

# A New Path for General Education at Sonoma State

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## Joint EPC/GE Task Force on General Education

Art Warmoth, Co-chair; Chair of EPC	Scott Miller, Writing Center
Paul Draper, Co-chair; Chair of GE Subcommittee	Christine Renaudin, Freshman Seminar Curriculum Committee Chair
Karen Brodsky, Library	Suzanne Toczyski, Modern Languages & Literatures
Jamie Holian, Student	Tim Wandling, English

The Educational Policies Committee (EPC) created the General Education Task Force last fall, with the following charge:

- Analyze and synthesize the available General Education assessment data, including an evaluation of the status of G.E. assessment in relation to the concerns raised by WASC;
- Develop alternative scenarios for the future of G.E. based on a range of plausible assumptions about the future;
- Propose a structure and process for faculty involvement in the discussion and debate of alternatives for General Education for the spring semester.

The Task Force recommends a restructuring of General Education to address the following concerns:

- WASC report (1998)
- Various faculty forums since 1999 (Area A Lab, Asheville-Group, Well Educated Teacher initiative (2002), Faculty Retreats (2002, 2003)
- Widespread student disaffection with General Education stemming largely from a misunderstanding of its purpose; a ineffective advising
- Educational Mentoring Teams (EMT)
- Resource Allocation
- Lack of ongoing assessment

This charge, coupled with a general sense of discontent with the G.E. Program on the part of faculty, students and administrators alike, prompts the Task Force to offer a comprehensive vision for solving many of the problems associated with General Education at Sonoma State University.

The sense of the Task Force is that it is time to think differently about General Education at SSU. Our recommendation has three basic tenets: a) a strong First-Year Experience (FYE) program for freshmen, b) sophomore-and junior-year experiences focusing on breadth and exploration, and c) senior capstone experience in upper-division GE. Taken together, the new program would offer a more coherent and meaningful GE Program than exists at present.

A rebuilt GE program must also include a focus on pedagogy, as well as mentoring and training of faculty who teach in the program. Additionally, we believe that getting students, faculty and administrators to think about GE in a new way will ultimately increase satisfaction with GE at all levels of the university. A rebuilt GE program will contribute to greater student retention past the freshman year, will reinvigorate faculty attitudes and involvement in GE, and will greatly

enhance the quality of the liberal arts and science education students achieve at Sonoma State University.

Our willingness to confront a fundamental breakdown in the GE aspect of SSU's mission is required, and we must use our collective knowledge, wisdom, political acumen, and material resources to re-invigorate General Education at Sonoma State.

A year ago, the School of Education convened a retreat to discuss what makes a "well-educated person" and a curriculum that would produce well-educated teachers. The future of a new generation of citizens is at stake, and our determination to meet this challenge will both define us, and earn us the appellation of "Well-Educated-Educators."

### **Blueprint for Change**

Recognizing that the Faculty Senate unanimously passed new Mission, Goals and Objectives (MGOs) (Appendix A) for General Education at Sonoma State, the following six-part blueprint is recommended:

- 1) Integrate EMT, Freshman Seminar, and portions of traditional 100-level GE curriculum to form a cohesive, rigorous, and sustainable Freshman Year Experience (FYE); and a means for advising students within the FYE**
- 2) Expand student choice among courses at the 200-, 300- and 400-level. Breadth requirements mandated by Title V and Memorandum 595 would be retained, but we recommend removing standing GE designations of most 200-, 300-, and 400-level courses**
- 3) Create a capstone GE experience at the 400-level that formally integrates several strands of inquiry and learning skills**
- 4) Introduce a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) component into GE, grounded in 100-level composition and critical thinking courses, and spreading across all disciplines in 200-, 300-, and 400-level courses**
- 5) Provide training and mentoring to enable faculty to teach to the goals delineated in points 1, 2, and 4**
- 6) Establish a permanent structure for assessing GE course goals and student learning outcomes**

### **Timeline**

Since the most recent WASC report of 1998, in which several important recommendations for GE change were prominently noted, little has changed, though much has been studied and proposed. Only this spring were a set of Mission, Goals, and Objectives (MGOs) for GE approved by the Faculty Senate. At the annual CSU GE Assessment Conference held in Fullerton in March, it was readily understood that GE and GE Assessment at SSU is conservatively 3-4 years behind much of the other CSU campuses. Clearly, the time to move past discussion and into decision is upon us.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends that the current GE system be phased out for the 2006 Catalogue, and that a new one takes its place at that time.

An expanded version of this blueprint, along with a plan for implementation and assessment, may be found on the following pages.

## **Map, Implementation, Assessment and Timeline**

Academic success and personal satisfaction throughout students' careers at SSU and beyond begins with a foundational FYE. The following recommendations are based on the conviction that younger students entering college in 2003 and beyond have unique needs, and that the university and faculty have an obligation to understand and meet these needs.

