

IPESL Grant Report
prepared by
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1. Title of Project

“Three Into One: Improving the Synthesis of Three Areas of Academic Concentration Into One Major”

2. Purpose of Project

The project focused on increasing Open Studies majors’ awareness of the level of synthesis of the academic areas they select. All students entering the major must provide a written justification of their selections. Students nearing graduation must complete the program’s only course -- the 400-level Capstone Experience --in which they prepare and present a project showing the “interconnectedness” of their chosen areas. At both vital points in the major, some students struggle to adequately grasp these linkages. The project was designed to help students better understand that their academic foci are more than disparate areas in which they happen to be interested.

3. Project Results

The project was intended to enhance critical thinking through the development of “support mechanisms” for students as they traverse the Open Studies major. It created a pair of guides for students to follow at the start and near the end of the major. These guides are intended to nudge students toward thinking more clearly about the interconnectedness of their foci at two critical points: (1) for students entering the major, a guide will help them prepare the required report that explains and justifies their choices of three academic areas of focus; and (2) for students embarking on the Capstone Experience course project, a rubric will help them illustrate their three areas as a coherent whole. Both guides require research, as well as careful thought, by students to enable them to answer a set of questions designed to help them understand and illustrate the commonalities of their chosen areas. In the case of the Capstone Experience course, it is especially important for students to develop a project that convinces their advisers and the program director that they have grasped the linkages sufficiently. At this point (August 2007), it is too early to assess the practical results of this project. Open Studies majors are few -- usually no more than half a dozen or so at a time -- and their progress through the major very self-paced. The guides will see their first distribution this fall (2007) semester. Their efficacy will be monitored as majors move through the program. Results will be examined in several ways: (1) by examining the quality and logic of the student’s written plan for entering the major; (2) by discussing the plan with the student and his/her proposed advisers; (3) by observing the quality of the student’s capstone project; (4) by comparing these “starting and ending” observations with each other and with reports and projects completed by previous majors; and (5) by discussing the student’s capstone-project results with his/her academic advisers. The assessment process, involving not only the director but also academic advisers, will reveal within a few semesters whether the project has met its objectives.

4. Issues

The first of the two guides noted above presented no particular challenges. The second guide, however, went through several revisions, and it still may not be in its final form. That guide, intended to lead students through the Capstone Experience course project, was trickier to prepare because these final projects can take so many varied forms. It was vital that the guide provide...well...guidance, while at the same time not being so prescribed as to limit creativity and imagination. the guide's success will be determined by whether the students find it helpful in preparing their projects and by whether the director and advisers find future projects to be well-done.

5. Disseminating the Results

The project's dual guides will be shared with majors and their advisers at appropriate points in the major. The project also will be shared with college student-relations coordinators for use in counseling prospective majors. The guides also will be posted on the Open Studies web site for examination by students considering the major and by faculty who might become involved in the program. This project, thus, has resulted in what should be of long-term usefulness in the Open Studies program.