For my contribution to the University of Illinois at Urbana project, The Ethnography of the University (EOTU), I approached a topic that I am personally connected to, but that is also central to understanding what a university is intended to offer, an education. Academically speaking, the role of a university is to educate as well as to train students for their future. In terms of my own connection to this topic, both of my parents are professors and I have lived near college campuses for all of my life. More importantly, for the last two years, I have worked as an academic peer advisor in the Illinois State University’s Academic Advisement Center. Through this job, I have not only worked along the side of students, by assisting them in their choices of classes and majors, but I have also been able to work with them in a classroom setting as a Peer Leader in the new freshmen introductory course, LinC (learning in communities). This position on campus has privileged me with offering an awareness of many opinions that circulate around the notions of the proper education taught at a university and what is desired. These opinions often exist in conflict and my project is embedded within this situation.

From the beginning of this project, my goal was to analyze the role of General Education. The General Education system is a large portion of a university education, especially at ISU, and also a commonality shared by many individuals on a college campus. The idea for the now active General Education was formed in 1992 and
gradually replaced the old University Studies program. University Studies consisted of a large assortment of courses that were divided into eight categories in which students were free to pick from. These classes existed in loose association to one another, creating a type of open menu. The creation of the ISU General Education program was in response to a national trend that desired the creation of a more integrated academic experience with definable goals. According to a few university related documents, the purpose of General Education is to encourage students to pursue other courses of study besides their major (IBHE) and to prepare students for “the expectations that the world will place on you once you finish school” (ISU General Education Program).

Instead of attempting to study this large topic as a whole I narrowed in my sights on the now absent Foundations of Inquiry (FOI). FOI was cancelled last year and this semester is a good moment to capture this experience. The class was designed as the introduction to ISU’s General Education program and accompanied this large batch of required classes. In many sources that date to this courses conception FOI was considered to be the “cornerstone” of the ISU General Education. The specific goal of FOI was to provide a single shared experience for all freshmen students that emphasized the necessity for critical thinking at the university. I like to think of this course as what the university envisioned as a key to success in a general education curriculum. Without this class, a casual observer is left to think what state is the General Education program left in?

This initial question targets a developmental issue for the General Education program that I focused on in my project. My main question is how the General Education program at ISU is developing? This system was formed with specific
objectives in mind and with the erasure of the introductory class, FOI, have these goals changed? I conducted my study through an analysis of General Education’s setbacks as well as successes. The primary setback in this study is the creation and subsequent deletion of the FOI program and some successes include the structuring of the ISU General Education system and recent efforts to introduce freshmen to college life. This topic is worth investigating because at the heart of all these courses, differing opinions, and planning efforts is the key to understanding ISU’s strategy for education.

II. Methods

In order to conduct this study I utilized a variety of ethnographic methods. Personal experience was one of my most useful tools because from the outset I understood where I should look to gather more information on my topic. Other methods used included, observation, research, and interviews. For the most part, I used observation only in the initial steps of my study. During my daily schedule I recorded notes concerning student and instructor behavior in a General Education course I was enrolled in and one that I was an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant in. These observations, along with ones made in the advisement office I work in, supported my previous notion that, on the surface, General Education classes were often not enjoyed and their function in a university education was not understood.

Observations by no means provided the wealth of information I gathered. I accumulated most of my data through research, but primarily through interviews. I carried out research that investigated university documents concerning General Education and FOI as well as campus publications, such as the ISU newspaper, The Daily Vidette. I
also gathered articles from education-based journals that provided more information on General Education systems at universities in general. Through these research efforts I was able to educate myself, amongst other things, about the trends in education beginning in the early 20th Century up to the present. Along with this research, specific sections from Rebecca Nathan’s, *My Freshmen Year*, were also beneficial in providing a source useful in comparing and contrasting education settings.

The majority of the information I used in this study came from interviews. In total, I interviewed nine individuals that were all involved with General Education and FOI in different ways. I interviewed four of my co-workers (Peer advisors), a freshmen enrolled in the new freshmen introductory course, two professors that were involved in the planning and teaching of FOI, the General Education coordinator, and the coordinator of the new freshmen introductory class. I conducted my interviews using a semi-structured format. I prepared a round of questions that I wanted to use as my foundation, but did not limit dialog based on this structure. Conversation was free flowing, allowing both interviewee and myself to feel comfortable with one another. I recorded most of these interviews and my analyses stem from these conversations.

III. Data

Upon evaluation of the information I gathered a number of relevant points were made apparent that provide the setting in which ISU’s General Education is developing. First of all, FOI was cancelled due to a variety of reasons. This conclusion was voiced in a number of written sources as well as by interviewees. From *The Daily Vidette*, the financial impracticality of FOI was cited. It stated that FOI ran for 7 years and in 2002
had 115 sections, which cost the university millions in staffing and organizing. All 3 individuals interviewed who were involved in the planning and teaching of FOI repeated this same line of reasoning. One interviewee stated that the money needed to continue FOI was equivalent to the hiring of 50 new faculty. Another reason for the cancellation of FOI was the inherent difficulties in the design of this course. The course began as serving the transition function from high school to college, but then in its later stages evolved into the instruction of critical thinking. It appears that the specific purpose of this course was written in sand and was often left to the devices of the specific instructor. One interviewee described summer planning sessions for this course as a situation similar to a “horse being designed by a committee, you get a giraffe that’s not good at one thing.” It seems that in terms of practice FOI was not the ideal introduction to ISU’s General Education program. I believe there exists a fundamental reason why this course was erased from the General Education core curriculum, and this was the lack of understanding by both instructors. One interviewer concluded that, “FOI was a great idea as an idea.” Too abstract of course goals left teachers wondering how to teach inquiry at the university level to incoming freshmen, and students questioned the use of such an introductory course in their college development.

