

Final Assessment Report

Liberal Studies (BA)

February 2020

Executive Summary

External reviewers found that the Liberal Studies (BA) delivered by the Faculty of Arts is in good standing:

Liberal Studies at the University of Waterloo is an unconventional program insofar as its primary purpose is to facilitate internal transfers from one program to another or the completion of a degree begun elsewhere. It also allows students who have taken various unrelated courses online and/or on campus to complete a degree outside the parameters of a disciplinary major. As such, the program has two main strengths: a) its great flexibility, which lets students with eclectic interests (the so-called "renaissance" students) create their own custom-made program; b) and its administrative function as a "place holder", giving students with a low GPA or temporary academic challenges the opportunity to remain registered in a major (or, as of September 2019, an honours) program while seeking to increase their grades and "shadowing" a conventional program of their choice in which they hope to (re)gain good standing.

A total of five recommendations, all of which are aimed at fostering community in the program, were provided by reviewers. In response, the program created a plan outlining specific actions to address each recommendation as well as a timeline for implementation. The next cyclical review for this program is scheduled for 2025-2026.

Student Complement (All Years)¹

	Three-Year General	Four-Year General	Honours	Co-op (through Arts and Business)
Fall 2019	188	381	75	42
Fall 2018	198	431	<i>Honours Liberal Studies became effective Fall 2019, which gave students access to co-op through Arts and Business.</i>	
Fall 2017	220	471		

¹based on Active Students Extract accessed from Quest December 19, 2019

Background

In accordance with the University of Waterloo's Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), this final assessment report provides a synthesis of the external evaluation and the internal response of the Liberal Studies (BA) program. A self-study (Volume I, II, III) was submitted to the Associate Vice-President, Academic on August 31, 2018. The self-study (Volume I) presented the program descriptions and learning outcomes, an analytical assessment of the programs, including the data collected from a student survey, along with the standard data package prepared by the Office of Institutional Analysis & Planning (IAP).

From Volume III, two arm's-length external reviewers were selected by the Associate Vice-President, Academic: Dr. John-Justin McMurtry, Professor and Vice-Dean of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, York University, and Dr. André Loiselle, Professor and Dean of Humanities, St. Thomas University.

Reviewers appraised the self-study documentation and conducted a site visit to the University on March 28-29, 2019. An internal reviewer from the University of Waterloo, Dr. Maren Oelbermann, Professor of Environment, Resources and Sustainability, was selected to accompany the external reviewers. The visit included interviews with the Associate Vice-President, Academic; Dean of the Faculty of Arts; Associate Deans of Arts; as well as meetings with faculty members, staff and current students. The Review Team also had an opportunity to tour the facilities and meet with representatives from the Library and Student Success Office.

Following the site visit, the external reviewers submitted a report on their findings, with recommendations. In response, the program responded to each recommendation and outlined a plan for implementation of the recommendations. The program response and implementation plan were endorsed by the Dean of Arts on December 10, 2019.

This final assessment report is based on information extracted, in many cases verbatim, from the self-study, the external reviewers' report and the program response.

Program Characteristics

The Liberal Studies BA provides a framework within which students take courses and receive support for their wide-ranging educational goals and aspirations in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo. Those goals include successfully transitioning from one program to another, completing a degree begun elsewhere, pursuing a degree online or part-time, and receiving an education that has the diversity and richness of a traditional liberal arts degree. At the time of review, Liberal Studies was available as a [Three-Year General Degree](#), and a [Four-Year General Degree](#). In September 2019, the [Honours Liberal Studies](#) program was introduced.

Summary of Strengths, Challenges and Weaknesses based on Self-Study

Strengths

- Flexibility, as exemplified by the range of students and the diversity of their ambitions;
- The range of disciplinary options, especially since minors are now allowed;
- The functionality of the plans, in that they allow for transition from one academic home to another, for recovery for students who have struggled, and for online and part-time study.

Challenges

- The diversity of ambitions of Liberal Studies students, which means that there is little sense of community within the plans for those students;
- The ambiguous nature of the program, in which a poor retention rate is a positive attribute;
- The relationship of the program to the identity of the University of Waterloo, which is known for demanding academic programming, experiential learning, and entrepreneurship.

