

Sonoma State University General Education Program Review

External Reviewer Report by Lori Beth Way, SF State

At the request of Sonoma State's GE subcommittee, I visited campus in Spring 2017 to help in a review of their General Education program. I received a self-study of the program prior to the site visit and then a revised self-study on September 5th, 2017. My goal in this report is to aid Sonoma State in thinking about how they would like to best serve their students through the general education program while also considering constraints outlined by CSU system rules. Much of what I do in this report is raise questions for discussion. The hard work comes in answering them. I hope though that I've also been able to provide you with some resources and recommendations regarding how you might answer those questions and have those discussions.

In case it may be helpful to have a sense of my background when considering this report, I was a professor in the Political Science Department at Chico State for 13 years. As a faculty member there, I was chair of the Educational Policies and Procedures Committee of the Academic Senate for six years and worked on the redesign of our general education program as a member of a six-person design team and then as co-chair of the implementation team. That process resulted in a completely redesigned GE program that started in 2012. After a couple of years as Senior Advisor for Undergraduate Education at Emerson College in Boston, I returned to the CSU as Associate Dean of Academic Planning at San Francisco State in Summer 2015. In Fall 2016, I became Interim Dean of Undergraduate Education and Academic Planning. In this capacity, I oversee GE, program review, assessment, and accreditation (including WASC), academic advising, tutoring, Metro College Student Success, Institute for Civic and Community Engagement, writing across the curriculum/within the discipline (WAC/WID), curriculum revision process, articulation, the catalog, developmental education and lead the campus student success plan efforts.

My visit to Sonoma State in March included a variety of very productive meetings with many people who are clearly committed to the success of SSU students and deeply value the unique education students at this particular CSU receive. I met with GE instructors, the GE subcommittee, students, Department Chairs, Interim Provost Echeverria, AVP of Academic Programs Karen Moranski, and the Education Policies Chair, Laura Watt. I'm very grateful for their time and hope that the result of our discussions and my review of the self-study produce some helpful things to consider at this point in time at SSU.

Self-Study

Preparing the self-study gave the campus, and GE subcommittee especially, an opportunity to embark on systematic reflection about what may and may not be working about the GE program. The self-study document outlined the different pathways or options that students may take through GE (e.g. Hutchins), the first and second year experiences, first year living communities' options, course formats and scheduling, the issue of potential bottlenecks, potential structural problems in offering GE courses, GE advising, the GE curriculum oversight process, assessment, and identified some possible action items.

It is clear that SSU has had a lot of innovation in pedagogy and course delivery at the course level. The campus has put a lot of thought into how different GE area goals are intertwined and self-reinforcing (e.g. A3 and C3) and consideration into what can be accomplished in a 4 unit course as compared to a 3 unit course.

Students have many different options of pathways through the GE curriculum. There are many distinctive programs, but it is difficult to decipher how the various options add up to a program or how they interact with one another. Are there benefits in some of these pathways that are not found in others? Are there particular aspects of the curriculum that all students should have access to regardless of the particular learning community they participate in?

While there has historically been a commitment to having GE as a place for students to explore disciplines, too much choice can result in students getting lost and unsure about how to navigate their way through. How do students understand these options? How are they presented to students? Why should they pick one as compared to another? The self-study presented seven different "freshman learning communities," which included Hutchins. The "stand alone" GE courses included the Academic and Career Exploration (ACE) and the EOP academy. They don't all meet the same areas of GE and it is unclear how they all map on the [50 unit pattern](#). The students who took the time to meet with me indicated that there was a great deal of confusion about how to make choices through the GE curriculum especially how to address the different course unit totals to then sum to the minimum number of units needed for a particular area.

The challenge is that what has developed is very complex and sometimes difficult to understand. According to the self-study, the Humanities Learning Communities courses "deliver A3 and C3 content instruction along with transition-to-college curriculum, and they aim to facilitate a pathway to the major hosting the FLC, without excluding non-major students." The HLC is also described as "two linked courses for an 8-unit year long academic experience." How much GE credit do students get from this? Just A3 and C3? The self-study indicated that the "A & H faculty designed their first and second year programs to address students' frustration. Faculty designed these courses to be fully integrated into their majors." It is unclear what the students were frustrated about. Were they frustrated because

they couldn't see the connections between their general education course and their major or their education over all? It is hard to assess because the source of their frustration was not identified.

