

Liberal Arts Program

University of La Verne

External Peer Review

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Summary

The program under review is an interdisciplinary undergraduate program in the Liberal Arts. The program is designed to provide students with a highly individualized course of study that allows them to investigate contemporary issues and fields of study that would be limited if approached from traditional disciplinary perspectives. Students complete coursework in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Fine Arts, most of which is at the upper division level. Both breadth and depth are ensured through an individualized study plan created with the approval of the program director that includes upper division courses in all four areas of study, a core curriculum in Liberal Arts that draws upon three areas of study, and a substantial senior project that is evaluated by two faculty members from appropriate fields and the program director. This combination of flexible individualized study plans and careful advising and oversight by the program director and outside faculty members is one of the greatest strengths of the program.

Students are able to choose the Liberal Arts major after completing one to two years of undergraduate study. This is important as students choosing the Liberal Arts major need time to discover their interests and ultimate goals. This Liberal Arts major is also useful to students whose chosen career paths are not well served by traditional disciplinary majors (this point will be addressed further in the Action Recommendations).

This review is based on the Liberal Arts program review completed in May, 2009, by program director Sean Bernard, course materials from the core curriculum, a visit to a class meeting of Liberal Arts 200—Foundations of Interdisciplinary Studies (2/18/2010), and conversation with the program director.

Learning outcomes and Assessment Procedures

The Program Learning Goals include:

1. Research and Cite appropriate multiple disciplines in written compositions to a specific and clearly defined purpose.
2. Describe distinctions between single-disciplinary studies, multi-disciplinary studies, and interdisciplinary studies.

3. Demonstrate how the integration of knowledge from multiple disciplines can provide a more complete analysis of complex issues.

In order to assess how well these goals have been met, the program has instituted a variety of procedures. An exit survey administered to students in 2009, a current student survey, and a senior project rubric that has been applied to 2009 projects as well as projects from previous years' graduates. The program director also sought out feedback from faculty and administrators who have had experience with the program.

Due to the small size of the program, only two exit surveys were returned in 2009. The questions on the survey are well conceived and move from general inquiries about the place of the Liberal Arts program on the LaVerne campus and the motivations for students choosing the program, to more specific questions about the curriculum and the students' future plans, to a self assessment of how well students feel they have fulfilled the program goals. Students appreciated the flexibility and diversity of the program, and felt that it helped them to find meaning and worth in pursuing studies not directly associated with a specific career path. They valued the ways in which the program required them to be self-motivated, and gave them the support they needed to pursue their passions. They felt less sure about how well they had mastered the second program goal. My own experience in a similar Liberal Studies Program at CSU Fullerton suggests that this is one of the biggest challenges in interdisciplinary undergraduate programs. The Liberal Arts Program has created a new core course, Liberal Arts 200, in part to address this deficiency. Providing a core course that students take early in their college experience should help give Liberal Arts students a better foundation in interdisciplinary study so that as they take courses in the traditional disciplines they will develop a better understanding of disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, and interdisciplinary approaches and the distinctions between them. Student responses to the survey also expressed some concern over confusion between Liberal Arts and the Liberal Studies major that is primarily designed to prepare students for a career in elementary education. This will be addressed in the Action recommendations.

The current student survey also appears to be a very appropriate instrument for assessing the overall program. Because it is administered to current students it does not include the section of questions specifically addressing the program Learning Goals. Instead, it is focused on gathering data on current majors and on how and why they chose the major, as well as questions about the adequacy of advising and course offerings.

The newly developed Liberal Arts Senior Project Rubric is a positive and very useful addition to the program's assessment strategy. Because this is a highly individualized program in which students will be working with a range of faculty potentially drawn from any department or discipline on campus, having a set of criteria that every evaluator can employ and that students are also familiar with before they begin their projects is critical. The range of qualities that are assessed in the rubric are appropriate to the program's learning goals and should be very useful to students and faculty, the program director, and future internal and external evaluators.

Program capacity

Since the program's latest internal review important steps have been made to improve curriculum offerings, advising, and faculty-student communications. Several of these stand out. The addition of a new lower-division Liberal Arts course (Liberal Arts 200—Foundations of Interdisciplinary Studies) to the curriculum improves program capacity in several ways. By adding a lower-division course to the major curriculum, interdisciplinary research and writing skills are addressed early in the course of study, thus clarifying some of the program's learning objectives for the students. Because the course is part of the INTD Values Area, it also has the potential to attract students to the major before they have progressed to their junior year. This may help to dispel some of the confusion on campus between the Liberal Arts program and the Liberal Studies program and attract students whose goals and interests make them well suited to the former. My visit to a meeting of Liberal Arts 200 revealed a lively and engaged group of students who responded very well to the guidance of Prof. Bernard. Their topic of study was appropriately interdisciplinary and should serve as an excellent foundation for those students who choose to pursue a BA in Liberal Arts. Since students in the 2009 Exit Survey mentioned that word of mouth was an important form of advertisement for the Liberal Arts program, this too should be enhanced by the addition of LA 200 to the curriculum.

