Review Process
This was the second program review of Liberal Studies. The first program review occurred in 2004, when the programs were still known as Non-major. The review team found the programs to be distinguished by providing:

- a degree option for a remarkably diverse group of students;
- educational opportunities for the professional who simply needs a degree;
- a degree option for the renaissance scholar, who is often a mature student, perhaps retired;
- a degree option for distance education students, many of whom fall into the category of those who need a degree to upgrade their credentials.

The review team also identified a number of areas in which improvement could be made, such as, the need to develop a program structure and generate a new identity for the programs. All of the recommendations have been implemented except the one that recommended the need to create co-op opportunities for student in the programs. This was not implemented since, at the University of Waterloo (UW), only Honours programs can have a co-op education stream.

The self-study was prepared by the academic advisors of the Arts Undergraduate Office and the Associate Deans for Undergraduate Studies and Special Programs. The results of an email survey of Liberal Studies students and recent alumni were also incorporated in the report. The self-study was submitted 6 July, 2011; the site visit occurred 14 and 15 March, 2012; the review team’s report was received 22 March, 2012; and the program’s response was submitted 31 May, 2012.

Characteristics of the Program

Historical Overview

The Arts Non-major Three- and Four-year General BA degrees, which were renamed Liberal Studies degrees in 2004, require successful completion of a set number of courses from any Department in the Faculty of Arts, together with specific requirements of courses from set groups of Departments.

The Arts Non-major Three-year General BA was first introduced in 1970/71. Various changes to the requirements for the degree were made in 1971/72, 1978/79, 1979/80, 1980/81, and
1985/86. The Arts Non-major Four-year General BA was first introduced in 1990/91. Changes were made to its requirements in 2003/04 and 2005/06. Based on the recommendation made from the 2004 review process, the Non-major programs were renamed: Three-year General Liberal Studies and Four-year General Liberal Studies. In 2008/09, the Group A and B Requirements, required by all Faculty of Arts students studying for a BA, were replaced by Breadth Requirements. During 2010/11 these were further modified.

Program Objectives

The Liberal Studies program of the Faculty of Arts seeks to equip students with the inquisitiveness and skills that will allow them to lead responsible and full lives. The program’s goals are to foster curiosity about the ideas and forces shaping civilization, while, at the same time, improving the ability to think clearly and critically, and to communicate in a sophisticated and thoughtful manner a deepening awareness of the world. The learning outcomes for Liberal Studies are congruent with those inherent in the BA Breadth Requirements.

Breadth and depth of knowledge. By the end of the degree, students will be able to:
- demonstrate awareness of and engagement with their own or another culture;
- demonstrate awareness of issues facing society and humanity in the 21st century;
- demonstrate historical awareness. Research. By the end of the degree, students will be able to:
  - demonstrate competence in the use of library and online research resources such as databases or publication catalogues;
  - gather, interpret, compare, summarize, and evaluate information from research sources, and make appropriate judgments about the appropriateness and quality of critical resources;
  - demonstrate competence in the use of one or more professional writing guidelines.

Writing and communication skills. By the end of the degree, students will be able to:
- write fluently and effectively in English;
- present information in a variety of ways to a range of audiences, competently using a variety of media including digital media.

Reasoning skills and reflective thinking. By the end of the degree, students will be able to:
- form opinions, based on sound reasoning and judgment, on matters of the day or relating to the human condition.

Because all Liberal Studies programs lead to a General BA degree, there is no co-op stream in these programs. It should be pointed out that the majority of Arts students graduate from a
regular program, not a co-op program. In 2010, 82.4% of Arts graduates completed a regular as opposed to a co-op degree; similar figures for 2007 were 88% and for 2003 it was 80.5%.

**Academic plans offered**

Two plans are offered in Liberal Studies: a Three-year General BA in Liberal Studies and a Four year, General BA in Liberal Studies. These programs are administered by the Arts undergraduate office.

