

**Weber State University**  
**Response to the 2021 Review of the General Studies Program**

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We thank the review team (Drs. Doris Geide-Stevenson, Hal Crimmel, Rick Ford, Jim Hutchins, Mary Beth Willard) for their thorough and insightful [review](#). This was the first time that a formal review has been conducted of the General Studies program, which is among the largest in the University averaging about 2,000 majors and 1,300 graduates annually over the past five years. This program response is authored by the Director of General Education (DGE) and Director of the Student Success Center, who authored the self-study.

The primary purpose of program review is to improve academic programs. The central goal of this first-ever review of the General Studies program is to provide a preliminary accounting of whether students are achieving programmatic goals and next-step success. The review team's report of this "*organizationally amorphous program*" is comprehensive and wide in scope. Indeed, the report highlights some vexing concerns for our institution (e.g., concurrent enrollment) that are beyond the direct scope of the General Studies program. Because this is a non-traditional program and program review, we have crafted a somewhat non-traditional response to the review. Based on the review team's evaluation of the program review standards we have distilled five core themes to address in our response below.

**Theme 1: Program Mission and Curriculum**

The General Studies program has no mission statement, but a central goal is fostering career exploration. One student learning outcome for academic advising through the Student Success Center (SSC) bears on student awareness "*of the resources and services available on campus to assist in achieving academic, personal, and career goals*". In addition, the SSC has refined the [Major & Career Navigation](#) program and is now focused on broader marketing of the program to students.

However, the review team commented that they "*did not see strong evidence that career exploration was part of the general studies program*". We agree that the career exploration goal of the program needs strengthening. There are existing courses (e.g., UNIV 1105-Foundations of College Success; UNIV 2900-Career Planning and Exploration; HTHS 1103-Introduction to Health Careers and Care in a Diverse Society) to which students are more intentionally directed through advising. In addition, some colleges (i.e., EAST, Education, A&H) have had college-specific versions of UNIV 1105 in the recent past. Other colleges (e.g., CSBS) are developing and many departments (e.g., Psychological Science, Geography, Environment & Sustainability, Microbiology/Zoology, Exercise & Sport Science) have developed lower-division courses that address career development, planning, preparation, and selection within their fields of study (e.g., PSY 2010 Science and Profession of Psychology; GEOG 2790 Exploring Geography, Environment & Sustainability; MICR/ZOOL 1280 Life in Medicine, ESS 2200 Exploring Exercise Science Professions). To be sensitive to limited staffing resources and time, we could creatively leverage existing resources (i.e., the Major & Career

Navigation program) and embed them in select general education courses to ensure that General Studies students are on the “right” academic path for their goals.

General education is the core curriculum (~34-41 of the required 60 credits) of the General Studies degrees. The review team noted that multi-year institutional efforts have increased the coherence and strengthened the assessment of the general education program. The site visit revealed some lingering confusions across campus regarding the distinction between the general education program and the General Studies program. Concerns about general education outcomes and [assessment](#) will continue to be addressed in other venues (i.e., formative biennial assessment process and annual Signature Assignment Assessment process). However, the review team raises an important concern about the general education experience of concurrent enrollment (CE) students. Many General Studies students are still in high school when they declare the AA or AS degree, and ~20% of the coursework in General Studies is completed as CE. This issue is likely not unique to the General Studies program. Many students in a variety of majors at Weber State are completing general education coursework in high school. What may be unique is that we addressed CE enrollments directly in our self-study and, therefore, have a better grasp of the nature and scope of the issue. The Director of General Education (DGE) will need to collaborate with department/program chairs to address general education revitalization efforts in CE courses. CE courses, like their counterparts on campus, need to be framed around [Big Questions](#), which are assessed through [Signature Assignments](#). The efforts of GEIAC and the DGE, thus far, have been to increase engagement of and support for general education revitalization on campus. Those efforts need to expand off-campus to our CE community to ensure the coherence and meaningfulness of our general education program for all students.