A successful FYE must be fashioned to ensure the retention of the entering students by helping them acclimate to the academic as well as the social and emotional aspects of university culture. It should be the cornerstone to General Education. A winning FYE is the gateway to the world of knowledge and a rich liberal arts experience. It is the road by which excited and capable students come to major programs ready to fully engage with faculty and content.

As students move into second and third years, we believe they will be better prepared more advanced classes, and that a great set of GE course choices would be warranted. This would surely allow students to fulfill breadth requirements from courses that meet person interest and schedules more regularly, while reducing the number of students taking GE course solely to fulfill the GE requirement.

In the senior year, we look to put in place an integrative capstone experience that asks students to bring together many strands of learning, both in content and method, to examine important topics from perspectives of multiple disciplines.

How the path would be built:

### **Point 1: Freshman Year Experience Housed Within General Education**

The most productive and efficient place to achieve acclimation is through an integrative approach to the Freshman Year General Education sequence. Such an approach is a strong, content-based structure for teaching:

- basic writing, communication, and critical thinking;
- integration of concepts from diverse disciplines of natural and social sciences; arts and humanities; business and economics;
- a comprehensive set of learning skills that includes understanding syllabi; note taking; reading strategies; study groups; effective use of information technology, information competence; and others;
- non-traditional topics such as the student's rights and role in the classroom; faculty expectations and requirements; University services and policies; diversity issues; campus organizations; counseling; residential life; drugs, alcohol and STD, and a host of others.

All four components are imperative to achieving a successful FYE, inspiring students to stay in school, and empowering them to succeed in major programs and individual areas of passion and interest. A proposed plan that links an integrated Freshman Year Experience (FYE) with breadth requirements and skill building, along with an upper-division capstone package follows:

### **First-Year Experience Package:**

- Fundamentals of Communication: Expository Writing and Analytical Reading (**4 units**)

- Critical Thinking (**4 units**)
- Freshman Seminar: “Know Your University” (**2 units, 1 unit per semester**)
- 2 courses chosen to fulfill individual students’ ‘passion’ (a strand) in one of three areas (but not within a major) (**6 units**)
  - Arts and Humanities (C)
  - Natural Sciences (B)
  - Social Sciences (D)
- 1 course from out of students’ strand (B, C, or D)(**3units**)
- B1 or B2 (**3**)

**TOTAL units:            23**

**Point 2: Becoming Independent Learners—Sophomore & Junior Years**

Once students have completed their FYE, they will have been well prepared for additional exploration of the various disciplines throughout the University. Given that students’ fundamental pedagogical imperatives and greatest personal passions are examined in their first year, we may assume that students will take approximately 19 units in the GE program spread over their sophomore and junior years—amounting to one 4- unit and five 3-unit courses that come from GE Areas that figure less prominently in the FYE.

Following the tightly designed and administered FYE, it is expected that students are ready and able to achieve more as independent learners. Sound fundamentals give way to an open university, and allow for the removal of standing GE designations of most 200, 300, and 400 level GE courses, enabling students to choose from a broader range of courses to fulfill the GE pattern.

In this scenario, students might choose any Natural Science course for which s/he has qualified to meet GE Area B1 and B3 requirements—not just those currently on the books. Similar constructions would be made for Areas C and D.

Courses that fulfill state-mandated content such as US Constitution would be duly designated, as would Ethnic Studies courses (though here, too, we might see a broadening of choice for students).

Departments would be asked to designate courses each deems appropriate for fulfilling traditional GE categories, and to provide criteria for such designation.

**Second/Third-Year Package:**

- A1 Written and Oral Analysis –taken in Second Year (**4 units**)
- 5 GE from outside of student’s “passion” strand (over 4 semesters) (**15 units**)
- Includes minimum of one 200-level “W” course

**TOTAL units:            19**

### **Point 3: Capstone—The Integrated Fourth-Year**

The capstone experience of the General Education program should have at its core the integration of learning that has taken place in the first three to four years of the student's university experience. Ideally, such a capstone would involve a set of courses from three different schools based around themes of common interest (global justice, gender and diversity, major social or historical trends (i.e. the atomic age, globalization; technology revolution, etc.) that are socially relevant and which contribute to developing capacities for citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Since this proposal envisages GE to be an integrated program of liberal arts, we expect the capstone experience to target or support themes that are broad, diverse, rigorous, and cross disciplinary. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the experience, such a program would need to be funded administratively in such a way as to allow faculty to collaborate and in some instances, team teach.

Two areas where the capstone experience would find natural resonance with the overall goals of GE are 1) Area E-Integrated Person courses, and 2) Writing Across the Curriculum. In the first instance, the capstone should involve pedagogical strategies to enhance personal integration of subject matter, methodologies, diverse ways of learning, and personal experience. In the latter case, writing about one's capstones course sequence seems an obvious culmination of the enhanced writing component of GE.

A set of 400-level capstone or "C" designated seminars should be developed (some current course certainly would be appropriate) to redefine the Area E "Integrated Person" requirement. Add to this an existing (though largely dormant) model of linking three syllabi to create thematic integration across disciplines. Ideally, each "C" course would link with a theme set of 300/400-level courses.