The Arts Liberal Studies programs should be seen in the light of this Faculty’s and UW’s commitment to breadth of learning. One goal and purpose of Liberal Studies programs has always been to provide an opportunity for the student with a commitment to comprehensive learning, the true “renaissance” individual. A significant number of the students registered in a Liberal Studies program have pursued it because it allows them maximum flexibility for focusing on courses which interest them. A large percentage of these are mature students. For individuals such as this, the requirements of a major program can be in some respects a constraint.

At the same time, the Liberal Studies programs serve another distinct and very different purpose for a body of students within the Faculty, a body which might be described as the “default” cohort. The Liberal Studies programs in any given term house a large number of students whose performance in their major subject has been unsatisfactory. If a student cannot remain in his or her major because the major average is too low, Arts Faculty regulations will transfer the student to the Liberal Studies program, provided that the student’s averages meet the minimum criteria of Liberal Studies (60% overall average, 65% Arts average). Some students are then able, while registered in the Liberal Studies program, to bring their grades up enough to allow them to re-register in their original major.

That the majority of students who pass through Liberal Studies do not return to their original major is not a surprising pattern, given that the difficulty with the original major subject is often the reason for the student’s poor performance in the first place. It is clear, however, that the move to Liberal Studies is often a matter of choice rather than compulsion.

The Liberal Studies program, therefore, functions as a sort of safety net for students who cannot perform well in a given subject, but who are still able to maintain a credible overall performance. It also provides a place for students to be while they explore other options once they discover that their original plans for a major no longer interest them. These purposes are very different from that of providing a liberal arts education, but the two distinct purposes are not necessarily mutually contradictory.

The Liberal Studies program also functions as an entry point for students who are not entering the Faculty straight out of the high school system: transfer students (whether internal, from another Faculty, or external, from another University of Community College) and mature students. These individuals may intend to declare a major; nevertheless, they will all begin in
the Liberal Studies program.

Students

Students normally do not enter Liberal Studies until their second year. Over the period 2004 to 2010 inclusive, approximately 1,346 students, on average, annually enter the Faculty of Arts. Of these students, approximately 28.9% (389) enter Liberal Studies in the fall term of the second year. On average, 23.9% of the 389 are international students. Despite the growth in undergraduate student numbers in the Faculty of Arts over the last seven years, the numbers in Liberal Studies have been declining slightly.

Over the period 2004/05 to 2010/11 inclusive, the high school entrance grades of Liberal Studies students range from below 65% to 95% plus, with 61% of the students having entry averages in the range of 75% to 89%.

Between 2004 and 2009, a total of $34 million in scholarship monies was earned by students in the Liberal Studies programs.

The pattern of Liberal Studies students’ course choices does suggest that they do distribute themselves across the various departmental offerings in a way which is in keeping with statements made in the survey such as “I can take a variety of courses that interest me for from several disciplines” and I enjoy the “freedom of choice of courses”. Although Liberal Studies students have the advantage of selecting courses from any Department, this can also be a disadvantage since many courses are filled early by majors from specific Departments.

Depending on the student’s level at the time they first “fall into” Liberal Studies, they may well have as many as seven courses in a particular major, even if they subsequently graduate in Liberal Studies. The higher the concentration of courses from a particular discipline, the likelier that either the student entered Liberal Studies very late in their undergraduate career, after some time pursuing a major; and/or that the student, after landing in Liberal Studies, was nonetheless pursuing a “shadow degree”, possibly without some of the more difficult required courses in that discipline. The most noticeable subjects of concentration are Psychology, Sociology, Economics, English, Social Work, History, Religious Studies, Political Science, and Accounting and Financial Management. Few students from Liberal Studies participate in the many Study Abroad opportunities offered by the Faculty of Arts and the University. Either they do not know that they are eligible to participate in these opportunities, or they do not have the overall cumulative average, of at least 75%, which is required to be considered for any exchange program.

In fall 2000, over half the students in Liberal Studies were distance learners, yet by fall 2010 only 21.2% were studying solely via distance. The decline is made up primarily of part-time students; they left as they completed their degrees and were not replaced. Interestingly, the
number of on-campus Liberal Studies students who take online courses has increased from 42% in fall 2004 to 55% in fall 2010.

