate the willingness of the faculty to develop courses that have become, in these and many other instances, integral to the program.

Also among the improvements has been the substantial increase in the availability and completion of Basic Skills courses. We noted in Section III the considerable problem faced by WSU in the late 1990s, when far fewer students than today could complete these requirements in their first year. We also noted the remarkable progress in providing necessary seats and sections in this area so that students could complete the requirements as the program intends: by the end of the first year, most ideally, and certainly prerequisite to their upper-division electives carrying the University Studies flag designation.

Ongoing Assessment

As noted in Section IV, the design of the USP Assessment Plan features the ongoing and cyclical assessment of each of the Program’s requirements. We begin the review of Faculty Area Committee reports this coming fall semester, following the receipt of reports from the Basic Skills areas of College Reading and Writing, Oral Communication, Mathematics, and Physical Development and Wellness. Reports from committees assessing the Arts and Science Core, Unity and Diversity, and Flag course offerings follow in each subsequent year.

Based on our review of the data collected from institutional surveys of student engagement and measures of academic progress, the University Studies Subcommitte has begun the task of determining which kinds of other measures might best provide supplemental data for the ongoing assessment of the program. At best, our data from the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Progress, for instance, indicate only the degree of success our students achieve on that particular instrument itself, and not the degree of success demonstrated with the USP’s student learning outcomes. The USS is undertaking the review of measures that might provide better indications of our students’ learning and engagement.
Innovations in Delivery

Last, we note that Winona State has in the last three years been engaged in a campus-wide initiative to reconsider our established practices, research new paradigms in teaching and learning, and develop new programming that will engage ourselves and our students as partners in a shared enterprise. This initiative—known first as the “New University,” then as the “Winona Experience,” and now as “Learning in the 21st Century”¹⁹—has resulted in a number of innovative programs that have the potential to further enhance student learning in the University Studies Program.

The First-Year Experience features a pilot redesigning the introductory Orientation 100 course, Introduction to Higher Education, as a three-credit interdisciplinary seminar to be offered for University Studies credit. Concurrent with national trends in first-year programming, the pilot version of the new seminar will continue to provide the transitional programming of OR 100 but also aim to integrate students within the fabric and the discourse of university life. The First-Year Experience also has brought faculty to work with orientation leaders, advisors, staff, administrators, and others to focus on improving the quality of experience for all of our incoming students.

The Common Book Pilot Program, currently in its first year and aligned with the First-Year Experience, provides incoming students with a shared substantive intellectual experience. In the initial year of the pilot, over 1,000 students read the current selection in a first-year course (primarily English 111, Basic Skills: College Reading and Writing) and attended related programming. The initiative will continue to be piloted for a second year, with the goal of greater adoption in a wider variety of University Studies courses and stronger connections to other interdisciplinary and extracurricular programming.

Third, a number of service-learning, travel-study, study-abroad, and experiential learning initiatives have developed under the Learning in the 21st Century aegis. These initiatives number too many to mention in detail, but a host of them are aligned with University Studies requirements and outcomes. Whether undertaking service projects in the local community, 

¹⁹ [http://www.winona.edu/21stcentury/](http://www.winona.edu/21stcentury/)
exploring the terrain, history, and peoples of the Northern Great Plains, studying commerce or culture in Australia, or examining the works to be performed at the summer’s Great River Shakespeare Festival, WSU students involved in these activities do so largely in courses approved for inclusion in the University Studies Program. Additionally, recent L21 funding has been approved for the development of interdisciplinary coursework fostering the integration of the arts and sciences.

Last, the **Residential College** offers two initiatives directly involving University Studies coursework and is in the process of developing a third. The Residential College offers the university’s Learning Communities programming, grouping and connecting USP courses with shared thematic foci on such topics as “The River” and “Gender and Culture.” Secondly, a recently proposed series of “Alex (Bud) Yard Courses” will provide students and faculty in designated USP courses a budget to address the needs of the community or explore a timely topic in an unusual way. Last, and in development, the Residential Scholars Program is designed to develop scholars-in-residence through a multi-year program focusing on civic participation, community engagement, and student-faculty research. Featuring an integrated curriculum with strong connections to the community, it provides a unique learning environment with a permeable class structure and schedule. The curriculum of the program will be designed to satisfy several University Studies objectives.

These new innovations, most of which will be offered within the existing structure of the University Studies Program, bode well for its future. The program as designed allows both the desired range of electives for novice students and the focused, experiential, and connected programming its more innovative initiatives provide allow. With its design and implementation complete and its assessment underway, we look forward to the future, both in the ongoing review of assessment data and in the further development of the innovations listed immediately above. Each of these aims to foster continuity, coherence, engagement, and success in our students’ achievement of liberal education outcomes, and we eagerly await the results of our efforts.