

BACHELOR OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

External Consultant Report

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General Observations

The California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) Bachelor of Vocational Education (BVE) degree program has been in existence since 1992. The degree is housed in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and School Psychology, but is administered through the CSUS College of Continuing Education. The program is and has been offered in a self-support mode, that is, it neither receives nor uses campus general fund income. During all but the last year of its existence the program has been led by one person, Dr. William Harris. The BVE degree is, by California standards, a relatively old degree, having been established in 1943 by legislative authority. The BVE degree or its successor is offered at the CSU campuses in Sacramento, Fresno, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Long Beach, and San Diego. The Sacramento State program is the second largest in the state, enrolling an average of 25 to 30 new students each semester.

This review is the first program review by campus or external reviewers, so there are no recommendations from previous reviews to follow. There is evidence, however, that program administrators and faculty have responded to less formal reviews of the program by advisory committees over the years and have adapted curriculum or delivery methods to better serve the program's audiences.

The commentary in the following pages is based upon several items, including the reviewer's personal knowledge of the degree programs on a California-wide basis, the self-study and all of the supporting documentation produced by the program, interviews with program administrative personnel, faculty, students, graduates, and employers.

Commendations to the Program

The CSUS BVE program is very well-regarded by its students, its graduates, and the employers of the graduates. Numerous graduates commented that they had received promotions or job commendations that were directly related to participation in and completion of the BVE.

The program is well-run, efficient, and good use is made of the fees that students pay for participating in the program. The classrooms in Napa Hall are first-rate and would be the envy of most faculty members in the CSU system campuses.

All faculty and staff members of the program demonstrate genuine concern for the students, especially of the differences adult learners bring to the program. Students are most appreciative of those efforts and attribute their success in the program to the level of support provided by faculty and staff who teach in and work for the College of Continuing Education.

Program Students

The comments in this section are based on review of student-produced material and interviews with students, graduates, and faculty. The CSUS BVE students are all adult learners. The degree requirements (5 to 7 years of work experience, hours teaching or training others) insure that students are well into their lives and careers before program entry. Most students have not had college or university experience as a student in the recent past, often well over 10 or 15 years. Two thirds of the students in the program are females who are well into their thirties or forties.

The gender and ethnic balance of the students and graduates interviewed appeared to be no different from what is seen in society as a whole, but I do not have the statistics for CSUS or the Sacramento area. The students and graduates interviewed appear to have the same characteristics and come from similar backgrounds as do the students in the other CSU BVE degree programs.

A review of the course schedules and discussions with students and graduates revealed that the program is offered at times and in locations that are convenient for the students and their busy lives. Students and graduates commented that the courses were not only fulfilling the learning objectives of the program, but that the skills and knowledge they gained in the classroom were almost all immediately useful in their life away from school – either their job or their home.

There is no campus-based student association or group specific to the BVE program, but that is not uncommon in a degree program for adult learners who have other life and occupational issues in addition to school. Students and graduates reported that they had formed informal study and support groups in the program, and that these groups and the peer pressures and support were contributing factors in completing the degree while also engaged fulltime in other parts of their lives. Both students and faculty have been involved as officers in the California Council for Adult Education.

Faculty

The faculty members for the CSUS BVE degree program are drawn from the fulltime, doctoral-prepared faculty of several departments on the CSUS campus and from a pool of practitioners in the area. The part-time faculty members who teach in the program all have an appropriate formal education, and all work in professional areas served by program graduates. All faculty members participate in regular faculty meetings, and their resumes indicate that they are active in professional organizations and professional development activities. The fulltime faculty members engage in scholarly and creative activities appropriate to the subjects they teach and they publish in venues particular to their subject expertise. There is no fulltime faculty member with a vocational education background, but the part-time faculty members are all engaged practitioners who bring their expertise to the program. The ratio of full and part-time faculty is appropriate for and common to BVE programs around the state and the nation.

Instruction in the program is generally provided to cohort groups consisting of 25 to 35 students, so the student-faculty ratio is nearly always the same. Fulltime faculty members commented that they appreciated the size of the classes, especially when some of the courses they taught in the regular program approached 70 to 75 students. All faculty members appear to incorporate technology into their instruction, and the program has a course specifically designed to teach the same competencies to the students.

Until recently, the program administrator made most of the curricular and teaching decisions of the program, but it appears that both full and part-time faculty are now actively engaged in decision-making for the program. Regular meetings have been held and faculty members or groups of faculty members have accepted responsibility for insuring course consistency. The faculty also spoke of the input that they had provided to the proposed master's degree.

