

Guidelines: General Studies Courses

(January, 2004)

General Studies courses are designed to be multidisciplinary, and each section should incorporate texts, insights, and subject matter from more than one discipline. Further, some of the introductory level courses satisfy one or more of the university-wide general education requirements, thus those sections must be designed to meet the criteria for the relevant general education area(s). New course proposals should explain clearly in what ways the course is interdisciplinary, and (if applicable) how the course will satisfy the operative general education requirement. Note: all GNST courses are “umbrella courses” under which a variety of themes and subjects may be considered.

I. Guidelines for Teaching General Studies Courses

Academic freedom insures that individual instructors have considerable leeway in designing their courses. However, since instructors from many different areas of the university are interested in teaching in the General Studies Program, the following guidelines may be useful for those who bring course proposals to the General Studies Committee. At base the Committee wants to insure that General Studies courses are as academically sound and educationally valid as any of the courses offered by traditional departments and disciplines.

Readings: There is no prescribed minimum number, but given the nature of the program and the student body, assigned readings should be diverse in length, difficulty, and subject matter.

Writing Assignments: Instructors are encouraged to emphasize writing in their classes by assigning/requiring essay examinations and papers. This does not preclude the use of more objective instruments, but, with rare exceptions, GNST classes should demand critical writing of the students. This includes an expectation that students provide full scholarly documentation for formal writing assignments (i.e., source references and bibliographies). Feel free to recommend that students purchase Diana Hacker’s, A Writer’s Reference, which many may already have if they have taken a Freshman or Transfer Seminar.

Feedback/Grading: The most useful feedback for students is that which is timely and helps them improve on future assignments. Therefore, papers and exams should be returned with instructor comments and not merely a grade. Also, providing early and relatively frequent feedback will go a long way toward easing student anxieties if you are an unknown quantity to them. Grade inflation is real, and no single instructor can put much of a dent in the phenomenon. But, that said, grades should reflect the real range of achievement and effort that is present in most classes. At Webster an “A” indicates “superior work;” a “B” “good” work; and a “C” “satisfactory” work, all “in the opinion of the instructor.” Note: Comments on student course evaluations that complain that the “course was too hard” are not construed as negative comments.

The Course Syllabus: Syllabi may be as diverse as the personalities of their authors. However, a number of elements should be present:

- A statement of the goals and objectives of the course. Make these realistic and achievable.
- A full explanation of expectations and requirements.
- A statement of policies re attendance, grading, late papers, etc. You can always wave a rule if circumstances warrant, but such statements ultimately protect you if there are student misunderstandings after the course begins. Re attendance: you may want to use the formula: “Students may fail the course if they miss more than so many classes.” In eight-week evening courses you should establish strict attendance policies. (Generally students who think they will miss (or do miss) more than two classes should be urged to withdraw from the course. In eight-week courses the upper limit for permitted absences should be no more than two, even for valid reasons.)
- A statement about Webster University’s (or your) academic honesty policy. You should clearly explain what plagiarism is and that it is academically unacceptable.
- Information about how students can contact you for information or an appointment.

II. GNST Courses Carrying General Education Codes

(See Appendix for General Education Criteria)

GNST 1300 (also GNST 1308) Technology, Science and Society:

Technology, Science and Society courses focus on contemporary problems that arise out of our increasingly complex technological and scientific environment. Subject matter should be timely and often controversial. A central goal is to acquaint students with the insights and methods of diverse technologically-based/scientifically-based disciplines and train them to think critically about universal challenges that confront humanity. By design these courses (as opposed to many specific courses in the sciences) are intended to be accessible to and appeal to non-specialists. If content warrants, the course will satisfy the general education goal for **scientific understanding**. Such sections will be offered as GNST 1308; sections listed as GNST 1300 will not carry a general education code.

