

GENERAL EDUCATION NEWS

From the CSUS Office of Academic Affairs

HOW LONG WAS THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR?"

*Jackie R. Donath, Chair,
General Education/Graduation
Requirements Policy Committee*

A month or so ago, my e-mail included a set of questions that the sender suggested could act as an exit exam for General Education. He invited me to test my General Education knowledge and my sense of myself as an educated person. There were about a dozen questions, and they were the sort that asked things like, "how long was the Hundred Years War?" and "what country makes Panama hats?" As I reviewed the message and the questions, it occurred to me that, for many of my students (and some of my colleagues as well), these sorts of questions reflected their sense of the value of general education---trivial at best.

From my perspective, the belief that General Education is really just a loose, relatively meaningless collection of courses which offer nothing more than the sort of knowledge one needs to win at Trivial Pursuit® reflects a failure of our efforts to highlight the importance of this central element of the university's curriculum. Especially in the context of the most recent General Education self-study and program review and the current activities of the General Education/Graduation Requirements Policy Committee and the Faculty Senate, I'd like to take advantage of this edition of the newsletter to advocate for this very important part of our students' education and to alert you to some changes in the ways we evaluate the components of our General Education Program.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In spring of 2002, the Faculty Senate unanimously passed a set of five Learning Goals for the Baccalaureate that were intended as a preliminary and significant step in defining our work and expectations for student achievement as a result of baccalaureate study. I'm sure I'm

"preaching to the choir" for when I tell you that I believe it is a central faculty prerogative and responsibility to oversee curriculum and student learning (and to be between them) and that anything we can do to formalize and make explicit the values, sensitive to the complex relationship knowledge, skills and expectations which are at the heart of our enterprise is to the good. Obviously, it makes sense to have an understandable set of goals for our General Education program; one that is tied to the University's mission and tailored to our student body.

These agreed-upon expectations of undergraduate learning place our common values at the center of our efforts to evaluate and improve the quality of student learning at CSUS. The implementation of these expectations across the curriculum is meant to allow us to work together in consistent and coherent ways to embody our *Strategic Plan* goal of offering "academic programs characterized by high quality, . . . a commitment to life-long learning, the preparation of an educated citizenry, and a responsiveness to regional needs."

GENERAL EDUCATION AND THE BACCALAUREATE

General Education is a crucial component of a baccalaureate education that is focused on the premise that all students should explore how the great body of human knowledge is organized and become familiar with the methods for gaining, evaluating and extending that knowledge. Baccalaureate-holding students should possess a range of knowledge, values, and skills that will enrich and shape their lives long after their formal education has ended.

Although one of the learning goals is "competence in the disciplines," the bulk of the baccalaureate learning goals reflect a campus-wide consensus about the

GE VIGNETTES

Q: What's going on in Area E?

A: Learning for a Lifetime

Did you know that in Health Sciences 124 students use their critical thinking skills and what they have learned about the five dimensions of health to critically examine biomedical and alternative health care practices, to evaluate their own preventive health care choices, and to analyze the arguments (including suspected false or unproven claims) made in media advertisements for health-related products?

Did you know that in Anthropology 188 students explore cross-cultural and intra-cultural social meanings, values, and uses of the body and the relationship between global systems of power and conventional constructions of the body?



RLS Professor Bill Finch hands back papers to Chris Dixon. Also pictured are Nick Perdigao (L), Alicia Stonebreaker and Matt Rals (Right).

Did you know that in Recreation & Leisure Studies 122, class lectures, readings, and diverse experiential activities culminate in student paper presentations of the individual lifestyle plans they have developed to help them enjoy present and future healthy lives?

Did you know that in Philosophy 100 students use multiple philosophical theories to explore the competing viewpoints and ethical implications of moral decisions they make in their everyday lives?