Since the Liberal Studies group of students is a highly diverse and diffuse one, with students joining, remaining and graduating, or departing the cohort for a wide range of reasons, it is difficult to attribute causes with any precision to levels of attrition. However, it would appear that there are two primary reasons for leaving Liberal Studies, both related to academic success: they are able to return to their preferred major or they are requested to withdraw from the Faculty. Over the period 2002/03 to 2008/09 inclusive, the rate of attrition between second and third year averaged 12.9% which is below the norm for the Faculty as a whole.

On average, over the period 2004 to 2010 inclusive, 132 students graduate annually with a Liberal Studies degree. This accounts for 9.9% of students graduating annually from the Faculty of Arts. Only Psychology, English and Economics annually graduate a higher percentage at 14.4%, 11.2%, and 10.5% respectively.

Although many students are in the Liberal Studies programs because their academic progress in their major was unsatisfactory, there is clearly a solid core of high achievers within the Liberal Studies programs, especially since, on average, 9.8% of graduates from these programs are on the Dean’s Honours List.

Faculty

Liberal Studies students have access through the courses they choose to virtually every professor in the Faculty of Arts, a total of 256 full-time faculty members. There are another 55 full-time faculty members in the Federated University and Affiliated University Colleges who also teach in Arts’ disciplines. As of 2011, 55 members of the Faculty of Arts have been recipients of UW's Distinguished Teacher Award. In addition, over the period 2005 to 2010 inclusive, the student course evaluations in the Faculty of Arts averaged 4.00 in fall, 4.04 in winter and 3.97 in spring, where 5 is considered “excellent”.

Concerns and Opportunities for Improvement

The reviewers indicated that the Liberal Studies program is working well in terms of allowing freedom of choice that is available to students. Indeed the variety of courses available to the students by various units is impressive. However, some students felt that a more rigorous structure would serve the curriculum better.

Although the reviewers found strong administrative support for the program, especially with the permitting of minors in the Liberal Studies program as of fall 2012, there was a strong desire for specific educational and social space for the program.
The general impression of the reviewers is that Liberal Studies is a relatively successful program. The review team found that improvements could be made in three areas: identity, curriculum, and delivery and quality enhancement.

The Faculty’s proposed course of action in response to the recommendations below can be broadly summarized as follows:

- Appoint a Director of Liberal Studies from the ranks of the Arts Faculty, to oversee the academic progress of students, and to investigate, propose and implement curriculum development and enhancement;
- Propose specific enhancements to increase the academic coherence of Liberal Studies as a flexible degree plan fully available online;
- Work with the Centre for Extended Learning (CEL) to increase the number of Arts courses available online, particularly at the third- and fourth-year level.

The program suffers from a lack of a clearly articulated identity. While the program serves a genuine need at the University, it is commonly identified as a “fallback” or “default” program, leading to a lack of pride.

**Recommendation 1:** That the Faculty changes the discourse about the program.

*Response:* We agree that this is desirable, but acknowledge that such an outcome is by nature organic, and will only come about based on the implementation of other recommendations as outlined below.

**Recommendation 2:** That a Faculty Advisor, either in a Director or Associate Dean capacity, oversees the existing administrative that is in place for the 1,200 students in the program.

*Response:* We recognize the importance of this recommendation and, cognizant of the resource challenges, will take steps to appoint a Faculty advisor with overall responsibility for the academic progress of the Liberal Studies cohort of students, as well as specific responsibility for curricular redevelopment and enhancement. This individual will work in conjunction with the Senior Academic Advisor in the Arts Undergraduate Office (AUO), given the large number of students and the accrued expertise of the incumbent.

**Recommendation 3:** That actual or virtual space be allocated to the Liberal Studies student body.

*Response:* Given the Faculty’s large and diverse nature, real or virtual space for students, and the associated sense of engagement with the Faculty of Arts that could be imparted, is a persistent challenge for all Arts programs. A virtual space is an interesting possibility, and would make an ideal initiative for the newly-appointed Faculty advisor, undertaken in conjunction with the ongoing redevelopment of Arts’ web presence overall.
**Recommendation 4:** That the Liberal Studies student body be encouraged to form a student organization specific to their program.

