

## **Section 4: The Distinctive Qualities of an SSU Education**

At the time of the development of SSU's Institutional Proposal, dialogue had begun on defining the "mark" of an SSU undergraduate liberal arts and sciences education. A team of faculty and administrators attended the AAHE/WASC workshop on institutional assessment in January 2005 and returned with a plan for dialogue and discussion on the outcomes of an SSU education. Concurrently, a large team of 20 faculty and administrators, funded by the Division of Academic Affairs, attended the annual AAC&U conference in San Francisco. An Academic Affairs Council retreat in the summer of 2005 centered on a discussion of the AAC&U's publication, *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate*. This marked the beginning of a dialogue about the mark of an SSU education that has continued at all levels of the university.

The Institutional Proposal defined the "distinctive qualities of an SSU education" as one of the chosen themes for our WASC review and proposed that the university engage in "campus-wide dialogue regarding the meaning of a liberal arts and sciences education." Using the work of AAC&U and the LEAP Initiative, various groups in Academic Affairs have engaged in discussions around this theme. At the time of the CPR visit, the team noted: "It appears to the Team that the University is at present balancing two worthy identifies, one as a regional comprehensive university, the other as the state's public liberal arts university. These identities may well prove compatible, but the University might find value in the collaborative development and articulation of a unified, coherent self-definition that reflects the full extent and diversity of its aspirations." In its letter of June 25, 2008, the WASC Commission further noted that SSU

should “reach consensus on a clear definition of the University’s complex mission so that planning efforts are informed by this understanding.”

Following the recommendations of the team report and Commission letter, the university has taken up a serious discussion in an attempt to define SSU’s “two worthy identities.” At the summer 2008 retreat with the Academic Affairs Council and the Academic Planning Committee, the Provost engaged the participants in a dialogue about the dual character of the SSU mission. The work of the retreat resulted in a document, [\*Liberal Arts and Sciences-Based Comprehensive University\*](#), which was reviewed and discussed in cross-constituent conversations with department chairs. The consensus conclusion of the conversation and the basis for further discussion of SSU’s identity and distinctive character is perhaps best captured by the white paper’s conclusion:

“...Sonoma State University is successfully combining the achievement of key learning outcomes of a liberal education with the breadth of coverage of academic disciplines and professional programs of a comprehensive university. There is no conflict between these two objectives: indeed the new century demands that we provide both for today’s students.”

With the insights gained from campus discussions of SSU’s identity, the university continues to work on defining the specific outcomes that characterize the university’s baccalaureate degree. The university has several probative documents to guide the work of identifying the distinctive marks of an SSU education, including (1) the [SSU Mission Statement](#); (2) the [University Strategic Plan](#) (USP); (3) the [Academic Affairs Strategic Plan](#) (AASP); and (4) the [Mission, Goals and Objectives \(MGOs\) of General Education](#), as well as the work of the GE Subcommittee in developing learning

outcomes for each area and subarea of General Education and aligning these with the [LEAP Outcomes](#) (see Essay on General Education).

Both the USP and the AASP use the SSU Mission Statement as the foundation of their strategic plans. The statement forms a set of outcomes for student learning for the institution (CFR 1.2):

“The mission of Sonoma State University is to prepare students to be learned men and women who:

- Have a foundation for life-long learning,
- Have a broad cultural perspective,
- Have a keen appreciation of intellectual and aesthetic achievements,
- Will be active citizens and leaders in society,
- Are capable of pursuing fulfilling careers in a changing world, and
- Are concerned with contributing to the health and well-being of the world at large.” (CFR 1.1)

The AASP mission articulates a finer definition of outcomes, as well as the methods by which students achieve these learning outcomes: “To advance its mission, SSU

- Encourages interactive teaching and learning and close mentoring relationships throughout the curriculum and throughout the campus;
- Provides a foundation for critical thinking, experiential learning and personal growth;
- Supports the exploration of a variety of perspectives and diverse modes of discipline-based and inter-disciplinary inquiry;

- Inspires ethical exploration, civic engagement, social responsibility and global awareness; and
- Creates a community that values diversity through undergraduate programs grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, and selected professional graduate programs.”

Clearly, the distinctiveness of SSU’s educational experience includes an emphasis on outcomes that stress community and civic engagement, cultural competence, including global awareness and social responsibility, and a commitment to sustainability, achieved through interactive teaching, mentoring, and experiential learning activities (CFR 1.2).

These outcomes are compatible with the foundation values of SSU, expressed in the USP: academic excellence, student-centeredness, creativity, respect, diversity, and sustainability.

