

# THE GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

## Report of the External Reviewers

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We were invited in spring 2007 to participate as external reviewers in California State University, Sacramento's regularly scheduled review of its general education (GE) program. Prior to our visit, Associate Dean Greg Wheeler provided us with the most recent GE program self-study, prepared by the General Education/Graduation Policies Requirements (GE/GRP) Committee and completed in December 2006. Dr. Wheeler also provided copies of or access to supplementary materials, including the current GE program as displayed in the campus catalog, the baccalaureate learning goals formally adopted by the campus, the self-study conducted during the previous GE program review, Faculty Senate actions taken in response to the recommendations of the previous GE review team, issues of CSU Sacramento's *General Education News*, and the schedule for our visit to the campus.

During the two days of our visit, we talked with faculty members, staff members, students, and academic administrators. We met with the GE Program Review Team; the GE/GRP Committee and the GE Course Review Subcommittee; academic advisors and degree evaluators; peer mentors, academic advising interns, and student orientation leaders; and the former chair of the GE/GRP committee. Two additional meetings, one open to all faculty members and one to college deans and department chairs, provided additional perspectives. Our primary hosts—Dr. Wheeler, Associate Vice President and Dean of Academic Programs Mike Lee, GE Program Review Team Co-Chairs Bruce Bickle and Roberto Pomo, and GE/GRP Committee Chair Janet Hecsh—were unfailingly gracious, deeply knowledgeable about the program, and clearly dedicated to making it both effective and practical. All the groups and individuals with whom we spoke were thoughtful and constructive, respectful of and concerned for the students served. It was a pleasure for us to participate in this review with such admirable colleagues.

### Program Self-Study

The 2005-2006 GE/GRP Committee developed the questions to which the self-study responded, and the Faculty Senate approved this structure. With one exception, to be discussed later, we noticed no obvious inaccuracies in the self-study.

The self-study demonstrates that the faculty leadership has habitually devoted considerable attention to GE policy throughout the last few decades, in part but not exclusively in response to periodic program reviews and staggered periodic reviews of courses by GE area. (The campus appears to have been more assiduous than many CSU campuses in its conduct of periodic formal reviews.) The importance with which both the faculty and administration regard GE policy and practice is manifest in the 2002 Faculty Senate recommendation, adopted by the campus administration, to establish a full-time administrative position to be devoted to general education matters.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of the campus baccalaureate learning goals and GE area-specific learning outcomes was a major step forward for the university. Plans to assess student learning outcomes have included GE, and when an assessment tool has proven not to provide useful information, a different strategy has been developed in its place. Apparently, though, few assessment results are yet available to inform any changes to GE policy and practice.

The self-study includes relevant information drawn not only from the Academic Affairs area but also from those units of Student Affairs that have extensive responsibility for GE advising and evaluation. We were pleased to see this recognition of the crucial role of staff in the effectiveness of the GE program.

The campus takes pains to consider together campus-specific general education requirements and other graduation requirements to which undergraduate students, regardless of major or transfer status, are subject. Their joint implications for students are thereby given close scrutiny.

The self-study appears to us to exhibit the same care and integrity that characterizes most of the GE activity at CSU Sacramento. It is, however, essentially a conservative document. Most of the questions address matters to which policymakers have devoted considerable attention in recent years, and the answers are unlikely to be surprising to anyone who has followed the debates. One question that might have produced more provocative answers—that concerning the program's coherence, clarity, and simplicity—was answered primarily by comparing CSU Sacramento's GE program to those of other Northern California CSU campuses. While comparison with other CSUs is particularly appropriate because of the systemwide framework and state laws under which all CSU campuses operate, there are other public universities serving similar populations whose GE programs might stimulate new ideas for program revision at Sacramento.

Pending the availability of assessment results, the campus might have probed a little more deeply into the conformity between the policymakers' vision of the GE program and how students are actually fulfilling GE requirements. For example, how many units are students—first-time freshmen and transfer students—really taking to fulfill GE and graduation requirements? For a given GE subarea, which courses are students frequently

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<sup>1</sup> The collective-bargaining environment of the CSU makes it unusual for a CSU faculty body to recommend the creation of any new Management Personnel Plan position.

using to meet the requirement (and why)? Are the common patterns of GE completion what policymakers anticipated?

### Program Coherence and Assessment

Although no one to whom we spoke expressed great dissatisfaction with the campus's GE program, and only minor changes were suggested, quite a few people seemed to be troubled by a lack of coherence in the program. This is not a new issue for the campus; as the self-study noted, concerns about GE program coherence surfaced in the 1989 and 2001 program review reports.

