

A WINDOW ON ASSESSMENT



SACRAMENTO
STATE
Leadership begins here.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Concentric Circles of Assessment

Terry Underwood, Faculty Assessment Coordinator



TERRY UNDERWOOD

Spelling out measurable learning outcomes and then measuring them in useful, meaningful ways is a tall order for any degree program. Once you manage to get a roomful of professors to agree on what they want students to learn, how do they find the time and energy to do the assessments and record the data? Even if you get the data recorded, how do you ask these professors—each of them already pushed to the limit—to spend their time analyzing and discussing the data?

Well, take the degree of difficulty of ‘doing assessment’ for any given degree program and quadruple it when it comes to assessment in General Education. Sacramento State has roughly 450 separate GE courses, many with multiple sections, all of them spawned from separate disciplines with distinct traditions and cultures and faculty who may only rarely get to spend time with one another across disciplinary lines.

As if this weren’t challenge enough, up the ante still more. Consider General Education in the context of a state the size of California running all of these courses on three distinct tracks: the community colleges, the CSUs, and the UCs. Given an internal funding mechanism that pits department against department within universities in competition for students, given legislation and policy that mandates a course delivery model based on distribution rather than integration, who could even imagine an assessment plan that might spell out measurable outcomes and actually assess student learning in GE across California institutions in ways that make sense and still leave time for teaching and research?

Want to see an even bigger challenge? Consider the entirety of American higher education across all fifty states. The basic structure of the baccalaureate degree remains the same everywhere: two lower-division years focused on GE and two upper-division

“...who could even imagine an assessment plan that might spell out measurable outcomes and actually assess student learning in GE across California institutions in ways that make sense and still leave time for teaching and research?”

Spring 2010 | Issue 5

Office of Academic Program Assessment

Terry Underwood,
Faculty Assessment Coordinator
Library 67 | 278-2498
Email: oapa@csus.edu
www.csus.edu/programassessment

Office Hours

Monday: 9am – Noon, 1pm – 3pm
Tuesday: 9am – 2pm
Wednesday: 10am – 1pm
Thursday: 9am – 2pm
Friday: By appt.

years focused on a major. Does anybody want to go there carrying the banner of assessment?

Yes, there are a few sturdy souls still standing on the battlefield of assessment and General Education, and this issue of A Window on Assessment gives you the chance to hear their voices personally and learn something about what makes them tick.

Susan Albertine, a strong advocate for sane and sensible assessment, serves us and our students as a Senior Director for the LEAP States Initiative (AAC&U), an ongoing project chipping away at the national challenge. Susan tells us what the work means to her and might mean to us if we embrace the call to collaborate. Ken O’Donnell, Associate Dean in the Chancellor’s Office, goes to work every day and sloshes through the challenge at the state level. Ken is here to tell us that this assessment work, instead of restricting and restraining us, could actually set us free. And Janet Hecsh, our very own GE committee chair, tells us where we are in GE at Sac State.

Of Values and VALUE

Susan Albertine, Senior Director LEAP States Initiative, Association of American Colleges & Universities



SUSAN ALBERTINE

There's both tension and joy to collaboration. At its best, collaboration takes you out of your familiar sphere and lifts you into a different place, a place of agreement, a place where consensus is possible and the good of the many makes for enduring value. So it has always felt to me, on campus, when people from many sectors come together for the good of something bigger. That's the joy.

The tension is, as I learned long ago, a necessity. In order to collaborate, we have to pull against each other. Compromise, negotiation, reconciliation won't come any other way. The tension that makes a rope strong or a safety net hold can also cause anxiety and pain. Sometimes the rope or webbing sags or snaps.

To collaborate on a campus or in a system, we have to move, for a start, beyond familiar boundaries of course, discipline, department, college, or institution. Nothing pushes the need for that kind of boundary-crossing like assessment. And it is and has been risky. As Peter Ewell has observed, over the past quarter century, faculty have been pulled roughly between assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement of learning.¹ There is no doubt that most faculty are drawn more to the latter than to the former. That old familiar tension. At times it has been enough to make certain committees think they should get out of town, scarlet A upon their breast.

But times are changing, as many people, Ewell included, have noticed. The assessment movement among faculty has gained strength. That strength is coming from a number of sources. Most significant among them is the wellspring of understanding one finds in the conceptual shift from teaching to learning. Concentrate on learning, you'll find a flood of questions flow. How do I know? How do my colleagues know? How do my students know they are learning? Assessment prompts curiosity and holds out promise of enriching discovery.

So begins assessment, genuine assessment, assessment designed to be deep and rooted in the work we love, the work that brought us into higher education in the first place. Thinking of assessment, I have long believed first that it depends on a willing collaboration and a passion to know about learning. For many of us, that requires a willing suspension of disbelief. That is fine, too. Many of us are there now.

So what does the VALUE project introduce that changes the dynamics of assessment? What does that mean for individual campuses and for campuses that are part of systems?