SSU strives to educate the whole student to be prepared to be an active, engaged citizen and life-long learner. The university’s Mission Statement defines its character and the USP provides the map for implementation through articulation of strategic areas. In “educating the whole student” SSU has also defined its distinctive qualities through its co-curricular experiences and its residential character. A goal of the university is to provide students with a quality co-curricular experience and a residential environment that leads to enhanced learning and personal growth (CFR 2.11). This is a goal pursued by programs throughout the campus, including [Residential Life](#), [Associated Students](#), the [Center for Community Engagement](#), and others. The academic experience of students is greatly enhanced by opportunities to develop working relationships with the faculty, staff, other students, and community partners in the context of coursework, research,

internship, service-learning, and volunteer opportunities. Thus, the university's co-curriculum enhances the academic curriculum (CFR 2.13).

One example of SSU's educational culture is the fact that students and faculty have opportunities to develop mentor-mentee relationships in a variety of contexts. Some of these are formally constituted programs such as the SSU Educational Mentoring Team Program ([EMT](#)), where faculty, student services professionals, and students work together as a mentoring team to help mentor and orient freshmen. Programs exist to educate students about current trends in academic and professional fields. The Departments of Physics, Biology, English, Women and Gender Studies, and Counseling sponsor lecture series to inform students about cutting edge developments in these fields and to illustrate examples of future career paths. The School of Business and Economics, for example, has a formal [Mentor Program](#) that is "...designed to provide opportunities for students to explore professions, companies, and industries in the world of work."

Less formal but equally important mentoring opportunities also exist. Faculty and students may work together on research projects, such as illustrated by the partnerships between students and faculty in Psychology and Anthropology projects in the 2009 Faculty Research Exposition. Illustrative examples of this work include:

- Students in courses such as Investigative Sociology work with the faculty conducting research on a specific topic each time the course is offered (the topic for Spring 2009 was Law Enforcement Related Deaths).
- Students in the [Anthropology](#) department may work on a variety of projects such as primate research with the faculty or as part of an internship on Forensic Anthropology with the Coroner's office.

- [Project Censored](#) provides a wide variety of opportunities for students from all majors to participate in research on media issues such as First Amendment freedom of the press.
- The annual [Graduate Student Research Showcase](#), hosted by the Academic Senate's Graduate Studies Subcommittee and the Office of the Provost, provides students from our master's degree programs a professional forum in which to present their work to the campus and receive feedback. Undergraduates interested in considering graduate work can also gain insight into the nature of graduate research and the requirements of specific programs in a variety of disciplines through attending this event.
- The CSU Student Research Competition is an annual, CSU-wide event where undergraduate and graduate students can present the research they have conducted in collaboration with their faculty mentors. This year, SSU had seven student competitors at the event and two first place winners in both the undergraduate and graduate behavioral and social science divisions.

A key aspect of student experience at SSU is represented by the residential communities. The student residential communities at SSU reflect a consideration of the importance of place and space in creating strong co-curricular learning environments. For example, students can choose to live in communities centered around themes such as healthy living, adventure building, community service, substance free environments, community co-ops, or residences associated with the Freshman Interest Group cohort. Under discussion is a new international residence group. The housing choices allow freshmen the opportunity to find a housing arrangement that fits their interests, such as

the MOSAIC living/learning community, which aims to “intentionally focus on appreciating the diversity in perspectives and life experiences of its students” through shared learning experiences such as common core classes, service learning, and field trips.

### **Conclusion on SSU’s Complex Character and Distinctiveness**

The university’s dual character as both a liberal arts and sciences and a comprehensive university is reflected in its membership in COPLAC and its status as a CSU campus. Within the university’s mission statement, this duality is articulated: “Excellence in undergraduate education requires that students participate in a well-planned program that provides both a liberal education and opportunities for specific career preparation.” The university’s liberal arts and sciences character is emphasized through the full development of the student in both the curricular and co-curricular dimensions articulated above.

As highlighted in the Provost’s white paper, [\*A Liberal Arts and Sciences-Based Comprehensive University\*](#), much has been accomplished, while challenges still remain:

“SSU faces a challenge common to many liberal arts and sciences institutions: how to continually strengthen and change the character of a liberal education to best meet the challenges of today: globalization, cross-cultural collaboration, a fast-changing, information-based economic landscape, creativity as the basis for economic growth.”

SSU is making significant progress on these fronts in a variety of ways, including:

- Adoption by the Senate of [General Education outcomes](#);

- Development of [detailed learning outcomes](#) by the General Education Subcommittee for each of the distinct coverage areas of our General Education program (see General Education Essay);
- A [Program Review process](#) that includes assessment of learning outcomes and development of goals and objectives for continuous improvement based on the results of such assessment;
- Enhanced programs in the [Center for Teaching and Professional Development](#) to support development and adoption of new pedagogies;
- Proposed strategies for global awareness, sustainability, and diversity in the [University Strategic Plan](#).