

# GENERAL EDUCATION NEWS

From the CSUS Office of Academic Affairs

## Reclaiming the “Liberal”: The Practicality of a Liberal Education

Leah Vande Berg, Assessment Consultant

*Liberal Education* is not a political term in the narrow sense. It describes an educational philosophy “that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance and cultivates social responsibility” (AAC&U, 2002, p. 25). A liberal education typically has two parts. One part is an in-depth study of a particular field (typically one’s major). The other part of a liberal education is General Education.

The General Education curriculum exposes students to a broad range of knowledge in multiple disciplines, requires students to grapple with important issues, helps them understand the past, and provides what are often students’ last and only introduction to the tools needed for lifelong learning and informed citizenship. The AAC & U argues that a liberal education is “the best and most practical form of learning for a changing world” because it prepares students not only for rewarding jobs and careers, but for fulfilling lives and responsible citizenship.

The *Greater Expectations Report*\*, published in 2002 by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, after two years of research by a panel comprised of scholars, business and industry leaders, and administrators, calls for a renewed commitment to provide students with a liberal education. This, the AAC & U argues, is “the education all students need” because it produces individuals who are “intentional about learning and life, empowered, informed, and responsible.” Such an education is PRACTICAL because it develops the skills and understanding that all thinking adults need: “analytical skills, effective communication, practical intelligence, ethical judgment and social productivity,” as well as the ability to “collaborate productively with people who are unlike them.” It is precisely such skills and knowledge---such a liberal or liberating education – that students gain from their General Education curriculum at CSUS.

And as the AAC & U *Greater Expectations Report* notes, “Graduates with this kind of liberal education will have gained high level abilities, transferable from discipline to discipline and from one environment to another... By developing their capacities to reason and critically evaluate, a liberal education readies them to decide important questions. By fostering a sense of social responsibility, it builds capacities to reach decisions that are wise and just” (p. 25).

Historically, a liberal, or liberating, education has been how nations’ leaders are trained. However, as the AAC & U notes, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our increasingly global and constantly changing world requires greater collaboration and adaptation, and “will require all people at times to be leaders and at other times to be skilled followers” (p. 27). David Kearns, former Xerox CEO, recently noted that in the current, competitive global business world “there is only one constant: change. And the only education that prepares us for change is a liberal education. . . . We need the flexible intellectual tools to be problem solvers, to be able to continue learning over time.”

The mission of the General Education curriculum at CSUS is provide a diverse, inclusive liberal education, one that does just what the AAC & U says. A liberal and liberating education should “seek out varied perspectives, crosses disciplinary lines, pursues wisdom from multiple cultures, and employs a range of teaching strategies.” (AAC & U, 2002, p. 27). So, the next time you look at the array of courses in the GE Curriculum, take pride in the central role that our diverse yet unified General Education Curriculum is playing in preparing the next generation of wiser, flexible, citizen leaders, who are committed to social justice and are broadly informed, critical, analytical decision-makers.

\*Association of American Colleges and Universities. *Greater Expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college* [National panel report]. (2002). Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

## GE Vignettes

**Q: What’s going on in Area D?**

**A: Lots of Fieldwork and Service Learning**

Did you know that in *Anthropology 101* (Cultural Diversity, Area D2) students gain “an understanding of the diversity that exists in human societies” by conducting five hours of fieldwork? In doing so, they have worked at such diverse settings a homeless shelter, on the South Sacramento Light Rail, at the Russian/Ukraine Community Center, and at a Pentecostal Church. After performing their fieldwork, they write descriptive, analytical and reflective essays discussing the enhanced understanding of cultural diversity in Sacramento that this experience enabled them to acquire.

Did you know that as part of the class requirements, students in GE Women’s Studies courses apply problem solving and service learning by working with a campus or community center or agency. Students also present papers evaluating their service learning project assignments to their classes and the WOMS Service Learning Committee?

Did you know that fall 2002 *Journalism 172* students developed lesson plans, visual aids, and materials, and then arranged with local elementary school teachers to present these lessons on the societal contributions of women in the mass media?



## GE Area D2 (JOUR 172)

Instructor Timi Poepelman and students Angela Bratrud, and Crystal Masson in front of Phoebe Hearst Elementary School.

