New Special Emphasis Requirement in Essential Studies Program
March 6, 2024

Summary: After a deliberative, faculty-driven process, the Essential Studies Committee proposes the addition of a new "Digital Information Literacy" special emphasis requirement for UND Essential Studies students.

Background

State Board Policy:
In May of 2023, the State Board of Higher Education (SBHE) issued Policy 461 requiring that NDUS institutions make a digital literacy requirement for all associate and baccalaureate-level programs

They defined Digital Literacy in the following manner: "The ability to use technology to find information, evaluate sources, create content, and communicate with others effectively. It's a skill set used to navigate the new technological paradigm in which society operates." The SBHE also identified the following learning outcomes:

a. Evaluate and interpret the accuracy, credibility, and relevance of digital information;
b. Describe the ways in which society and culture interact with digital technology;
c. Demonstrate the knowledge to use digital technology safely and ethically at a basic level;
d. Understand the applicability of digital literacy and artificial intelligence to the current and emerging workforce.

ESC Response:
In the fall of 2023, the Essential Studies Committee voted to explore how a new Special Emphasis Requirement, if added to the ES Program, could address the academic learning outcomes of the SBHE policy.

Essential Studies Committee wanted to stay true to Essential Studies as an academic program that enriches the undergraduate experience through a liberal arts education. In particular, the ESC wanted to explore how Information Literacy, which is already a central learning goal of the ES Program, could be linked to Digital Literacy. This connection is meant to move UND student learning beyond simply *using* technology to one that encourages students to think about epistemology and how we ascertain truth; how we create, consume, and share information ethically; and how technology is shaping individuals while also shaping the larger society.

Therefore, the Motion below is intended to address SBHE learning outcomes "a," "b," and "d" through an ES Special Emphasis requirement. While elements of "c" will be taught in this Special Emphasis requirement, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies & Student Success has also worked to secure the funding and institutional support for learning modules that entering students will take to address the simpler elements of learning goal "c": modules that ensure students can use technology "safely" and "at a basic level." Students will benefit if their major program and Career Services also work to address outcome "d."

Why a "Special Emphasis" requirement:
Special Emphasis courses are designed to be an "overlay" in the ES Program. That is, they are either overlaid on courses that meet the Breadth of Knowledge areas in ES (Fine Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, or MST) or overlaid on courses that meet requirements in the major. Therefore, a Special Emphasis does not necessitate the addition of credit hours to ES or to a student's program of study.

Currently, we have Special Emphasis requirements that line up with ES's Learning goals of communication (the "A"), intercultural knowledge (the "D" and "W" courses), and quantitative reasoning ("Q"). We do *not* have a special emphasis that enforces student learning in Information Literacy, and in addition, very few ES classes claim Information Literacy as their primary learning goal.

Even before SBHE Policy 461, UND faculty members and librarians had been concerned about better addressing student's civic online reasoning—and helping students find, use, and create digital information ethically and responsibly. Requiring a new Digital Information Literacy Special Emphasis course would ensure that UND undergraduates have practice responsibly using digital information.

Process

The following motion is the result of a deliberative, faculty-driven process designed to address learning outcomes "a," "b," and "d" of SBHE Policy 461 in an academic manner through UND's general education program, Essential Studies:

1) After initial ESC discussions about the policy, a subcommittee of the ES, the Steering Committee, was formed to explore the creation of a new Special Emphasis and to develop a timeline for implementation.
2) On October 3, 2023, the Steering Committee met with stakeholders from across campus to discuss a feasible implementation and timeline. That meeting included representatives from the Senate Executive Committee, Libraries/Library Committee, Registrar's Office, Curriculum Committee, University Writing Program, and Teaching Transformation and Development.
3) On October 19, ESC and Steering Committee Chair Nicole Derenne met with the Senate Executive Committee to discuss the process and timeline for proposing a new ES Special Emphasis requirement.
4) On November 2, Nicole Derenne presented the ESC's initial recommendations for a new Special Emphasis to the UND Senate.
5) Shortly thereafter, the campus received a message asking for feedback on the implementation plan and timeline, as well as for volunteers for a Working Group, with a deadline of November 15.
6) A 40-person Working Group, with staff and faculty representatives from across campus, was formed and met on December 8.
7) The Steering Committee has met frequently throughout the fall and spring to coordinate these efforts and to keep the process moving forward.
8) A subcommittee of the Working Group, The Learning Goal Team, was formed and included UND Librarians, Faculty, and Staff, representing a range of disciplines and a variety of campus entities.
9) The Learning Goal Team met five times in January and February of 2024. They read and discussed several articles—selected by UND Librarians—to develop an informed understanding of the pedagogies and learning recommended by experts in the field.
10) The Team's informed discussions led to the naming of the new Special Emphasis ("Digital Information Literacy") and to the descriptive language and validation criteria grid. This working draft was then circulated to the Essential Studies Committee (2/15) and to the members of the Digital Literacy Working Group (2/19) for feedback.
11) On February 20, the working draft produced by the Learning Goal Team was presented to the Senate Executive Committee by Nicole Derenne and Lori Robison.

