“The curriculum has been this way since I attended,” said Economics Professor Norris Peterson. Peterson was referring to the structure of the major that permits students to take electives in filling out their Economics requirements. Given faculty interest over the years, these electives have drifted somewhat, exposing students to technical skills as opposed to applied understandings of Economic theory.

Back in 2010, faculty in the Economics department began to notice a problem in capstone. Students would come to capstone unable to pursue topics due to a lack of exposure to applied courses. A student might want to do a capstone on mergers and acquisitions but had chosen electives that did not cover this topic and a different capstone subject would have to be selected.

This led to faculty discussions about a gap in the curriculum. Students were exposed to the theory of Economics: - Micro, Macro and Approaches – in the core curriculum but chose electives that were more technical in nature – not applications of theory.

This discovery (student evidence!) led to departmental discussions. Chair Lynn Hunnicutt and Associate Professor Priscilla St. Clair brought the issue to the forefront to address the deficiency. Other members of the department at the time included Neal Johnson, Mark Reiman, Karen Travis and Martin Wurm.

A number of changes were incorporated and approval sent to EPC for the 2013-14 declaring students.

The option to choose a concentration was removed as very few students were selecting these options. Second, requirements were put in place for students to take an applied course in each area – Micro, Macro and Approaches. Curricular offerings were adjusted to be sure the courses would be available.

Lastly, the Economics department has seniors take the ETS field test in Economics. Students taking the exam this year were not required to go through the revised curriculum. Two years from now, the ETS field test will be given to seniors that did take the new required applied courses. Importantly, students will be better able to engage in relevant and robust applied capstone projects.
In most biological systems, complex interactions often make interpretation of results difficult. Such has been the case in the Biology department that has experienced a doubling in the number of graduates over the past five years. In 2010, faculty agreed to more rigorous requirements in the capstone accompanied with rubrics to guide student expectations. As the same time, enrollments in the major were growing, adding to pressure on workloads. Additionally, conversation was brewing about how to distribute faculty efforts in mentoring students. And to top it all off it was clear to faculty that writing in the capstone was not satisfactory – a perfect storm.

After Ann Auman, Amy Siegesmund, and Patty Dolan attended a PNLC Student Learning Workshop the Department focused on one learning goal: Writing. The rest of the Assessment Committee included Neva Lauri-Berry, Michael Behrens and Rosemarie Haberle. In the Summer of 2014, expert Jan Pechenik facilitated a workshop on Biology writing with faculty. Like most, faculty members were not experts in how to teach writing and the professional development was targeted to this specific need.

The department is now wrestling with creating a common assignment among 200 and 300 level courses to assess the extent to which students are being given opportunities to improve their writing prior to capstone. What the assignment should be and how to assess the student work are the projects being tackled this spring.

In the fall of 2014, PLU students were asked their views on their general education experience. Interestingly, these results are consistent with student focus groups done over the past 4 years.

79% reported they gained an understanding and appreciation of others opinions, values and beliefs.

67% reported these experiences occurred randomly often through a single course or teacher – students were frustrated with what they considered boxes to check and hoops to jump through – they appreciated the education they obtained typically but were equally negative about requirements that were not always coherent and/or delayed graduation.