Thus, ~1/3 of the General Studies program credits are elective. This “curricular flexibility” enables students to be considered “degree seeking” and financial aid eligible, and provides a context for them to explore majors and careers. However, this flexibility may undermine student efficiency if students choose electives poorly. When faced with a Cheesecake Factory-style menu with hundreds of course options and perhaps too little guidance from an advisor about the choices that would best suit their interests and tastes, it should not be surprising that students make uninformed decisions and choose courses, for example, based on the time they are offered or because they heard about them from a friend. Bullock (2017) found that WSU General Studies students were less efficient in completing their Bachelor’s degree as compared to students earning other Associate degrees. It behooves us as an institution to examine just how flexible the curriculum should be for General Studies students. We can maintain curricular flexibility but ensure that students have advising and expert guidance early in their decision-making process. While it is beyond the scope of the General Studies program to require or implement, Weber State as an institution recently made [new student orientation](#) mandatory, and is seriously exploring making first-year advising mandatory. Mandatory orientation and advising for first-year students would support students’ efficient navigation of the flexible curriculum of the General Studies program. Weber State also could explore the viability of academic learning communities for first-year students (e.g., [Block U](#) at the University of Utah, [Freshman Learning Communities](#) at Georgia State University) that entail block scheduling, or clustering, of general education courses around an academic theme aligned with a meta major (e.g., health, global citizenship, STEM). There are many advantages to this sort of approach, including that it does not require a change in the structure of or courses within the general education program and it fosters belongingness among first-year students and a sense of place within the university.

## **Theme 2: Program Advising**

[General Studies advisors](#) receive a robust on-boarding and continuing training and development program focused on the conceptual, relational, and informational core values prescribed by NACADA and the CAS Standards. As a result, advisors spend time developing materials, presentations, and online information to meet students' needs. These do not all live on a website, but rather advisors meet students where they are within specific programs ranging from New Student Orientation modules, Early College/Concurrent Enrollment information sessions, and Advising Units in first-year courses.

Specific pathways are discussed on a one-on-one basis. Through training, grad maps, networking with college advisors, and institution knowledge, advisors are able to work with students who are undecided on a major or have an idea of a Bachelor's degree to select core, breadth, and elective classes to streamline their time to degree completion. While these are more organic in nature than formalized pathways, they allow each student to have an individualized plan to meet their needs. We are excited to have mandatory orientation, and, hopefully soon, mandatory first-year advising in order to have this interaction with each of the students.

The [Student Success Center](#) (SSC), in conjunction with Career Services, has developed the Major and Career Navigation program specifically for undecided students. After a successful pilot, the University transitioned to virtual due to the pandemic. In fall 2021, we look forward to rolling this program out to more students, both in person and virtually. Within this program, students will take the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) and Work Values Assessment. Students then attend a workshop presented by SII certified General Studies and Career Services Advisors to review results and connect that information to majors and careers. Finally, students have a one-on-one appointment with a General Studies Advisor to discuss goals, next steps, and to create an academic plan.

## **Theme 3: Concurrent Enrollment**

The [self-study](#) (see pp. 9-11) addressed numerous points bearing on changes in concurrent enrollment (CE) over recent years, including the trend of increasing enrollments in CE courses over the past decade, the higher number of CE credit hours students have at graduation with the General Studies AA/AS degrees, and the higher percentage of overall Gen Ed SCHs generated by CE courses. Nearly all of the most popular CE courses are Gen Ed courses, which is the core of the General Studies curriculum, and nearly all of those CE courses have increased their enrollments since AY17.

During the site visit, the review team met with various individuals who have more direct responsibility for CE, including Scott Teichert (Executive Director, Admissions), Jed Spencer (Executive Director, Financial Aid), Beth Rhoades (Director, Continuing Education Programs), and Nicole Butler (Program Administrator, Digital Learning and Professional Education). In addition, the review team gained insight into departments' experience with CE through their meeting with representatives from high CE enrollment departments (i.e., English, Math, Communication, Health Sciences, History, Nutrition, Political Science).

