Proposal for Changes to the Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) Degree in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Introduction:

CUSA was asked to examine the Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) degree with departmental majors. Specifically, the goal was to identify the place of the BGS degree in the system of undergraduate degrees offered by the College and recommend future directions and academic standards for the BGS degree with a major. An additional goal was to examine how the BGS degree with majors supports the overall undergraduate educational mission of the College.

Background:

Historically, BGS degrees were developed across the US in the 1970s and 1980s as universities sought to engage with non-traditional students and provide a more flexible avenue for degree completion. There is little agreement on the specific qualities common to a BGS degree, and not all colleges and universities offer them; none of our peer institutions does. The inclusion of a major in KU’s BGS degree differentiates us from other institutions. In the context of KU, recent iterations of the BGS degree were justified as offering students more flexibility given the extensive demands of the General Education requirements. With the implementation of the KU Core, however, all CLAS students now have more flexibility, with even those pursuing the BA now having greater flexibility than was ever offered to BGS students. The implementation of the KU Core in particular requires that we reconsider the BGS and reshape it to best serve the population we believe most benefits from it.

With this in mind, over the last two years, CUSA has undertaken discussions of the scope, purpose, and place of the BGS degree amongst the other degrees offered by CLAS. The Bachelor of Science (BS) offers depth; the Bachelor of Arts (BA) balances breadth and depth. For the BGS to remain a distinct degree, CUSA believes that the BGS must emphasize breadth while maintaining the educational rigor that puts it on par with both the BA and BS.

In order to re-imagine the BGS within the new landscape created by the KU Core, CUSA undertook sizeable information-gathering tasks, with the support of Student Academic Services staff members, in an attempt to gather information regarding (a) the general profile of students typically pursing the BGS degree and (b) the opinions and objectives of various stakeholders regarding the BGS degree (see attached data). CUSA’s ultimate goal was to revise the BGS degree in such a way that it best serves a particular student population and maintains credibility both at KU and for outside stakeholders.

We note that there is a small population of students who pursue a BGS because they are completing degrees in one of the professional schools and want also to pursue a major in the College. CUSA believes that we want to continue to encourage this activity, but that there are other ways to facilitate College Bachelor’s degrees for these students. The BGS requirements recommended below thus do not treat this special population.

CUSA identified several characteristics of a large proportion of BGS students based on the available data:
- The BGS degree accounts for at least 34% of the total undergraduate majors (min 0%, max 67%) for approximately 75% of CLAS departments.

- The majority of students who choose the BGS enter the workforce immediately after graduation, rather than pursuing graduate or professional school.

- Students often choose the BGS late in their careers at KU; many choose it as a way to graduate more quickly.

- Although students are drawn from a range of achievement levels and preparation, the average incoming test scores and KU GPA of BGS students are lower than those of BA and BS students.

- Half of the students who choose the BGS do so because they want to avoid the 4-semester BA language requirement.

Overall, CUSA believes that the current BGS degree requires substantial revision in order to meet the unique needs of students who typically pursue this degree at the University of Kansas. Specifically, it appears that the proper place of the BGS degree within the degrees offered by the College is one that (a) offers elements of both breadth (similar to BA degree) and depth (similar to BS degree), (b) preserves educational rigor valued by the College, and (c) specifically prepares students for the workforce with intellectual flexibility and expertise in a variety of areas.

Proposal:

CUSA proposes that the BGS is best suited to prepare students for the workforce with a variety of intellectual tools and skills. With this in mind, we recommend the following as requirement for the KU BGS degree with major:

1. **Fulfillment of KU Core Requirements**

   *Justification*
   
   “The KU Core is designed to yield fundamental skills, build a broad background of knowledge, generate capacities and opportunities for blending and creating ideas, strengthen an appreciation of cultural and global diversity, and cultivate ethical integrity. The KU Core educational goals are integrated into all of the degrees and majors pursued by undergraduate students at the University of Kansas.” (KU Core Website)

2. **Major**

3. **BGS Degree Specific Requirements**

   a. **Second focus area:**
      i. 2nd major or degree; or
      ii. a minor

   *Justification*
While the BGS degree is primarily focused on breadth, CUSA does not want to sacrifice the depth opportunities available in other degree options. Therefore a second focus area is required for this degree. The second major or minor offers the depth desired making this degree a combination of a strong liberal arts education, but also providing students with the opportunity to further explore academic disciplines. CUSA feels that the second focus area will help prepare students for a wide variety of career paths after graduation from KU.

b. Oral and Written Communication:

Students must select one of the following course options:

i. 1 additional KU Core Goal 2.1 (written communication) course beyond the KU Core 2.1 requirement.

ii. 1 additional KU Core Goal 2.2 (oral communication) course beyond the KU Core 2.2 requirement.

iii. 1 non-English language course that focuses on written or oral communication beyond the KU Core 2.1 or 2.2 requirement.

Justification:
In the age of globalization and social media, it is important for students entering the workplace to have excellent oral and written communication skills. Given the likelihood of BGS students pursuing employment directly following graduation, CUSA believes that these students require written/oral communication preparation beyond the basic courses required by the KU Core. Specifically, we want BGS students to have adequate training in communication such that they are more likely to successfully adapt to the needs of an ever-changing employment environment.

c. Quantitative Literacy:

Students must pass an additional course beyond the KU Core Quantitative Literacy goal with a pre-requisite of Math 101, or another course approved by CUSA (e.g. statistics, modeling).

