To: Academic Council, through College Council  
From: Marek Steedman, Director of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Date: 9/25/14  
RE: New Degree Program Proposal: Bachelor of Liberal Studies

The Office of Interdisciplinary Programs proposes a new degree program, Liberal Studies. The program would offer a Bachelor of Liberal Studies and be housed in the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies. The proposed degree would be offered from August 2015, on both Hattiesburg and Gulfparks campuses. BLS prefixed courses would also be delivered online. We do not need additional faculty or graduate assistants to begin to offer the degree program. The proposed degree plan has been approved by the faculty in Interdisciplinary Studies as well as the Office of Interdisciplinary Programs Advisory Group.

Enclosed please find:

• A completed copy of the IHL New Degree Program Form
• A proposed program assessment plan
• A degree plan for the BLS
• A copy of the IR Processing Form
• A statement of impact from the University Librarian
• An Online Program Proposal Information Form
• An Articulation Agreement
• Proposals to add three BLS prefixed courses:
  o BLS 401 (Research Seminar) (3hrs)
  o BLS 402 (Capstone Supplement) (1hr)
  o BLS 491 (Experiential Learning Experience) (3hrs)

Description of Proposed Curriculum:

Students completing a Bachelor’s of Liberal Studies would complete all necessary requirements of the GEC. Students would then choose a single concentration, from among the minors on offer at the University of Southern Mississippi, in the same way that IDS students do currently (in the BIS students choose two concentrations). Students would then complete the rest of their coursework with a distribution of courses across three out of the six colleges. Students would need to meet any pre- or co-requisite requirements before selecting any course. In their final semester, students would complete the BLS Capstone Experience by selecting either BLS 401 (Research Seminar), a traditional research course, or BLS 491 (Experiential Learning Experience), in which students would complete a service or other experiential learning project and complete a series of reflection essays and written reports (see attached syllabi). Students would concurrently enroll, whether they selected BLS 401 or BLS 491, in BLS 402 (Capstone Supplement), a one-hour course focused on professional development and career preparedness.
Rationale for Proposed Degree Plan:

The proposed degree plan is intended primarily to offer a path to completion for students who have accumulated some college credit, but have not achieved a four-year degree. We hope that the program will serve the needs, however, of three distinct populations of students: a) current students in IDS whose academic and career goals are not well suited to an interdisciplinary research degree; b) returning students with some college, who have been out of college for some time, and who are seeking to complete a degree while remaining in the work force or attending to family responsibilities; c) undeclared students who are looking for a more flexible and general degree plan than the University currently offers.

A) Over the last five years, the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at USM has expanded as it worked to meet the needs two broad categories of students: students seeking a true interdisciplinary degree with emphasis on research, and students seeking a broader and more flexible degree. In order to better fulfill its true mission, the IDS program has recently modified its curriculum, expanding its requirements and hence further widening the gap between the two populations the degree has tried to serve. Yet we recognize the value of enabling students to find a path toward degree completion and to provide broad-based academic training. The proposed BLS degree will enable the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies degree to meet its stated mission even while meeting the needs of the many students at USM who seek the credential of a Bachelor’s degree. This plan has been generated through program level assessment of the core sequence in IDS, as well as two years of deliberation and study by the IDS Advisory Group.

B) Recent studies by the Pew Research Center and other agencies point to the correlation between higher education and both employment status and income level: graduates of 4-year colleges perform better in the job market than those with only a high school or an associates degree. US Census Bureau statistics from 2012 bear this out for the state of Mississippi: over a 3-year period, 85% of those with a bachelors degree or higher were in the waged workforce, by contrast with only 68% of those with a high school education. By providing a clear and ready path to degree completion and allowing for completion online, the proposed B.L.S. will help USM retain and graduate more students. Further, by focusing on broad categories of learning rather than disciplinary specialization, the B.L.S. will graduate students who are flexible, adaptable, and wide-ranging in their skills—students who are well prepared for the evolving demands of waged work in the 21st century.

C) In formulating the number of students enrolling in and graduating from the proposed program, we drew heavily from statistics regarding the current population of Undeclared students on the USM campus. Many of our current Undeclared students seek flexibility in both curriculum and method of instruction. Students expressing interest in the kind of flexibility the proposed BLS offers include, but are not limited to, veterans, ROTC, pre-professional, junior-senior transfer, non-traditional, and returning students. There is already, in short, a large and ready population for the degree. We predict a fairly large group enrolling in the program in Year One, with growth in the 15-20% range over the next several years. Graduation numbers are projected based on the percentage of students reaching senior status for each year, current university-wide graduation rates, and anticipated growth in the program as a result of recruitment.

Perhaps most importantly, the BLS will assist the university’s efforts to enhance student persistence and increase graduation rates by offering a degree that can be completed in both traditional and online formats and by offering an attractive option to students who have some college education but who, for any number of reasons, halted their education before completing their degree.