At many of the CSUs linking courses like this, in a learning community, is not feasible because so many of the students are part-time and do not have schedules that permit them to take linked classes at specific times. I suspect this kind of course delivery is possible because, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), 90% of SSU students are full time. (This is close to Humboldt State's ratio.) Given that the HLC's launched in 2012, there has likely been sufficient feedback from students regarding whether such scheduling is too difficult for them.

Keeping with the theme of connecting GE requirements to students' major interests, the School of Science and Technology created Science 120, which also meets multiple GE requirements and is year-long. An identified challenge with this course though is that it cannot be selected by those students in certain (high enrolled) science majors because it will increase their time to graduation.

One topic that was addressed briefly in the self-study and in a couple of meetings during my visit to campus was online course offerings. Some department chairs were interested in increasing the number of online courses, but there were others who had reservations. [Eleven percent](#) of Sonoma State students currently take distance education courses. The availability of online courses and whether SSU would like to increase that availability will likely need to be addressed during any redesign of the curriculum.

A New Context

Redesigning general education at any university is usually the most difficult, time-consuming, sometimes heart-wrenching activity that we undertake. There's an important reason for this. The General Education program gets to the core of what we do. It is the curriculum that all of our students receive; it has the broadest effect across campus. And, perhaps, most importantly to an institution like Sonoma State, the General Education program reflects the liberal arts nature of the institution.

The release of [EO 1100 Revised](#) has clearly created challenges for SSU given that much of the current GE program is out of compliance. The SSU Academic Senate resolution lays out the myriad ways in which the campus curriculum will need to change. Perhaps most extensively, the GE curriculum in all areas needs to be based on offering 3 unit courses. While there may be some 4 unit options, the spirit of EO 1100 Revised is that when a course is 4 units in GE that is largely because it is double counting in a major and will, therefore, be an advantage to take the 4 unit course (see [GE EO 100 Revised FAQ #22](#)). While the work ahead is surely hard, there is also an opportunity now for Sonoma State to take the necessary step back to look at the GE program holistically.

A major impetus for EO 1100 Revised was to establish equity between students who start as first-time freshmen and those who transfer. One of the changes that SSU will need to make is that both transfers and native students have the same GE curriculum. The [current transfer path of 48 units](#) for those students who have already taken 30 units at another institution is different from the native path and, therefore, no longer allowed. The self-study reports that 32% of your students take this path so there are a sizeable number of students who this affects. The self-study doesn't say what requirements transfer students who transfer in with less than 30 units are held to. In order to come into compliance with EO 1100 Revised, that will have to be clarified.

As Sonoma State thinks about the future, they might also want to consider where their "transition-to-college" curriculum fits. It appears to be currently incorporated in the learning communities of A3 and C3. Is this curriculum something that you'd like to see integrated into several courses in the future or perhaps focused in one particular course? EO 1100 Revised created some new options for Area E content including the ability to make Area E courses first year seminars. The additional topic that was added was "student success strategies."

The advent of EO 1100 Revised, while difficult, also offers an opportunity for a new day. It presents the moment the campus may need to really consider what do we want GE at Sonoma State to be? How can SSU retain what it means to be unique and simultaneously meet the mandates of the CO's office?

The self-study does an excellent job of reviewing a variety of GE courses and innovations created through course development. The types of first year and sophomore year, residential, and research courses created is impressive. Clearly there are strong aspects of each of the different pathways through GE, but it doesn't seem that students receive the same benefits if they are pursuing different pathways. The challenge for Sonoma State at this point is to consider how these different wonderful components of the GE program can be designed to reach all SSU students.

