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# Report of the University Studies Council to the Faculty Senate - June 2009

Portland State University. General Education Working Group

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## Report of the University Studies Council to the Faculty Senate – June 2009

Prepared by Mitch Cruzan, Chair

**Council:** Mary Ann Barham, Darrell Brown, Mitch Cruzan, Ann Marie Fallon, Harrell Fletcher, Jeff Gerwing (UNST Faculty Representative), Deb Kaufman, Subhash Kochar, Hildy Miller, Swapna Mukhopadhyay, Betsy Natter (Co-Chair), Bob Schroeder, Tom Seppalainen, Michael Taylor, and Linda Walton. **Ex-officio:** Sukhwant Jhaj, Shawn Smallman

The culminating work of the council this year was to develop a process for the realignment of University Studies Clusters (*see Action Plan below*). We have identified a preliminary list of new clusters that we believe represent the priorities of the faculty and students at Portland State University, and have developed a process for cluster realignment that relies heavily on input from faculty, departmental chairs, cluster coordinators, and deans. Our primary goal in this report is to present an implementation plan for cluster realignment, with opportunities for further input during a interim report to the Senate in the fall of 2009 and final approval of a proposal in spring of 2010.

### **Other work of the 2008 – 2009 UNST Council included:**

- We implemented recommendations concerning transfer students from the 2007 – 2008 council:
  1. Transfer students with 30-44 credits will no longer be required to complete Transfer Transition. (This is a change in the graduation requirements for transfer students.)
  2. Transfer students with 30 or more credits will be required to have taken one writing class beginning with Writing 121 or its equivalent with a grade of C- or above. (This is a change in the 2009-10 admissions requirements for transfer students.)
- We unanimously approved changes in policies on cluster courses suggested by the 2006 *ad hoc* council:
  1. Courses not offered at least once in a two-year period are subject to removal from a cluster unless special circumstances exist.
  2. New courses with 399/410 designations will not be considered for approval as cluster courses. Faculty currently offering 399/410 courses are encouraged to seek approval for them as regular courses. All 399/410 courses will be removed from cluster course lists beginning AY 2010 - 2011.

The University Studies Council intends to proceed with junior cluster realignment as outlined below.

- **Realignment will:**
  1. Enhance the interdisciplinary curricular content of clusters to encourage students to explore a theme from diverse perspectives.
  2. Increase course offerings within each cluster so students have more options to complete their requirement in a timely manner.
  3. Reduce the number of clusters offered to eliminate or reduce the large number of student petitions generated under the current system.
  4. Reinvigorate cluster areas, providing more opportunities for faculty and students to collaborate across departmental boundaries around issues and questions that are salient to Portland State.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to express my deep appreciation to all the council members for their hard work, and particularly for helping generate an atmosphere that facilitated candid and creative discussion on issues that are profoundly important to all of us and for the university.

## University Studies Council – Action Plan for Cluster Realignment

### I. Rationale.

Upper Division University Studies Clusters are comprised of courses from a variety of disciplines. The courses call upon the skills and knowledge students have developed in their lower division University Studies courses, FRINQ and SINQ. Students in these courses are expected to be increasingly proficient in writing, research, discussion, computer and inquiry skills. Through their choice of Cluster courses, students can design an individualized plan of study focused on an interdisciplinary theme that supports their overall academic goals. Currently, there are 26 clusters.

Over the past two years, a series of problems with the existing cluster offerings have been identified through conversations with university faculty, students and cluster coordinators:

1. Many of the current clusters fail to meet UNST goals by either lacking sufficient coherence or levels of interdisciplinarity.
2. Several of the clusters are relatively small and offer a very limited number of courses per term.
3. Infrequent course-offerings have precipitated confusion and frustration among students.
4. Insufficient course offerings within clusters has precipitated an unwieldy number of petitions for substitutions of courses to meet graduation requirements.

