I. Intro

For my contribution to the University of Illinois at Urbana project, The Ethnography of the University (EOTU), I addressed a topic that I am personally connected to, but that is also central to understanding a major role of universities—offering a general education. Academically speaking, the purpose 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 my life. More importantly, for the last two years, I have been employed as an Academic Peer Advisor in the Illinois State University’s Academic Advisement Center. Through this job, I have not only worked alongside students, by assisting them in their choices of classes and majors, but I have also supported them in a classroom setting as a Peer Leader in the new freshmen introductory course, LinC (learning in communities). This experience has made me aware of many diverse narratives about the education universities should provide and what students want from their college experience. University narratives and students’ opinions seem to conflict; my project considers this situation.

From the beginning of this project, my goal was to analyze the role of General Education, which comprises a large portion of university courses taught. Illinois State’s current General Education program was formed in 1998 and replaced the older University Studies program. University Studies consisted of a large assortment of courses that were divided into eight categories from which students were free to choose. These classes
existed in loose association to one another, creating a type of open menu. The creation of ISU’s General Education program responded to a national trend in favor of a more integrated academic experience with definable goals (Healy 1999, Latzer 2004, Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, Levy 2005). Coming at a time when universities nationwide were reconfiguring their general liberal-arts programs, ISU’s General Education program reflects a pattern in which course topics are narrowed down in order to allow students a sampling of unfamiliar disciplines. According to ISU university 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).

This study focuses on a single course, Foundations of Inquiry (FOI). This class was designed as the introduction to ISU’s General Education program and was considered to be the “cornerstone” of this program. 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. The university envisioned this course as a key to success in a general education curriculum. However, FOI failed and was cancelled last year, making this semester a good moment to capture this experience. Also, going on right now is the implementation of a new pilot project called LinC (learning in communities). This course replaces FOI as the primary model for introducing freshmen to the university and academic life, but is done so on a volunteer basis. Without FOI, a casual observer might ask what state is the General Education program left in?

What exactly happened with FOI and what does this have to say about the General Education program? I examine General Education’s setbacks as well as
successes from a variety of perspectives. In particular, I examine the creation and subsequent deletion of the FOI program and recent alternative efforts to introduce freshmen to college life.

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 participant-observation, documentary 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 for which I was an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant. These observations, along with ones made in the advisement office I work in, supported my previous impressions that students often do not enjoy General Education classes and do not understand the function of these courses in a university education.

I reviewed university documents concerning General Education and FOI as well as campus publications, such as the ISU newspaper, The Daily Vidette. I compared this information to national trends in university education from the early 20th Century to the present. I also used Rebecca Nathan’s ethnography, My Freshmen Year (2005), to compare and contrast the educational setting at ISU to another university.

Most of the data I used in this study comes from semi-structured interviews with nine people who were involved with General Education and FOI in different ways. I interviewed the current General Education coordinator, the coordinator of the new
freshmen introductory class LinC, two professors who were involved in the planning and teaching of FOI, a freshmen enrolled in LinC, and four Peer Advisors. Peer Advisors are a group of employed student workers who are generally academically successful and assist other students in forming their academic schedules as well as choosing a major. They have interesting insights from both a student and administrative point of view. I recorded most of these interviews.

III. Data

*Foundations of Inquiry: A cornerstone?*

FOI was conceived in 1992 and became active in 1998. This course was described as the cornerstone to the General Education program because faculty was to introduce critical thinking skills and university expectations. This was hailed as the appropriate step to prepare students for the work that lay ahead of them. During my interviews I asked a number of informants what was FOI and I received varying responses. When I asked the current coordinator of General Education this question his response was drawn out, as if he were mulling over the many possibilities in his head. He responded by saying, “FOI...was many things...um, and what it was will depend on who you talk to and when you talk to them.” He indicated that the course was similar to the freshmen seminar model that is apparent on other US campuses (Nathan 2005). He continued by describing the purpose of teaching freshmen inquiry at the university level, what he referred to as “epistemology to freshmen.” He finished this question by stating, “developmentally, this was a risky proposition.” From the student perspective, FOI was a little different. One Peer Advisor I interviewed thought FOI was similar to a “high
school setting” in which conversation was encouraged and argumentation was the main
topic accompanied by the teacher’s input. Teacher input was a common theme in a
conversation I had with a former professor of FOI. FOI organized faculty from a variety
of fields within ISU who were supposed to be teaching similar goals. The professor I
interviewed indicated that during the progression of FOI two opposing mindsets were
formed. One side urged the teaching of a “common experience” in FOI while the other
side wanted to teach critical thinking with faculty freedom. This opposition often was
expressed during summer workshops, which the professor referred to as a type of “FOI
boot camp.” This division between faculty-administrators contributed to a blurring of
course objectives, which was felt by students. Two Peer Advisors echoed the same
sentiment that there was little connection between FOI to other General Education
courses. As the supposed cornerstone to the general education curriculum FOI continued
for 7 years and at it’s highpoint, in 2002, had 115 sections (Vidette 2002). During FOI’s
operation, ISU’s General Education program was one of 12 universities nationwide
involved in a project aimed at designing a model for freshmen education (Vidette 2003).
This occurred two years before its cancellation. Was FOI a cornerstone? As a former
professor explained, in the beginning FOI was “a metaphor of we are building a building
here.” What happened?

