

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN OSHKOSH

Quest and Connect. A revised general education curriculum provides new pathways to civic engagement and capstone experiences in the majors.

To learn more about this case study, see note to readers on p. 5.

As part of the new University Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin (UW) Oshkosh, a history professor taught a class on the history of farming in which students gathered oral histories of local farmers. According to Tracy Slagter, associate professor of political science, one student connected with his research so much that he ended up going several times to one of the farmers' houses for dinner.

“Students are able to make connections they would not ever have thought of making,” says Slagter, who also served as director of the University Studies Program, a curricular reform effort that began in 2012 to overhaul UW Oshkosh's general education curriculum, providing new pathways to capstones or signature work.

MOTIVATION

UW Oshkosh lies along the banks of the Fox River, enrolling approximately 12,600 undergraduates and 950 graduate students. The impetus for curricular revision came from several directions.

According to Lane Earns, provost and vice chancellor, UW Oshkosh “hadn't made a major change in decades. Then our accrediting body suggested we do something significant, and we took that as an opportunity to revamp our entire general education program.”

The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools said that UW Oshkosh had too many courses that counted for general education: seven hundred, to be exact. The accreditation team felt that meant little coherence. Further, a student survey revealed that the students themselves did not understand the purpose of general education and believed it to be a “waste of both time and money.”

THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSITY STUDIES PROGRAM

The context was conducive to reform. Faculty members were exploring new pedagogies at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Teams of faculty and administrators were also defining essential learning outcomes, largely adapted from those identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), while others were honing high-impact practices as defined by AAC&U, such as undergraduate research, service learning, and capstone courses and projects.

In 2011, Slagter was asked to serve on a summer team investigating the possibility of general education revision. The group looked at first-year experiences, capstones,



and eportfolios, and then chose a smaller leadership committee to look at best practices at other universities “in order to figure out what we could do at UW Oshkosh, and what we could afford to do,” says Slagter. “Being part of that team was exhilarating. It was a truly faculty-led exciting process. It led to what became the University Studies Program.”

Slagter notes that the rationale for creating something new was, in part, to prepare students for signature work. “If we are going to get signature work from students,” she adds, “if that is the expectation, then something has to come before that and that is ‘inspiration.’ If we offer uninspired general education courses, why would students be inspired to do anything great?”

The University Studies Program (USP) was approved by the faculty senate in March 2012. To get its new program rolling, the university received a grant from the UW system and from the Faculty Development Fund, a part of the university's Office of Grants. The provost's office also provided funds. Faculty received \$1,000 stipends to create new courses, while the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning provided professional development and support. All courses were reexamined for inclusion in the program, and a faculty senate committee had to approve all new general education courses. Peer mentors were hired and trained. The first cohort of students in the USP started in 2013.

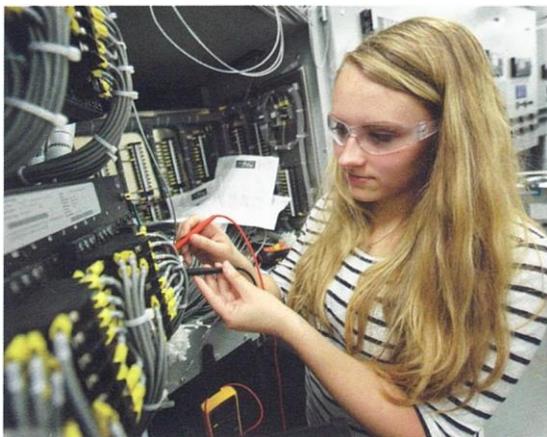
QUEST AND CONNECT

The hallmark of the USP is “Quest” which stands for “Question.” In a Quest, students address “signature questions”: “How do people understand and engage in community life?” “How do people understand and create a more sustainable world?” “How do people understand and bridge cultural differences?”

The aim is to provide students with common intellectual experiences, such as small learning communities and civic engagement, through the traditional liberal arts and sciences. Nine of the forty-one general education credits are met in Quest courses, which students complete during their first two years on campus.

Quest I: The First-Year Experience. In Quest I, courses in the disciplines are paired with writing and public-speaking courses. Students have peer mentors and receive an introduction to college life and university resources. For example, a pair might focus on sustainability and include Environmental Communication.

“Half of the disciplinary courses are paired with the first-year writing course,” says Slagter, “and the other half are paired with the introductory public speaking courses. Students who take the writing courses in a pair with their Quest I course will then take public speaking in their second semester on campus while enrolled in Quest II.”



Quest II: Problem Solving. In the second semester of their first year, students focus on reasoning and solving ethical dilemmas. The USP ensures “that all students have both introductory written and oral communication courses under their belts before their sophomore year,” Slagter says.

Quest III: Community Experience. “There are three things that a Quest III class brings together,” says Michael Lueder, civic engagement coordinator. “First, and foremost, is the disciplinary nature of the course ranging from history, art, political science, business, and so on. The second piece is one of the signature questions. Then there is a community-based learning experience built into

the course. We pair students with community partners.... I work with the faculty to bridge the gap with the community partner and we create a relationship between a course and partners.”

For example, in a Quest III biology course addressing sustainability, students worked with a local fourth-grade class, teaching a mini-science lesson at a nearby prairie. Students sampled streams for freshwater insects and water quality, and posted a video of their work on YouTube. Students can also fulfill Quest III via study abroad trips to Costa Rica or Ireland. “The goal is to give students a real-world setting to experience the signature question and course content,” adds Lueder.