Justification:
Basic quantitative literacy is essential for success beyond graduation, both on the job and off. This requirement follows the justification for the BA, which argued that basic quantitative skills are essential in the current economy, and that algebraic skills are the foundation for most other math courses such as statistics. The goal is to prepare KU college graduates for the social and economic demands of the 21st century. The importance of quantitative reasoning for all citizens will continue to grow in the future. We cannot predict the technology and the work environment that our students will face twenty or forty years from now. Even though manufacturing jobs once required no mathematical skills and provided a path for those not finishing high school, today, according to a recent NPR report, manufacturing workers need algebra and trigonometry. A recent report on quantitative literacy from the Mathematical Association of America noted that “sociologists draw inferences from data to understand human behavior; biologists develop computer algorithms to map the human genome; factory supervisors use ‘six-sigma’ strategies to ensure quality control; entrepreneurs project markets and costs using computer spreadsheets; lawyers use statistical evidence and arguments involving probabilities to convince jurors.” To reach the necessary level of quantitative reasoning, one must first achieve competency in college algebra (Math 101). To understand and calculate with the formulas of statistics, for example, one
needs significant experience with variables and their functional relationships.

d.  Language and Culture:

Students may complete this requirement in one of three ways:

i.  Two semesters of non-English language study (including ASL), or proof of two-semester proficiency in a language other than English.

ii. One semester of non-English language study (including ASL), or proof of one-semester proficiency in a language other than English; and one additional Goal 4.2 course beyond the KU Core; or

iii. Three additional Goal 4.2 courses beyond the KU Core 4.2 Requirement.

Justification:
Language study offers students a broad range of benefits, including enhancing their understanding of language structure (laying the foundation for other-language learning as well as improving native language skills), and exposing them to other-cultural thinking, both of which are especially important in an increasingly global economy. Participatory competency in non-English languages and cultures is ever more essential as the global community becomes increasingly central in our lives and requires that we interact with other cultures, economies, peoples, and nations. As the KU Core states, “participating in 21st century society means acquiring knowledge and understanding of the world beyond our immediate experience and culture,” “reexamine our own lives in a global context,” and “enabling [our students] to engage with the languages, cultures, customs, beliefs, and/or behaviors from the world’s various communities,” tasks which can best be accomplished with participatory knowledge of the non-English languages that drive those communities and cultures. Non English language capabilities and cultural knowledge are integral to the BGS and liberal education, the aims of which are to develop a citizenry broadly informed and capable of critical inquiry and appraisal, to provide fundamental knowledge and understanding of human complexities, to enable our students to communicate effectively in a global economy, and to ensure that they have the cross-cultural linguistic tools more and more necessary to succeed in an interconnected and multilingual world.

The BGS degree is intended to give graduates flexibility and choice in future career options. The requirement encourages student exposure to language study with the hope that they will choose to take full advantage of the benefits of KU’s diverse offerings in language.

e.  Experiential Career Preparation:

Students must take an approved internship program, a service learning program offered through departments, or a career-focused course such as LA&S 492: The Job Search.

Justification:
Students with clear career paths who choose the BGS as well as those who come to the BGS late with no clear employment trajectory are both well-served by coursework or experiences geared to prepare them for the workplace. These courses all serve this goal in different ways.

f.  Laboratory or field experience:

Students may complete this requirement in one of three ways:
i. a combined lecture-laboratory course;
ii. a credit-bearing laboratory course or field experience; or
iii. a credit-bearing independent study

**Justification:**
An understanding of experimentation and observation as the basis of scientific understanding is a critical component of basic scientific literacy. Successful laboratory courses or field experiences enable students to learn and implement experimental procedures to collect data and analyze these data to formulate scientific understanding. Moreover, these experiences integrate thinking and introduce science as an active process. The goal of coursework in the sciences is not simply to learn specific content, but to develop empirical skills and understand the foundation on which scientific knowledge rests. Although lecture courses can successfully convey scientific information to students, laboratory and field experiences allow students to engage experimental and observational methods, presenting science as an active process. Consequently, these experiences play a unique role in advancing scientific literacy. The aim of the laboratory or field experience requirement is not solely to have students acquire specific skills in experimentation, observation, and data analysis but also to place the acquisition of scientific knowledge in a new, active context and develop a conceptual understanding of the experimental process and its central role in the sciences. The BGS degree is intended to give graduates the greatest flexibility and choice in future career. With this in mind, students should be familiar with a range of methods and approaches to knowledge. Consequently, while the new KU Core Curriculum does not have a specific laboratory requirement, the addition of this requirement for the BGS degree is in keeping with the spirit of this degree.

**Review of Degree**

While CUSA believes that these degree requirements would serve students, we also propose that CUSA conduct a formalized degree review within five academic years (completed by Spring 2020). This review would determine the degree’s ability to meet the learning outcomes stated above, and better ascertain the BGS degree’s place within the College’s undergraduate academic portfolio. CUSA suggests the following measures for review: an alumni survey determining job readiness, time to degree rates, and median declaration point for the BGS. The review would include a recommendation to the Dean of the College and College Academic Council for either:

1. Continuation of the BGS Degree with a major as-is
2. Modification of existing requirements
3. Discontinuance of the BGS Degree with a major