Part I: Assessment Plan for Women’s and Gender Studies Program

The Women’s and Gender Studies Program, except for its capstone course, is comprised entirely of courses which meet the current general education requirements for gender studies. Because of this, our assessment plan is heavily tied to the goals of the UWP general education plan in general, and the gender studies requirement specifically.

Therefore all of our courses should be rooted in the four ideas that comprise UWP’s educational philosophy:

[F]irst, that students are capable of and responsible for making choices; second, that the quality of choice is largely dependent upon the nature and extent of their experience and the degree to which they understand the experiences of others; third, that understanding of the self and others becomes more meaningful and constructive when it is informed by knowledge; and fourth, that while there are kinds of knowledge that people need in order to practice their particular professions, there are other kinds of knowledge that people need in order to live in a world larger than the purely professional.

The development of these latter kinds of knowledge is the essential purpose of a liberal education. Such an education empowers persons to live thoughtful lives, concerned about a universe much larger than their immediate environment and about a public realm that reaches far beyond their professional circle, local community, or nation. More specifically, this central part of education promotes the ability to think and communicate coherently, critically, creatively, and empathetically about:

- the thoughts and actions of women and men from one's own culture, as well as from different cultures;
- the processes of nature, both animate and inanimate;
- the interrelations among people and between nature and humankind; and
- the possibilities for each person to enhance or detract from the goodness and beauty of life.

Women’s and Gender Studies courses provide students with the necessary knowledge, socialization, community experience, and cultural competency to understand women and gender roles; they help to facilitate students’ understanding of the centrality of gender and sexuality in their lives as educated individuals, professionals, and citizens; they create awareness of the ways in which women’s concerns and societal concerns labeled “feminine” or have often been distorted when viewed through the lens of a male-centered and hetero-centric culture; they
explore the ways in which gender and sexual orientation inform the creative experience and our ability to imagine; and they develop the ability to communicate effectively these ideas to others.

The goals for our minor and the assessment tools for our four leaning outcomes remain unchanged since the update we submitted in January 2010. However, since we are now the Women’s and Gender Studies Program but the minor is still titled “Women’s Studies,” and since we are one step away from having a minor in Gay Studies, I anticipate that these learning outcomes and tools will be revisited as soon as the university decides whether or not to adopt the new general education plan.

Part II: Answers to Questions

1. What evidence do you have that students achieve your student learning outcomes?

All students minoring in Women’s Studies must complete either a Cooperative Education project or an Independent Study project as a capstone course. These courses ask students to demonstrate, via reflection upon their Coop or via applied research or via artistic expression and interpretation that they understand and can apply at a deep level key threshold concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies. Within this context, a “threshold concept” is a particular paradigm of thought—such as viewing gender as a socially constructed category which one both is influenced by and helps create—which, when understood, opens up venues of understanding, analysis, social action and artistic expression that would not be available to the student prior to understanding the concept.

These concepts are all introduced in the only required course, WOMSTD 1130, Introduction to Women’s Studies, and explicitly linked to the general education outcomes for gender studies. Faculty and staff who teach this course, coming as they do from different disciplines with different areas of expertise, have a great deal of flexibility in how they may approach the course subject material. However, instructors must keep in mind that this course counts for gender studies and social science or humanities general education credit and should have on their syllabus how the class addresses those general education outcomes. We expect all instructors to address the following topics, as well as others from their own area of expertise. Some of these are content areas; others are threshold concepts; almost all required content areas include the application of threshold concepts to that content area.

1) The social construction of gender; gender theories and feminism (TC)
2) The history of women’s rights in the United States (C)
3) The intersection of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (TC)
4) The social construction of sexuality, including GBLTQ issues (TC)
5) Gendered violence, including rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and GBLTQ hate crimes (C)
6) Women’s health issues, including menstruation, abortion/contraception/reproductive rights, menopause, and eating disorders and other health issues related to body image (C)
7) Women’s issues in the home, including marriage/divorce, gendered housework, and gendered childrearing (C)
8) Work issues, including myths about women workers, gendered professions and academic disciplines, affirmative action, and women and the global economy (C)
9) Women and religion, including mother goddesses, patriarchal major religions, and “women’s” religions (C)
10) The current “state” of gender in the U.S. and globally. (C)

Obviously, many of the categories may overlap in a given day’s instruction, and instructors may approach these issues from a humanities or social science perspective or combination of the two. Instructors should build at least two writing assignments into the class syllabus, as well as class discussion of these topics. Instructors should also encourage, and may require, participation in women’s studies-related events on campus. They may also want to require service learning opportunities.

These assignments, discussions, and activities should always be linked back to the Liberal Arts areas that this course serves: gender studies, humanities, and social sciences. The philosophy and outcomes for these areas are given on the course guidelines as reminders.

With this course as a foundation, students may choose from a wide range of electives, all of which also count for general education gender studies credit and are assessed both from that perspective and by their “host” department. The WGS Curriculum Committee must approve all courses that count for gender studies credit and faculty and staff who teach these courses are asked to submit syllabi at the beginning of each semester. However, at this time, the only “enforcement capacity” the WGS program has for assessing courses offered by other programs and already approved is to withdraw general education credit.

At this time, our minors are assessed by their successful completion of courses in Women’s and Gender Studies, by meetings with the Director, and by the evaluation of the student’s capstone project. That evaluation may include the Director’s evaluation of student’s portfolio from the co-op; meetings between student, WS Director, and placement supervisor discussing the internship; meetings and discussions between the WS Director and the placement supervisor regarding the student and the placement; and presentation of student research or creative work to other students and faculty in the program.

2) What have you learned as a result?

For the past several years the program has been in dynamic change, with many new associated faculty, several new courses, and a proposed new Gay Studies certificate. When we changed our program name in 2009 we also implemented the “Topics, Expectations, and General Educations Outcomes for WS 1130 Introduction to Women’s Studies,” and since then we have had frequent conversations and discussion about this course in particular. That has included sending the director and two other people who teach WOMSTD 1130 to system-wide meeting sponsored by OPID and the Women’s Studies Consortium about how to best assess this course. I am pleased to report that our method of assessment via a combination of threshold concepts and content
areas is the preferred method in the field. In contrast, our expanding the program to include Gay Studies and to require discussion of GBLTQ issues in the introductory course actually lags behind the national trends, but after much student demand and with dedicated faculty commitment we now have courses in this area and may soon have a certificate.

3) Document specific changes resulting from your assessment efforts

As noted, our assessment efforts have led to the development of specific guidelines for WOMSTD 1130 and the development of a new certificate program in Gay Studies. We have not had any need to change the capstone courses.

This July 1, 2011, we moved under administrative control of the Office of the Provost though our curriculum is still part of the College of LAE. The administrative shift of our program should make it much easier to staff our courses and for us to locate rooms for courses, both of which were issues we discussed in our recent report to the Academic Planning Council.

In addition, since all of our courses but the capstone co-op or independent study are general education courses, we are strongly invested in the current proposed changes to the general education plan. Because of these things, we are waiting until the new general education program is in place to further review our assessment. In addition, the members of the WGSP may soon begin discussion of whether or not they want to be part of a university-wide council or stay within the governance structure of the College of Liberal Arts and Education.