

## **Section 5: General Education**

Improving student learning in our General Education Program continues to be a topic of vigorous debate and discussion at SSU. This review will highlight the work done in the areas in four distinct venues, all of which address themselves to what is variously referred to as General Education Reform or Renewal. These four areas are: (1) the General Education Program Review; (2) the First Year Experience program (UNIV150); (3) the Hutchins lower division general education program; and (4) ongoing reform efforts in the School of Arts and Humanities, as well as in the School of Social Science. The GE Subcommittee takes the leading role in coordinating these efforts on the campus.

### **General Education Program Review**

Having overseen the implementation of a model for an integrated first year experience program (Univ150) in 2005-2007, the GE Subcommittee subsequently turned attention to a full program review, following the program review policy of the university. The GE Subcommittee strongly endorsed the need for a program review so that any future reform or revision would be based on the kind of evidence only a thoroughgoing program review could provide.

With that purpose in mind, the subcommittee began its work in early 2007 with a planning retreat to map out the review. The first major task addressed was to examine and in many cases revise the learning outcomes for each distinct GE area (CFR 2.3). The subcommittee hosted meetings across all areas of GE, bringing together experts from the disciplines who teach courses in each area. Not only did these forums promote valuable interchange among multidisciplinary colleagues, who attended these meetings and in turn shared new ideas with colleagues in their own departments, they led to improved

language and clearer articulation of learning outcomes in all areas of GE. This major effort to clarify student learning outcomes across each of the 17 GE areas has enhanced SSU's ability to clearly articulate the desired level of student achievement in each of the areas (CFR 2.2).

While these student learning outcomes were already vastly improved after the work in spring 2007 and fall 2008, the subcommittee established the program review period of spring 2009 as a time to seek campus-wide input. Suggestions for improvement of the new learning outcomes (Academic Senate website: <http://www.ssugeproject.blogspot.com/>) were solicited.

The subcommittee undertook a program review for all of GE and reported on its progress at the Academic Senate Meeting in February 2009. In planning for the review, the following key goals, tasks and timelines emerged:

- Clearly understand the current curriculum.
- Obtain feedback from the external reviewer regarding improved implementation of curricular goals.
- Review new GE area learning objectives and compare to other learning outcomes.
- Develop an action plan for reform, assessment, and improvement of the curriculum.
- Develop GE learning objectives in consultation with faculty teaching in GE (S08, F08).
- Collect GE syllabi and enrollment data and summarize information extracted from them (intersession).

- Write self study document (Intersession, Feb 09).
- Gather input from students (S 09).
- External review visit (Apr 09).
- Complete program review write up (May 09).

At the time of this report, Academic Senators commented that a thorough program review of GE was long overdue and a good step for the university. The subcommittee was encouraged to continue its open process and to offer campus forum(s) on the topic (CFR 4.1).

By the end of spring 2009, the subcommittee had completed a systemic program review of the general education program, accomplishing all of the tasks outlined in the March report to the Senate (CFR 2.7). The subcommittee developed work teams to take on the tasks listed in this review. A crucial aspect of the approach taken was a comparative evaluation of SSU's GE learning outcomes as they aligned with planning guidelines for the CSU system, particularly the Four Essential Learning Outcomes from the American Association of Colleges and Universities' [Liberal Education and American Promise \(LEAP\) campaign](#), cited in [CSU Executive Order 1033](#) and that EO itself, which governs General Education across the system (CFRs 1.1, 1.2, 4.3).

The subcommittee completed its [program review](#) in May of 2009. The completed review highlights five areas of the GE Program: Administration, Quantitative Analysis, GE Alignment, GE Assessment, and Recommendations. The section on "administration" reports the wide variety of course formats available to general education students, with discussion-centered courses available throughout the curriculum. A section on GE advising observed some of the concerns the university has about this issue, including the

“uneven quality” of GE advising in the majors and the “overload” of students facing the undergraduate advising center. The subcommittee met with a focus group of students to assess their advising experiences and reported concrete ideas (focus first-year advising on the first year rather than the entire GE Program) and also feedback on ways in which the advising structures do not work as well as hoped. This section includes an update of the work on online “self advising” programs developed by the CMS (Common Management System) Task Force on GE Advising. An overall recommendation of the GE Program review is “to improve advising in GE” (59) (CFR 2.12).

The review also summarizes some of the decade-long focus on GE planning, assessment and learning outcomes on this campus:

“Responding to the national consensus that instruction in General Education, especially foundational courses, should be integrative and synthetic, the SSU campus community has expended considerable effort to develop improved models for instruction in General Education. In 2000, a group of faculty members and administrators attended an American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) workshop in Asheville, North Carolina to begin the process of GE integration and renewal. In 2002, an all faculty retreat on General Education was convened. These events stimulated the production of a statement of Mission, Goals and Objectives of General Education, which were approved by the SSU Academic Senate in 2003 and are currently integrated into the university degree requirements in the SSU catalog.”