## Assessment Plan Development for General Education Courses

Greg Wheeler, Director of General Education

Many of you are not looking forward to developing assessment plans for your courses. You may think the work will not produce any useful benefits or that the data collected will be misused. You have seen many fads in education and you may believe that this is another fad that will soon pass. Some of you may have heard that developing an assessment plan is worthwhile but you have no idea where to start. Here are the answers to these common concerns:

**Why must I develop an Assessment Plan for my GE courses?** The simple answer is that the CSUS Faculty Senate mandated these plans in April of 2002. But the whole answer is more complicated. In general, the national assessment movement has its roots in two concerns. The first concern results from a perception by many in the public—legislators, business community, and others—that students are not being educated well and that the education system should be held accountable. This concern has resulted in standardized tests in the K-12 system and suggestions that exit exams should be created for universities. Our regional accrediting body (WASC) now requires evidence that assessment is being done at the college, program and course level as is mandated by CSU system directives. It is clear that if programs do not develop meaningful assessment procedures, they will be imposed from outside our institution.

The second concern that leads to assessment plan development is the realization that many students do not learn what we expect them to learn. By identifying what our students actually learn and dissecting the specifics of that learning we have the potential to make changes which improve our classes.

As part of the program review process, all Major programs should already have assessment plans. Extending the concept to General Education classes should not be difficult. The GE plans for the area under review are requested the third week of fall semester. The review process usually takes all fall semester.

**When must I have an Assessment Plan in place?** General Education classes are reviewed in a 5-year cycle. Area E is being reviewed in fall of 2003 and then the cycle begins at Area A in fall of 2004. Once plans are approved, they are implemented in the spring semester.

**What is required?** The minimum elements of an assessment plan for a GE course are listed on the web at <http://csus.edu/acaf/ge/checklist.doc>. You will notice that the faculty has already defined the learning goals that must be assessed. These are listed for each of the GE areas at <http://www.csus.edu/acaf/Portfolios/GE/geareacriteria.htm>. In addition to the GE learning goals, you will want to develop some goals that are specific to your course. For example one goal might be to master the details of pigmy camel reproduction. This may be a valid course goal, but it is not a GE goal for all our students.

**How will assessment data be used?** Currently, Faculty Senate policy requires departments to have completed plans in the fall and to report the assessment results in the spring of each review cycle. There are many ways that the data could be reported, but the suggested form is on the web at <http://www.csus.edu/acaf/ge/asmntforms.stm>. This data will be summarized and reported by the GE Policies/Graduation Requirements Committee. Individual course section data need not be reported to the CEP/GRC. It is the goal of assessment to improve course instruction and student learning. In GE classes, course instruction must be geared to the learning goals established by CSUS Faculty Senate Policy.

**Where can I get help?** There are many sources of help in development of the assessment plans and analysis of the results. You may decide to use any or all of these resources:

1. The GE web pages on assessment, <http://www.csus.edu/acaf/ge/home.stm>. (These pages contain checklists and details on assessment plan development.)

2. Campus assessment workshops. These are offered in the spring and early fall and go over every aspect of the course syllabus and assessment plan development. Call the Director of General Education, Greg Wheeler (87466) for dates and times.
3. Contact Leah Vande Berg, the Campus Assessment Consultant ([vandeberglr@csus.edu](mailto:vandeberglr@csus.edu)) for help or to schedule a meeting with your faculty. Leah's primary function is to help individuals and departments to develop and implement assessment plans.
4. Send faculty to the CSU Assessment Conference in March of each year. Greg Wheeler has travel funds available for those faculty who contact him by early February of each year. This is an excellent nuts and bolts conference put on by our system to improve the use of assessment plans. We take 10 people.

**What happens if the Department is unable to complete the Assessment Plan by the third week of fall semester?** We have tried very hard to provide the information and resources you need to complete the Assessment Plans in a timely manner. The GE Policies/Graduation Requirements Committee may extend your deadline a few weeks, but any GE course without an approved assessment plan may be removed from the GE program.

## General Education Calendar

February 10, 2004, 4:00-7:00 p.m., includes dinner  
Second meeting of GE Area A interest group

February 12, 2004, 3:00-5:00 p.m.  
First meeting of GE Area B interest group

March, 2004  
Area A Assessment Workshops/Chairs Meeting

Newsletter Compiled by Peggy Allan



# California State University, Sacramento