12) On February 23, the Learning Goal Team met for a final time to consider feedback and revise. Their recommendations were then sent to the Essential Studies Committee.
13) On February 29, the Essential Studies Committee voted affirmatively to bring the motion below to the University Senate.

Motion:

Going forward, the Essential Studies program will require that students—starting with all first-time college students beginning in Fall 2024 and all new transfer students beginning in Fall 2025—take a Special Emphasis course in "Digital Information Literacy."

[Please note: After much consideration, this title was selected because it references the larger learning goal, Information Literacy, which is already an established part of the Essential Studies program, while also drawing attention to the digital elements that the SBHE has required UND to address.]

- **The following description (developed by the Learning Goals Team) will be used to describe what the Special Emphasis Course is meant to do and the kind of learning it is meant to address:**

The Information Society needs a citizenry capable of accessing, creating, evaluating, organizing, interpreting, and disseminating information in increasingly digital formats: these transferrable and applied skills are necessary for success in the current and emerging workforce—and also necessary for active, thoughtful, and ethical participation in contemporary democratic society.

To this end, the Essential Studies Program requires students to take a class with a special emphasis in "Digital Information Literacy." The design of these courses needs to be informed by several key Information Literacy concepts, as articulated by the Association of College and Research Libraries: 1) Authority is Constructed and Contextual; 2) Information Creation as a Process; 3) Information Has Value; 4) Research as Inquiry; 5) Scholarship as Conversation; and 6) Searching as Strategic Exploration. At the same time, such classes will teach students specialized tools and practices for finding, evaluating, and using information—in a variety of digital formats or mediums—effectively, efficiently, safely, and ethically.

In addition, these classes should empower students to actively participate in information environments. **Digital citizens need transferable, foundational skills that prepare us to work with and evaluate new technologies—like artificial intelligence—and to be ready for emerging and future technologies.** To become digital citizens, students need opportunities to be active learners who practice the rhetorical skills that come with communicating, creating, and distributing their own research; they need to practice the metacognition that helps learners reflect on their own cognitive, ethical, and emotional growth in digital spaces; they need opportunities to participate in interactive environments as critical thinkers; they need responsible, epistemic strategies for evaluating the information and misinformation that we encounter, asking themselves how we know what we know; they need to become critical information consumers that can collect, interpret, and apply a range of data and information.

Classes in "Digital Information Literacy" will, therefore, strengthen student agency as they encourage the dispositions that learners need to participate actively and thoughtfully in digital information environments.

- **This grid (developed by the Learning Goals Team) will be used to validate and revalidate courses in this Special Emphasis area:**

Criteria	Evidence Supports?
Course design is informed by the following Information Literacy concepts: 1) Authority is Constructed and Contextual; 2) Information Creation as a Process; 3) Information Has Value; 4) Research as Inquiry; 5) Scholarship as Conversation; and 6) Searching as Strategic Exploration.	
Digital Citizens need foundational skills that prepare us to work with and evaluate new technologies—like artificial intelligence—and to be ready for future technologies. Course develops transferable and applied skills necessary for the current and emerging workforce: the course teaches specialized tools and practices for finding, evaluating, and using digital information effectively, efficiently, safely, thoughtfully, and ethically.	
Strengthening student agency, the course involves students in actual practice with rhetorical thinking through opportunities to access, communicate, create, and distribute information.	
Course provides opportunities for metacognition: opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning.	
Developing a digital citizen who is aware of the ways society and culture interact with technology, the course teaches critical thinking skills and interpretive strategies across modalities, helping students critically evaluate information, its contexts and availability.	
Productively engaging with digital information is an explicit and primary component of the course: The Digital Information Literacy material must comprise **at least 1/3** of the course's focus and graded assignments.	
Must meet Information Literacy Learning Goal	
Must not carry any other Special Emphasis designation nor may it be a Capstone course	
Must be at the 200 level or higher	

[Please note: A repository of resources will be created and made available for faculty course development. Many of the criteria in this grid, for example, will include references to external sources so that faculty can learn more as they design or redesign course offerings for the special emphasis.]

SBHE Policy 461 Learning Outcomes
   a. Evaluate and interpret the accuracy, credibility, and relevance of digital information;
   b. Describe the ways in which society and culture interact with digital technology;
   c. Demonstrate the knowledge to use digital technology safely and ethically at a basic level;
   d. Understand the applicability of digital literacy and artificial intelligence to the current and emerging workforce.

Continued Implementation Plans

Spring 2024:
The Working Group will meet again this spring to develop a communications plan to keep campus informed of the new Special Emphasis. A small group of librarians and faculty members will work on creating a digital repository of sources and suggested assignments that will aid faculty in future course development. The ESC will validate a small number of new Digital Information Literacy courses for AY 2024-25.

Summer 2024:
Plans are underway to create faculty course development opportunities.

Fall 2024:
Faculty across campus will be invited to submit to the ESC, in December of 2024, materials to validate new Digital Information Literacy Special Emphasis courses.