*Response:* While the Faculty recognizes the good intentions behind this recommendation, it is only feasible once recommendations 2 and 3 above have been fully implemented. It is the opinion of the reviewers that greater depth should be a feature of the Liberal Studies curriculum. To this end the reviewers suggest:

**Recommendation 5:** That the Faculty considers the creation of courses specifically for Liberal Studiers students. At least two new or modified existing courses should be added; one a “foundation course” focusing on the transition from high school to the world of ideas, while the other, a capstone course, could serve as a transition from University life to the professional world.

*Response:* The development of foundation and/or capstone courses, and/or new offerings such as those proposed in the Honours Liberal Studies plan, will be undertaken by the newly appointed Faculty advisor.

Another identified issue was that of the “shadow” degrees. Students often complete enough courses for a major but do not fulfill the program requirements by avoiding certain required courses perceived as difficult. The reviewers have sympathy with this position but feel that such a “pseudo-major” seems contrary to the goals of breadth implicit in the concept of Liberal Studies. Therefore the review team suggests:

**Recommendation 6:** That students not normally be allowed to complete more than the maximum number of courses for a minor in any discipline.

*Response:* We agree in principle, but note the significant operational and communication challenges involved, particularly when it comes to the “default” student group, and especially at graduation time. Given the size of the cohort, the suggestion that they could be managed as exceptions by the Associate Dean does not seem feasible operationally; further investigation by the Faculty advisor will be needed.

The absence of any Science components in the Liberal Studies program struck the reviewers as highly unusual. As a result the review team suggests:

**Recommendation 7:** That the Liberal Studies program should require two courses from Mathematics or Science or at least one special inter-disciplinary course on Science and Society.
Response: We agree whole-heartedly with this recommendation and will seek a suitable course offering from groups such as Science, Technology and Values; or consider other courses in the Faculties of Science and/or Engineering. It is noted that the suitable online offering would have to be developed, as no such course exists right now. The reviewers were of the opinion that there were certain administrative roadblocks in the existing program structure. The review team suggests:

Recommendation 8: That the Faculty should explore the possibility of reserving (sometimes additional) spaces in courses offered by the various units for students of Liberal Studies.

Response: The Faculty agrees in principle with this recommendation, but notes that it is part of a larger problem with University demand for Arts service courses, and our resource capacity to meet it. Careful analysis would need to be done on a course-by-course basis to determine those for which reserve caps would make sense.

Recommendation 9: That students should be granted electronic access to degree navigators in the QUEST system to check degree progress. This would have the added benefit of freeing up advising resources for more developmental work rather than the more mechanical and purely administrative checking of requirements.

Response: We agree in principle, and note the ongoing efforts of the Senior Academic Advisor in the AUO to promote and further utilize this potential within the Quest system for the Liberal Studies students.

Recommendation 10: That students should be informed in a timely manner at the end of first year about their acceptance into a traditional major or their placement in Liberal Studies. Similarly, students who have attained good results in second year and have accumulated significant number of credits in a discipline should be contacted by the appropriate discipline and provided with information on how to enter, or re-enter, the major.

Response: This recommendation refers to a number of distinct communication processes and agents; for example, by AUO advisors, regarding a student’s initial placement in either his/her desired major or Liberal Studies, typically at the end of his/her 1B term; or by Department advisors, regarding either a student’s completion of a minor and eligibility for a major; or when
a student “defaults” out of the major and into Liberal Studies. The Faculty agrees in principle, but notes the significant resource and system challenges in implementing such a recommendation, beyond the considerable communication efforts already being made by the advising team.
Looking to the future, the reviewers considered the proposal for an Honours degree in Liberal Studies.

**Recommendation 11:** That the existing program be first strengthened with the proposed additional new (or modified existing) ARTS courses, piloted for two years, then, at that juncture, give consideration of extrapolating an Honours stream from a more rigorous General program. **Response:** This will be undertaken as part of the broader initiative on the part of the Faculty advisor to develop a core curriculum for Liberal Studies.