Once we start to think of GE as a program rather than a collection (of often absolutely wonderful) courses, there is a need to coordinate that program. There is a need to consider the degree to which those courses build on one another and/or fit together to create a cohesive experience for students. The nine learning outcomes developed for GE provide the outlines for the program, but it is currently unclear how those learning outcomes are met through the curriculum. The GE subcommittee reviewed the course syllabi for GE Area B1 and only 4.7% of them listed the overall GE objectives. It would be good to consider why this might be the case. Are the learning outcomes well-known and supported? Are they seen as the guiding principles and values of the GE program? The review of syllabi also revealed that only 15.2% of the syllabi listed the GE sub-area objectives. It might be the case, then, that the use of learning outcomes as guiding courses may not be integrated into pedagogy across the campus.

The nine GE program learning outcomes, as noted, focus on acquiring a foundation of intellectual skills and capacities. The campus might ask itself what learning outcomes would reflect the deeply held values at SSU. For example, what role does community engagement take on campus? Faculty I met during my visit also illustrated a strong commitment to Ethnic Studies and its contributions to the GE program. How might a newly redesigned GE program illustrate that commitment?

Student Experiences

Students expressed difficulties meeting the GE requirements. One aspect of that struggle was working out the 3 unit as compared to 4 unit requirements in various sections of the program. In particular, some would have taken 3 courses, but were short on the units or took more units than were necessary.

The issue of the availability of GE courses was raised in several meetings. These concerns generally seemed to fall in one or more of the following categories: some courses were listed as in GE, but not regularly offered, some were restricted to particular majors, and Ethnic Studies sections didn't seem to be offered at the volume needed.

Students also identified that they had difficulty meeting GE requirements because some GE courses were restricted to particular majors. In several conversations, it seemed the case that there was some tension around meeting GE FTE targets and major targets. One option the faculty may want to consider is creating a "met in the major" process so that courses in GE can be open to all students. The way met in the major works at other campuses is that a program applies to a GE committee to show the ways in which a particular course (or set of courses) meet the learning outcomes of a particular GE area. If the committee agrees, what happens is that students in that major do not need to take that GE area because they have already met that requirement through a major course. You can see an example of this at [SF State](#).

Another concern that students had about their GE courses was that because some of the courses were also in service to the major, there was an assumption that students had more knowledge than they, in fact, had. The students felt like they were sometimes in courses that were really specialized for the major rather than a broad educational experience.

Students also said that what was required for UD GE was unclear and noted there was no list anywhere. As an external reviewer, I couldn't find anything in the public domain that explained how upper division GE worked. The 50 unit pattern worksheet merely indicates that 9 units of UD GE are required. When I searched a few degree [roadmaps](#), I found that UD GE were major courses. The self-study doesn't address the upper division GE framework. It would be helpful to students to make clear and easily accessible their requirements for UD GE.

A Way Forward/ The Sonoma Experience

Given the many innovations that have developed at SSU, the campus is in a good position to review them as a collective and consider what they have in common that best serves students. Is the Sonoma Experience GE connected to the major? Is the Sonoma Experience students conducting their own research? Is it cohorted or linked courses?

The key to accomplishing any significant GE redesign is to put courses aside at the beginning and start with the goals of the program. Is the campus happy with the current set of learning outcomes for the overall program? Are there perhaps ones that you'd like to see revised or some you would like to eliminate? To what degree are the learning outcomes consistent with the mission of the university?

The campus may want to consider how to accomplish those goals in the various areas. For example, I previously mentioned the possibility of moving the content of the transition-to-college curriculum to a stand-alone Area E course. Additionally, those courses could be developed to be linked thematically to majors or colleges. (This assumes that the faculty agree that it is a good idea to link GE to majors. There are many arguments against such an approach, but the development of the learning communities that have occurred seemed to indicate a desire to link GE to the majors.) In overlaying the goals of the program onto areas, another option would be to designate a subarea of C, D, or B as including undergraduate research activities. (This could build on the current sophomore year research and creative experience.)