*What the hell went wrong with FOI?*

The FOI project failed after only 7 years for a variety of reasons. This multi-
causal conclusion was voiced in a number of written sources as well as by interviewees.
The financial impracticality of FOI was a main reason (Vidette). FOI 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 course’s inherent design flaw. The course began as serving the transition function from high school to college, but then in its later stages evolved into instruction on critical thinking. It appears that the specific purpose of this course was written in sand and was often left to the discretion of the specific instructor. One interviewee described summer planning sessions for this course as not only expensive for the university but also a situation similar to a “horse being designed by a committee; you get a giraffe that’s not good at one thing.”

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 and students, which resulted in an overall dissatisfaction with the program. Teachers didn’t want to teach the class and students didn’t like the idea of a mandated course without much practical benefit. This confusion turned both parties off the idea of this type of introduction. One interviewee concluded that, “FOI was a great idea as an idea,” but described the reality of the situation as “the blind leading the blind.” Very abstract course goals left teachers wondering how to teach inquiry at the university level to incoming freshmen, and students questioning the use of such an introductory course in their college development. It seems that in terms of practice FOI was not the ideal introduction to ISU’s General Education program and apparently not a cornerstone providing much in the way of support.
So how about the good news?

Can we talk about successes in what appears to be a rather grim academic situation? This depends on which perspective the observer is looking from. With FOI gone and along with it the metaphor of a cornerstone to the General Education program, is this structure still standing? Yes. From the perspective of the coordinator of General Education this has a lot to do with the program revisions that began with the switch from University Studies and continue even after the cancellation of FOI. 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 program. The abstract nature of FOI did not appeal to the students currently entering ISU. From the student perspective, all of the five ISU students I interviewed knew the major they wanted to when they entered 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-minded student. What I mean when I refer to the project-minded student is an individual who is aware of their educational goals and wants to shape this education in accordance with the development of career skills necessary after college. This characteristic was expressed in a rather surprising way that made me rethink some of the conceptions I had before investigating this topic. Previously, my
opinion was that, for the most part, the General Education program was not appreciated and understood by the student population. My observations of students sleeping in large auditoriums and complaints during academic planning appointments in the Peer Advisor office formed my conception of the General Education program. But this notion of resistance was challenged after completing two interviews with Peer Advisors. Both of these individuals indicated that they and other students stood to benefit from a general education. This was not because they were becoming well-rounded individuals, a common benefit expressed by many liberal-arts programs, but because as one interviewee stated, “Gen Ed. helps in creating a foundation that can be useful in the present job market where individuals change jobs around 3 or more times during their life.” It appears that students desire a pragmatic link to their learning in order for them to achieve their educational and career goals, and encouraging the development of this broad source of knowledge can be considered a success for ISU’s General Education program.

What appears to be another potential success to the General Education program is the formulation of a new introductory course targeted at freshmen. LinC caters to incoming students that desire instruction in transitioning from high school to college. This is a step offered by ISU to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in their undergraduate studies. Some of these tools include time-management skills, participation in campus organizations, academic planning, and interaction with their fellow peers and individuals familiar with the university.

While a mandatory introductory class like FOI did not work for a variety of reasons, it is argued that 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. Unlike FOI, LinC is not designed similar to a freshmen seminar and has objectives that can be measured. 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 transition into the college workload. I believe this is a very proactive step by ISU to provide an introductory course that assists students in the completion of their intended objectives.

IV. Relevance: Why should we care?

I believe this project reveals a number of issues that deal with academics at a university. Specifically, this study describes the rise and fall of a course intended to introduce the university’s objectives of prescribing a general education. In the process of explaining why a course, such as FOI, fails this study outlines the developmental steps ISU has taken to relate to the ever-changing student body. More importantly, I believe it describes the trend of modern public universities catering to students as consumers. With
the decrease in government support, college institutions rely increasingly on their paying population, and must cater to student demands. 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 larger societal forces that are influencing incoming students, such as the high price for education and the competitive job market. This is the type of general education students are after and FOI was unable to relate to the practicality of students. Responding to this issue the university removed it.

V. Implications: *What does it all mean?*

   My project results reveal the changing educational setting of one university, but I believe as a whole my analyses are relevant to other campuses across the United States. Unlike the specialized European model of higher education, which restricts many individuals from pursuing higher education, in the US, the goal is to afford the opportunity for as many people as possible to get a college education. This means college classrooms are filled with students of many different abilities and intended goals. Introductory classes, such as FOI and LinC are intended to greet incoming students and pass along the goals of the university. Unfortunately, a class such as FOI blurred objectives making these goals immeasurable. The reaction to this abstraction was a large amount of dissatisfaction by students and teachers. Rebecca Nathan recorded a similar situation during her freshmen experience (2005). She found that the freshmen seminar model is out of sync with the current focus of students, which in turn shapes the objectives of universities. The cancellation of FOI was more than a widespread
disapproval rating. The significance of its removal is a national trend toward making practicality an issue shaping course development. It seems ISU, as well as other universities nationwide, are developing educational programs that have concrete measurable objectives, which is in line with the practical demands of students. These changes are all wrapped into the main goal of both universities and students, to prepare and be prepared for the realities after college. I believe this is evidence of a combining of educational narratives.

Work in Progress...

In order to provide more helpful insights for 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.