While FOI was considered to be the cornerstone to the ISU General Education this educational structure is still standing. This has a lot to do with the instituted revisions that began with the switch from University Studies program and continue even after the cancellation of this course. As indicated by the General Education Coordinator, “no one course is responsible for any one program objective.” The recent transition from FOI has resulted in the dispersal of the useful portions of the course, such as critical
thinking, to more practical course applications, like in introductory English and
Communication classes. This reliance on practicality to transmit university objectives is
the key to connecting students to ISU’s General Education. The abstract nature of FOI
was not complimentary to the current brand of students entering ISU. Out of the five ISU
students I interviewed all of these individuals knew the major they wanted to pursue
entering college or were quick to find one. While this is not to say that all students
entering ISU know what they want to be when they grow up, the general feeling I
received from my research indicates a more project-oriented student. Many of the
students interviewed stated that they decided to go to ISU because it’s specific major
concentrations, such as education, meshed with their higher learning objectives. It
appears that students desire structure to their learning in order for them to achieve their
educational goals. A course, such as FOI, set out to provide a structured introduction to
the structure of General Education, but in the end apparently lacked in this department.
Thus, it was only natural that ISU decided to send this course the way of Old Yeller.

The last point made apparent by my research concerns the formulation of a new
introductory course targeted at freshmen. The course caters to incoming students that
desire instruction in transitioning from high school to college. This is a step by ISU to
provide students with the tools they need to succeed in their undergraduate studies.
While a mandatory, introductory class like FOI did not work for a variety of reasons, a
class such as LinC has a better chance based on an awareness of the failings of FOI.
When I interviewed the coordinator of this new course I asked whether LinC was created
in response to the cancellation of FOI. She responded by a yes and a no answer. It is true
that LinC is a similar model to FOI, with its concentration on freshmen experience, but
the course objectives and the volunteer nature of the class are very different. Introducing the practical social applications on a campus is the main focus of LinC. Students get to know one another in a classroom setting, and these students are present in their other General Education classes as well. According to the LinC student I interviewed this was the most beneficial feature of the class, and she indicated that the primary benefit to her was that she now has friends. She stated that her fellow LinC classmates are individuals she is able to call upon when in academic need. This type of relationship, though not intimately personal, appears to be very useful during a freshmen’s first year experience. The practical minded student is able to create functional relationships that ease their transition into the college workload. I believe this is a very proactive step by ISU to provide an introductory course that assists in the completion of their intended objectives.

IV. Relevance

I believe this project reveals the developmental steps ISU has taken to relate to the ever-changing student body. More importantly, I believe it describes the catering nature of modern public universities. With the increasing reduction of government support, college institutions are more reliant on their paying population, and if students aren’t buying what the university is selling there exists a serious problem. Universities will continue relying on programs such as General Education to provide a foundation of knowledge beneficial throughout undergraduate studies and beyond. But developmentally, public universities are formulating strategies that are in line with the current mindsets of incoming students. ISU is no different. When FOI was first introduced, it was intended to provide a structure that would introduce freshmen to the
general academic requirements of the university. Due to a number of reasons FOI gradually reduced its role as the cornerstone to General Education and was removed. In reality, there is no one course at ISU that supports the entire General Education system. The system forms an integrated whole that at times is a burden to students, but when introduced the right way, students can formulate practical strategies that enable success on their own terms. While the objectives of General Education have remained the same I believe that they are being broadcasted in new ways to relate to current students.

V. Implications

My project results reveal the changing educational setting of one university, but I believe as a whole my analyses are relevant on other campuses across the United States. Unlike the specialized European model of higher education, which naturally restricts individuals from pursuing higher education, in the US, the goal is to afford the opportunity for anyone to get a college education. This means college classrooms are filled with students of many different abilities and intended goals. Developmentally, universities need to accommodate to this thriving mass of students. I advise faculty-administration to stray away from course designs that rely on abstract concepts. I do not believe this encourages the college-level thinking universities are trying to bring about. Instead, universities ought to provide practical applications that assist incoming students in the facets of campus life and introductory coursework. The 21st century, project-minded student does not want to question what they know in their introductory freshmen course. They want to know what faculty-administrators can do to assist them in their goals.
In order to provide more helpful insights into university curriculum planning this project requires even more research. If interviews were expanded and more observations of other first year courses, such as LinC, were undertaken a better picture could be provided. The best method to coordinate university development is a difficult topic to investigate due to the number of variables involved, such as time and funding. If this study were to be expanded to other campuses the ability to pinpoint appropriate programs to assist the success of students and completion of university objectives would be greatly increased.