Examples from other CSUs include, that at [Chico State](#), students are required to take four courses that are designated writing intensive through their GE. At SFSU, courses in the areas can also be designated one category or more of the [SF Studies courses](#) – social justice, environmental sustainability, global perspectives, American and ethnic minorities. In both cases, the students are meeting a GE requirement and a university requirement with the same course (i.e. double counting). These requirements basically occur as overlays. The university requirement illustrates the campus's values within the general education program.

Another set of conversations may center around what has been accomplished by combining or linking A3 and C3. What learning goals were met by offering the course material this way? How can those positive aspects be retained or even enhanced?

It will be important as SSU considers the way forward that they work closely with academic advisors and seek the input of current students (and even alumni) about what the current strengths and weaknesses are of the current program and work to dream about the future together.

One trend nationally has been to consider using [meta-majors](#) to provide students with pathways through general education. The meta-majors are offered as a way to

build a cohesive curriculum while engaging students' broad interests before they specialize in a particular major. Given the self-study's report about the ways in which the learning communities have fed into, double counted, or were linked to majors, considering lessons from meta-majors might be helpful.

On the other hand, SSU takes great pride in its identity as a liberal arts institution and this emphasis definitely stands out in comparison to the other CSUs. The faculty may want to explore the degree to which they would want to go down the path of making GE partially in service of the majors rather than as a strong broad liberal arts program of its own. What skills, competencies, values, dispositions, and knowledge do you want to ensure that all SSU students, regardless of major, have?

Moving to 3 unit courses: SSU should consider the degree to which the advantages of 4 unit courses are balanced by the disadvantages, especially to transfer students. According to the self-study, over 30% of students follow the transfer pathway and almost all of them will largely be transferring 3 unit courses.

Sonoma State has illustrated with this program review that they are interested in thinking seriously about the tough questions around how we best serve students through a liberal arts education. The CSU system just stepped up the need to be committed to that by requiring serious changes to the ways in which SSU administers their GE program. There are many different ways to proceed. I offer one here merely based on my own experience at a CSU similar to SSU.

I would recommend that a team of faculty be jointly tasked by the Academic Senate and Provost's Office to redesign General Education at Sonoma State. This need not be a current sitting committee, but it could be given the shared governance structure. That's not something I can know as an external reviewer. The key is that a relatively small (no more than 8 people) team be charged to consult widely both with internal constituents and national and state models to offer the campus options as to how to retain the distinctness of SSU while complying with statewide mandates.

The key to the membership of this team is that it consists of faculty (and at least one GE/undeclared advisor) who are widely respected and trusted by the campus by virtue of position or personality or both. They also need to be unleashed to imagine. While some will focus on all the constraints of EO 1100 Revised, there is still a lot of room for creativity in the guidelines. The central question needs to always be what is best for students at Sonoma State University.

The [SSU Academic Senate resolution](#) regarding EO 1100 Revised is accurate in its estimate of the amount of work that needs to be accomplished in a short period of time. The extension to Fall 2019 allows the campus additional time, but given the degree of curriculum and course revisions that have to occur, focused sustained work will be required to even meet that deadline. Given this, resources will likely be necessary to support faculty time to work on this project. In order for the

redesigned GE program to be a reflection of the wishes of the majority of the faculty, the redesign team will be required to consult widely and broadly. The successful redesign at Chico State required team members to visit department meetings, college meetings, and hold several open forums.

Another option that can be used in conjunction with an on-campus team is the use of an outside facilitator. Student-centered curriculum change can sometimes be derailed by a focus on enrollments and interests of specific departments. Of course, that is understandable because any curriculum redesign can have profound impacts on resources and allocations. These constraints can be overcome though with a faculty body that is focused on making changes that are in the best interests of students' education. An outside facilitator who has expertise in curriculum design can be helpful in keeping the focus on assisting in the creation of the GE program prior to populating the curriculum with specific courses. The selection of courses that will constitute the components of the curriculum can then be chosen within the framework of the learning outcomes and goals of the program. This is a delicate process that requires that first the faculty are agreed on the parameters of the program.