The section concludes with a discussion of how GE Reform planning will be carried out going forward:

“Faculty members in schools are best qualified to address pedagogical issues. The GE subcommittee will focus on the coherence of the curriculum as a whole and the goal of improving student learning through specification of learning outcomes and assessment of student performance towards those outcomes, regardless of course structure.”

The sections on assessment and alignment reflect thorough analysis of current practices at SSU as well as consideration of how these practices align with national standards and evolving thinking about general education. An extensive analysis (pp 28-35) reveals the extent to which SSU’s GE program aligns or fails to align with the outcomes established by AACU’s LEAP (Liberal Education and American Promise campaign), which has been adopted by the entire CSU as a planning framework for general education (CSU Executive Order 1033).

A key goal repeated throughout the self-study and articulated under the recommendation section of the review is to:

“Establish an assessment plan for GE that includes assessment at the Area Level (using the draft Area Learning Objectives for Areas A-E) and at the program level (using the [SSU Mission, Goals, and Objectives for GE](#)) (60). (CFR 2.3, 2.4, 2.5)

It is here that the valuable work already completed by the GE Subcommittee has established an important foundation. The learning outcomes developed in consultation with faculty experts provide a road map for both the “Alignment” of learning outcomes and their “Assessment” as called for in the Program review. These outcomes in turn flow from the work done earlier in the decade in developing a vision statement for the “[Mission, Goals, and Objectives](#)” of General Education at Sonoma State (CFR 1.1).

The GE Program Review concluded with an external reviewer coming to the campus to evaluate the self-study and the GE Program. The GE Subcommittee selected a noted GE educator from a sister CSU campus who has considerable expertise in GE administration. The subcommittee awaits the external reviewer's report, which will address potential administrative restructuring and also present a viable assessment strategy for the GE Program (CFR 2.7). The committee has also drafted a possible list of "actions" that will be refined into an action plan for GE (and become the final chapter of the GE Program Review) which will be completed over the summer and reviewed by the GE Subcommittee at its first meeting in the fall. This action plan should fulfill the expectations of the visiting team that GE is making "demonstrable progress" on its renewal efforts.

### **First Year Experience (University 150)**

This ambitious program was [approved for permanent status](#) by the Academic Senate in March of 2008. First introduced as a pilot program in 2006, FYE (UNIV150) combines instruction in critical thinking, written and oral presentation, centered on the theme of "Identity and Global Challenges." Each week, the 170 freshmen enrolled in the course meet with scholars who lecture for one hour, addressing themselves to the course theme. Around that lecture and course readings, four hours of skills building seminars are conducted. Additionally, the program offers educational experiences in the area of student development aimed at fostering excellent student skills and assisting first year students in their transition to college life. The program uses experienced student peers, who work alongside the faculty in the program, connecting student academic experiences with meaningful co-curricular programming and activities.

A major addition to this program in 2008-09 was the development of a residential life component, as a majority of the FYE students now reside in the same dormitory village. One of the FYE faculty members, Dr. Kelly Estrada from the School of Education, was selected to serve as the Faculty in Residence beginning in 2008. From the locale of their shared housing, Dr. Estrada is able to facilitate co-curricular activities that enhance the program's curriculum, including film screenings, field trips and social gatherings and celebrations. The program has also helped the campus develop new synergies with residential life personnel, which will strengthen the entire university's ability to serve our students (CFRs 2.13, 4.6).

Upon evaluation of student learning in the course's first two years, and in dialogue with the program's faculty, the GE Subcommittee decided to alter the GE credits earned by its students. At its inception, the program offered credit for A3 (Critical Thinking) and A2 (Expository Writing). Evaluation and assessment revealed that the course aims and pedagogy were appropriate for critical thinking, but not for Expository Writing, which required more detailed attention to writing instruction than the multidisciplinary nature of the program could offer (CFR 4.3). Because the students do undertake year-long research projects, which they present in multi-media mode in their sections and to the overall program, the decision was made to award students GE credit for area A1 (Written and Oral Communication). The Academic Senate accepted this recommendation when the program was given permanent status in 2008. The faculty in the program revised their learning outcomes accordingly for 2008-09.

## **Hutchins**

No review of the Educational Effectiveness of the university's GE Program should omit a discussion of SSU's distinguished Hutchins Program, which offers an alternate lower-division general education program to about 3% of SSU's incoming first year students. Hutchins completed a program review of its program in 2006 (available in the WASC Visiting Team Room) and documented continued success in guiding students through a seminar-based, reading intensive and multi-disciplinary curriculum that awards GE credit in all areas except mathematics (B4). In discussing the Hutchins Program's outstanding reputation and record of student success, the external reviewer, J. Scott Lee, Executive Director, ACTC Liberal Arts Institute, Saint Mary's College of California, wrote:

“Maintain[s] the mission, curriculum, basic pedagogical means, high quality, and functioning of the program. The program is a gem.”

