

# Changes to U and G Essential Studies Requirements

## Overview for Faculty

### Assessment

The assessment of student learning in and around issues of diversity that took place in 2015 and 2016—especially when coupled with several highly visible examples of student insensitivity—convinced the Essential Studies Committee that UND needs to provide a stronger, more consistent education to prepare students for life in a diverse world.

Faculty who read and scored student work commented that though students demonstrated that they were generally aware of the importance of respect and sensitivity, student responses were seen as "lacking substance" and "a sense of broader social patterns." Faculty also commented that student responses demonstrated that our ES courses need to become more rigorous, to better address theoretical considerations and concepts, and to more consciously and explicitly bring the lessons of our courses into the "here and now." (<http://und.edu/academics/essential-studies/diversitysummaryreportmay16.pdf>)

### A Campus-wide Commitment

Educational research tells us that intercultural competence<sup>1</sup> cannot be achieved solely through one class or one magic experience. Milton J. Bennett posits such competence as a developmental process; individuals require exposure to challenging ideas, as well as a wide variety of experiences, discussions, and opportunities for self-reflection to reach the desirable stage of what he calls "ethnorelativism."

To help students on this campus, in other words, develop the ability to engage meaningfully with a diverse world, there is much that must be done. Study abroad experiences should be encouraged and made more available to students. In addition, as Darla K. Deardorff argues, "it is crucial for institutions to maximize the curricular and co-curricular resources available on every campus, from international students and scholars to international faculty, to service learning opportunities in the community" (71). Deardorff also reminds us that learning about diversity is not the sole province of general education: "it becomes important for academic departments to engage in reflection" and ask, "What intercultural skills and knowledge are needed in this major?" (69) (<http://und.edu/provost/diversity/files/docs/dac-recommendations-16.pdf>)

### What Improved ES Courses Can Contribute

While Essential Studies Special Emphasis courses are only one part of this complex educational context, we believe that modifying and improving the current "U" and "G" courses could contribute significantly to student learning in and around issues of diversity. Indeed, educational research suggests that if we focus on providing students with courses **that explicitly develop a set of transferable academic skills, by teaching important foundational threshold concepts and encouraging student reflexivity**, we can do a better job of giving students the tools they need for engaging with difference—both on-campus and in their lives beyond college.

Bennett names these tools "intercultural competence" and "intercultural learning." His definition for "intercultural learning" becomes particularly useful for considering what we mean to achieve through the new ES courses: he names it "the acquisition of general (transferable) intercultural competence; that is, competence that can be applied to dealing with cross-cultural contact in general, not just skills useful only for dealing with a particular other culture" (*Basic* 12). This definition of "intercultural learning" is also included: "Acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Bennett, Deardorff, and the AAC&U uses the term "culture" to mean "all of the knowledge and values shared by a group" (AAC&U) whether that group is constructed by race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, ability, economic class, religion, or any number of other group identities. The adjective "intercultural," used by these authors—and throughout this document—therefore refers to the skills associated with, as the AAC&U puts it, being able to "adapt . . . to unfamiliar ways of being" no matter how those "ways of being" are defined.

one's own and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange" (*Basic* 113).

**In short, what we hope for the new ES courses to teach is a set of skills and concepts that are not specific to the understanding of one group or culture but are instead a set of transferable skills that students can rely upon to analyze social issues, to interact with others, and to guide their own behaviors when engaging with any and all human differences.** As Deardorff puts it, we must understand that "culture-specific knowledge needs to go beyond the conventional surface-level knowledge of foods, greetings, customs, and so on. Further, knowledge alone is not sufficient for intercultural competence development . . . developing skills for thinking interculturally becomes more important than actual knowledge acquired" (68). In other words, **we need ES courses that will teach active ways of thinking—not just content knowledge.**

### **The Interplay of Classroom and Experience**

It has been common for faculty to imagine that these transferable skills and concepts, "intercultural competence" or "intercultural learning," are best taught through experience. While the importance of experience is undeniable, Bennett's research suggests that, ideally, learning in the classroom and experience will become mutually reinforcing. The classroom becomes essential, then, because it gives students a means of naming what they experience and of better understanding their own responses as they engage with identities and cultures different from their own. Those who teach these ES classes should be aware of the ways that learning in the classroom can actively supplement and improve the experiences students will have in the world.

