

# Liberal Studies

Professor Nelson Pole  
Director  
Rhodes Tower 1927  
216.523.7179

To: Rosemary Sutton, Assessment

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**Background:** I became Director of Liberal Studies in January of 2005. I took over a moribund program that did not have a Director during the Fall of 2004. The lack of a person in the Director's position is devastating as that person is the only faculty assigned to the program though, at the time, LS had an assigned specialist in the Advising Center (who was a graduate student). Undergraduates who inquired of the program at the Advising Center were told that it was no longer accepting majors. In fact, during AY 2003-2004, the Dean of Arts and Sciences formed an ad hoc committee to study LS and to recommend whether the program should be abolished. Instead, the committee recommended that the program be revived as it provided a valuable option for many of the College's students. Their recommendation led to a search that ended with my becoming Director. Still, the program was on life-support.

I had background in LS, both as an undergraduate and, at CSU, as a faculty participant in the LS Advisory Committee during the 1990's. So, I had an idea of what were major functions of the Director. My first task was to announce that LS was "back in business" and to both introduce myself to the remaining majors in particular and to the CSU community in general. I also began the long process of learning the CSU requirements that were not on the various check-sheets. It took more than a calendar year to really get a grip on all of the operating controls of the program. Perhaps, I still have not completed this task!

Meanwhile, LS was subject to the Program Review process. In the midst of learning my responsibilities, I had to also select a short-list of outside consultants and write a report about the functioning of the Program. I was advised to consider it an opportunity to "sell" the Provost on the future of the Program and the resources that would be needed. This was my first opportunity to think strategically about LS. The Review process ended during Spring 2007 with the Provost encouraging LS to pursue some of the directions charted in the Review documents. I think of AY 2006-2007 as my first year with a fairly clear idea of how to do my job. So, in coming to the issue of assessment, there are few established benchmarks against which to measure progress. Success for us is still measured by life and an increase in the numbers of students served.

1. **Goals:** Liberal Studies, LS, is a degree program that offers no courses of its own. Virtually any course offered by the College of Liberal arts and Social Sciences, CLASS, and the College of Science, COS, as well as many offered by the other CSU colleges serve to fulfill LS requirements.
  - The overt goal of LS is to provide a broad liberal education for every major. LS requirements reflect this by having each major take, beyond GenEd, at least 16 credits in the Social Sciences, 16 credits in the Arts and Humanities, and 16 credits in the Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Logic. Students are also to take 18 additional free electives. Because the LS requirements are so unstructured, a secondary goal of LS is to provide a first rate advising system that is operated by the Director.
  - Another goal of LS is to provide each student with a coherent education, one that the student sees as more than a “hodge-podge” and as more than an “easy” way to graduate.
  - A recent goal is to make LS known as a good choice as a pre-professional major for a student intending to go on to a professional program such as medical or law school.
2. **Outcomes:** Outcomes were developed by the first Director of LS, David Richardson. At that time, the current Director was a member of the LS Advisory Committee and saw first hand how the unit operated. The current Director, as an undergraduate, also had student experience in a LS-type program. So, there was first hand experience with what it is like to be a “major” in LS. Both experiences shaped expectations about how to behave.

(Note: At the time Professor Pole became Director, January 2005, the Program had been on “death watch” for 4 months. It had been slated to be killed except that the ad hoc committee convened to recommend its demise instead recommended its continuation. So, the first goal of the Director was to bring back the program to “health.” Two years later that it is still here is strong evidence that the original goal was achieved.)

The Director will be available to both majors and prospective students as well as to alumni. The Director will be available in the office on a walk-in basis and through appointment. The Director will be available via telephone and email as well as via regular mail. The Director or the Director’s representative will participate in on-campus recruiting and informational fairs. The Director will maintain good relationships with the Advising Office and with advisors at our feeder institutions such as CCC.

Each prospective major will write a letter of application before being “officially” admitted as a major. In the letter they will describe the coherence of their education, their past, current and prospective course work.

