

The Higher Learning Commission Action Project Directory

Ohio University

Project Details				
Title	Curricular Themes	Status	REVIEWED	
Category	1-Helping Students Learn	Updated	01-30-2015	
Timeline		Reviewed	04-15-2015	
	Planned Project Kickoff	11-05-2013	Created	12-20-2013
	Target Completion	08-24-2015	Version	1

1: PROJECT GOAL

A:

Curricular Themes provide a vehicle for revitalizing student understanding and enthusiasm for Ohio University's breadth of knowledge requirements while improving the coherence of the curriculum. Students will be better able to appreciate the value of the breadth requirement because they will be building a more sophisticated understanding of the issues and challenges addressed by the theme. The course offerings associated with a theme can be used by a student as a registration guide, which should yield a superior approach to selecting courses that fulfill existing breadth of knowledge requirements.

2: REASON FOR UNDERTAKING THIS PROJECT

A:

Ohio University desires to be innovative and contemporary in its curricular offerings. The curricular themes initiative in the College of Arts and Sciences seeks to provide students with a broad but integrated range of opportunities for building the critical skills and knowledge they need for successful careers, engaged citizenship, and fulfilling lives. Arts and Sciences faculty are building interdisciplinary and team-taught courses involving collaborative discussions about course design and pedagogical strategies. Arts and Sciences has expanded professional development opportunities for faculty including teaching and advising workshops, a faculty mentoring event, and faculty learning communities.

3: ORGANIZATIONAL AREAS AFFECTED

A:

Faculty members from every department within the College of Arts and Sciences have participated in the development of theme courses and curricula. Some faculty members from other colleges with theme-relevant expertise and interests also have participated in the themes initiative. The following themes are in various stages of development. Several themes are fairly well-developed and will be ready for implementation in Fall 2014. Multiple departments and programs are involved in each of the themes, promoting interdisciplinary faculty collaboration and learning opportunities for students.

- Conflict and Cooperation
- Making and Breaking the Law
- Sustainability
- Food Studies
- Wealth and Poverty
- Love and Hate: Gender, Race, and Sexuality
- Knowing the Future
- So, You Want to Change the World: Ideals and Engagement
- From Fire to iPhone: The Technological Human
- Becoming Human
- A Sense of Place

4: KEY ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES

A:

Curricular Themes are intended to encourage curricular innovation. As faculty from different departments, programs and colleges come together to develop a theme, they share ideas for multidisciplinary approaches to course content, collaboration, team teaching and the integration of extracurricular activities into a coherent educational experience. Moreover, they also have the opportunity to think about how the existing courses that will continue to fulfill the majority of a student's distribution requirements may relate in meaningful ways. Any member of the university community, irrespective of college, is encouraged to participate in the development of the themes. We want to take advantage of all the University's resources to create the best educational experience for students possible.

5: PROJECT TIMEFRAME RATIONALE

A:

The curricular themes project is in pilot stage, beginning in 2013-14. New courses are just now being developed and made available to students. Faculty development opportunities are beginning this academic year as well. It is expected that the 2014-15 year will be the first year in which a sufficient number of theme-based courses are offered and assessed. The target completion of spring semester 2015 will allow the program to continue to develop in 2013-14, and operate as a full pilot in 2014-15, with assessment of its effectiveness following.

6: PROJECT SUCCESS MONITORING

A: There is no "one size fits all" model for the themes. Each theme will have its own structure and organization. Students could start with a freshman/sophomore level course designed to introduce a theme and its complexity. This course would be designed and taught by a team of faculty who provide multidisciplinary perspectives. Students would be given opportunities to develop fundamental academic skills such as critical thinking, writing, oral communication, quantitative literacy and information literacy within the context of the theme. Mastery of content knowledge or a particular skill would not be the goal of the course, but rather, consciousness-raising about the complexity of the theme, promoting intellectual curiosity about the course content, setting standards for intellectual engagement and preparing students for theme-related courses embedded within departmental curricula. Assessments of these objectives are being developed.

Following the completion of the introductory theme course, students would enroll in disciplinary courses related to the theme. These courses would elaborate on theme-relevant content knowledge and skills. Ideally, these theme-relevant courses would be spread across the natural sciences, social sciences, the arts and humanities. Analysis of enrollment patterns of a cohort of students would be one way to monitor the desired effect of curricular themes.