As faculty, we aren't trained in curriculum development. We are all experts in our disciplines. As we know, training for doctorates largely doesn't include training on pedagogy or assessment of student learning. Faculty members who have spent time learning about curriculum design largely gain that expertise by engaging in years of curriculum work and often learn such skills and knowledge from their peers who have learned them primarily through their service to their university. At SFSU for curriculum redesign of majors, we consulted with Amy Driscoll of WASC, Portland State, and previously Monterey Bay. When Chico State set upon their redesign they used resources from AAC&U and the Dean of SFSU consulted as well. The key to a successful outcomes when redesigning a curriculum relies on a consultative facilitated process.

Resources to support the GE Program

The GE subcommittee's charge indicates it "encompasses all issues pertaining to the GE curriculum." It is responsible for approving all new GE courses, articulations, GE petitions, and minor changes to GE courses. That work of the every day as well as the policy level work is likely too great for one committee. When the focus is primarily at the individual course level, it is hard to evaluate and revise at the area and program level. At the risk of scorn for this suggestion (not another committee!), SSU might benefit from creating an additional committee or splitting the current committee into two in order to give one body enough time to focus on the goals of the overall program and whether those goals are being met (i.e. assessment). In this arrangement, one of the committees could focus on course level matters such as new course proposals.

According to the self-study, there is no faculty or administrator specifically responsible for general education (other than maybe the AVP of Academic Programs who has a very large portfolio). It might be helpful to consider identifying a faculty GE Director, which is found on many CSU campuses. At San Francisco State University, the GE Director is half time (.4 AWTUs). The position coordinates with the GE committees (there is a policy committee, a lower division committee that approves courses, and an upper division committee that approves courses) and the Associate Dean of Academic Planning. A major task of this position is coordinating the assessment of the GE program with particular attention to the WASC core competencies. The faculty director also assists faculty who are interested in creating new GE courses and responding to feedback from the committees regarding changes the course needs in order to be approved for GE. Having a GE Director is also essential when changes in policy are requested by the Chancellor's Offices. The Director can take a lead on convening the faculty and shepherding the process.

The self-study indicated that there was concern about making sure students can enroll for the GE courses they need in order to graduate in a timely fashion (see pages 13-16). SSU may want to consider some resources that may be able to help them with their scheduling. Some campuses are successfully using the Degree Planner/Smart Planner to understand what courses students are choosing, especially when they can select among several in any given area of a curriculum. Another option is the software product [Ad Astra](#), which has been adopted by a few CSUs to both track historical enrollment in courses and to predict future course needs based on students' degree requirements. Sacramento State, especially, has utilized Ad Astra to assist in making strategic scheduling decisions.

Another important resource and student support question arises from the current arrangement of GE advising. In order to meet the ambitious goals of the CSU's GI 2025, many CSU campuses are reviewing their advising practices and, in particular, moving to more proactive advising models rather than waiting for students to seek out advising resources. The current SSU model appears to rely heavily on peer advising, which has both positives and negatives. Trained professional advisors (usually with masters degrees in counseling) are in the position to be able to assist students in selecting courses in a way that will best suit their needs and interests. Professional advisors also can help students understand how the GE program works as a whole so that students don't feel like they are merely taking courses to check boxes of random requirements.

Meeting graduation goals will require a significant focus on retention in the first and second years of college when students are most likely to leave. Research has shown that students who are able to complete 30 units that count towards their degree during their first year are more likely to be retained. Assuring that those 30 units will all count towards their ultimate degree requires that students make informed choices about the classes they register for. Professional advisors who are trained in the intricacies of the GE program can reach out to students prior to registration

periods so that all of the weight of understanding and advising about GE doesn't fall completely during summer orientation.

It appears from the self-study that other than peer advising, faculty are often expected to advise both for the major and for GE. That is a lot to ask of faculty who have other teaching and research responsibilities. What kind of training is provided for faculty so that they feel confident about advising on GE requirements? Might professional advisors, like those designated for undeclared majors, be a good investment for advising of university requirements that are not major requirements? The self-study indicates that some colleges have been able to create school-wide academic advising centers. This is a positive development. Lessons from several CSUs, however, indicate that such advising centers need to be coordinated so that training and information provided to students is consistent. Just as we have not had training in curriculum development, faculty, and therefore leadership in colleges, often do not have training in advising. A lot of research has been produced in recent years about best practices in advising. There is a clear connection between the quality of advising that a student receives and their ultimate experience at a university. Several CSUs have begun to establish advising systems that include some centralized coordination across the colleges.

