

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

## Nationally-praised ILS program frustrates some students

By Adam Hillberry  
INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER

The Integrative Liberal Studies program, established four years ago, graduates its first class of seniors this spring.

The program received recognition last week from the Association of General and Liberal Studies, a national forum addressing the improvement of undergraduate education. Edward Katz, UNC Asheville dean of University Programs and professor of literature and language who led the intensive faculty effort to create the program, accepted the 2007 Award for Improving General Education on behalf of the university.

"That's the way work in the 21st century is done: across intellectual boundaries," Katz said. "To solve complex problems, you're never going to do it by yourself and you're never going to do it with a team of people who have only knowledge in your subject area."

Every undergraduate student must complete a freshman or transfer colloquium course, foundation courses including Language 120 Foundations of Academic Writing, a laboratory science course, a health and wellness course, a four-hour mathematics course and up to the second introductory level of a foreign language; three classes within a predetermined cluster; a writing intensive, two information literacy intensives, a quantitative intensive and a diversity intensive; four Humanities courses and an arts course.

These issues and topics are best demonstrated through liberal arts by connecting them through other disciplines, according to Bert Holmes, Philip G. Carson Distinguished Chair of Physical Science.

"You need people who understand the political issues around it, the economic issues, the science. The clusters are designed to give people these multiple perspectives and help them understand solving problems requires them to have abilities in different disciplines," said Holmes, coordinator for the Globalization and Environmental Issues cluster.

Wofford College, Agnes Scott College, Converse College and the ILS program at UNC Asheville recently received a learning outcome assessment grant to fund an assessment of the program as it pertains to first-year students at liberal arts colleges, according to Katz.

The grant is funded by the Teagle Foundation, which provides leadership for liberal education, marshalling the intellectual and financial resources necessary to ensure today's students have access to challenging, wide-ranging and enriching college educations, according to their mission statement.

"It's a great opportunity we're taking advantage of to help us with the assessment of the ILS program. We're using it to study learning outcomes and student engagement in first year programs," Katz said.

### History

Before the ILS system, students registered for regular courses using pure distribution without any interconnectivity between them, according to Michael Ruiz, a physics professor who began teaching at UNC Asheville in 1978.

"We had a general education change in 1986. We had this new program where we're going to do something special for the general student to make things more meaningful where we would have a course with a lab and not the first course in the major," Ruiz said. "Then we would have a three-hour course in science that was interdisciplinary. That three-hour

“ ”

*I think that they implemented it the year after they voted for it without a whole lot of consideration. It just seems like it's become a bureaucratic nightmare.*

LIZ GUTHRIE  
Senior Literature Student

“ ”


*When you are trying to hit requirements for your major, it's kind of hard to hit these side things, too. I felt like it was another thing to keep us here longer.*

RYAN BUCKINGHAM  
Senior Biology Student

“ ”

*That's the way work in the 21st century is done: across intellectual boundaries.*

EDWARD KATZ  
DEAN OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS



interdisciplinary course kind of grew up into the cluster."

If a student wanted to take a course in physics, biology or chemistry, they had to take what was in the major during the late 1960s and 70s, according to Ruiz, the coordinator of the Perceptions: Senses, Self and Society cluster. The faculty decided in 2000 they had not changed the general education requirements for maybe 15 or 20 years, according to Holmes.

The current cluster system began development three years before it began in 2004 as part of a review of general education, led by Katz, according to Alan Hantz, chair of the ILS Oversight Committee.

"The faculty began to talk about the key things to have in our general education program where we need students with multiple perspectives on an issue," Holmes said. "We said, 'How do we do that? How do we ensure they have some of those skills that we think they're going to need to be successful in the future?' And that's what developed these ideas of clusters."

Several members of faculty tried redesigning the general education requirements and the style of the cluster within ILS came from their deliberations, according to Kevin Moorhead, chair and professor of environmental studies.

"In terms of clusters, a group of science faculty were asked to put a grant together for the National Science Foundation because there appeared to be some funding availability for general education for this particular type of model of the clusters," said Moorhead, coordinator for the Transformations in Appalachia: Intersections of Science and Culture cluster. "We faculty got together, some five or six of us, and put together and designed clusters literally to seek that funding from NSF. In doing

so, these clusters came online, even though the grant was not funded from NSF, and those became the original clusters."

The program's designers also implemented the intensive requirements. Because of the broad program overall, the faculty chose to rename the program as integrative liberal studies.

When teaching his physics classes, Ruiz feels confident since students will be taking other related courses and the material will be reinforced.

"I'm hoping there is more connection being made for the courses rather than taking a course in the social sciences, course in the sciences where you're just picking anything," Ruiz said. "Now you at least are guided into an umbrella of courses that have some kind of connection. In that sense, it's better for the student to have a connection. If you had the perfect free choice on the natural and social science, you would have maximum flexibility from the student's perspective because you could pick anything you want, like a cafeteria."

### Student qualms

Some students said they see problems with taking courses and applying them to their cluster while also focusing on their major requirements.

"I'm glad I'm not on the cluster system because everyone I know seems to have to take clusters when they really should be taking a class they need to take to get towards their major and graduate. In the cluster system, the students are more ping-ponged around," said Matthew Swain, senior biology student.

