

Program Title: Integrative Studies (BA, BS) - Grand Valley State University

Institution: Grand Valley State University

Innovation Category: Working Adult Students

Point Person & Contact Information:

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Project Description:

Re-envisioning higher education for returning adults, the Brooks College Integrative Studies Program offers an innovative, fully online degree completion track that is deeply rooted in collaborative and experiential learning. Called LEADS (which stands for “Lifelong Educational Attainment for Determined Students”), the track was developed in response to the unique challenges of returning non-traditional adult students within higher education. By integrating best practices from accelerated learning, adult learner pedagogy, design thinking, interdisciplinarity, community-based learning, and leadership studies, the Integrative Studies Program’s accelerated degree completion track helps students integrate their learning across the artificial divides created by university disciplines and structures, wrestle with the complexity of social issues in our communities and develop the skills necessary for addressing these problems.

The program also fulfills a crucial gap at GVSU, which has adult students spread across almost all of its 101 undergraduate degrees. Brooks College was the first at Grand Valley to intentionally design an academic program with adult student needs in mind, starting with its hybrid Integrative Studies Accelerated Leadership Program. By moving to this fully online, accelerated set of course options, the LEADS Integrative Studies format makes the program even more accessible, supporting students who are located anywhere in the state or country to learn on a schedule that fits with their busy lives and other responsibilities. Graduates earn either a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science in Integrative Studies and can choose to nest a variety of certificates or badges within the degree or custom design an area of focus that is uniquely suited to their interest and career goals. The program also allows students to integrate and build upon their previous college credit in order to complete their degree in as little as 19 months.

Project Objectives:

The Integrative Studies Degree in the LEADS program includes a full complement of courses designed to be offered fully online in six-week formats. This includes all core courses and degree requirements within the Integrative Studies major as well as five certificate options designed around high-demand skills areas: Applied Data Analytics, Business Fundamentals, Intercultural Communication, Leadership, and Project

Management. Most courses are asynchronous and integrate national best practices to support adult learners. Faculty teaching in LEADS are trained in adult learner pedagogy, connecting with students individually and supporting their persistence to graduation and beyond as they advance in their careers or pursue new professional opportunities. Students can join the program at six different points during the calendar year with courses offered over a full 12 months to maximize students' options as they complete their degrees.

Although the Integrative Studies LEADS track is fully online, students engage in a unique range of experiential learning opportunities through community engagement, internships, research methods, and capstone projects. Targeted synchronous opportunities offer students an added opportunity to network with each other, take full advantage of the career-focused resources offered through Grand Valley, build community with fellow students, and showcase their work.

Target Population: Adult Learners, "Some College" Population

Quantifiable/Qualifiable Outcomes:

Increase the number of adults with college degrees in Michigan and beyond.

Since launching the LEADS track in Fall 2020, Grand Valley's Integrative Studies Program has enrolled more than 663 adult learners within that track.

Retention rates for the online, accelerated track average nearly 70% or better, matching or exceeding the Integrative Studies Program's high persistence rates for learners pursuing face-to-face and hybrid modalities. This is well above national averages for online learner graduation rates which tend to be much lower (20% on average per recent statistics, see *Inside Higher Ed* [article](#), January 2024) and also exceeds national averages for adult learner completion of bachelor's degrees (54%, per a 2022 study published by the Lumina Foundation).

Three-quarters (75.1%) of students pursuing the LEADS track in Integrative Studies are enrolled as part-time students. About a quarter of students who pursue the LEADS track complete their degrees within two years or less. A majority are able to complete their degrees in four to six years, with time-to-graduation largely determined by whether students are enrolled part-time or full-time, whether they are able to enroll continuously, or if they need to stop taking classes for a semester or two before re-starting. The flexible enrollment needs faced by adult learners underscores the program's outstanding retention rates which support student persistence across their educational journey.

Students who complete the program overwhelmingly indicate that the Integrative Studies Program has helped them meet their professional goals, receive a pay increase or promotion, and increased their confidence.

Impact/Student Testimonial:

“I have benefited more from community-engaged learning in this cohort than any other educational experience I have ever had. ... I have a newfound sense of responsibility as a citizen of the Grand Rapids community.”

Strengths include:

- a unique format that is designed to support full-time employed, working adults to take up to 12-15 credits/semester and persist to successful graduation
- dedicated advisors and full-time faculty who are trained in adult learner pedagogies ensure student success
- cross-campus and community collaboration
- innovative course and content delivery
- committed faculty and staff who work together to engage students in real-world projects relevant to their career interests
- ongoing assessment to evaluate student learning outcomes and alumni satisfaction

Challenges/Problems Encountered:

The 6-week accelerated format is intense for both students and faculty, requiring considerable commitment on the part of both if students are enrolling full-time. The asynchronous format does provide needed flexibility, making the program far more scalable than earlier versions offered as hybrid-only. The LEADS format also makes these courses available to anyone across the state of Michigan and supports students whose jobs require significant travel or who are balancing a range of responsibilities such as childcare, active military service, or the like.

Careful attention to course design, coordination/onboarding/faculty training across multiple departments and colleges, as well as structural supports from Records, Financial Aid, Admissions, as well as university-wide resources such as the Writing Center, Tutoring, Instructional Design and eLearning, and University Libraries is key to supporting these fully online learners. The program has benefited from university-level supports like the Pew Faculty Teaching & Learning Center which has supported regular training in adult learner pedagogies via its Faculty Learning Circles that bring together faculty from units across the university coupled with consistent templates, coordinated

exams and assignment schedules, as well as other coordinated resources and supports that are tailored to working adults learning as part of this program.

Evaluation Approach:

Student learning objectives are of critical importance and are aligned with individual academic disciplines.

Assessment data is collected using program-ending portfolio manuscripts, instructors, internship supervisors and community partner reports. Themes arising from these layered approaches have been triangulated to provide a robust understanding of the program value.

Value Proposition, Financing Strategy and Return-On-Investment Indicators:

Several factors minimized direct expenses in this program, including: identification of faculty and staff who were committed to adult learning and willing to explore a new format/delivery, and using an existing degree, but providing coursework in a condensed format. Additional financial support as part of a Presidential Initiative to extend and support adult learners also aided expansion of this program with ongoing support provided by the Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Division of Academic Affairs. The program has continued to benefit from enrollments supported by the State of Michigan's "Grow Your Own" grants to support future educators, employer contributions/partnerships, and institutional commitment to expanding access to higher education for all learners.

Stipends for one-time new course development and course conversions (to asynchronous, 6-week formats) were provided to faculty by the Provost's Office and partnering colleges.

There was a one-time contribution of funds for marketing and recruitment.

Potential for Replication:

While the program requires intensive planning and dialogue at the front-end, the potential for replication is high.

Finding your campus champions across campus and creating a shared vision is critical.

Vendor Involvement:

None, other than typical existing university support applications (Blackboard, Workday Student, etc.)

Additional Resources:

- Integrative Studies Program, [gvsu.edu/int](https://www.gvsu.edu/int)
- Grand Valley State University's Online Accelerated Bachelor's Degree for Adults, [gvsu.edu/complete](https://www.gvsu.edu/complete)

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