

REVIEW OF THE B.A., B.S. IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES

Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Code: 24.0102
General Studies

OVERVIEW

The B.A., B.S. in University Studies program is administered by University College, a unit that reports directly to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost. In addition to the University Studies program, University College administers the B.A., B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies program, which has also been reviewed during this program review cycle. The last review of the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program occurred in 2012-2013. While programs at Illinois State University are typically reviewed every eight years, review of the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program was scheduled six years after the prior review so the two degree programs offered by University College could be reviewed concurrently.

University College was established in July 1996 to improve the effectiveness and efficacy of academic support services provided to undergraduate students and to deliver support services to unique student populations. A primary focus of University College today is providing programming that addresses the academic and transitional needs of first-year undergraduate students. Among the units, programs, and services of University College are undergraduate academic advisement, developmental mathematics, first-year seminars, the Julia N. Visor Academic Center, retention services, and orientation and transition services. All first-year students regardless of major (with the exception of those in the University Honors program) are advised by University College. In addition, all students who have not yet declared a major are advised by the unit, regardless of the number of credit hours they have earned.

The B.A., B.S. in University Studies program was initially proposed in 2002 and was first offered by the University in 2006-2007. The program was designed to serve students in academic good standing who are either unable to meet the admission or retention requirements for majors with requirements above university minimums, who discover late in their program of study that they do not wish to pursue the academic or career path related to their choice of major, or who have completed 75 or more credit hours but not yet decided on a major. Since 2006-2007, the mission and objectives of the program and its student profile have remained unchanged. The program continues to serve a diverse group of students who have been generally successful at the University and are in good academic standing but are unable to complete a traditional major in a reasonable time due to one or more factors, such as adopting new career goals or pursuing different career opportunities, extenuating personal circumstances, or the inability to gain admittance to their program of choice because enrollment in the program has reached its capacity. But for the University Studies program, students enrolling in the program would not likely complete an undergraduate degree. One of the many unique aspects of the University Studies program is the goal of minimizing its enrollment by serving students through their traditional major of choice instead.

The curriculum of the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program is flexible enough to accommodate breadth or depth of study. Students select from among three plans of study: specialized studies, through which students focus their coursework on one discipline; general studies, through which students focus their coursework on two disciplines; and liberal studies, which provides for coursework that bridges academic disciplines. Students work with the University Studies advisor to develop and follow an individualized plan of study. With approval of the advisor, credit hours earned prior to admittance to the University Studies program and credit hours being earned at the time of admittance to the program may count toward University Studies graduation requirements.

Occasionally, staff or faculty members conflate the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program with the B.A., B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies program, since both have unique academic purposes and both are administered by University College. The B.A., B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies program is primarily intended for students interested in completing a program of study not otherwise offered by the University or a multidisciplinary program of study that spans the offerings of two or more academic units at the University. The Interdisciplinary Studies program also provides a path to graduation for students in teacher education programs who do not complete all clinical experiences required for graduation and teacher licensure.

Enrollment and Degrees Conferred, 2011-2018
B.A., B.S. in University Studies, Illinois State University

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Enrollment, fall census day	43	50	45	50	44	25	23	35
Degrees conferred, graduating fiscal year*	90	76	109	102	117	95	87	94

Table notes:

Graduating Fiscal Year consists of summer, fall, and spring terms, in that order. For example, Graduating Fiscal Year 2018 consists of the following terms: summer 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018.

The number of degrees conferred by the program is significantly higher than fall census day enrollment because students typically transfer into the University Studies program at times during the academic year other than early in the fall semester. It is not unusual for students to transfer into the program during the spring semester, in time for May or August graduation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

Program goals

- Expand graduation opportunities for Illinois State University students who are in good academic standing but cannot gain admission to their desired major or cannot complete it.
- Provide students enrolling in the University Studies program with opportunities for pathways to meet their career goals.
- Improve opportunities for realistic and meaningful individualized plans of studies for students in the program through the accessibility to 300-level courses and practical opportunities.