Until late Fall 2006, the Director was the only member of the unit. Feedback came from students and from both on-campus and off-campus Advising Staff. Late in the Fall, the Director was finally able to form and convene an Advisory Committee and to formulate a set of by-laws for LS. The by-laws made the members of the Advisory Committee members of the unit. They have provided helpful advice on a variety of policy issues facing LS but, not yet, on the goals.

Feedback from students made it clear that they found the requirements confusing in that they did not understand the meaning of the headings “Social Sciences,” “Arts and Humanities,” and “Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Logic.” This led the Director to develop a web site, the Liberal Studies Course Planner at <http://www.csuohio.edu/liberalst/CoursePlanner.htm>, that linked each heading with the Bulletin listings of the departments that offered that type of course as well as attempting to list all the special cases. As students used the site and revised their questions in lieu of it, the site was revised until the only questions about the meanings of the requirements were highly idiosyncratic.

Responses from students at graduation made clear their appreciation of the level of advising offered by the Director. And comments from Advising Staff made clear their appreciation of the level of involvement offered by the Director.

- 3. Research:** Indirect and direct evidence is gathered through unsolicited oral and written comments from students and prospective students during the advising process as well as from Advising Staff. Then, when a major applies for graduation, he or she is asked to fill out an “exit” questionnaire.

The “exit” questionnaire has been revised several times as experiences have posed new questions of interest. For example, LS has always been curious about what draws students to the program. So, the questionnaire asks “Was Liberal Studies one of the attractions that brought you or kept you at CSU?”

From the beginning of the exit evaluation, we have asked “How has your college work changed you?” More recently LS has matured to the point that we have begun wondering more about the role of LS in this process. So, we added the question, “What were your goals in choosing Liberal Studies as a major?” to serve as a reminder to the student so that they could give a fuller answer to the follow up, “Did you accomplish your Liberal Studies goals?”

During the process leading to the student’s applying for admission to the program, students (seem to) talk freely about their LS hopes. Some state quite frankly that their primary goal is to find a way to graduate as quickly as possible. I try to make it clear that a way to graduate quickly might be their goal but that from the LS point of view the goal is a broad general education. Feedback for the “goals” questions will hopefully indicate how well LS is meeting its goal.

Keeping tabulated data on the numbers of students meeting with the Director is a measure of how well LS is recruiting new students.

4. **Findings:** Each interview and “exit” questionnaire is carefully studied for feedback. A systematic review has not occurred. This Assessment Report makes it clear that we need to start summarizing the data and making it available to the Advisory Committee. This year, having the first Advisory Committee, the Director’s Annual Report emphasized the increasing number of students who are working with the Director. The growing number is the only measure of progress a (as opposed to reporting all the activity to bring LS “back to life.”)

According to the Office of Institutional Research, in Fall 2003, there were 68 LS majors but during the “kill” year the number fell to 42. We are still having trouble getting a firm count, but we now think that the number is well above 50 with another several dozen who are being advised in our office though are not (yet) official majors.

Judging from the stated goals indicated in the letters of application, the goal of increasing the recognition of LS as a pre-professional program is not being met. On the other hand, LS increasingly attracts students who are trying to complete a degree program that has suffered setbacks or who are taking up their studies after a hiatus.

5. **Review:** With one exception, faculty/staff and students were not involved in the review process except as sources of data. The exception is Debra Shepherd, the new secretary for CLASS Interdisciplinary Programs, IDP. Debra has designed a number of flyers for LS and has attended a number of recruiting fairs on behalf of IDP. She provides many insights into how well we are getting our points across.
6. **Actions:** We continue to search for better recruiting tools by redesigning flyers, posters and web sites as well by seeking productive recruiting venues.
  - We have made it easier for students to elect LS as a major late in their college career. Among the population served by this change are those who seek to complete their degree by changing their major to LS. We did this by reducing the number of hours that a student had to complete after declaring their new major from 26 upper level credits to 16.
  - Assessment data next AY will be shared with the Advisory Committee.