Weaknesses

- The limited opportunities for experiential learning, although the EDGE Certificate, Honours Liberal Studies, and Honours Arts Co-op will improve student access to experiential education;
- The lack of an Honours plan, which has been rectified by the introduction of Honours Liberal Studies in 2019;
- The lack of community support for career-planning, cohort-building, and networking for students who spend more than two terms and/or graduate in Liberal Studies.

Summary of Key Findings from the External Reviewers

Reviewers indicated that Liberal Studies is an atypical degree program which primarily caters to internal transfer students. Its strengths are the flexibility it affords to students by allowing them to engage in a variety of academic interests; and it provides a means for students to retain their enrolment while working on their grades and determining their academic path.

On the other hand, reviewers saw the following weaknesses: “1) most importantly, the lack of defined learning outcomes, as students in Liberal Studies can take a wide range of disparate courses that do not necessarily coalesce into a coherent set of competencies; 2) the absence of a sense of cohort among students as they each pursue their own path and often remain in the program only for two or three terms before transitioning into a disciplinary major or honours; 3)

and incomplete data on the specific trajectory of individuals who meander in and out of the program or, more importantly, those who graduate with this degree. As a degree is designed for those who graduate from it to present a set of competencies it is surprising that there is not any robust data on these students or their academic trajectories.”

Program Response to External Reviewers’ Recommendations

1. Develop a Handbook for Liberal Studies which highlights the pathways in and out of Liberal Studies, the supports available to students while in the Program (library, advisors, etc.), and the pathways to graduation. The handbook should be positive and share success stories so that the students can see themselves moving forward rather than feeling « dumped » in Liberal Studies.

Response

The program will develop a digital handbook for Liberal Studies which includes information about supports and pathways to graduation. That handbook can contain information about how students move in to and out of Liberal Studies, what they can accomplish in Liberal Studies, and what their pathways to graduation are. The program agrees that this handbook would help provide both practical advice and a sense of belonging to something with others. The basis for this handbook already exists in the Liberal Studies section of the Arts Advisor Handbook.

Leadership and support: The Arts Undergraduate Office (AUO) Advisor who serves Liberal Studies students will oversee the development of the handbook, in consultation with AUO advisors who advise first-year students, Arts and Business students, Honours Arts Co-op students, and internal and external transfers, all of whom counsel students moving in to Liberal Studies. Students in co-op programs also have Co-operative Education advisors, and they can contribute to the appropriate sections. In addition, the handbook could be reviewed by the internal transfer advisors in other faculties, and with the Registrar’s Office staff who help facilitate external transfers in to Arts at UWaterloo. No additional resources are needed for this project.

Timeline: One year (August 2020)

2. Develop Learning Outcomes which offer some indication of the knowledge, skills and values that students acquire through the Liberal Studies program when they graduate from it.

Response

The program will work with staff in the Centre for Teaching Excellence to develop program level learning outcomes.

Leadership and support: Associate Dean, Undergraduate Programs; Centre for Teaching Excellence

Timeline: Two years (August 2021)

3. Gather more robust data on the Liberal Studies student body such as: which programs they come from, which programs they go into out of Liberal Studies, which students graduate in Liberal Studies (and from what programs), how many students are voluntarily "renaissance scholars" and which are in the program involuntarily, where students work after graduation, and how many go on to graduate school.

Response

The program would like to collect more data on Liberal Studies students, and can commit to regularly and consistently collecting data on Liberal Studies students regard to their point of entry to the plan (internal transfer; inadequate academic standing in major (or failure to declare a major); readmission; external transfer), the amount of time they spend in the plan, what majors they come from and go to (for those who do so), how many leave UWaterloo because of persistent failure, and how many graduate. It is beyond current data-collection capacity to locate and survey graduates as to their career placements or graduate school enrollments.

Leadership and support: The Arts Undergraduate Office Advisor for Liberal Studies; AUO Advisors for internal transfers, external transfers, and readmits, and the Arts Academic Officer, who can provide data for students who fail to secure standing in a major or fail to declare a major.

Timeline: One year (August 2020), and continuing.

4. Create an "excellence award" for the best graduating student from Liberal Arts to encourage a sense of belonging, excellence and value for students who are going to graduate from the Program.

Response

The Faculty of Arts confers a convocation award to the top graduate in each Honours program (minimum overall average 80%) and will add Honours Liberal Studies to the list of convocation awards.

Leadership and support: Student Awards and Financial Assistance prepares the information for convocation awards, which are approved by the Associate Dean, Undergraduate

Programs. The program will ensure SAFA is aware that Honours Liberal Studies will now be included in the convocation awards program.