(Donath, continued)

purposes of General Education and emphasize ways of knowing and contexts for knowledge rather than specific content. More than a specific list of courses, the CSUS Baccalaureate Learning Goals emphasize the development of knowledge, values and skills that will serve students throughout their lives, providing them with

- the resourcefulness and flexibility to adapt successfully to rapid social, economic and technological change,
- the understandings and tolerance necessary for informed citizenship and social action,
- the interest and curiosity that is essential to the pursuit of learning throughout a lifetime

GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT AND PROGRAM REFORM

These are not trivial matters and the development of a curriculum that supports the learning goals is at the center of our efforts to organize and offer students a general education program that acts as a foundation for their study in a major and as a framework for life. The creation of University-level learning goals has led to conversations about student learning and course assessment. Additionally, the General Education/Graduation Policies Committee helped prepare a statement about the purposes of GE to be distributed to students and faculty and encouraged the Director of General Education to find opportunities to educate the campus about the program---this newsletter is just one of his outreach efforts.

As a result of the passage of the Baccalaureate Learning Goals, the General Education/Graduation Policy Committee has worked on learning goals for the foreign language graduation requirement, English 20 and the Information Competency Requirement. The General Education Course Review Subcommittee has spent the last three years examining General Education Areas C-E, and will turn its attention to Area A course review in the fall. Departments and faculty must now assess their courses in General Education in light of the Learning Goals.

It's clear to me, after 8 years in the "GE business," that program reform is an

ongoing (probably never-ending) process. And certainly, my experiences suggest that any efforts to change or improve our General Education programs are tricky, as each iteration of the program has strengths and weaknesses. Nonetheless, General Education provides the best opportunity for the faculty to celebrate the origins of the university----based on the Latin word "universium"---as a society of teacher and students where the whole, or the meaning of the whole, could be studied. While we no longer study some unitary, nameable whole, General Education can, and should, offer our students breadth and synthesis that will illuminate the important connections and relationships that can help them meaningful organize their experiences, both at CSUS and in the so-called "real world."

THE "MEANINGFULNESS" OF GENERAL EDUCATION

The university has begun to work against the devaluation of General Education by focusing energy and resources on assessment and improvement. Our General Education program has the potential to legitimate the work of building connections between disparate-seeming bits of knowledge. Les Adler, in an essay entitled, "Uncommon sense: Liberal Education, Learning Communities and the Transformative Quest," suggests that "Whether a fragmented system of education can in any effective way produce integrated beings is perhaps the most significant question confronting practitioners of liberal education today."

This is, ultimately, the core aspiration of our General Education program---to introduce students to the diverse kinds of knowledge on which they can draw in order to find answers to the problems and questions we all face. That we don't meet our goal as completely as we might wish may reflect the complexity and importance of the task. Recognition of the significance of even our imperfect attempts should cause us to more strongly value the efforts we make in this curriculum and renew our determination to pursue excellence in General Education.

. . . and by the way, the Hundred Years War lasted 116 years and Ecuador makes Panama hats.

AAC & U CONFERENCE

In March 2004, six faculty members, GE Director Greg Wheeler, and Director of Curriculum Assessment & Accreditation Linda Buckley attended the American Association of Colleges & Universities Conference, held in conjunction with the annual CSU Assessment Conference in Long Beach. Several attendees share their reflections on the conference in this article.



Conference Attendees: Back (L to R): Elizabeth Strasser, Kimo Ah Yun, Joan Neide; Center (L to R): Dan Melzer, Greg Wheeler, Kristin Van Gaasbeck, Linda Buckley; Front: Anne-Louise Radimsky (not pictured Ernie Hills).

AAC & U Workshop, Plenary Address, and Poster Sessions Provide Valuable Information By Kristin VanGaasbeck, Economics Department

The AACU General Education and Assessment conference consisted of sessions broken down into three tracks: Designing General Education Programs for Key Liberal Education Outcomes, Assessing Student and Institutional Learning for Accreditation and Accountability, and Aligning Institutional Structure and Rewards to Value General Education.

Prior to the opening keynote address, I participated in a workshop "Integrating Goals for General Education with the Work of Departments." In this workshop, I gained valuable information about how to work with colleagues and different departments to solve problems. During the session, groups were asked to identify a problem (related to general education). These were then exchanged with another group that was to define the problem and identify key elements of a successful design. In the last round of exchanges

(Van Gaasbeck, cont).

another group was responsible for developing a plan to resolve the problem. The lessons from these exercises were two-fold: First, once the problem has been defined, a solution should be sought out, rather than others criticizing the problem itself. Second, faculty can be incredibly productive if forced to resolve issues during a predetermined time frame.

