

Portland State University Faculty Senate Motion
June 2021

UNST Proposal #2: Eliminate the requirement that students take the SING that matches the Junior Cluster. (Effective AY 22-23)

Background, rationale, and preliminary discussions

The UNST Council proposes to eliminate the requirement that students take the SING that matches the Junior Cluster. We propose to make this connection “recommended.” In fact, when the Council sought feedback on the prior motion to reduce the required number of SINGs from three to two, this revision was routinely suggested by the Cluster Coordinators, Advisers, Department Chairs who contribute SING and Deans consulted (the responses received are below).

The UNST curriculum was designed with the model of a student starting at PSU as a freshman. However, most PSU students have transferred here and most transfer students start at the Junior Cluster level. Among the graduates who completed clusters, 41% took SING courses that matched their clusters. About 1.5% of students took SING courses that did not match their cluster. The rest of the cluster students ($\approx 57\%$) did not take any SING courses.

Since Junior-level transfer students do not take the corresponding SING course, cluster faculty cannot teach the course assuming the SING course was taken. For students who enter as Sophomores, we have learned from advising that when students have difficulty finding a SING section corresponding to their Cluster choice that will fit in their schedule, they change Clusters to expedite completing their degree requirements.

Given that cluster courses are not really taught assuming SING content and that the linked requirement forces students into unwanted choices, we do not think the linked requirement serves its original purpose of introducing students to the cluster. A linkage would be desirable and recommended (but not required), especially for those who want to use the Cluster to build a minor, but the Cluster and UNST Learning goals can still be taught at both levels without this requirement.

Motion presented by the University Studies Council

The Faculty Senate will eliminate the requirement that students take the SING that matches the Junior Cluster. The linkage will be “recommended”.

Feedback and Response

After this motion was passed by the UNST Council, it was brought to the Steering Committee for next steps, specifically to recommend other committees that should

be consulted before bringing these motions to the Senate. They recommended the Academic Requirements Committee, the Budget Committee, and the University Curriculum Committee. Those committees provided the following feedback.

The Academic Requirements Committee supports this revision because it better aligns with the needs of transfer students. In fact, they suggested we propose the revision for next academic year (AY 2021-22) instead of waiting until the following year (AY 2022-23) to reduce the number of petitions to UNST and ARC pending approval. The Council appreciates this support and suggestion but prefers that the motions to reduce the number of SINQs and to decouple the SINQ and Junior Clusters occur at the same time so that the PSU Catalog need only be revised once to accommodate these motions. The Academic Requirements Committee also asked in the required number of Junior Clusters would be reduced from 3 to 2, but the Council has no plans at this time or for the foreseeable future to consider such a proposal.

The Budget Committee agrees with our assessment that overall, the budget impacts of this motion will be neutral, but that it will “likely have positive impacts on retention and recruitment as a result of greater flexibility.” However, they note that while demand for elective courses should increase due to increased flexibility this demand may be unevenly distributed across departments. Thus, the UNST Council hopes that programs and departments will use next academic year to revise their strategies to account for these possibilities before the reduction of SINQs occurs the following year (AY 2022-23).

The University Curriculum Committee supports the proposal, but asked if unlinking SINQ’s and Junior Clusters if “eliminating the scaffolding model” will “remove what is unique about University Studies and signal a transition back to a distribution model of general education?”

As part of the deliberation of this motion, the Council reviewed one of the founding documents of UNST, Charles White’s “A Model for Comprehensive Reform in General Education” (1994), for the purpose of answering those questions. We concluded that this motion would not conflict with the goals of providing a curriculum that employs both thematic clusters and scaffolds student learning for the following reasons.

First, the White article discusses Freshman Inquiry (FRINQ) for nine pages (p 201-210) and five pages on Senior Capstones (p 212-217), but only a page (p 211) on SINQ and Junior Clusters. Clearly, the link between the two was not an original or essential part of the program, as it is never expressly stated. The article only suggests that SINQ and Junior Clusters should focus on interdisciplinary topics of inquiry, like “Knowledge, Values, and Rationality” or “Interpreting the Past,” but not that the curriculum of SINQ and Junior Cluster must be linked and scaffolded.

In practice, this link between SINQs and Junior Clusters only minimally exists in the courses currently offered. While the UNST Council, the Cluster Coordinators, and the Cluster Curriculum Committee do ensure that Junior Cluster courses teach the learning objectives of UNST and the Cluster, ensuring continuity between SINQs & Junior Cluster has proven difficult for a variety of reasons.

First, faculty who teach SINQ courses often do not teach Junior Cluster courses, thus there are few instructors who independently align their curriculum. Most importantly, Junior Cluster courses have no pre-requisites and as stated earlier, $\approx 57\%$ of students in Junior Cluster courses have not taken the associated SINQ. Therefore, neither instructors, coordinators, nor the Council can expect most Junior Cluster students to have the background knowledge of a specific SINQ beyond the general curriculum relevant to UNST Goals.

Ironically, students often take their Junior Cluster courses first to sample the topic and then select a SINQ during their Junior or Senior year based on those experiences, degree completion, or simply due to availability. This strategy significantly impacts the retention advantages of the SINQs and negates any possibility of scaffolding learning.

In conclusion, the UNST Council could take steps to reinforce the curricular connection between SINQ and Junior Clusters, but such a strategy would be counterproductive. Tightening the link between SINQ's and Junior Clusters would not significantly improve the curriculum for traditional students who enroll as Freshmen, but they are already reluctant to commit to a SINQ during their Sophomore year when the curriculum would have its greatest impact on retention and teaching basic academic skills, like Writing, Communication, and Quantitative Literacy. Likewise, transfer students are not helped by this link because they have either completed enough credits to not need SINQ courses, or they also avoid taking their SINQ courses until after they have completed a sample of Junior Cluster courses. This almost guarantees they are not completing their *sophomore* general education courses until their *junior or even senior years*. The impacts of this cul-de-sac on student success, retention, and degree completion should be obvious.

By removing this requirement, the interdisciplinary and thematic learning goals of the program and clusters will still be ensured separately at both levels through the current oversight processes. Traditional and transfer students will be more likely to take SINQs and Junior Clusters in the proper order and will still be encouraged and perhaps more likely to take the Junior Cluster courses associated with their initial SINQ. They will be less likely to delay the completion of their GenEd courses because committing to a SINQ will not commit them to 12 Credit Hours in a Cluster of which they have little to no foreknowledge. Most importantly, they will receive an even broader range of curriculum, since all their SINQs and Junior Clusters could be separate, while still benefiting from clustering as opposed to random electives.