

Landmark 'University Studies Program' earns key Faculty Senate nod

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Pardon the pun, but there is little to nothing "old school" about the "University Studies Program" (USP).

The sweeping and innovative redesign of how the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh offers a high-value, high-impact general education is designed to take student learning to a new plateau. And it is going to become reality in fall 2013.

The groundbreaking USP proposal earned the nearly-unanimous approval of UW Oshkosh's Faculty Senate on March 13. It is the culmination of months of collaborative work by the members of the institution's academic community, who developed a landmark framework for general education at the University, following general guidelines set forth by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). With Faculty Senate approval, the USP framework's big ideas, concepts and questions now segue into a roughly year-and-a-half long implementation process. Faculty and staff training, course selections and student and community education are all necessary for the program to hit the ground running in fall 2013.

"It's historic," said Lori Carrell, communication studies professor, director for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and a co-leader in the development of the USP. "... I truly believe this is all due to colleagues who, at their center, at their core, have a passion for student learning."

The program represents the first, whole-scale redesign of general education requirements at UW Oshkosh in four decades. General education course updates and structural changes have incrementally taken place over the years. However, the nucleus and framework of general education student learning requirements have never seen so fundamental a reengineering at the state's third-largest institution. Come Fall 2013, gone is the culture of first and second-year students taking, completing and crossing off course requirements and moving on to their major-focused course work. Instead, students can expect several small classes and a cohesive program specifically designed to enhance their academic success.

The USP is designed to get students, within their first two years at UW Oshkosh, exploring "signature questions" that connect to heart-and-mind values of the institution, preparing them for 21st Century global citizenship. More specifically, the USP connects these learning experiences to three key questions that directly tie into the University's established Essential Learning Outcomes: "How do people understand and create a more sustainable world?" "How do people understand and engage in community life?" and "How do people understand and bridge cultural differences?"

UW Oshkosh Faculty Senate President and political science Professor James Simmons said he was gratified to see the Faculty Senate, after past attempts to reach consensus on general education reform proposals, approve the dynamic University Studies Program proposal in a nearly unanimous vote.

“The time for discussion and debate over reform is passed,” he said. “Now comes the more difficult effort of developing the actual program, delivering the revised curriculum, reporting on the progress of the USP and assessing its results in terms of essential student learning.”

The USP takes student learning and engagement to an entirely new level. While it does prescribe a hard number -- 41 credits -- of courses from an array of academic disciplines, the program is lithe. It balances intensive writing and speaking courses with participation in community-based, service-learning projects. It provides students with learning communities and peer mentors. It braids the experiences together within a new, elegantly designed timeline and structure with three themes: Question, Exploration and Connection.

Within their first four semesters at UW Oshkosh, students will have completed three “Quests,” each centered on the big questions and specific fields of study. The Quests also consider the essential skills desired by employers.

The timeline for implementation of the USP will move quickly, Carrell said. It involves:

- **Faculty and staff development:** starting in late May, faculty involved in the USP will begin professional development to prepare for the fall 2013 program’s start date.
- **Course implementation:** The selection of specific courses that fit into the USP framework will begin this spring and extend into the summer and fall.
- **Incoming student, community education:** USP developers will reach out to departments such as Admissions and the Registrar’s office to ensure students entering UW Oshkosh in the fall 2013 semester are aware of, and prepared for, the USP experience. Carrell said this will mean reaching out to even prospective students sooner than later. The community-engagement Quest within the USP also requires education for and coordination with area agencies and nonprofits – the vital community organizations that will benefit as students delve into service-learning projects. While external nonprofit involvement is not specifically required for students inside the USP, it is expected to be one popular option that students pursue.

Carrell said the opportunity for USP students to engage with the missions of area nonprofits represents a new and additional, high-impact intersection between the campus and the community. When the USP’s community-engagement Quest is initiated in 2014, there is potential for an estimated 900 UW Oshkosh students to be stepping off campus and connecting with community agencies. It may be some students’ first introduction to civic engagement, but the USP is designed to prevent it from being their last, Carrell said.

“This is their appetizer to a banquet we hope lasts the rest of their lives,” she said.

Learn more:

- [University Studies Program proposal](#) (PDF document)
- [Association of American Colleges and Universities](#)