Students learning outcomes

Each student enrolling in the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program follows an individualized plan of study with individualized student learning outcomes. The program does not currently have a common set of student learning outcomes applicable to all students.

Program curriculum (2018-2019)

Students select one of three options: specialized studies, general studies, or liberal studies.

Graduation requirements (specialized studies option):

120 credit hours including completion of all university requirements for a B.A. or B.S. degree, including General Education requirements, and completion of all course requirements set forth in the student's individualized plan of study. Individualized plans of study for the specialized studies option consist of at least 30 credit hours from the major plan from one department or school, including at least 9 credit hours of 300-level coursework in that major.

Graduation requirements (general studies option):

120 credit hours including completion of all university requirements for a B.A. or B.S. degree, including General Education requirements, and completion of all course requirements set forth in the student's individualized plan of study. Individualized plans of study for the general studies option consist of at least 36 credit hours for the major plan with at least 18 credit hours from each of two disciplines, including at least 9 credit hours of 300-level coursework in the major.

Graduation requirements (liberal studies option):

120 credit hours including completion of all university requirements for a B.A. or B.S. degree, including General Education requirements, and completion of all course requirements set forth in the student's individualized plan of study. Individualized plans of study for the liberal studies option consist of at least 36 credit hours of coursework bridging academic disciplines, including at least 9 credit hours of 300-level coursework in the major.

Program delivery

The program is offered on the Normal campus.

Courses taken by students in the program may be delivered through face-to-face instruction, blended face-to-face/online instruction, or online instruction.

Department faculty (Fall 2018)

There are no designated teaching faculty members for the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program. Because students enrolled in the program take courses offered through other academic units of the University, any faculty member at the institution may teach a course in which a University Studies major is enrolled.

Specialized accreditation

The B.A., B.S. in University Studies program is not affiliated with a specialized accreditation association.

Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand

Changes external to the University have had little impact on the University Studies major since the prior program review. However, current economic trends indicate that students nationwide (if eligible) may be more inclined to seek a non-traditional degree in order to facilitate more timely graduation. Some employers still place less value on non-traditional degrees like University Studies in the hiring process. To help University Studies graduates address that issue should they encounter it, University College has made strides toward emphasizing the importance of articulating the uniqueness of the program to potential employers and why the student selected the major. Efforts to increase awareness of the University Studies program have resulted in greater recognition campus-wide of program needs and benefits and a slight increase in the number of students enrolling in the program.

Responses to previous program review recommendations

The 2012-2013 program review resulted in two recommendations. One was to maintain and expand relationships with units across campus that can enrich student experiences through co-curricular activities and support services and that can help students complete the program in a timely manner. A specific strategy suggested by the Academic Planning Committee for accomplishing this recommendation was to organize a program advisory council to regularly solicit feedback regarding the program from faculty, alumni, and other constituents. Since that program review, University College has continued its practice of regularly informing academic advisors campus-wide about the University Studies program so they are able to articulate program requirements to students interested in and eligible for the program. Following the Academic Planning Committee suggestion, University College established a program advisory council, the University Studies Program Council, in fall 2014. To provide council members with a holistic understanding of the program and its students, University College staff presented information to council members regarding the program application process, student enrollment and demographics, and individual cases. The council has benefitted the program and its students in some ways, such as through discussion of expanded programming for students by the Career Center. However, the council has limited scope to successfully address the primary barrier to graduation for students in the program: the ability of students to gain admittance to 300-level courses they need to meet program requirements. Enrollment in those courses is often restricted by academic units to students enrolled in their own programs. While some successes removing this barrier have been achieved by University College staff working with unit faculty and staff on a case-by-case basis, the issue has not been completely resolved. A second recommendation was to work with University Assessment Services to investigate and implement methods of student learning outcomes assessment appropriate for the program and to use assessment findings to inform program improvements. University College has since begun working with University Assessment Services to develop assessment plans for both the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program and the B.A., B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies program. The primary challenge in developing an assessment plan for each program is the lack of student learning outcomes common to all students in each program, since students in both programs have individualized plans of study. Efforts to develop the assessment plans continue.