Undergraduate students at CSU Sacramento have a rich array of choices in how they meet GE requirements. We understand the value that the campus puts on this flexibility. Not only does it allow students to tailor their pathway through GE to their interests, it makes it quite easy for the very large number of students who take courses at other institutions of higher education (before or after matriculating at CSU Sacramento) to complete GE and other graduation requirements without taking more units than minimally necessary. This efficiency helps make a college education more affordable for students and ultimately provides more Californians access to a CSU education for a given amount of state resources invested in the campus. It is considerably harder, however, for a highly flexible GE program to ensure coherence, and the resulting complexity may give rise to other difficulties (see "Program Complexity," below). Moreover, according to some scholars of decision-making, abundant choice may be less conducive to student happiness than somewhat more limited choice.<sup>2</sup> Determining what amount of choice within GE is ideal for CSU Sacramento students and faculty probably requires an extended process of trial and error.

We think it very important for the campus to begin to examine carefully and fine-tune the balance that its current GE program strikes between flexibility and coherence, better to help students make connections among the elements of GE. The elements of the current program are isolated from one another. All the assessment activity appears to be focused on how an individual course meets the criteria for the subarea for which it is proposed and the one or two primary baccalaureate learning goals associated with that subarea. The GE Course Review Subcommittee has been very diligent in its consideration of individual course syllabi, but the campus does not seem to be taking advantage of possible synergies across courses or developing opportunities to assess how effective the GE program as a whole is in helping students—both first-time freshmen and transfer students—to meet the baccalaureate learning goals adopted by CSU Sacramento. The GE program as currently structured does not lend itself readily to assessment of student learning that takes place in multiple courses, but we expect that a WASC accreditation team will be looking for exactly that kind of assessment. The accreditation team will also be looking for procedures ensuring that the campus will act on the results of the assessment.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Barry Schwartz, "The Tyranny of Choice," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol.50, No. 20 (January 23, 2004), B6.

One can imagine the establishment of some incentives for a faculty member teaching a GE course to pay attention, at least as a secondary matter, to reinforcing and making use of skills and knowledge associated with baccalaureate learning goals other than the one or two goals formally associated with the subarea in which the course is placed. One can also imagine adjusting the GE program structure to promote the development of somewhat greater depth of learning outside the major.<sup>3</sup> The current GE program does identify some "further study" courses, but a "further study" course does not necessarily build on previous study; the category includes both lower-division and upper-division courses, and many of the courses identify no other courses as prerequisites. A program that includes some relatively advanced or capstone GE experience could also facilitate the incorporation of program-level assessment activity into a course; this is generally a desirable assessment strategy for a university whose budget is largely driven by FTEs.

### The Upper-Division GE Requirement

The second sentence of Section V of CSU Executive Order No. 595 states, "At least nine of these semester units . . . must be upper-division level and shall be taken no sooner than the term in which upper-division status (completion of 60 semester units or 90 quarter units) is attained." Although the self-study cites this requirement on page 19 and declares that the CSU Sacramento GE program is in compliance with EO 595, the program as displayed in the catalog appears to allow students to count any upper-division GE courses taken in freshman or sophomore status toward the nine-unit upper-division GE requirement.

The compliance issue affects mostly students who entered CSU Sacramento as first-time freshmen, since the vast majority of transfer students have junior status on entry to the CSU. The GE program could be brought into compliance very simply, by declaring that an upper-division GE course taken as a freshman or sophomore can count toward the area requirement but not the nine-unit upper-division requirement. The student could still complete the GE program in 51 units; he or she would just finish with more than the usual number of upper-division GE units and correspondingly fewer lower-division GE units. The simplest solution, however, may not be the most desirable.

Bringing the upper-division GE requirement into compliance with EO 595 presents the campus with an opportunity to reconsider the purpose of having an upper-division GE requirement and various actions that might better conform to that purpose, e.g.,

- establishing criteria distinguishing courses that meet the upper-division GE requirement from courses (lower- and upper-division) that meet other components of the GE program;

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<sup>3</sup> There is evidence that such depth is more conducive to cognitive growth than additional breadth; cf. Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, "Studying College Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Meeting New Challenges," *The Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1998), 151-165.

- creating an intentional capstone GE experience, which could also be the occasion for overall assessment of the GE program;
- putting a distinct CSU Sacramento stamp on a student's undergraduate education (as many people noted, upper-division GE is the only part of GE in which CSU Sacramento faculty members encounter the majority of CSU Sacramento students);
- creating a multidisciplinary upper-division GE "package" that spans areas.

We recognize that the campus has resisted separating upper- and lower-division GE programs, in part because it is quite common for community college students to transfer to CSU Sacramento with sufficient coursework to satisfy all twelve units of Area B, C, or D but with fewer than nine units satisfying another of those areas. For example, a student majoring in one of the sciences might have taken a year each of calculus, chemistry, and biology courses—adding up to more than twelve units in Area B—but only six units in Area C and nine units in Area D. A student majoring in one of the arts might have taken nine units in Area B, twelve units in Area C, and six units in Area D. In the current program, the science student could take six upper-division units in Area C and three upper-division units in Area D to complete simultaneously the three area requirements and the upper-division GE requirement, while the arts student could take three upper-division units in Area B and six upper-division units in Area D to produce the same effect. The current program is seen as minimizing the number of units that students in this situation would have to take to complete GE. A distinct upper-division GE program with a fixed distribution of units across areas (e.g., three units in each of the areas B, C, and D) would mean that each of those hypothetical students would have to take nine upper-division GE units and an additional three-unit course in the area in which he or she had completed only six units—a total of twelve units—to achieve what requires only nine units in the current program. We note that multidisciplinary upper-division GE courses spanning two or more GE areas could, however, make the distribution of units across areas moot.