As an instructor, I greatly benefited from the plenary address "The Science of Learning: How Applications of Research Can Enhance Learning." The speaker reported empirical findings from psychology about how students learn. I learned valuable tips such as asking students to complete a short problem at the end of a lecture (this immensely helps them retain material) and reinforced the importance of active learning.

Representatives from San Jose State provided an overview of how their faculty implement the CSU GE program. It was useful to see how these larger objectives were interpreted and assessed at a peer institution. Their GE assessment program is similar to ours: emphasizing the importance of the faculty's freedom in teaching courses while striving to ensure common themes across different sections of the same classes, and even those falling under the same GE area.

Being a relatively new addition to the CSUS faculty (along with most members of my department), this was especially useful. In implementing our own GE assessment, it would be useful to have reports available online, along with exemplar reports completed by other departments. More information on SJSU's assessment program is available at the website below.¹

Along similar lines, CSU Long Beach provided a poster presentation for their writing program. The presentation outlined problems with the WPE, highlighted recent campus assessment activities, and detailed rubrics created to evaluate writing across the curriculum. These rubrics are available at the website below.²

¹ <http://www2.sjsu.edu/ugs/assessment/asge1.html>

² <http://www.csulb.edu/centers/fcpd/>

Themes and Challenges in Writing Assessment

By Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator

Because of my interest in writing assessment, I attended sessions at the AACU conference that focused on writing. The institutions that had effective writing assessment touched on similar themes: "ground-up" assessment that included input from students and faculty; assessment of writing as a critical thinking and meaning-making activity, rather than simply transcription of facts; and a focus on using writing assessment as a way to get faculty from across disciplines together to talk about what it means to write well in college.

The AACU sessions I went to also reaffirmed for me that many institutions were facing the same challenges when it comes to improving student writing that we are facing at CSUS, such as budget cuts and the resultant increases in class size and a significant population of students who are inexperienced as writers.

The institutions that were having the most success with assessing and improving student writing and learning had strong programs for supporting students (Learning Communities, Writing Centers, Learning Skills Centers) and institutional support for faculty (faculty development workshops, course load reductions for teaching writing intensive courses, and generous stipends for participating in university-wide writing assessment).

2004 FALL GE CALENDAR

September 20 (Monday)

- * Area A GE Course Syllabi Due
- * Area A Course Assessment Plans Due

October 12 (Tuesday)

- *Area B GE Faculty Reception & Assessment Orientation Meeting

Newsletter Editor: Leah R. Vande Berg
Editorial Assistant: Sheryl M. Hurner
Special thanks to Rusty Slabinski and Jenny Stark

Educational Assessment in the 21st Century

by Kimo Ah Yun, Communication Studies Department

The AACU Conference afforded me the opportunity to reflect uninterruptedly about education in the 21st century and the role assessment may take. It further provided me the opportunity to discuss assessment with my own colleagues and conference participants from other universities, and to share some thoughts that emanated from this with you.

The first goal of assessment is to better understand learning; the second goal of assessment is to better understand teaching. Teaching and learning are inextricably connected; they are two sides of the same coin that cannot and should not be disassociated. Assessment focused on learning but not teaching or teaching but not learning is doomed to failure.

Assessment is scary. To engage in the assessment process, one must be brave enough to find out what students actually learn and to be dedicated enough to address what they do not. Accountability in university scholarship is not normative, but is requisite for successful assessment. Such a change in university culture will take time, if it takes place at all.

Assessment requires a real commitment from faculty. Faculty may go through the motions of assessment if they are told they must, but they will not do so in a meaningful way unless they believe the benefits deriving from the process outweigh the costs. Faculty are well aware of the costs, especially additional work, but are less aware of the benefits. Benefits to students, faculty, units, and the university should be clearly articulated to faculty members.

Assessment requires a real commitment from administration. The administration can take steps to enhance the likelihood of assessment success. The most obvious way is through strategic distribution of resources. Resources could be allocated to an office of university assessment to plan and implement assessment efforts, as well as to faculty members, units or colleges to engage in meaningful assessment. Additional resources in the form of graduate student support, faculty release time, and perhaps additional support staff serve as examples.



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