A culminating experience could be provided by a junior/senior level multidisciplinary course, where students further elaborate their theme-related content knowledge and skills. This course could be designed as a seminar, or team-oriented project course, or theme-related capstone. The goal of the course would be moving students past an appreciation of the problems related to the theme to critical analysis and problem solutions. Course activities would support these goals. Additional opportunities to develop core skills (team-building, critical thinking, writing, oral communication, quantitative literacy and information literacy) would be part of the course. Outcomes assessments of this culminating experience are being developed.

7: PROJECT OUTCOME MEASURES

A:

An outcome of the curricular theme experience will be that students will be better able to articulate how the breadth requirement contributed to their educational experience in concrete terms. Analysis of subsequent enrollment patterns of a cohort of students beginning the curricular themes experience will reveal the extent to which students chose to pursue the expanded curricular offerings. Interviews and/or surveys, along with

Project Update

1: CURRENT PROJECT STATUS SUMMARY

A: General Project Status: In progress
Original Project Start Date: Academic year 2014-15
Original Project Completion Date: August 24, 2015
Anticipated Completion Date: August 23, 2016

The themes initiative was formally launched at the start of this 2014-15 academic year. Students were introduced to themes during the new student orientation program ("Bobcat Student Orientation"), and eight of the nine themes groups that have formed to date are offering courses, programs and activities during this academic year.

The nine themes are:

- Between Love and Hate
- Fire to iPhone: The Technological Human*
- Food Studies*
- Knowing the Future*
- Making and Breaking the Law*
- Ohio: Sense of Place*
- Sustainability Studies*
- War and Peace*
- Wealth and Poverty*

The themes initiative has been developing progressively over the past year and a half, and some of the themes are more fully developed than others at this point in time. The theme progress reports are included here to provide insight into the depth and scope of theme activities that have been undertaken, and the high level of commitment that faculty theme leaders, theme members, students, and staff are giving to this initiative.

The curricular themes initiative is intended to encourage curricular innovation. As faculty from different departments, programs and colleges come together to develop a theme, they share ideas for interdisciplinary approaches to course content, collaboration, team teaching and the integration of extracurricular activities into a coherent educational experience. Moreover, they also have the opportunity to think about how the existing courses that will continue to fulfill the majority of a student's distribution requirements may relate in meaningful ways. Any member of the university community, irrespective of college, is encouraged to participate in the development of the themes. We want to take advantage of all the University's resources to create the best educational experience for students possible.

Ohio University desires to be innovative and contemporary in its curricular offerings. The curricular themes initiative seeks to provide students with a broad but integrated range of opportunities for building the critical skills and knowledge they need for successful careers, engaged citizenship, and fulfilling lives. Ohio University faculty are building interdisciplinary and team-taught courses involving collaborative discussions about course design and pedagogical strategies.

2: ORIGINAL PROJECT GOALS AND DELIVERABLES

A: A central goal of the curricular themes initiative is to provide a vehicle for revitalizing student understanding and enthusiasm for Ohio University's breadth of knowledge requirements while improving the coherence of the curriculum. Students will be better able to appreciate the value of the breadth requirement because they will be building a more sophisticated understanding of the issues and challenges addressed by the theme. The course offerings associated with a theme can be used by a student as a registration guide, which should yield a superior approach to selecting courses that fulfill existing breadth of knowledge requirements. Curricular offerings developed for the themes include student internships, externships, research opportunities, and other forms of experiential learning and interaction.

While there is no "one size fits all" model for the themes in terms of structure and organization, several of the themes are utilizing a

model with the following features:

- An introductory-level course is developed to introduce a theme and its complexity. These courses are designed and taught by a team of faculty who provide multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Students are given opportunities to develop fundamental academic skills such as critical thinking, writing, oral communication, quantitative literacy and information literacy within the context of the theme. Goals of these courses include consciousness-raising about the complexity of the theme, promoting intellectual curiosity about the course content, setting standards for intellectual engagement and preparing students for theme-related courses embedded within departmental curricula. Assessments of these objectives are being developed, including, but not limited to, course evaluation items that are specific to curricular theme courses.
- Following completion of the introductory theme course, students enroll in disciplinary courses related to the theme. These courses elaborate on theme-relevant content knowledge and skills, and are spread across the natural sciences, social sciences, the arts and humanities.
- A culminating experience is provided by a junior/senior level multi-/interdisciplinary course, where students further elaborate their theme-related content knowledge and skills. This course could be designed as a seminar, or team-oriented project course, or theme-related capstone. The goal of the course would be moving students past an appreciation of the problems related to the theme to critical analysis and problem solutions. Course activities would support these goals. Additional opportunities to develop core skills (team-building, critical thinking, writing, oral communication, quantitative literacy and information literacy) would be part of the course.
- Extracurricular experiences such as study abroad, undergraduate research, service learning and internship opportunities related to the themes are integrated into the learning experience.