Connect. Upon completing the Quest courses, students take an advanced composition course called Connect in which they reflect on their progress and discuss and assess the value of the liberal arts for their lives. “It is designed as a midterm 'capstone' for general education,” says Slagter. “It’s an advanced writing course that allows students to examine the purpose of a liberal arts education and to hone their research and writing skills.”

In addition to Quest and Connect, students fulfill other general education requirements in math, humanities, social sciences, lab science, fine arts, and performing arts.

“General education has a crucial role to play in getting students to signature work,” Slagter continues, “by [being] heavy on innovation and sparking student interest.... General education can be a springboard for signature work, it can be a location for signature work. But general education has to do more than convey facts and information. It has to inspire. And that is what we are trying to do.”

GETTING TO CAPSTONES

“Signature work is any student-led research project or other work where the student gets to define the project,” says Slagter. “As we continue to work on capstones, and encourage departments to bring general education work into their capstones, I think it will be more accurate to call the capstones themselves 'signature work' because of that interdisciplinary aspect.... [I]t has to be student led and also interdisciplinary, drawing on multiple lenses to create the work.”

Every student at UW Oshkosh experiences a capstone in his or her major. Slagter says that before the University Studies Program, many departments had capstones already; now all departments are required to have them, even though they are not part of the USP. The capstone experience may be a research or field experience or an internship, according to the individual departments.

In the political science capstone, students meet with individual faculty members to get feedback on their research plans. “We treat their research prospective as a prospective journal article submission,” says Slagter. “We give them feedback, and they write a letter about what they’ve learned and what they’ve changed. Students are asked to draw on their political science work, but also think about things not in their discipline. For example, one student recently did a project about pregnancy discrimination legislation, drawing on courses in law, women’s studies, and feminist theory.”

Slagter adds, “Our hope is that in the next academic year we will show how a department connects the work in the major with general education. That work is in its infancy. We do have reports from departments that students are influenced by their USP courses.”

ASSESSING THE QUEST AND CAPSTONES

Many departments require eportfolios, “and USP encourages their use overall,” says Slagter. “But we’re not yet to the point where students are actively curating and using eportfolios.” A website shows examples of eportfolios and provides instructions for creating one. In addition, the USP posts resources for faculty on creating rubrics for measuring learning outcomes.

Students are asked to begin keeping their work from the first paper they write. “Quest instructors are strongly encouraged to have students submit a written, ungraded reflection at the

end of the course,” says Slagter. “Most instructors do this, and these reflections are kept in our course management system so students can access them later on,” She adds, “These [and other Quest assignments] are available to students by the time they reach their disciplinary capstone course. But it's up to the department if they want to use those Quest assignments.”

In addition, individual departments have eportfolios. In political science, “we feel that it is important for students to have a collection of their work,” says Slagter, “and to reflect back on even the bad work, to say, 'Here is how far come I've come with my writing, Here is how far I've come with the departmental learning outcomes, Here is what I've learned in this major.’”

Coverage of learning outcomes in the USP is tracked every semester and reviewed by the Faculty Senate Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning. Administrators at UW Oshkosh believe that the USP has increased students' understanding of their liberal arts education and provides them with a clearer path to graduation. They think that faculty now have a greater intentionality in their course development, increased connections across campus, increased communication about student progress, and a commitment to program success.

“Many of these things we know from conversations across campus and in meetings with departments and other faculty groups,” says Slagter. “For example, prior to the University Studies Program it was rare to see syllabi with defined measurable student learning outcomes; the USP has made that the new standard.”

SUSTAINING THE USP

The implementation team (the dean of the College of Letters and Science, two associate deans, the registrar, the head of advising, the director of admissions, and a representative in the provost's office) dealt with the practical implications of the program and monitored how things were going. If they noticed problems for some students, such as scheduling issues, they took a solution through faculty governance. “That was important,” said Earns. “When we passed the USP originally, we said, 'This is not written in stone. We are going to make some adjustments; and we did.’” The program has evolved and continues to evolve.

The University Studies Program is administered by a director and an associate director, the latter being a faculty member who is chosen by the USP Council of faculty, administrators, and staff and the provost, and who automatically rotates into the director position after two years. Two student affairs educators assist with advising and the community engagement component of Quest III, and the program employs two support staff.

In the summer of 2016, a new team directed the program. “There is no one from the original leadership team that headed this,” adds Earns. “But new people are in place [who] are committed to it. It wasn't their program from the beginning. They grew into it, and became part of it, and are ready to take over. This is the key to show that it will continue on its own.”

ADVICE

USP administrators and faculty believe that faculty leadership and transparency are crucial to the success of a reform process. They add that support needs to come from across the campus, as advisors, residence hall directors, admissions counselors, student affairs staff, student leaders, and librarians are key to changing a campus culture and implementing a new program.

According to Earns, “What worked here was that while the administration encouraged and funded USP, it stepped back and let faculty take control of the process. You can't do it any other way.”

A Note to Readers

This Campus Profile represents one of many possible ways to make deep civic inquiry and engagement part of all postsecondary students' learning experience.

The profile was adapted from a 2017 AAC&U publication related to AAC&U's initiative on preparing students to do significant "signature" projects on issues important to the students and to society.

The case shows how signature work can prepare students to apply their higher learning to public issues and challenges. It also shows how civic inquiry and action can become deeply embedded in an institution's degree requirements, institutional culture, and reciprocal relationships with community-based partners.

Source: Wilson Peden, Sally Reed, and Kathy Wolfe, *Rising to the LEAP: Case Studies of Integrative Pathways to Student Signature Work* (Washington: DC. Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2017).

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