Major findings

The B.A., B.S. in University Studies program continues to serve a unique population of students at Illinois State University by providing them with an alternative means of graduating in a timely manner. Without this program, students unable to enroll in majors of their choice, students unable to meet retention requirements of their majors when different than university-wide retention requirements, or those deciding late in their academic careers that their major of choice is not right for them would have no option other than to leave the University without having earned a degree. Providing information to the campus community regarding availability of the University Studies program and working with campus constituents to streamline the academic experience for students enrolling in the program continue to be priorities for University College. Advisor training and campus-wide information sessions provide updates about the University Studies program. The University Studies Program Council, established since the prior program review, has improved communication among constituents by engaging them in discussions of issues pertinent to the program and the students it serves. The ability of University Studies students to enroll in the 300-level courses they need to meet program requirements has been an issue since inception of the University Studies program. Because University Studies students take courses offered by other departments or schools and because some departments or schools may restrict enrollment in their courses to students enrolled in their own programs, the University Studies program relies on academic units to cooperatively agree to accept University Studies students into their courses. While University College has expanded its outreach to academic units regarding this issue since the last program review, the problem persists. A review by University College of similar programs at other universities, conducted as part of this self-study process, found that programs at two other public universities in the state require a capstone experience or student portfolio. Illinois State University should consider establishing a similar requirement for its University Studies program, perhaps to substitute for one of the required 300-level courses. The review also found that at least one other comparator program in the state provides academic and pre-professional opportunities for its students, such as a research day, speaker events, professional workshops, and activities coordinated by student organizations and clubs. Illinois State University might consider incorporating similar opportunities in its University Studies program, to enhance the overall program experience for students and potentially increase students' focus on career planning.

Initiatives and plans

- Develop a student learning outcomes assessment plan that includes student learning outcomes that reflect the unique nature of the University Studies program.
- Continue to augment career readiness and development services provided to University Studies students.
- Develop a more defined set of goals for the University Studies Program Council.

PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

Review Outcome. The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee thanks University College for agreeing to compile and submit a self-study report for the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program two years before it was due, so the program could be reviewed by the committee concurrently with its review of the B.A., B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies program, also administered by University College. The committee appreciates the ability to review the two programs during the same cycle, to help the committee understand their differences and similarities. The committee thanks University College for a critical evaluation of the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of the University Studies program. The committee appreciates efforts of University College staff to study comparator and aspirational programs, particularly given the differences among general studies programs with respect to their missions, the student populations they serve, and the academic environments in which they exist.

The committee recognizes University College for its many contributions to undergraduate education at Illinois State through its work with students in the University Studies program and the Interdisciplinary Studies program and through its services to undergraduate students across all units and programs of the institution. Among those services are advisement for almost all undergraduate students with fewer than 24 credit hours; academic support through tutoring, coaching, and workshops; developmental mathematics courses and tutoring; first-year seminars to help

students transition into college; retention services; and orientation and transition services. The committee recognizes the unique contributions the University Studies program makes to undergraduate education at the University. The program provides opportunities for students to earn an undergraduate degree if they remain undecided about their career goals after starting their upper-division courses, if they decide late in their chosen major that they prefer not to complete it, or if they are unable to meet admission or retention requirements of programs with requirements above the university minimums. In the six years since the 2012-2013 program review, the program has graduated 604 students. The committee notes that the number of graduates during those six years peaked at 117 in Fiscal 2015 and has since dropped to 94 in Fiscal 2018. If that decrease is the result of more students having been served through traditional academic programs at the University, the committee views the decrease as a positive development.