In addition to course offerings, internships, externships, and service learning opportunities, numerous themes events have been offered during the past year to the university and local community, including speaker series, panels, workshops, film screenings, and more.

3: ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVER THE PAST YEAR

A: As noted above, incoming undergraduates were introduced to curricular themes during Bobcat Student Orientation this past summer, and eight themes groups are offering courses, programs and activities for students this academic year. The provost has dedicated special investment funding to support this work. That money is allowing faculty groups to move forward with curricular development, communication, and collaboration in this university-wide initiative to reinvigorate the undergraduate curriculum.

Four team-taught, interdisciplinary introductory theme courses were introduced this year. Additional new themes courses have been approved as course offerings for the 2015-16 academic year, are currently under review by departmental, college and university curriculum committee, or are in development by themes faculty.

In addition, the recruitment of six new theme-oriented Group I faculty in the College of Arts & Sciences has commenced. These positions are jointly funded by the provost and Arts & Sciences. Three of these searches have been completed at the time of this writing, and the remaining three are well under way. The positions are in archeobotany (Food Studies theme), rural development (Wealth and Poverty theme), history of science and technology (Fire to iPhone theme), conservation biology (Sustainability Studies theme), politics of development in global south (Wealth & Poverty theme), and behavioral economics (Knowing the Future theme).

4: INSTITUTIONAL INVOLVEMENT

A: The curricular themes initiative currently involves all departments and programs in Arts & Sciences, with increasing involvement of additional colleges and academic and non-academic units (e.g., Bobcat Student Orientation, Residence Life, Office of Global Opportunities, Center for Campus and Community Engagement, and more). Each theme has a designated faculty leader or co-leaders, and these individuals meet together monthly as a Themes Steering Committee. Most of the themes groups also now have curriculum committees and/or core faculty committees that meet regularly.

In addition to course offerings, internships, externships, and service learning opportunities, numerous themes events have been offered during the past year to the university and local community, including speaker series, panels, workshops, film screenings, and more.

In addition, student clubs have formed around some of the themes (e.g., Food Studies; Making and Breaking the Law). University-

wide events also have been offered each semester to promote and share information about the themes initiative. For example, an event was held in April, 2014, to recognize the one-year anniversary of the inception of the themes initiative, which was attended by more than 120 university colleagues.

5: EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

A: With this project in its pilot year of implementation, assessment of its effects on the institution, students, and others in the learning community will follow in subsequent action project reports.

In the meantime, faculty professional development opportunities related to the themes project are being offered. For example, a “Liberal Arts and Sciences Show case” is planned for the end of spring semester, 2015, which will feature one or more themes-related sessions. We anticipate that panel discussions and/or workshops will be offered by interested faculty members who have been participating in the themes project, who can share good practices for interdisciplinary course design and team teaching with university colleagues.

6: ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES TO PROJECT SUCCESS

A:

- A particular strength of the themes initiative is its flexibility in the different curricular models and options that faculty leaders and group members are utilizing to promote student learning and engagement. This flexibility also presents some challenges in assessing the curricular themes initiative as a whole and institutionalizing the learning from the project’s goals. Themes leaders are engaged in discussion of how to balance the unique qualities and approaches of particular themes with coordination of efforts across the themes groups.
- Team teaching offers an important avenue to create and deliver interdisciplinary themes courses. Faculty members involved in the themes initiative are sharing ideas and pedagogical strategies for successful team-teaching and student learning. Beyond pedagogical issues, important questions for sustaining and growing the themes initiative include: How will team teaching be funded, rewarded, and recognized?
- A stable resource base is needed for continuing development and institutionalization of the themes, including resources for curricular development and teaching, co-curricular activities, and administrative support.
- Additional challenges include identifying and implementing effective strategies to identify students who are interested in participating in theme, in tracking student involvement in themes courses and activities, and in assessing student learning and satisfaction in themes courses and co-curricular activities.
- As noted above, the curricular themes initiative currently involves all departments and programs in Arts & Sciences, with increasing involvement of additional colleges and academic and non-academic units. An important challenge is to continue to broaden themes involvement and leadership more fully across the university.