Ryan Buckingham, senior biology student, needs to fulfill his diversity intensive by taking a specific sociology course and finds the ILS program difficult to navigate.

"It's pointless to have 2,000 students shoot for one teacher to get credit for the class. And if you don't get in that class that semester or you don't get that teacher, it doesn't count. That's kind of ridiculous. When you are trying to hit requirements for your major, its kind of hard to hit these side things, too. I felt like it was another thing to keep us here longer," Buckingham said. "I know people who are getting hosed because of the clusters, either because you have to have a specific teacher or the specific class is only offered odd years fall semester. It's a good idea, but it could be executed a little bit better."

Lauren Bellard, senior art student, said it is frustrating because some classes aren't approved quickly, such as her information literacy intensive, an upper-level art history course.

Holmes said students come to him to ask whether a transfer credit could count within a cluster.

"My approach is to be inclusive. If it's the same course I tend to count it," Holmes said. "As long as we're covering topics that are going to be essential to student understanding of the multiple perspectives issue."

Liz Guthrie, senior literature student, said the cluster system is really good in theory.

"I think it makes a lot of sense to have all of your general education requirements connect to each other," Guthrie said. "But I think that they implemented it the year after they voted for it without a whole lot of consideration. It just seems like it's become a bureaucratic nightmare."

The clusters don't work well for transfer students at all, according to Nikki Jones, junior biology and history student.

"It's difficult if you don't go here for four years," she said. "I have to get into upper level classes that aren't taught

often. It's very frustrating."

Caitlin Erwin, junior literature student, said she may not be able to graduate this spring if she still has to take a psychology class she thought she opted out of.

"I got a four on the AP exam for psychology, but I still think I have to take it to fulfill cluster requirements which might mean I can't graduate on time," she said.

Students were not properly prepared to handle the cluster courseload, according to Justin Holt, senior Spanish student.

"It was a little bit ridiculous they came up with the concept and then applied it to a class of students who were already at and enrolled at the university without any idea the program existed, and when they didn't have the program fully developed," he said.

Holt said the program was underdeveloped when it was implemented in 2004.

"They could have had some kind of consideration for the current class," he said. "The whole program needs a little bit of refinement because there are certain clusters that require a student take courses that require prerequisites unlikely the student will have taken because it has nothing to do with their major."

### Faculty critiques

The faculty senate is beginning to evaluate the ILS program, according to Hantz, who coordinates and evaluates clusters. He said more clusters are ways to make more courses accessible to students and likes the idea of having broad clusters but also having narrow ones.

The subject of how broad a cluster should be is actually under debate among faculty, according to Hantz.

"Some think they should be very specific and others think they should be broad. I see value in both approaches," Hantz said. "The importance of making a cluster work is having faculty involved in the cluster talking to one another about what they're doing and how they are relating to one another."

Ruiz said he believes the faculty wants the system adapted so students feel there are enough class choices that fit within clusters.

"What I've tried to do, and Katz has encouraged me, is to think broader. Make the cluster idea more general so that they wouldn't be so content-specific, so more departments could join the cluster," Ruiz said.

In his cluster, other departments asked Ruiz to include one of their major specific courses as the third, so a student could connect their major to the material in the cluster.

"When departments were doing that, I thought it was a deal because then the student could use a course to count more than once," Ruiz said. "I believe that's the spirit of our general education: to help students take a course that might also be a quantitative intensive. I think that's one way to help the student, by having the third course in the major."

Ida Bostian, assistant professor in the drama department, said she is excited to be co-head of a cluster, and she plans to pull a lot of the arts classes into her cluster, Identity and Its Expressions.

"I'm trying to serve the students so instead of having to take a class that only counts as a cluster class, they can also count as (something else). I'm trying to get intensives in there as well," she said.

"I'm anticipating that people will have problems and I'm anticipating people would like to have classes count toward the cluster. That's something I'm going to do case by case."

## Water

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

faucets tightly, according to the memo.

UNC Asheville faculty are also doing their part, Barnwell said.

Residential Education and Housing Operations staff have been asked not to wash vehicles, to "constantly check on public bathrooms and kitchens to make sure sinks are not dripping and toilet flush valves are not hung up," and to reuse mop water when sanitary, according to a memo sent to staff.

In addition to the possibility of wildfires, traditional fires remain a constant threat, as illustrated by the fire that burned down the Patton Avenue Ashley's Furniture store on Nov. 5, and the October house fire which killed seven col-

lege students at Ocean Isle Beach.

"I have become more aware of fire safety issues in my own home," Heling said. "Eighty percent of the fires that affect college students take place in off-campus housing, and as such I realize my statistical vulnerability. I think fire is a wonderful tool that comes with a simple caveat: it must be used responsibly."

Heling said he understands the California fires illustrate the possible danger posed by forest fires.

"I am concerned about the increased threat of fire resulting from the drought conditions," he said. "I think that all citizens should do their best to conserve water and limit their usage of it."

News that matters to you,

just a mouse click away...

# The Blue Banner Online

[www.unca.edu/banner](http://www.unca.edu/banner)