### **Pedagogical Strategies: Threshold Concepts and Encouraging Reflexive Thinking**

As Deardorff says, "development of intercultural competence does not unfortunately 'just happen' through learning about another culture or because persons from differing backgrounds are in the vicinity of one another" (70). As educators, we must consider how best to intentionally help students "develop skills for thinking interculturally" (Deardorff 68).

A campus-wide, OID sponsored workshop, conducted in March of 2017, considered how "Threshold Concepts," especially threshold concepts associated with learning in and around issues of diversity, can become effective pedagogical tools. Glynis Cousin defines a threshold concept as "transformative," because "it involves an ontological as well as a conceptual shift" (4). These new understandings become "part of who we are, how we see, and how we feel" (Cousin 4). And, thus, "once understood the learner is unlikely to forget" the concept. At the same time, because the concept has the potential to transform our thinking, it may also create "troublesome" learning because it can seem "counter-intuitive" or "alien" (4).

Though learning threshold concepts can be challenging, the teaching of them can prevent instructors from "burdening themselves with the task of transmitting vast amounts of knowledge bulk and their students of absorbing and reproducing this bulk" (Cousin 4). Instead, we can design courses around helping students really learn "what is fundamental" in a subject (4). A focus on threshold concepts can help the new ES courses move away from an emphasis on content knowledge in order to better encourage active ways of thinking interculturally.

For models of how to teach threshold concepts, we might look at the example of the textbook *Threshold Concepts in Women's and Gender Studies* (introduced at the 2017 OID workshop). Through the example of their textbook, Launius and Hassel model pedagogical strategies for teaching conceptually difficult diversity issues: 1) they openly name and explain the concept—and explicitly mark it as a threshold concept; 2) they illustrate the concept through theory, scholarship, and day-to-day, contemporary examples or "case studies;" 3) they introduce "Learning Roadblocks" to explicitly explain to the students what issues/beliefs might be getting in their way as they attempt to learn or accept the threshold concept; and 4) they provide students with many exercises, questions, and writing prompts for discussion and informal writing. These questions tend to be reflexive as they ask students to reflect on their own prior knowledge, and to apply the concept to new examples.

The reflexivity that Launius and Hassel ask students to engage in is frequently mentioned as an important component of improving the intercultural learning of students. Deardorff, for example, says, "Intercultural competence development is an ongoing process, and thus it becomes important for individuals to be given opportunities to reflect on and assess the

development of their own intercultural competence over time" (68). The AAC&U notes the importance of "measuring our capacity to identify our own cultural patterns [and] compare and contrast them with others."

### **New Courses**

Beginning in Fall 2020, Students will no longer be required to take courses from the ES U and G list but will instead be required, as part of their Essential Studies coursework, to take one course from each the following two categories: **1)The Diversity of Human Experience** and **2) Analyzing Worldview**.

### **Course #1: The Diversity of Human Experience**

#### **Course Focus:**

Courses with this designation may be at the 100 level or above and may take a variety of disciplinary approaches to a wide-range of subject matters. At root, however, the course must be committed to helping students better **understand the diversity of human experience** and committed to encouraging a **consideration of the multiplicity of differing worldviews**.

These worldviews may be highlighted through study of the values, perspectives, traditions, and beliefs of a particular group or groups. This study of differing cultures, groups, and worldviews may occur through an examination of language, history, geography, politics, art, or religion—or perhaps through examination of how a group's perspectives have been shaped by particular historical or contemporary issues. Courses in this category might also more explicitly examine the academic frameworks we use for understanding and studying social and cultural difference.

#### **Threshold Concepts:**

Courses in this category teach students the following foundational concepts:

- **The existence of cultural differences and the complexity of social identities.**

Bennett notes that "the disavowal of cultural difference" is frequently an issue for students at the initial stages of developing intercultural competence; these learners attempt to flatten differences into similarities, thus maintaining the centrality of their own worldviews ("Towards" 24-25).

Thus he encourages teaching what he calls "differentiation" as a key concept, by which he means, "first, that people differentiate phenomena in a variety of ways, and, second, that cultures differ fundamentally from one another in the way they maintain patterns of differentiation or worldviews." He believes that intercultural sensitivity increases "If a learner accepts this basic premise . . . and interprets events according to it." Bennett warns, however, that this "concept of fundamental difference in cultural worldview is the most problematic and threatening idea that many of us ever encounter" ("Towards" 22).