7: PLANNED NEXT STEPS AND TIMELINE

A: Next 12 months:

- Continue to communicate the purposes of the themes to current Ohio University students, faculty, and staff, and to help recruit students to the university.
- Continue to promote and support interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship (e.g., via team teaching opportunities, interdisciplinary faculty learning communities).
- Develop templates to facilitate data collection, reporting, and coordination across themes groups;
- Develop course evaluation items for student assessment of themes courses, including course evaluation forms for team-taught courses;
- Continue to develop coordinated marketing of themes courses and activities;
- Implement effective methods for students to obtain information about themes activities and events and to keep track of their progress in one or more themes.
 - In addition to avenues including Constant Contact, Facebook, Blackboard learning management system, an iPhone Themes app is under development, which will allow students to “subscribe” to one or more themes and get more information, such as theme descriptions, class listings, and upcoming events. The app will “remember” which themes a student chose, and on second use would display content for those theme(s); events and classes associated with a theme can be “pushed” to the user’s phone; and most importantly, the user could check off, or track, classes on the theme list that he or she has completed. If the iPhone app is successful, a Themes app will also be developed for Android users.

- Identify effective ways to articulate themes courses and programming with academic departments and programs, minimizing disruptions to departments/programs and maximizing faculty and student engagement.

Next 12-24 months:

- Continue to solicit participation from faculty, colleges and campuses across the university.
- Take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with academic and non-academic units across the university (e.g., Office of Global Opportunities, Office of Student Affairs, Residential Life, and more); seek greater involvement in collaborative course development across colleges and campuses.
- Better identify how themes can articulate with General Education.

8: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, QUESTIONS, OR CONCERNS

A: A detailed 30-page appendix report is available that provides information on curricular and other activities undertaken in eight of the themes (marked with an * in question one).

Update Review

1: CURRENT PROJECT STATUS SUMMARY

A: The concept of theme based general education is a growing trend, as institutions try to create a more meaningful undergraduate experience. As institutions face pressure from many sources to increase completion rates, this is a timely project that has the potential to increase student success.

It's clear that Ohio University has spent an extensive amount of time in planning and designing the theme based programs. This represents a fresh approach to general education, as it incorporates some of the same principles that have long been effective in technical course work.

Given the complexity of the project, and the fact that the themes were just launched in the 2014-2015 academic year, extending the project for another year seems to be good idea.

2: ORIGINAL PROJECT GOALS AND DELIVERABLES

A: It's clear that there is a strong institutional commitment to this project. This is far more extensive than the usual cyclical course and program review. Student assessment and collection of appropriate data from not only the classes, but also the extracurricular experiences will be essential as the curricular themes move forward.

As other Action Projects are planned, it may be beneficial to develop those around themes with similar development characteristics, rather than grouping all theme programs into a single Action Project. This would allow the institution an opportunity to evaluate and compare those to other theme groups that have developed with different program features.

3: ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVER THE PAST YEAR

A: The institution has accomplished a great deal over the past year. The implementation of eight themes is impressive, and demonstrates the level of commitment to not only the project, but also to student success.

While not stated, it is assumed that in addition to the actual work accomplished over the last year with a goal of serving students, that this has also been an excellent faculty and staff development activity. The opportunity to work collaboratively, and thinking differently about course design and delivery is an excellent example of AQIP Category 3: Valuing Employees.

4: INSTITUTIONAL INVOLVEMENT

A: The campus wide involvement in this project is impressive and necessary for success. The institution is to be commended for taking the time to celebrate success, this is an integral component of high performing organizations.

While too early to have formal metrics, the fact that student clubs have formed around the themes, seems to indicate a high level of satisfaction.

5: EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

A: The learning opportunities presented by this project are impressive. Again, given the breadth and impact of this project, it may be more manageable to look at several Action Projects designed around particular anticipated outcomes. Given the breadth and depth of this project, there are so many ways in which success can be measured and so many elements to examine, that better definition may lead to more measurable success. There is a need to determine and measure student learning outcomes in this format vs. those in standard courses; student retention and completion in this format vs. a standard course format; faculty learning and satisfaction via involvement in themes vs. those not participating.

6: ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES TO PROJECT SUCCESS

A: While the challenges seem overwhelming, again this seems to be due to the expansiveness of this project. Some refining of the goals and measurements would seem to make this more manageable. Each of the identified challenges could actually be a stand alone Action Project. This could result in more focus on each of these challenges, and the ability to more fully evaluate each component of the theme experience.

7: PLANNED NEXT STEPS AND TIME LINE

A: The institution has done an excellent job applying continuous improvement principles in the identification of components of this project which will continue to evolve and contribute to overall success. However, as previously stated, measurement may be more meaningful and better managed by prioritization of the components, and possibly developing some of these as stand alone projects.

8: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, QUESTIONS, OR CONCERNS

A: The institution is to be commended for the documentation of the extensive work involved in this project. The institutional challenge is to determine how to best use the information.