Frequently Asked Questions

1) **Isn't this a big change to the Essential Studies program? Have we made changes like this in the past?**

   From the start of the ES program, there was a recognition that students' learning needs might change. UND wanted a general education that could respond, and thus the Special Emphasis component of the program was understood as a place where particular, evolving learning needs could be addressed. For example, when ES assessment data showed us that our former "U" and "G" Special Emphasis courses were not adequately promoting intercultural knowledge and skills, the University Senate approved a recommendation from the ESC to create new "D" and "W" Special Emphasis courses for UND students entering Fall 2020.

2) **Does a New Special Emphasis Requirement in ES add credit hours to ES or to a student's program of study?**

   No, Special Emphasis requirements are an "overlay." They are added either: 1) to courses in the ES Breadth of Knowledge areas (Fine Arts, Humanities, MST, or Social Sciences), or 2) to courses in the major. In short, students get credit for the Special Emphasis while completing another ES requirement or a requirement in the major.

3) **Were other methods for addressing SBHE Policy 461 considered--methods that wouldn't have involved Essential Studies?**

   The creation of a single required course in Digital Literacy for all UND students would have come with incredible challenges for staffing and resources, because hundreds of seats would be needed each semester. Such a required course could also add credit hours to students' programs of study—or might have had the unintended consequence of replacing other important coursework.

   A series of online modules that students could take on their own were also considered as a means of addressing the policy. However, once the ESC considered the close connections

between information and digital literacies—and the critical importance of these skills for a 21st century citizenry—we wanted to encourage strong faculty engagement and more active student learning through the ES program.

4) **Will the SBHE be satisfied with this plan to address Digital Literacy? How are other institutions in the state responding to the policy?**

UND is going above and beyond what we are required to do by the State. We are addressing the policy learning outcomes and, at the same time, making our general education program responsive to crucial student learning needs that many in our faculty want to address. We are thinking about pedagogical approaches that will help students learn through practice.

Other state institutions are addressing the state policy through a required course, an addition of material to an existing required course, or a series of online modules for students. UND's faculty-driven approach should stand out—as we strive to create opportunities for real and active student learning.

5) **Why create such detailed descriptions and criteria for validation? Wouldn't it be easier to ask faculty to validate courses according to the SBHE learning outcomes?**

The Learning Goal Team wanted UND's course offerings to reflect current pedagogical practices and expert knowledge in the field, with hopes that they would create an important educational framework that UND's faculty could get behind.

In addition, over the years, we have learned that the more specific the ESC can be in its articulation of student learning goals and course criteria, the better. Faculty appreciate a better understanding of how their own courses will contribute to the program; the ESC can be more consistent as it makes validation decisions; and, perhaps most importantly, specific learning goals mean that we can better communicate the value of the ES program and its requirements to students. In short, clear standards lead to more consistent ES course offerings—and, ultimately, we hope, to more meaningful student learning.

6) **Are there particular academic disciplines that are best suited for teaching Digital Information Literacy?**

Every discipline uses information, and thus every discipline in the information age must come to terms with how the changing digital environment makes a difference to our work, to society and culture, and to our students as both citizens and workers.

The Learning Goals Team intentionally created course descriptions and criteria that could be addressed in a range of disciplines. Under this validation criteria, the course can be *about* any theme or topic, but the key for validation as a Digital Information Literacy Special Emphasis will be that students are given significant opportunities to actively practice—and to reflect on—these critical skills. UND's Librarians will be very willing to help faculty design such activities and assignments.

7) **How will learning in the new Special Emphasis area be assessed?**

Information Literacy is still one of the overarching goals of the ES Program, and the new Special Emphasis has been designed to improve learning under that larger umbrella category. Therefore, the ES program will continue to assess student learning in Information Literacy with the current VALUE rubric. We hope, of course, that the added Special Emphasis course requirement will improve student learning—and that future assessment efforts will reflect that improvement.

8) **Why validate only a few new Digital Information Literacy courses for Fall 2024 while saving the bulk of the validations for Fall 2025?**

The May 2023 SBHE policy created a very tight timeline for implementation. To deal with this timeline, we are recognizing that very few new students entering in fall 2024 will need to have completed the new Special Emphasis course in their first year. While the ESC will make sure that a few courses are ready for students to take if necessary in AY 2024-25, we will save most validations for Fall 2025. This will give faculty members time to plan course revisions and/or to participate in summer course development, and it will also help the ESC maintain consistent and high standards for course validation.

9) **Will there be enough Digital Information Literacy courses going forward?**

If we value this learning and want to make it part of our general education program, it will be incumbent upon all of us to encourage colleagues to develop such courses. Summer faculty development opportunities are currently being created to encourage new course validations in Fall 2024. Programs should consider how they might address learning in these areas and develop a Special Emphasis overlay to a course in the major. Courses offered to ES Students in Fine Arts, Humanities, MST, and Social Science disciplines might find that they enjoy increased enrollments by adding this Special Emphasis designation.

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