

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

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An IPESL Grant Application  
by  
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## Spring Semester Schedule:

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Monday/Wednesday; available all day Friday

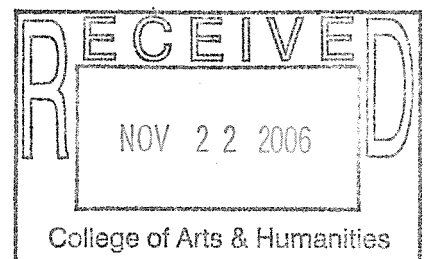
 11-22-06

Signature of Applicant



Signature of Program Director

  
Signature of College Dean/Vice President



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## IPEL Grant Application

### **1. Title of Project**

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

### **2. Purpose of Project** (246 words)

This project involves a program<sup>1</sup> in which students create a “custom” major by combining three areas of academic concentration from among MSU’s undergraduate disciplines. The project will focus on increasing student 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 ultimate goal of this project is to help students better understand that their academic foci are more than disparate areas in which they happen to be interested. In that context, a working definition of students’ critical-thinking skills is their ability to (1) recognize, gather and evaluate relevant, accurate information in a self-directed way while considering the major; (2) ask appropriate questions of professors and others before declaring the major; (3) reach a reasoned, objective decision about entering the major; and (4) recognize and explicate the linkages among the academic areas of concentration, particularly as evidenced in the capstone project. Students thus will meet Schafersman’s criterion for critical thinking: “The ability to think for one’s self and reliably and responsibly make...decisions that affect one’s life.”<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Project Description** (248 words)

The project will enhance critical thinking through the development, implementation and assessment of support mechanisms for students as they traverse their major. Specifically, it will create a pair of concise written guides for students to follow at the start and near the end of the major. These guides will 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 will 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 will be especially important for students to develop a project that convinces their advisers and the program director that they have grasped the linkages sufficiently. In preparing the questions for the guides I will consult the works of critical-thinking experts such as Hickey, Mertes, Chaffee, Beyer, Schafersman, Paul and the Foundation for Critical Thinking. My examination of the writings of these experts will consider both content-area and philosophical approaches to improving critical thinking. The result will be guides that are practical and useful for every major and his/her advisers.

### **4. Assessing the Results** (145 words)

Results will be assessed in at least five 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

<sup>1</sup> To protect the blind review process as much as possible, I have not named my one-person program in this application.

<sup>2</sup> Steven D. Schafersman, “An Introduction to Critical Thinking,” [www.freeinquiry.com/critical-thinking.html](http://www.freeinquiry.com/critical-thinking.html), January 1991.

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, with an eye toward evidence the student presents of having an acceptable understanding of the linkages among the areas of concentration; this discussion among program director and academic advisers will follow the student's capstone-experience presentation. The multifaceted assessment process, involving not only the director but also academic advisers in diverse disciplines, will reveal within a few semesters whether the project has met its objectives.

#### **5. Disseminating the Results** (99 words)

The project's purpose is to provide students and advisers with tools to make the students' work successful. Thus, the results will be shared with majors and their advisers (with the potential to eventually reach faculty in dozens of undergraduate disciplines as they agree to become advisers). The project also will be shared with college student-relations coordinators for use in counseling prospective majors. The documents resulting from the project will be posted on the program's or IPESL's MSU Web site for examination by students considering the major and by faculty at other universities who are part of a similar program.

#### **6. Supporting department/university goals<sup>3</sup>** (50 words)

The project will help students select and succeed in their areas of concentration. It will enlighten faculty advisers regarding program expectations so they may better advise students. Also, it will help students discover whether the major will be a good fit for their unique life experiences, learning styles and abilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Relevant program/university goals: Enhance academic excellence in undergraduate studies; promote diversity.