*These problems are not new, but have been highlighted in reports to the Faculty Senate by this council in 2006 (as the ad hoc predecessor to the council) and 2008. This council is obligated to take action to ensure continued student success and the integrity of our undergraduate general education.*

### II. Implementation Process.

*The University Studies Council will initiate a process to solicit information and opinions from faculty, department chairs, and deans aimed at the implementation of a cluster realignment that meets the following goals:*

1. Enhance the interdisciplinary curricular content of clusters.
2. Increase course offerings within each cluster.
3. Reduce the number of clusters offered.
4. Realign clusters to support themes and learning goals that are of prime importance for faculty and students of Portland State University.
5. Reinvigorate cluster areas, providing more opportunities for faculty and students to collaborate across departmental boundaries around issues and questions that are salient to Portland State University.
6. Introduces a new thematic organization that ***includes all existing cluster courses.***

These guidelines for UNST cluster development and assessment will be used to replace the current clusters with a shorter list of broader and more robust themes. We hope to implement cluster realignment over the next year (i.e., by spring 2010).

After reviewing the current cluster course offerings, six tentative and broad thematic areas have been identified by the Council. These new cluster themes will be composed of existing cluster courses. *Our goal is to develop collections of thematically unified courses that encourage students to explore subjects from the diverse perspectives offered by different disciplines. Achieving this goal will require the collective efforts of faculty and departmental chairs from across the university.*

*The University Studies Council intends to realign clusters in several stages:*

1. **Spring 2009** - Develop a preliminary list of new clusters.
2. **Summer to Fall 2009** – Solicit input from faculty and departmental units on new course distributions that align with the new clusters. This will allow for general feedback on cluster realignment and proposals for additional clusters that serve themes not represented in the current list of clusters.
3. **Fall 2009** – Assessment of curricula offered by each to cluster to address:
  - a. Richness - an adequate number of courses are included to ensure a minimum of *eight* offerings per term.
  - b. Interdisciplinarity - courses in each cluster are drawn from a minimum of three disciplines, with substantial contributions of courses from at least two.
  - c. Inquiry approach – each cluster contains courses that utilize inquiry-based approaches in their pedagogy.
  - d. Thematic coherence – the suite of courses included in the cluster represent a cohesive theme that does not have substantial overlap with themes represented by other clusters.
4. **November 2009** – Interim report to the Faculty Senate.
5. **Winter to Spring 2010** – Solicitation of additional faculty input and refinement of cluster course composition.
6. **Spring 2010** – Submission of a report on the outcomes of our efforts and request for the approval of the proposal for UNST cluster realignment from the Faculty Senate.

**III. Potential cluster themes.**

1. ***Knowledge, Technology and Society*** – Students in this cluster will investigate the nature of forms of knowledge across science and technology and the ethical and social responsibility of science and its technological applications. Courses will focus on the development of skills in creative and critical thinking as it applies to the growth and implementation of knowledge.
2. ***Cultural Studies***– Students in this cluster will study expressions of culture in texts, art, media, politics and economy, evaluate their connections to relevant social issues of ethnicity, class, and gender, and reflect on pathways for cultural transformation.
3. ***Globalization*** – Students in this cluster study the interactions among peoples and cultures past and present. Courses will focus on defining and understanding globalization through both discrete components and systemic processes, and on the development of skills and attitudes that enable students to function as “global citizens.”
4. ***Family, Community and Society*** – Students in this cluster will focus on the central contexts of social life - from families through communities to societies - and the ways that norms, diverse traditions, cultural contexts, and other social structures shape our experience and existence.
5. ***Sustainability*** – Students in this cluster area will focus their studies on understanding the interconnections among economic, environmental, and social concerns to create a more sustainable future.
6. ***The American Experience*** – Students will investigate the pivotal political, social, economic, natural, historical, and cultural factors that allow for an understanding of the American past and present.

#### **IV. Course distributions.**

The development of new clusters will rely heavily on input from faculty, departmental chairs, and cluster coordinators. The preliminary list of proposed clusters will be distributed to departmental chairs with a request to:

1. Assign all of the existing individual cluster courses to one of the newly proposed clusters.
2. Provide written feedback on courses that have inadequate correspondence to the proposed clusters, including a brief description of the course focus and how it supports identified themes

#### **V. Assessment.**

The University Studies Council will assess newly formed clusters to ensure adequate levels of richness and evenness among disciplines of course offerings to provide students with diverse perspectives. Adjustment of the course composition of clusters may occur with input from faculty and departmental chairs to promote thematic cohesiveness and to bolster course diversity.