Based on the self-study and these conversations, the review team noted that many WSU departments have very successful CE programs with skilled coordinators who supervise curriculum

and the SSC provides strong advising support. However, the review team also raised a number of questions and concerns about CE at Weber State. They suggest that Weber should have a standardized model for sharing CE funds with departments, develop CE programs in local high schools to better serve first generation students, build out stronger technology infrastructure, assess the next-step success of CE students, ensure that departments get credit for CE SCHs and support to run strong CE programs, and develop a Best Practices document to ensure the high quality of all CE programs on campus. These are all important and valid considerations that are beyond the purview, authority, and responsibility of the General Studies program.

That said, there clearly needs to be broader campus awareness of the changing CE landscape at Weber State. Many of these considerations are being addressed by groups more directly involved with the tactical and strategic aspects of CE. The Provost, Dr. Ravi Krovi, is aware of the need for a broader strategic approach to CE that involves faculty input to ensure we are resourcing these programs smartly. For example, in 2021, the Provost's Office asked Julie Snowball, AVP of Regional Partnerships, and Leslie Park, M.Ed. Student Success Center, to co-chair a campus-wide Dual Enrollment Strategic Planning Group. The two participated in strategic planning conversations that focused on issues and opportunities related to dual enrollment at both the high school and technical college level. As a result, two strategy groups will be forming: one group will look at high school dual enrollment and the other group will look at technical college dual enrollment. For each group, a small planning group has formed to draft goals and will be expanding to include faculty and staff from across campus, as well as partners from K-12 and/or Technical Colleges. The work of the larger group is set to begin in fall 2021 or spring 2022. An advisory group consisting of campus leadership will govern both these strategy groups. Finally, CE is currently writing a self-study in support of NACEP accreditation. Their report, due in ~4-6 months, is addressing new [NACEP standards](#). The most recent NACEP accreditation was [2014](#).

While many of the review team's concerns with CE are beyond the purview of the General Studies program, the curricular concerns are within our purview. As discussed above, many General Studies students are still in high school when they declare the AA or AS degree, and ~20% of the coursework in General Studies is completed as CE. The DGE and GEIAC will need to collaborate with department/program chairs to address general education revitalization efforts in CE courses and to facilitate "robust assessment" to ensure that CE Gen Ed courses are taught to Weber State standards. Finally, the [Dual Enrollment Advising Team](#) within the SSC continues to develop and implement stronger advising support for CE students. Because the number of students participating in CE classes far exceeds the number of advising FTE for this program, the University is looking at ways to expand the advising team to meet the growing demand.

#### **Theme 4: Improved Information Sharing**

The review team requested that we do better to "*[h]ighlight the current structure and size of the General Studies program across the university. Disseminate the program review report more widely than normal (e.g. include Dean's Council and Department Chairs' Council) with the goal to help connect more General Studies majors to an academic college which should help with retention, time to degree, and advising burden*". We believe the initiation of the first-ever review of the General Studies program and the writing of the [self-study](#) was an important first step to highlight the current structure and size of the program across the University. The site visit itself brought together nearly three dozen stakeholders, including students in the program, to discuss the program curriculum, advising, supports, and tactical issues. The findings

from the self-study and the review team report will be presented to a meeting of Faculty Senate Executive and Deans as part of this special program review process. The purpose of that meeting is to further generate discussion about how best to ensure a high-quality General Studies program. Ultimately, the decision about how to proceed lies with Provost Krovi.

We agree with the review team's view that the goal should be an early "*hand-off*" of students in the General Studies program to an academic college and major. One proposal for doing so is for the Director and staff of the SSC to work with Chairs and Deans to develop degree routing plans for General Studies majors. The review team's insight regarding the various categories of students in the General Studies program (see [review](#), Table 2, p. 3) underscores the unique needs of the diverse students in the program. Because of its curricular flexibility, we expect there will always be students for whom the Associate's degree in General Studies is the "*right*" degree. However, the General Studies program, in collaboration with the SSC and College Advisers, can work to ensure that students end up in the "*right*" degree program for their academic goals. Connecting students with the "*right*" programs and "*right*" resources will undoubtedly promote retention and graduation.

The review team also highlighted lingering confusions across campus regarding the distinction between the General Studies and the general education programs. "*WSU faculty seem to largely confound the general education program with the General Studies degree*" (p. 7). In addition, there were lingering concerns and questions about general education assessment. We acknowledge that the majority (~2/3) of the 60 credits required for the AA/AS in General Studies are in general education. However, the general education program is distinct with its own [mission](#), [program learning outcomes](#), and [assessment](#). The DGE, along with the [Gen Ed Council](#), will continue to work to address any concerns with the general education program through other venues (see Theme 1 discussion above).