Timeline: Immediate.

Recommendations Not Selected for Implementation

5. Create a core capstone course with clear learning outcomes (such as Skills Identification, Reflexive journaling, Written and oral communication exercises, Professional development, Strategies on how to transition to the workforce or grad school) for those who wish/are required to graduate from Liberal Studies.

Response

The program is not convinced of the need or the administrative feasibility of devising a capstone course.

With regard to the need, the program notes the following:

- a. All students in Liberal Studies have satisfied (or will satisfy) their Arts Communication Requirement;
- b. Internal transfer students in Liberal Studies have often come from co-op programs and therefore have taken professional development courses and participated in job searches;
- c. Students who arrive from co-op programs will normally have had work terms, and are likely to have completed work term reports, which require reflection on the work experience;
- d. UWaterloo has an extensive infrastructure of employment readiness support that is open to all students;
- e. With the introduction of Honours Liberal Studies (2019), students can also enroll or stay enrolled in the Arts and Business program (Regular or Co-op), and therefore complete ARBUS 400, the capstone course for that plan; further, Management Studies is a popular minor for Liberal Studies students, and they also complete ARBUS 400.
- f. With the introduction of Honours Arts Co-op (2020), students in Liberal Studies will be able to do co-op, and will be required to complete at least four work terms, four work reports, and four Professional Development courses;
- g. Students in Liberal Studies can (and do) complete the EDGE Certificate (offered by Co-operative Education), which provides experiential learning, skills identification, and reflection on the relationships between work and academic experiences.

With regard to the administration of such a requirement, the program has the following concerns:

- a. Many students in Liberal Studies believe that they will not graduate from Liberal Studies; most are correct in this respect. Students would have to be assertively advised to enroll in a capstone course in time to graduate. Even with assertive advising, many students in Liberal Studies are likely to fail to enroll because of their confidence in regaining standing in another disciplinary major. Therefore, while the capstone course may well support their academic achievement and career success, its requirement may also have the effect of preventing timely graduation.
- b. Because a capstone has to be small, but the enrollment in Liberal Studies, particularly in the final year, is impossible to predict with the appropriate accuracy, staffing and course scheduling would be challenging.
- c. Liberal Studies has three-year and four-year General degree plans in addition to an Honours plan and devising a capstone for all three would be difficult.
- d. The Faculty of Arts is not in a financial position to invest in this option with regard to either staffing or administering.
- e. The Undergraduate Affairs Group (UGAG), the body which considers and approves curricular innovations and changes in the Faculty, has shown no interest in such a course, and the last time a program review suggested the idea it was rejected by UGAG.

For these reasons, there are no plans to introduce a capstone course for Liberal Studies students.

Implementation Plan

	Recommendations	Proposed Actions	Responsibility for Leading and Resourcing (if applicable) the Actions	Timeline for addressing Recommendations
1.	Handbook for Liberal Studies	Handbook for Liberal Studies will be prepared	AUO Advisor for Liberal Studies; no resources	One year (August 2020)
2.	Develop learning outcomes	Learning outcomes will be developed	AD Undergraduate Studies with CTE; no resources	Two years (August 2021)
3.	Gather more robust data on Liberal Studies students	Establish regular and consistent data collection on all of the facets referred to by the reviewers except graduate career or grad school outcomes	AUO Advisor for Liberal Studies; no resources	One year (August 2020) and thereafter termly
4.	Create an excellence award	Add Honours Liberal Studies to convocation awards	AD Undergraduate Studies; no resources	Immediate

The Associate Dean, Undergraduate Programs, in consultation with the Dean of the Faculty shall be responsible for the Implementation Plan.

Date of next program review

2025-2026

Date

Signatures of Approval



Katherine Acheson

February 24, 2020

Chair/Director

Date

AFIW Administrative Dean/Head (*For AFIW programs only*)

Date



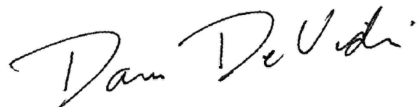
Sheila Ager

February 26, 2020

Faculty Dean

Date

Note: AFIW programs fall under the Faculty of ARTS; however, the Dean does not have fiscal control nor authority over staffing and administration of the program.



February 18, 2020

Associate Vice-President, Academic

Date

(For undergraduate and augmented programs)

Associate Vice-President, Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs

Date

(For graduate and augmented programs)