The committee commends University College staff members for their work with each University Studies student to develop an individualized plan of study that builds on prior coursework completed by the student and includes courses appropriate to the student's educational and professional goals. The committee notes emphasis in the plans of study on developing critical thinking and interpersonal skills. The committee also commends University College for efforts to further a sense of belonging and community among students. Examples include sending a letter of congratulations and a gift to each student upon their completion of the program and recognition of University Studies students at commencement. University College staff has been assisted in those efforts by members of the University Studies Program Council, which has been established since the prior program review.

The committee recognizes that students choosing the University Studies major may need more than four years to graduate from the program given their late change of major and the difficulties they may face enrolling in 300-level (senior-level) courses. The committee commends efforts of University College to help students complete the University Studies program as quickly as possible, to minimize their costs of attendance and accelerate their transition into graduate studies or employment. The percentage of graduates who take more than five years to complete the University Studies program decreased from 44.2 percent in Fiscal 2014 to 27.6 percent in Fiscal 2018.

The committee recognizes the many accomplishments of students who complete the University Studies program. For example, since the prior program review numerous graduates have pursued master's degrees (e.g., at Illinois State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Olivet Nazarene University) or have been employed by Fortune 500 companies (e.g., Merrill Lynch, American Airlines). One former University Studies student was nominated for a university alumni award. A study of alumni employment and earnings completed by University Assessment Services in 2017 documents stable employment and steadily rising income among University Studies alumni.

Through its discussion of the University Studies program review report, the committee has identified several challenges and opportunities for University College to explore collaboratively with other units at the University. Those challenges and opportunities are set forth in the recommendations that follow. Several recommendations suggest substantive changes to the program that the committee feels merit discussion and action well prior to the next program review on the eight-year cycle. Accordingly, the committee asks University College to consider the committee recommendations and summarize its discussions and any actions taken through two follow-up reports submitted to the committee via the Office of the Provost.

In a first follow-up report, submitted to the committee via the Office of the Provost by May 15, 2020, the committee asks University College to report which recommendations the college is addressing or plans to address, the order in which the college is addressing the recommendations, the parties involved in the discussions, and actions either taken or planned to be taken.

In a second follow-up report, submitted to the committee via the Office of the Provost by May 15, 2022, the committee asks University College to report the status of its efforts to address the recommendations, including any actions taken or planned to be taken.

The committee recognizes that University College has been charged with administering the University Studies program but may not be empowered to effectuate all of the committee recommendations. The committee suggests that in considering the recommendations, University College work with the Office of the Provost to which it reports to engage the appropriate shared governance partners and processes in the discussions.

Recommendations. The Academic Planning Committee makes the following observations and recommendations to be addressed by University College. In program review follow-up reports, due May 15, 2020 and May 15, 2022, and in the next self-study report on the eight-year program review cycle, tentatively due October 1, 2026, the committee asks the program to describe actions taken and results achieved for each recommendation.

Explore enhancements to the curriculum and to co-curricular opportunities. The committee encourages University College to continue exploring curricular and co-curricular enhancements that promote an academic experience commensurate with experiences of students in all other academic programs offered by the University. To the extent that it is feasible given the point at which students enter the University Studies program, the committee recommends that each student be encouraged and guided in selecting a faculty member to serve as their academic mentor. This approach would be similar to the approach taken with students in the Interdisciplinary Studies program. The committee recommends that students be encouraged to work through their academic mentor to arrange opportunities for exposure to research in the discipline and for assisting with or conducting research, if feasible. The committee recommends consideration of offering an optional capstone experience, to further improve the quality of the academic experience and to help students prepare for post-graduation employment or graduate studies. The committee also supports University College staff in their efforts to expand career development programming for University Studies students during the next program review cycle. The committee encourages University College to collaborate with the Career Center at the University in the endeavor.