One resource that has become available to the CSU campuses is [EAB](#). This is a software platform that provides advisors with a lot of information about students' progress and allows them to identify students who need support or outreach. CSU, Long Beach, Fullerton, CSU LA, and East Bay have all successfully used EAB and are strong proponents of its usefulness. The result of several campuses' support for the product was a system-wide contract that started this academic year. The contract allows campuses to purchase EAB for a significantly reduced cost and with support both from the company and the CSU central offices.

Assessing a GE Program

The best way to ensure assessment is productive, meaningful, and efficient is to create a GE program with assessment planned from the beginning. The most important start to such a process is to have program learning outcomes that are truly widely supported and a reflection of the mission, vision, and values of Sonoma State. The upper division GE courses are potential good sites for assessment of the learning outcomes. This is because the question is whether as a whole the general education curriculum is meeting the learning outcomes. While each of the courses should be scheduled in some regular (such as every five years) cycle, it is also important to assess the program as whole.

Several of the current nine learning outcomes correspond with WASC five core competencies (e.g. information literacy). Assessing the GE program learning outcomes will also allow you to simultaneously assess WASC's core competencies.

The work of assessing both GE and core competencies requires faculty time and energy. This work can potentially be completed by a campus-wide assessment committee or a GE subcommittee, but one that doesn't necessarily have a large number of additional tasks. Coordinating such efforts could be guided by a GE faculty director.

SSU has made some progress in assessing components of the GE program. Some majors have included reflections on their GE courses in their program review documents. Assessment of several GE courses can be found in some of those program reviews (self-study, p.21). The findings were that the identified GE outcomes for those courses were being met. The self-study notes, "GE assessment as part of the department program reviews has not been as consistent as the GE subcommittee had hoped" (p.22). Understandably, there is a lot to be done in a program review and our inclination is to focus on assessing our major. If the one expectation of program review is that departments must assess their GE courses during that review, then that expectation will need to be made explicitly to departments. Perhaps one possibility would be to include a GE committee in the review of that section of a department's self-study.

Faculty have also recently finished an assessment of information literacy and oral communication skills. The initial findings are that the quality of the research that first year students were conducting was not at the level expected. The faculty, however, responded to those findings by creating a more active role for the library in the associated courses. The self-study notes that follow-up on information literacy assessment has been challenging, but these are positive first steps and illustrate how assessment findings can help inform changes to course design.

The oral communication faculty have a system for assessing students' skills using common assignments and a similar rubric. This is a promising practice. The findings and responses were not shared in the self-study though. A couple of science courses have also conducted meaningful assessment.

While it appears that pockets of assessment of particular GE courses and areas have been conducted, the challenge remains (as it does at many universities) in creating a system of assessment that regularly considers both particular courses as well as the program as a whole.

Conclusion

Sonoma State is a jewel for the CSU. The development of several innovations within SSU's GE program is impressive and reflective of the faculty's deep commitment to supporting students' liberal arts education. Understandably, faculty have expressed concern about the direction of the CO's Office regarding EO 1100 Revised. It is difficult for the CSU to balance having distinctive campuses that offer unique experiences for students with providing access in ways that allow transfer between the campuses to be as seamless as possible.

I honestly believe though that Sonoma State is up to the challenge. The campus appears to be in a place in which it could fairly quickly determine what the core values and goals of the GE program should be and then seek to build a revised GE program around those goals and values. This work though, as noted throughout, is not easy. It is time consuming and will require some devotion of resources (perhaps from student success funds?). It will also require the political will of faculty and academic affairs leadership. The outcomes, however, could greatly improve student learning, achievement, and educational equity.