Every campus I visit, somebody asks me about the

VALUE rubrics. It is truly noticeable. If people know about LEAP, they know about the rubrics. If they know about high-impact practices, they know about the rubrics. A friend and supporter of the LEAP Compass project exclaimed to me how astonishingly fast word is spreading—outcomes, HIPs, rubrics for assessment.

Now I confess to having wrestled with my inner English professor several years ago on the subject of rubrics. I bet I am not alone. I and my colleagues learned, however, to like rubrics and to use them across many disciplines years before VALUE came into being. Now I hear about rubrics every place I go. So for one thing, rubrics have earned currency on campuses. That means communication and exchange will follow.

For two, rubrics foster collaboration. They are wonderful bridge builders and network weavers. You can use rubrics to form consensus about expectations for performance and outcomes across multiple sections of a course. You can use them for disciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary program development. You can use rubrics in the classroom so as to make the implicit explicit to your students. You can hand them to your students. You can hand them to employers. You can use them for program review. For accreditation. For alignment between grades 12 and 13. Connect them to portfolios and e-portfolios, you can launch new ventures in lifelong learning and career preparation for students. You can modify and own them locally and still align your work at the state level and nationally. That is some considerable potential. The genius of the VALUE rubrics is that they work best and perhaps only when faculty use them to assess student performance. They are deeply embedded in the curriculum. The antithesis of standardized tests, they stoutly stand for standards without devolving into standardization.

The VALUE project is a not quite three years old, launched in 2007 as part of the LEAP initiative. The rubrics were made by faculty teams, the teams drawn from campuses across the country.² We are just beginning to see what campuses and systems of higher education will make of the rubrics, what collaboration they will build. Within the three state systems of higher education that are participating in the Compass project—the CSUs, the University of Wisconsin System, and the Oregon University System—we are joining widespread discussion of the rubrics and robust experimentation with them as a key feature of emerging learning outcomes and assessment practices. It is too soon to tell where this emerging collaboration will move. I and we at AAC&U will be delighted to keep you posted.

1 Peter T. Ewell, "Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension," National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, Occasional Paper #1. learning-outcomesassessment.org

2 For the lists of faculty teams that wrote the VALUE rubrics, See *Rising to the Challenge: Meaningful Assessment of Student Learning*, published jointly by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the Association for Public and Land-grant Universities, 2010.

General Education in the California State University

Ken O'Donnell, State University Associate Dean, CSU Office of the Chancellor

The Origins of GE Breadth

For our first two decades as a state system, each university of the CSU set its own general education curriculum. Then, in May of 1980, the Board of Trustees adopted the common General Education Breadth curriculum still in use today.

In hindsight Executive Order 338, signed the following November, is surprisingly forward in its thinking. It calls on each campus to “challenge its own creativity,” leaving to “each campus faculty the responsibility for developing the institution’s particular program.” The opening page calls for integrated coursework, and general education at the upper division to “feature the interrelationships among disciplines within and across traditional general education categories.”

It even foreshadows higher education’s shift to a focus on learning outcomes, calling on faculty to develop “programs in terms of educational goals and student needs rather than in terms of traditional titles of academic disciplines and organizational units.”

So what went wrong?

Thirty years later we’re still struggling to live up to our own best intentions. GE throughout the system is plagued by the chase for FTEs, a checklist approach to curriculum that makes learning feel like running errands, and yes, division into traditional titles of academic disciplines and organizational units. Why?

For one thing, decades of sickening lurches in state support have made it harder for schools and departments to reach across disciplinary boundaries without risking their very survival.

For another, the thing about traditional organization is that it’s expedient. Since 1980 the CSU has nearly doubled its enrollment, and added three full universities. It’s hard to think outside the box when it’s all you can do to keep up.

And most of all, there’s transfer. Since 1980 student migration has accelerated between our universities and across segments of California public higher education. This puts pressure on academics to keep the units of learning simple and interchangeable.

So while our goals remained noble, expressed in language that survived two revisions to the original executive order, organizational pressures have if anything made us lose ground. Our transfer-friendly GE Breadth curriculum was so appealingly modular that the UC system later joined us in a sibling curriculum, IGETC. And to this day, interchangeability prevails.

Liberal Education and America’s Promise

To be sure, there is high-quality general education and local innovation at each California State Uni-

versity, in large part because of our segmental mission. The CSU draws faculty with a special affection for undergraduate learning and cutting-edge, high-impact curriculum and pedagogy. In a sense dedication to the best in liberal education is in our DNA, even when the logistical demands on our system pull us the other way.

So it wasn’t surprising when CSU campuses signed on early for the national LEAP campaign, launched in 2005 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Eight CSUs -- including Sacramento State -- are members of the LEAP Campus Action Network.

LEAP -- Liberal Education and America’s Promise -- articulates the core values and aspirations of American undergraduate education. It focuses attention on the “essential learning outcomes” for all students, regardless of major. In other words, it cast general education in terms of outcomes, nationally developed, iteratively vetted, and distilled to a one-page list that could be numbered and cited.