Continue seeking access to 300-level (senior-level) courses. The fall 2012 program review report for the University Studies program describes the difficulties students have obtaining admission to 300-level courses they need to graduate. Enrollment in 300-level courses most in demand by University Studies students may be restricted by academic units to their own majors. Some 300-level courses may be over-subscribed, whereas some may have pre-requisites University Studies students have difficulty meeting. The committee recommended in 2013 that University College establish a program advisory council to help address this problem. In its fall 2018 self-study report, University College notes that an advisory council has been established and has studied the matter. However, the problem persists. The committee encourages University College staff to continue working with the council, academic units, and the Office of the Provost to study patterns related to this issue and to seek ways to address it.

Consider revising, merging, or eliminating curricular options. The committee suggests that University College explore the benefits and disadvantages of revising, merging, or eliminating the three curricular options of the University Studies program. The committee observes that there are only minor differences across the three options and that revising, merging, or eliminating them might provide additional flexibility to students in devising plans of study that best meets their academic and career goals. Changes might also help mitigate confusion among students regarding the requirements they must meet to graduate and might render the program easier to administer. If the options are retained, the committee recommends careful consideration of the option names to most clearly reflect their content, to distinguish one option from another, and to help graduates with their job searches or applications for admission to graduate programs.

Explore consolidating University Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies. The committee observes that plans of study for the B.A., B.S. in University Studies program and plans of study for the B.A., B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies program are similar despite differences in the profiles of students each program is intended to serve. Accordingly, the committee recommends that University College work with the Office of the Provost and the appropriate shared governance committees to explore the benefits and disadvantages of consolidating the two programs. The committee observes that consolidation would eliminate the long-standing confusion among students, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders (including employers) regarding differences between the programs. Consolidation might be particularly appropriate if the grade point average required for admission to the Interdisciplinary Studies program is changed to match the requirement applicable to University Studies students and if the human and educational services sequence of the Interdisciplinary Studies program is eliminated.

Inform university conversations regarding student diversity in the University Studies program. The committee observes that the University Studies program consistently serves a higher percentage of students who self-identify with racial/ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented at the University than the average across all undergraduate programs offered by the University. While the committee recognizes the value of the program in providing opportunities for all students to earn an undergraduate degree from the University, the committee believes that this phenomenon should be carefully examined and monitored by the University. The committee recommends

that student diversity in the program be studied in connection with broader university efforts to study and address long-standing disparities in student success metrics, such as retention and graduation rates, across racial and ethnic groups. The committee views this issue as meriting conversations involving multiple shared governance partners facilitated through the Office of the Provost. The committee asks that University College staff contribute to these conversations by providing and contextualizing information regarding student experiences in the University Studies program, such as details about why students enroll in the program and obstacles students encounter when attempting to enroll in and complete their first-choice majors.

Develop and implement a plan for connecting with program alumni. The self-study report mentions recent efforts by University College staff to compile and research a list of University Studies graduates. The committee recommends that University College continue those efforts by developing and implementing a plan for systematic outreach to alumni for feedback regarding the program and for updates regarding their professional endeavors. The committee suggests that University College consider including as a component of the plan efforts to engage alumni through social media. University College might consider encouraging students to join social media sites established for program alumni when the students enroll in University Studies. Through such an approach, students could be encouraged to maintain contact with University College during and after their time in the program and would have opportunities to engage with and learn from program graduates.

Develop and implement a new student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program. The committee concurs with University College that development and implementation of a new student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program should be a priority for the next program review cycle, after decisions have been made regarding the program structure and curriculum. The committee recognizes the challenge facing University College in developing such a document given that the program does not have core courses or plans of study shared by multiple students. The committee recognizes that an assessment plan for the program may, consequently, focus more heavily on indirect assessment methods than do assessment plans for other academic programs. The committee recommends including strategies for documenting information regarding individualized plans of study and career paths of alumni and for communicating that information to other units at the University to inform academic program planning. The committee recommends that University College look to the Assessment Advisory Council, University Assessment Services, the University Studies Program Council, and comparator and aspirational programs for guidance in developing the new assessment plan.