Both the former and the new program administrator are fulltime faculty in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and School Psychology, and both were or are the Department Chair. The program administrator is responsible for all faculty appointments to teach in the program. It appears that the faculty and staff share a mutual appreciation for what the others do for the students.

Both current students and graduates reported that they were very happy with the demonstrated competence of the faculty, and they were especially appreciative of the support received from faculty. Such support included attention in the classroom, availability via telephone and e-mail, and assistance in applying for other positions and to graduate programs.

The Academic Program

The academic program for the CSUS BVE program has remained the same since inception. That is not to say that the course content has remained static, but the curriculum pattern contains the same courses that it started with. There is evidence that the courses and their delivery have been changed and improved over time to reflect developments in the subject matter and the methods of teaching. A review of the course syllabi and interviews with students and faculty reveals that writing is systematically taught and evaluated in context in virtually all courses. Information competence is taught both in a discreet course and as part of the other major courses. There are standard course outlines for all courses, and most instructors incorporate all the learning objectives in their syllabi. Faculty members meet and discuss the courses and the methods of delivery in order to maintain consistency in the multiple sections of courses being taught. Evaluative criteria are published in course syllabi, and students and graduates relate that their skills and knowledge are regularly assessed, but there is inconsistency in the assessment methodology (see recommendation below).

There seemed to be some inconsistency in the syllabi that were provided for review. Some contained explicit student performance objectives, while others just

provided course goals. Very few of the syllabi had detailed course content or an instructional plan for specific course dates. While this was not mentioned or seen as a short-coming by students or faculty, it makes sense in a program dedicated to pedagogy that the best practices be displayed at all times to the students.

No data were available on student retention or graduation rates, but students or graduates were interviewed from every cohort that has completed the program, and they were questioned about completion and graduation. From these anecdotal comments, it appears that the program has a very high retention rate. Graduates commented that the few students they knew of who had dropped out or not completed the program did so for personal or financial reasons. Graduates reported that they knew of one or two students who had been really frustrated by the WPE requirement and had dropped. Overall, the program appears to have a very high rate of student satisfaction and retention.

Institutional Support

The CSUS BVE program is offered only in the self-support mode. Classes are taught either in Napa Hall or at remote sites arranged by the program administrator. The classrooms and other amenities in Napa Hall are new and technologically sophisticated. Support staff members are provided with spacious and modern offices in the same facility.

The program has incorporated an orientation in the campus library at the beginning of each cohort group, so the students all have, from the beginning, access to and instruction in the use of the library. The campus library also has made available a distance education desk which helps students access materials online and at other CSU campuses. Faculty members reported that they had recommended specific purchases to the library, and that all such requests had been honored. Both student and faculty members felt that the library and library support were adequate for program needs, especially the digital materials.

Students and graduates were particularly complimentary about the advising and counseling services they had received, both from faculty and the staff in the College of Continuing Education.

Recommendations

1. The program should consider developing and requiring the use of a standard syllabus format that would include at least: instructor contact information, the course description, a comprehensive list of student performance objectives (outcomes), specific evaluative criteria and their relationship and weight in the grading process, a detailed outline of course content, the program policies regarding absences, and a detailed calendar of events in the course (a timeline). This would assure that all faculty members are following the appropriate university policies, but it would also provide an example for the students to use in their own teaching.

2. The program should develop a policy and process to insure that all instructors evaluate student achievement using a variety of assessment tools, such as quizzes, objective tests, term papers, oral presentations, homework, class participation, and research. In addition, it is recommended that no single assignment or assessment activity constitute more than 25 or 30% of the course grade. Further, it is recommended that the program faculty jointly develop or adopt (and use) scoring rubrics for such activities as the term papers, research, oral presentations, and class participation. These rubrics and their use will serve as powerful examples for the program students to take back to their own classrooms and workplaces.
3. The program faculty might want to consider conducting a thorough review of the program elements, especially if they consider further the implementation of a master's degree program. Such a review might reveal the possibilities of "double-numbering" some courses so non-BVE graduates could use some of the courses as electives in the graduate program.
4. The campus may wish to explore the possibility of providing the required upper-division general education courses either in a live, off-campus location, or online. Students reported that the most difficult part of the program was the requirement that they come to campus and attend those courses at the times that were more conducive to fulltime students. By providing the upper-division general education courses at the same site where major courses are taken, the BVE program will truly become a seamless exercise for the students.