And cite them we did.

In 2007 the Chancellor’s General Education Advisory Committee embarked on a revision of the General Breadth Executive Order. The faculty senate began with a two-phase survey of the faculties around the system, soliciting suggestions for revision and sparking grassroots interest in general education that coalesced into the informal GE Affinity Group. And at the group’s first meeting, in February 2008, it urged the faculty senate to incorporate the LEAP outcomes verbatim into the new GE Breadth executive order.

For that spring term the EO remained in draft, giving faculty on each campus time to review and comment. By the following summer it was signed into policy. The LEAP essential learning outcomes call for:

1. Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world.
2. Intellectual and practical skills, like critical and creative thinking.
3. Personal and social responsibility, including civic engagement.
4. Integrative and applied learning, so graduates may continue to grow with a changing world.

To be sure, challenges remain: the same executive order goes on to name unit values, disciplines, and departments in the familiar, disconnected cafeteria model. But for the first time, the hopes we’ve expressed since 1980 are as quantifiable as the distribution requirements we rely on to facilitate transfer. And by focusing on a shared set of outcomes, precisely stated and measurable, our component universities are freed to create a wider range of educational experiences.



KEN O'DONNELL,

“...write a piece about the hopes and goals of the Chancellors Office underlying the directive to the campuses to make use of the LEAP Framework in GE programs. Is this an effort to make all of the campuses look alike? Or is it something else?”

Rethinking General Education

By Janet Hecsh



JANET HECSH

Two years after the end of our last Program Review General Education at Sacramento State is on the cusp of substantive change from a GE model we have had for the past thirty years to a 21st Century GE characterized by a contemporary, interdisciplinary approach that blends curricular and co-curricular experiences and offers young people multiple modalities to learn and apply their learning to real world situations and challenges.

I have come to understand a variety of perspectives on GE. In meetings, in one-on-ones over coffee or lunch, and in public and in private conversations, I've heard how it offers too much/too little/just enough choice. I know everyone's autobiography as an undergraduate! I understand the territorial imperative and the altruistic and idealism. I see how the invitation to be creative in the 1980s Executive Order has become compliance focused and often incomprehensible to students. According to the last two program reviews and the most recent WASC Review, our GE program needs reconsideration and repurposing. It must be assessable.

The Compass Project has asked us to get creative with GE, and our collaboration with the "Compassinos" in the system and in other systems nationally has provided us with models and with suggestions for avoiding the "potholes" so ubiquitous in reform initiatives in large systems. With the leadership of Susan Albertine and Alma Clayton-Pederson at AAC&U and Ken O'Donnell in the Chancellor's Office, the Compass project has acted as a mini "think-tank" bringing Sacramento State faculty together for workshops and workgroups featuring our colleagues sharing their work (Virginia Matzek, Sustainability Across the Curriculum; Sheree Meyer, One Book), student and faculty panels (GE and Transfer, GE Reads).

The Compass Project and members of the GE/GRPC were instrumental in drafting and carrying forward the new Baccalaureate Learning Goals (BLGS) with the LEAP Outcomes embedded. These were adopted by the Faculty Senate in November 2009. Now we are working backwards from those Goals to consider how we will have evidence that students are meeting those goals. The VALUE Rubrics have been a useful tool to assist in beginning a curriculum alignment resulting in a coherent program.

Recently, a workgroup composed of members of the Faculty Senate Curriculum and Instruction and General Education Committees and their sub-committees began a design for a General Education Pilot, Sacramento State Studies, that would be interdisciplinary, portfolio and outcome based, and delivered in a significantly different paradigm. This effort has engaged about twenty faculty over the past two months, facilitated by Chairs Lang and Hecsh, and will result in a proposal to be shared with the university community in April and May.

Shared governance and consultation have played a strong role in this movement. Provost Sheley and Vice Provost Lee in Academic Affairs, along with Vice President Varlotta and her staff in Student Affairs, have crucial in facilitating the process. The campus responded to a straw poll inviting comments and suggestions for themes and courses. The most wonderful thing about this has been the sometimes shy inquiry of newer faculty saying, "I'd love to try something new" or "I have an idea about a course that I would teach with two other faculty" or "students will really like this." Of course the "this" is contested ground. That's what we would expect in a university where ideas and ideals live.

Sacramento State has great students, great faculty and staff. We have wonderful programs like Community Engagement, First Year Experience, One Book, and we have outstanding student advocacy services; the Writing Center, Math Lab, CAMP, EOP, Student Advising, ASI. The goal of the pilot is to leverage these programs and services and blend these into a vital and vibrant General Education experience.

When folks want to make a joke, they sometimes tease us in Education that our discipline is without content. When I want to tease folks, I joke back saying that education—that is, teaching and learning—IS our content. It is what I know best. I have a strong commitment to providing access for young people entering as first time freshman and coming to campus as transfers. I look forward to handing incoming freshman a compass that makes navigation easier and results in a memorable undergraduate education.