### **Theme 5: Program Organizational Structure**

The review team accurately notes that the General Studies program "*functions as a way to classify students as 'degree seeking' for the purpose of making them eligible for financial aid*". Curricular flexibility is a strength of the General Studies program, but, as discussed in Theme 1, we must ensure 1) that the program is appropriately structured to support the goal of major and career exploration, and 2) that students are efficient in their degree progress. The review team recommends that we "*rethink the current organizational structure of the General Studies major*". We will now offer some thoughts from our perspective on this recommendation.

The reviewers suggest centralizing various programs and processes (e.g., concurrent enrollment, advising, general education assessment) that are presently distributed and associated with different organizational units within Academic Affairs as a way to effectively manage the program. While the current organizational structure may not have been intentional from the inception of the General Studies program, we do not yet see clearly the management problems that centralization is supposed to address. New university-wide discussions focusing on Concurrent Enrollment (CE) are underway to identify strategic directions for the program. It appears that CE students are being well-managed by the partnerships between the offices of the Director of Continuing Education Program, Enrollment Management, and the Assistant Vice President of Regional Partnerships. The strategic direction of and the WSU investment in the CE program are open questions that need broader discussion involving faculty and deans (see Theme 3 above).

The SSC has additional responsibilities (e.g., Starfish, New Student Orientation) and important connections to other enrollment services offices (e.g., Registrar, Financial Aid, Admissions) beyond General Studies advising. These responsibilities and coordinations may be more disrupted by a wholesale reorganization of the Provost Office than whatever increase in organizational efficiency could be gained for the General Studies program. To that end, one goal of General Studies advising is to direct students to more appropriate and efficient certificate and degree (Associates and Bachelor) programs. It is not clear how the reorganization helps in that effort.

Finally, general education assessment is a part of the broader program review process and is integrated with the academic analytics in the [Office of Institutional Effectiveness](#) (OIE). For programs to be holistically reviewed, their general education courses must be assessed in the context of their entire certificate, Associate's, Bachelor's, and graduate degree offerings. Reorganizing general education assessment out of the OIE may also create more disruption in their organizational context than it helps the General Studies program. And it remains an open question as to where, or on whom, such assessment responsibilities would land. The current processes of Biennial Assessment of area learning outcomes led by GEIAC and OIE and Signature Assignment Assessment of program learning outcomes led by the DGE and OIE (see <https://weber.edu/GenEd/assessment.html>) engage and train faculty members from across campus to code course assessment data. These processes have an additional positive side effect of diffusing a better understanding of general education assessment across faculty, departments, and programs.

More generally, the centralization of management around general education and General Studies may have elements of the approach adopted elsewhere (e.g., Utah Valley University, Dixie State University) of a University College (UC) that houses developmental programs in Math and English, the general education program, advisement, and university studies degrees. At first glance, such an approach to centralize the program has some appeal in creating a more distinctive identity for General Studies. However, this sort of approach as a way of managing all first-year programs and classes was rejected in favor of a First Year Council structure for a few reasons that may be relevant to this discussion. First, it was clear that each first-year program or class had report lines that would have to shift in a reorganized UC. It was not clear that shifting would create more coordination, cooperation, and efficiency. Indeed, there was a concern it may actually create the opposite. Second, these programs and classes may have other goals associated with other students than just first-year and placing them in a UC may undermine those goals. Finally, coordination between first-year classes and advising for other classes and advising in students' major programs (located in another college) may be undermined by a UC.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

We sincerely appreciate the review team's comprehensive review of the General Studies program. We hope this program review process will keep the goal of continuous improvement in the foreground and that we have begun a productive discussion about the future of the General Studies program. As we consider the state of the General Studies program, we should keep the following questions in mind: As an institution, what is the purpose and value, and what are the goals of the General Studies degrees? Does the current structure of the program (e.g., curriculum, advising) support the next-step success of students in the program?