LA 390 and LA 499 make up the rest of the core curriculum in the Liberal Arts program. This two semester sequence, especially once the purpose and content of LA 390 are clarified (as mentioned in the internal Program Review). The development of the Senior Project Rubric along with a review and revision of the LA 390 course are positive developments and signs that the program is reflecting upon the results of their assessment attempts and responding with appropriate revisions of their curriculum.

Student and faculty feedback about the program suggests that no further core curriculum needs to be developed at this time. Since the flexibility and individualized design of the Liberal Arts major is its great strength, all courses in the University catalog should continue to be available for potential use of a study plan. In order to ensure the quality of the individualized plan and the integrity of the major, the program director's advising and oversight role is crucial. Since this is a small program at present one advisor is adequate, however, if the program should experience substantial growth, more faculty advisors would be necessary.

Action recommendations

The Liberal Arts program has already taken a number of steps to improve the program in terms of clarity of purpose, coherence, and communication between students, faculty mentors, and the program director. Several additional observations or recommendations might also be considered as the program continues.

In terms of consistency and clarity of program goals and communication with students and faculty, I recommend that the program consider setting up several dedicated areas of study or themes and connecting with faculty who could help the program director with advisement in their area. For example, preparation for Nursing and Dentistry, well-known interdisciplinary fields such as American Studies and others could be identified and included on the program's website and other promotional materials. This would accomplish several things. It would increase the visibility of the Liberal Arts program as preparation for more specific career or

academic pursuits (some students may be intimidated by the individualized nature of the program because they cannot imagine how it could be useful to them without some examples), and allow faculty from various departments to become point persons for the Liberal Arts program, providing advising support to the Program Director, and steering potential students to the program.

Visibility and coherence are both important to the continued health and vitality of the program. Many faculty members housed in traditional disciplinary departments are engaged in interdisciplinary research or have had interdisciplinary training, including them in the program in some fairly undemanding but specified way would be a great help. I do not, however, recommend limiting the flexibility of the program for individual students (by, for example, creating more formal concentrations or limiting which courses from the catalog can appear on a study plan) since this is clearly one of the program's strengths.

The campus administration might help develop this pool of interested faculty through hosting social mixers or faculty discussion groups centered on Liberal Arts. The value of a Liberal Arts education is a topic very much in the news, both inside and outside of academia, this interest might be used to spark conversation on campus and to raise the visibility of the Liberal Arts program.

Continuing with the theme of continuity, having a program director with adequate time and commitment to the program who can serve for a period of years is very important. Since the program director plays such a pivotal role in advising, supervising research projects, and teaching in the core curriculum, a stable position is indispensable. If the major grows, additional release time for advising may become necessary.

While the similarity of the titles of the Liberal Arts program and the Liberal Studies program continues to cause some confusion on campus, I do not recommend any name change at this time. Rather, increasing awareness of the Liberal Arts major, especially through networking with faculty across campus, appears to be the best way of addressing this confusion. Since the Liberal Arts major requires students to take courses across the traditional Liberal Arts fields, for the time being the current program title seems appropriate.

As these action recommendations suggest, I think the two most important steps the program can take to improve and remain healthy are better promotion and communication with students, and better communication and connection with faculty from across campus.

Overall health of the program

The Liberal Arts program clearly provides a unique and very valuable course of study for students at the University of LaVerne whose individual academic interests or career goals are less well served by traditional disciplinary majors. Students have commented that they were able to find and pursue their passions in the Liberal Arts major. Their responses to exit survey questions suggest that they also experience some of the less tangible and easily assessed benefits of a Liberal Arts education—an openness to the world, confidence that they can approach real world problems and issues with a diverse frame of reference and analytical skill.

While the program has thus far generally accommodated a very limited number of students, I suspect that it will grow a bit in the years to come. Clarification of the goals of the program, implementing strategies to make more students aware of the value of the program in terms of personal and intellectual growth and career preparation, and increasing faculty involvement should keep the program healthy. A highly individualized program such as the Liberal Arts major at LaVerne will, for very good reasons, always appeal to a fairly limited number of students. Attracting self-motivated, passionate students is one of the best ways of ensuring the integrity and high quality of the program. The same applies to the faculty who become involved with the program, reaching out to those who already value interdisciplinarity and the Liberal Arts should create the greatest potential for maintaining program quality while also fostering growth in enrollment.