

DRAFT (4/8/21)

UNI Foundational Inquiry (UNIFI) Program Philosophy

General Education Re-envisioning Committee, Phase II

The Liberal Arts at UNI: Foundational Inquiry

The liberal arts play an essential role at a public comprehensive university, opening a world of possibilities for a diverse range of students. In keeping with the liberal arts tradition, UNI Foundational Inquiry (UNIFI) courses emphasize habits of mind, capacities, and skills that prepare students to live fulfilling lives. Our aim in teaching UNIFI courses is to be inclusive, as our students come from a wide range of geographical, religious, racial, and economic backgrounds. About one-third are first generation college students. Some are veterans, and some spent time in refugee camps before their families moved to Iowa. UNI graduates are particularly likely to stay in Iowa, and so we recognize our students as our future neighbors and fellow citizens. We see our role as enabling them to lay a firm foundation of skills, knowledge, and habits of mind upon which they can develop their own personal, professional, and civic projects.

The historical intent behind the liberal arts is to prepare students for liberty: for playing a role in shaping our shared world through democratic processes, and for making individual choices responsibly. Liberty depends on certain individual capacities, such as the abilities to chart one's own life course, think critically, and argue persuasively for certain plans of action. But liberty also depends on responsibility. Such responsibility requires responding to others as equals and working with them across differences. It includes understanding that individual aspirations are always pursued in the context of the human and natural worlds on which we all depend for meaning and sustenance.

To this broad approach to the liberal arts we specify several capacities that we see as essential today for enabling students to live fulfilling lives:

- self-awareness, including awareness of one's roles in various communities
- a recognition that one must be able to work with others, including across differences of background and values
- open-mindedness, or a capacity for growth and ongoing learning
- willingness and ability to think carefully based on facts and evidence.

Our Goals

Our foundational courses are designed around goals for students, not specific bodies of knowledge that they must master to be considered educated. To pursue these goals, students do take courses in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. But bodies of essential knowledge in such fields--even in a single discipline--are difficult to compile and rapidly become outdated. Our approach entrusts faculty to decide the specific content they will teach, moving nimbly within a framework that is oriented toward broad goals.

Those broad goals arise out of the essential liberal arts orientations mentioned above. Students will develop their abilities

- to communicate in writing and orally
- to practice thinking critically
- to apply mathematical and ethical reasoning
- to apply insights gained through the natural and human sciences
- to experience the creative process
- to consider a multitude of ways human beings have organized our worlds and made them meaningful over time.

To these we add goals oriented toward understanding the commonalities all people share, as well as some of our differences--both those that might involve conflict, and those that add to the richness of human experience. Finally, we explicitly aim to enable students to work with others across differences.

Connecting Academics to Life Beyond College

Students benefit from seeing how their academic work connects to their present and future lives. Therefore students apply the skills they learn in their foundational courses to questions and challenges in the world outside academia. One way they can do this is through certificates: clusters of three or four courses that address a single theme or issue from the perspective of several different disciplines. This approach demonstrates that the skills and knowledge students acquire in different classes are relevant to worldly issues, and can be applied in a range of settings.

While the liberal arts have never been (and should not be confused with) training for a particular job, the skills and habits of mind that the liberal arts enable students to develop are necessary to success in many workplaces. The American Association of Colleges & Universities regularly surveys employers about what skills and habits of mind they desire

most in college graduates. Employers consistently emphasize the importance of communication skills, ethical judgment, the ability to work in teams, and the ability to apply knowledge to real world situations.

UNI empowers students to develop their own individual potential, whatever that potential may be. Our approach to the liberal arts--the arts of living a free life--is to enable students to move forward toward new beginnings and successful futures.