GNST 1400 Civilization and the Arts:

Each section of GNST 1400, Civilization and the Arts should deal with a specific city in an important era in that city’s history: e.g., Athens in the 5th century BCE, Renaissance Florence, Weimar Berlin, etc. Daytime sections are usually taught in two two-hour blocks per week for

eight weeks. Students receive 2 credits for each 8-week block. Evening or online sections may be taught for 3 credits, but the workload should be commensurately greater.

The “Cities” courses should introduce students not only to the broad historical context of the time and place (politics, economics, social structure, thought), but also to the various arts that were significant at that time: drama, literature, painting, architecture, sculpture, poetry, film, etc. Not every course can cover everything (film is tough to teach in a course on Periclean Athens), but the title of the course demands a fairly eclectic look at the role of the arts in the civilization being studied. Some instructors use guest lecturers to do this; others prepare themselves to teach in new areas.

Informational Note: The Department of Theatre and Dance requires Theatre students to take two of the two-credit Civilization and the Arts courses, thus daytime sections may have a disproportionate number of Regional Theatre and Musical Theatre students.

GNST 1400 is coded for **historical consciousness** and **humanities**. Each section must be designed in a way to satisfy the criteria for both goals.

GNST 2000 (GNST 2004, 2005, 2006) Topics in the Liberal Arts

This course focuses on a great book, individual, idea, or theme in the liberal arts. Content should be balanced with critical inquiry, emphasizing the interrelatedness of ideas, values, and cultural forms. Individual sections may satisfy the general education goals for **humanities** (GNST 2004); **values** (GNST 2005); or **cultural understanding** (GNST 2006). Sections listed as GNST 2000 will not carry a general education code.

III. Additional General Studies Courses:

GNST 1200 Freshman Seminar / GNST 2200 Transfer Seminar

These are interdisciplinary seminars that combine academic inquiry with the development and improvement of fundamental academic skills, especially critical thinking and communication (the ability to write, read, listen, and speak effectively). The subject matter can be diverse, and not necessarily in a faculty member’s area of expertise; but expectations with respect to skill development necessitate that all seminar instructors conform to a detailed list of goals and objectives, a copy of which may be obtained from the Director of the Freshman Seminar Program.

GNST 2500 Honors Seminar

A course designed predominately for freshmen and sophomores, in many cases serving as a follow-up to the Freshman Seminar. These courses should address significant issues and topics using a combination of “great books” and contemporary writings.

GNST 3500 Liberal Arts Seminar

An interdisciplinary seminar for upper-division students. Sections may address a wide array of topics in the “liberal arts,” at the discretion of the instructor.

Appendix: General Education Criteria

Historical Consciousness: Courses coded for “historical consciousness” help students recognize the causes, relationships and sequences within seemingly random social and historical events. These courses should embed facts within a broader context, emphasize multiple causality, establish a sense of sequence (chronology), and utilize historical evidence. Historical consciousness helps make the world comprehensible by exploring human events in the broad context of time, place and circumstance. Historical antiquarianism, the mere collection or presentation of facts without analysis is not sufficient.

Humanities: Courses coded for “humanities” analyze the human experience through the legacy of great works and ideas. These courses utilize original works or texts instead of secondary interpretations, although the use of secondary works of synthesis is not excluded. These courses also provide the student with multiple perspectives on the human condition.

Values: Courses coded for “values” encourage critical and self-conscious reflection on the attitudes and beliefs relevant to individual and social choices and actions. They expose students to a wide range of normative standards for ethical choices, and give students the opportunity to articulate and critique the values that underlie ethical choices. These courses, while encouraging students to make thoughtful judgments about values, do not necessarily mandate the implementation of any set of values.

Scientific Understanding: Courses coded for “scientific understanding” involve the analysis of the concepts undergirding a scientific discipline, along with its methods, limitations and impact in the modern world. These courses should aim to show how theories are formed, tested, and validated, and they should discriminate between conclusions reached from the application of scientific methods and those that arise out of nonscientific or unscientific reasoning.