### **Planning in the Schools**

This section focuses primarily on GE planning underway in the School of Arts and Humanities. A good deal of the discussion about General Education reform has centered on the first-year courses, especially those taught in Arts and Humanities. Active planning for major revisions to the first year experience for SSU students continues in this school. Many professors who have taught in the FYE (UNIV150) are members of the school's Curriculum and Chairs committees, including faculty from American Multicultural Studies, Spanish, English, Music, Theater Arts, Hutchins, and Philosophy. In April 2009, the School's Curriculum Committee and its Council of Department Chairs approved a plan to align the school's GE courses with the 4 unit model of course instruction employed by many of its departments and to enhance the planning and



development of first year multi-disciplinary programs in the school along the lines of the already established FYE (UNIV150) course. In coordination with the efforts of the GE Sub-Committee's program review, the faculty in this school are also seeking ways to implement aspects of the campus 2003 planning document, "[New Pathways for GE](#)" into its curriculum, including enhanced focus on student development and advising, and multi-disciplinary theme-based instruction in the skills areas of critical thinking, oral presentation and/or expository writing. The adopted plan calls for the development of such courses in areas A3 (critical thinking) and in area C (Comparative Perspectives), with a focus on written and oral presentation across the first- and second-year courses. The plan proposes to reduce the seven 3-unit requirements in areas A and C in the current GE pattern to a total of five requirements, each for 4 units. The Dean of Arts and Humanities supports these reform plans, and the School's emerging Strategic Planning process (CFR 4.2) includes the following initiatives:

**Strategic Initiative:** To achieve national distinction in the humanities and the arts we need a reformed GE package, while maintaining strong majors in our disciplines that are coherent and distinctive: Development of 4 –unit interdisciplinary base for GE and a new vision of Area A.

**Strategic Initiative:** To achieve national distinction in the humanities and the arts we must be able to integrate elements of EMT and FYE into the School curriculum.

The proposed GE reform plan approved by the School incorporates these initiatives. In addition to planning for 4-unit modules, the proposal calls for “improved

articulation and sequencing of instruction in writing, critical thinking, oral communication, and comparative perspectives, allowing for a clearly articulated sequence through our lower division writing and critical thinking courses“(A & H GE Reform Proposal) (*CFR 4.6*). The School plans to bring its proposal to the GE Sub-Committee for consideration in fall of 2009.

The English Department has also created a new English 100A-100B “stretch” course that brings SSU into accord with the CSU guidelines on remediation, that is, to reduce remedial courses; remove the stigma of remedial from introductory courses; to award baccalaureate credit, if warranted, to course that are offered; to increase retention in the freshman year; and to provide quality, student-centered programs even in time of severe budgetary curtailment. This program, which will provide students with Area A2 GE credit over one year of a cohort model English composition and reading course, was approved by EPC and will begin in the 2010-2011 academic year.

While A & H’s efforts have coalesced into an adopted proposal for GE Reform, planning and consideration of GE Reform continues across the schools (as documented in the GE Program Review). For instance, the Chairs in Social Sciences have recently completed an analysis of the GE courses and learning outcomes in that school, examining its alignment with the revised learning outcomes from the GE Subcommittee and considering the impact of a potential shift to a 4-unit standard for GE courses. Faculty members in the Sciences are examining alignment of the courses in area B with the outcomes established by LEAP and Executive Order 1033. Representatives from each school serve on the GE Subcommittee to coordinate planning and assessment efforts

### **Looking Forward**

Increased support and supervision of the GE Program was identified as a key area of concern by the GE Subcommittee.

“The Subcommittee should work with administrators and faculty governance to consider models for oversight and review of GE instruction and administration. One possibility is to provide the support described above to a Subcommittee of similar structure as the current one, and another one would be to appoint a ‘GE Coordinator,’ with a significantly reduced teaching load, to oversee scheduling, oversight, and assessment (*Review 59*).”

The university’s Educational Policies Committee (EPC) has for the last year been actively considering the creation of an organizational unit that could provide coherence and structure to GE planning and assessment efforts, seeking to address “the feasibility of and planning for a school-level unit within Academic Affairs that would be responsible for leadership and oversight of undergraduate curricular and co-curricular education that occurs prior to or outside of upper-division study in the major programs and their associated Academic Schools (EPC memo).” In May of 2009, EPC approved and forwarded to the campus Provost a recommendation for the creation of such a school-level unit in order to provide oversight and coherence to University-wide courses and general education; the Provost has subsequently requested feedback on the proposal from the Academic Planning Committee (APC), the GE Subcommittee, and the Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management and plans to make a decision on this proposal in the Fall of 2009.

Clearly, SSU has come a long way in defining and understanding the goals and learning outcomes of its GE program. In concert with the ongoing planning and reform

efforts in FYE, A & H, and other units, the GE Subcommittee is fostering dialogue appropriate to the assessment and continuing improvement of SSU's General Education mission. The dialogue continues in multiple venues. Working towards an enhanced and better articulated general education learning experience for SSU's students continues to be at the forefront of the university's planning efforts.