- **Our worldviews are constructed through our identities and cultures.**

A fundamental premise in intercultural learning is the understanding that our identities and cultures, our very sense of who we are, has been socially constructed. (See Launius and Hassel, 24-70, for their work on introducing this concept in Women and Gender Studies courses). As Bennett says, "While one is born into a cultural system, that system only exists because the previous generation kept on constructing reality more or less in the way they were socialized." He adds, that cultural systems only continue as "new members in the system enact the roles and rules of the system" (*Basic* 8-9).

The premise that identities and cultures are socially constructed has a variety of implications. If we understand our identities to be, as Bennett puts it, "nonessentialized," then it becomes "theoretically possible for a person to

construct a system . . . that is different from the one in which that person received primary socialization" (*Basic* 9). It becomes possible, that is, to try out the perspectives of others.

For those at the initial stages of developing intercultural competence, what needs to be understood is that our socialization into cultures and identities constructs our worldviews (our beliefs, values, and ways of seeing and experiencing the world). If learners come to understand this premise, an important realization can follow: "When [we] can place more of our own behavior in a cultural context, [we] are less likely to assume that the behavior is universal" (Bennett, "Towards" 45). We come to understand that our own worldview should come to be "experienced as but one of a variety of worldviews" (Bennett, "Towards" 25).

**Encouraging Student Reflexivity:**

A significant part of acquiring increased awareness of these concepts is for students to complete assignments or discussions that help them understand the fundamental differences in worldviews and how their own worldviews have been constructed. In so doing, we want students to come to an understanding about how foundational these threshold concepts are in their understanding of themselves, others, and everyday life.

To be validated/revalidated, a course in this category should be able to demonstrate that students will have defined opportunities, through course assignments or activities, to reflect on their own identities, cultures, and worldviews; and to reflexively consider their own worldviews as the product of their identities and cultures.

**ESC Process for Course #1: The Diversity of Human Experience**

All courses, whether they are currently on the ESC U/G lists or not, will need to apply to be included in this category by meeting the validation/revalidation criteria (below). However, existing U/G courses will be allowed to fulfill the requirements of this course category during the transition period away from the U/G requirements. Starting with the 2018-19 AY revalidation cycle, U/G courses must either validate into this or the other new (see below) course category or lose their Special Emphasis status.

**Validation/Revalidation Criteria:**

Criteria	Evidence Supports?
Focus: The course materials, assignments, topics of discussion, and/or learning activities demonstrate that the course is helping students better understand the <b>diversity of the human experience</b> and is committed to <b>encouraging a consideration of the multiplicity of differing worldviews.</b>	
Threshold Concepts: The course materials, assignments, topics of discussion, and/or learning activities demonstrate that the course is teaching these threshold concepts: <b>1) the existence of cultural differences and the complexity of social identities, and 2) that worldviews are constructed through our identities and cultures.</b>	
Encouraging Student Reflexivity: Course assignments and/or activities demonstrate that students have had defined opportunities <b>to reflect on their own identities, cultures, and worldviews; and to reflexively consider their worldviews as the product of their identities and cultures.</b>	
The Focus, Threshold Concepts, and assignments/activities that Encourage Student Reflexivity must constitute at least 1/3 of the course's focus and graded assignments.	
May not carry any other Special Emphasis designation	

**Transfer:**

Transfer courses from a wide-range of disciplines, including courses taken at an international university through a UND study abroad program, will fulfill this requirement if deemed equivalent to courses validated for this requirement at UND. Any transferred language acquisition course (whether that language is taught at UND or not) would fulfill this requirement.

## Course #2: Analyzing Worldview

### Course Focus:

Courses with this designation must be at the 200 level or above. The development of a set of transferable academic skills and the teaching of important threshold concepts for engaging with difference must be an explicit and primary component of the course. While these courses certainly rely on particular disciplinary perspectives, they are distinct from courses in the Diversity of Human Experience category in the sense that they take the development of these skills as the clear and present purpose of the course.

Diversity of Human Experience courses ask students to recognize social and cultural difference while understanding how our worldviews are shaped by our identities and cultures. This second course should **encourage students to think about the real-world consequences of those differing worldviews**. In particular, courses in this category need to give students the tools to analyze social inequities by introducing the threshold concepts associated with **institutionalized privilege and oppression and the ways that ideologies support privilege and oppression**.