### Program Complexity

The GE requirements, some of which are "overlaid," appear extraordinarily complicated, especially as they are communicated to students on the GE website, with its long lists of courses, its areas and subareas, and the appended "Additional Graduation Requirements." In practice, the flexibility afforded by such a large degree of choice may help to minimize units to completion of requirements for both transfer students and first-time freshmen while remaining consistent both with the campus's unique educational priorities and with the system-wide, legislatively encouraged standards intended to ease transfer among California's public segments of higher education. Even with such flexibility, however, we were told that a large number of waivers and substitutions are sought by and granted to students who find that they have not made their way efficiently through the thicket of courses or have made mistakes in their choices. The situation is especially acute for students who change majors and thereby change the status of their GE completion and for

transfer students who have not obtained full certification in lower-division GE and United States History, Constitution, and American Ideals and have not satisfied CSU Sacramento's second-semester composition and foreign language requirements.

At the very least, the university might find a way to represent the requirements graphically as a sort of roadmap that students might more easily follow. This would also help GE advisors to explain the requirements and faculty advisors in the majors to understand them. If the requirements cannot be represented so as to be readily comprehensible, perhaps they are indeed too complex.

Reducing the number of choices could reduce the complexity without losing significant flexibility. One of the goals of general education should be to "require and foster academic community" across and outside of the specialized communities of the majors,<sup>4</sup> but with students scattered in so many courses, the spirit of common intellectual endeavor and common values, articulated so eloquently in the university's statement "about general education," is lost.

Because there are so many ways to satisfy the CSU Sacramento GE requirements, it is difficult to see how they embody the university's mission or how, taken as a whole, they put a distinctive stamp on all the university's graduates—both worthy goals of any GE program. The message to students, "about general education," states, "The CSUS General Education Program is designed to educate in this holistic sense. Thus, it is not simply a series of courses to complete or hoops for students to jump through . . ." But, in fact, as the program is presented with its long lists of courses, it appears to someone confronting it for the first time as exactly what the university does not want it to be—a series of courses or hoops. What is lost in the diverse offerings is the "holistic sense" of education that the GE program was intended to promote.

The lists of courses, extensive as they are, still fail to give students the information they would need to make the kind of careful selection recommended in "about general education." How would a student know, for example, which courses on the list "offer new experiences, such as inquiry-based or community-based learning"? The courses seem indistinguishable except by title, and it would take a hardy and curious student to consult descriptions of all of them so as to know which might best "challenge her world-view or cherished assumptions."

Of course, good advisement can simplify the most complex curriculum and help students make good choices. We found that while GE advisement at CSU Sacramento is very strong in certain respects, there is room for improvement.

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Gaff, et al., *Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1994), 31.

## Advisement

Mandatory freshman orientation and advisement is a commendable development at CSU Sacramento. Freshman Seminar, a proven success, provides a further classroom and content-based advisement opportunity, and its placement in Area E of the GE program gives students who enter as freshmen and take the seminar a common experience and an academic community. We recommend that the university consider making Freshman Seminar mandatory (and effectively the only choice in Area E) for students who enter as first-time freshmen. Departments that currently offer courses in Area E but not Freshman Seminar could partially offset a potential loss of FTEs by developing and teaching a Freshman Seminar course.

Faculty rotation through GE advising is another commendable initiative. It serves to open up faculty perspectives and to forge a link between major and GE advisement that is highly desirable. We recommend that more faculty members be involved in GE advising, with the university providing incentives as appropriate. We also suggest that the university formalize the obligation for these faculty members to report back to their departments at the conclusion of their GE advising stint and encourage them to lead development efforts in their departments that would increase faculty awareness of the nature, value, and specific requirements of the GE program.

## Faculty Development

Just as advisement is key to a successful GE program, so too is faculty development. Faculty members are usually immersed in their disciplines, and their knowledge-making is most often discipline-based. It has been many years since most faculty members pursued general education formally, as undergraduates. The majority of the GE courses at CSU Sacramento are disciplinary and have therefore not created an opportunity for faculty members teaching them to reach across disciplinary boundaries for connections that promote the achievement of the overall learning goals of CSU Sacramento's GE program.

Moreover, the large number of retirements and new hires that have characterized CSU Sacramento in recent years creates the need for faculty development to equip faculty members to help students reach those goals. Bringing faculty members together outside of their disciplines might stimulate the development of cross-disciplinary courses at the undergraduate level, a welcome addition to the GE curriculum. A robust program of faculty development could promote a pedagogy of GE—inquiry-based, community-based, active learning—from which would emerge a sense of shared values and principles among the faculty and consequently among the students. Such a general-education faculty development initiative could strengthen the university's engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning and tie the institution more productively into the national conversation on this subject.