To teach these concepts, courses in this category may certainly take on a variety of topics or issues—whether contemporary, historical, or professional—as the subject matter of the course. They may create opportunities for a sustained, detailed analysis of an issue or problem. The course may focus on particular cultures, groups, or identities, and yet the course should also highlight how the concepts taught in the course can shape engagement with all cultures and identities. To this end, the course may ask students to practice applying the concepts that they are learning in these courses to other real world situations, and/or to particular professional, historical, or social contexts.

### Threshold concepts:

Courses in this category teach students the following advanced threshold concepts, articulated by Launius and Hassel, while building on the foundational threshold concepts of the Diversity of Human Experience courses:

- **Privilege and oppression are part of larger social institutions and systems.**

Launius and Hassel suggest that "the concepts of privilege and oppression provide a fundamental framework for understanding how power operates in society" (73). "Privilege," they continue, "can be defined as benefits, advantages, and power that accrue to members of a dominant group as a result of the oppression of the marginalized group" (74).

This can be a difficult concept for learners because they must recognize that "individuals and groups may be privileged without realizing, recognizing, or even wanting it" (74). In addition, this threshold concept proves difficult because we tend to imagine that privilege operates individually. However, "Privilege refers not just to individual opportunity but to structured social opportunities" (Launius and Hassel 77). Oppression, similarly, needs to be understood as "a group phenomenon" in which "institutional power and authority are used to support prejudices and enforce discriminatory ways" (80).

- **Ideologies represent the values and interests of a particular group and they are the fundamental means through which systems of privilege and oppression are organized.**

As Launius and Hassel point out, "ideologies are sets of ideas or beliefs" and "ideologies always represent the attitudes, interests, and values of a particular group" (80). The dominant culture, they point out, defines "pervasive societal beliefs" and these support institutionalized privilege and oppression (80).

They also point out the importance of understanding the ways that these "pervasive social beliefs" become internalized: "Institutional and ideological manifestations of privilege and oppression are internalized by members of both dominant and marginalized groups. In other words, it is often the case that members of marginalized groups come to internalize the dominant group's characterizations of them as lesser and inferior" (87).

**Encouraging Student Reflexivity:**

As Launius and Hassel suggest, to "develop a heightened awareness of the ways that ideologies operate in culture at large as well as in [one's] own life and thinking," one must "develop metacognition—or thinking about one's own thinking or thinking processes" (80). They continue, "Understanding ideologies means being able to (1) identify patterns of thinking, (2) monitor one's own thinking for those patterns of belief, and (3) critically reflect on how one's ideas and attitudes are shaped by those beliefs" (80).

To be validated/revalidated, the course should be able to demonstrate that students will have/have had defined opportunities, through course assignments or activities, to practice this kind of metacognition—and to understand themselves as constructed by and implicated in ideology and in systems of oppression and privilege.

**ESC Process for Course #2: Analyzing Worldview**

All courses, whether they are currently on the ESC U/G lists or not, will need to apply to be included in this category by meeting the validation/revalidation criteria (below).

**Validation/Revalidation Criteria:**

Criteria	Evidence Supports?
Focus: The course materials, assignments, topics of discussion, and/or learning activities demonstrate that <b>the class examines the real-world consequences of differing worldviews by giving students tools to analyze social inequities.</b>	
Threshold Concepts: The course materials, assignments, topics of discussion, and/or learning activities demonstrate that the course is teaching these threshold concepts: <b>1) privilege and oppression are part of larger social institutions and systems; and 2) Ideologies represent the values and interests of a particular group and they are the fundamental means through which systems of privilege and oppression are organized.</b>	
Encouraging Student Reflexivity: Course assignments and/or activities demonstrate that students have had defined opportunities <b>to practice metacognition—and to understand themselves as existing within ideology and systems of oppression and privilege.</b>	
<b>Transferable academic skills for productively engaging with difference are an explicit and primary component of the course:</b> The Focus, Threshold Concepts, and assignments/activities that Encourage Student Reflexivity must constitute at least 1/2 of the course's focus and graded assignments.	
May not carry any other Special Emphasis designation	
Must be at the 200 level or higher	

**Transfer:** Only transfer courses at the 200 level or above that are deemed equivalent to the courses on the Analyzing Worldview list would fulfill this requirement

**Works Cited**

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