Taken together, a "C" course and two other linked classes structure the Capstone Experience.

#### **Fourth-Year Package (Linked courses /Capstone Experience)**

- 3 upper-division courses connected to individual student's "passion," drawn from three traditional GE Areas. **(9 units)**
- Includes minimum of one 300/400-level "W" course
- Includes minimum of one designated "C" course (which could also be a "W" course)
- All three courses are thematically linked.

**TOTAL units:           9**

### **Point 4: Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)**

A great deal of research in the field of composition shows that students need sustained and concerted writing instruction throughout their educational careers and that writing skills often do not easily transfer among various rhetorical situations. The writing-across-the-curriculum movement strives to assert and define clear, appropriate, and vital roles for strong first-year composition programs (such as English 101), strong GE writing experiences, and content based, genre appropriate departmental writing courses for students' home majors. Many institutions, including some in the CSU, have embraced the writing-across-the-curriculum movement, and the

movement also very much accords with Sonoma State University's mission as a liberal-arts-focused institution.

Currently, GE 'Area A' encompasses three courses that already are intended to constitute writing-intensive experiences for students (English 101--Expository Writing and Analytical Reading; Written and Oral Analysis--the traditional "Humanities 200" course; and Critical Thinking--Phil 101 or 102). We propose a revitalized attention to the writing-related components of these courses. The 'Area A' GE Lab Final Report (May 2001, Appendix B) substantially articulates appropriate outcomes. It suggests that these courses should be geared to the writing needs of today's entering freshman, employ a common set of learning outcomes, and be taught by faculty who possess a demonstrated passion to teach these courses and an understanding of the unique needs of the young student.

In addition to the 'Area A' requirements, we propose the development of other expressly designated writing-intensive courses offered at the 200, 300, and 400 levels. These "W" designated would carry low enrollment caps. Students would be required to enroll in at least one 200-level "W" course and another 300- or 400-level "W" course. Syllabi would be read and approved by the GE Subcommittee in consultation with the Director of the SSU Writing Center and the Writing Coordinators Ad-Hoc Committee, which the Director chairs; criteria for approval will encompass specific writing-integrative features as articulated within generally accepted WAC best practices.

Assessment of the campus's WAC program might be driven by several mutually supportive methodologies. These include, but are not limited to, selective assessment of specific courses in a rotating schedule; collection and evaluation of student writing portfolios at various stages in the course of study; student-driven assessments in the capstone curriculum; assessments built into a revised Written English Proficiency Test procedure; and others.

The General Education Task Force recognizes that each student's potential for success stems from his or her sense of well-being within the learning environment. This proposal aims to shape a GE program that is comprehensive, transparent, and engaged. It will ask students to have high expectations of themselves and their instructors; and will provide students with access to the knowledge and skills necessary to reach their academic potentials while becoming self-actualized citizens of the world.

#### **Point 5: Training and Mentoring for Faculty**

A training and mentoring program must be developed in which all faculty members teaching freshmen, regardless of course content, would receive training and support to meet the above objectives in order to ensure that all freshmen-level classes successfully integrate the learning outcomes of FYE (Appendix C.) This step is fundamental, and requires significant resource allocation on a sustainable basis.

#### **Point 6: Assessment**

Critical to any successful program is a means to assess its goals and outcomes in an ongoing and permanently sustainable way. Above we have outlined a specific assessment recommendation regarding WAC above.

At all levels of GE, a system must be developed and implemented that can assure that syllabi approved for GE courses remain true to their original intent, and that courses continue to be taught from a GE perspective by faculty trained and mentored in GE goals. Assessment methodologies and the resources for implementing them should be developed hand-in-hand with the program. Each discrete segment the program could be reviewed on 3, 4 or 5 year rotations.

Though the Task Force in no way wishes to impinge on the academic freedom of the faculty, it does hold that criteria and goals that are agreed to through the GE oversight process remain current.

Moreover, it is critical that student progress through GE curriculum be tracked to ensure the strength and efficacy of the GE Mission and Teaching Goals through assessment of Learning Objectives.

### **Resource Allocation**

Historically, a liberal arts education has been characterized as much by its pedagogy as by its balance between discipline-based and interdisciplinary curriculum. That pedagogy is based on seminars and on mentoring through advising, directed independent study, and supervised research. Except for the need for adequate freshman and general education advising, the mentoring element is primarily associated with majors. However, seminars should be a key component of general education at a public liberal arts and sciences university, and we believe that the successful launch of every incoming freshman depends on the small seminar taught by faculty trained to address the unique needs of these young learners.

Sonoma State has yet to determine the precise role that seminars should play in the general education curriculum. Research suggests that the optimal size for seminars is in the range of 12-15 students. It seems clear that the FYE should include a large proportion of seminars in order to facilitate the transition into higher education, and to assure that freshmen develop the foundational literacy skills that are essential to college success. On the other hand, it is also clear that, under SFR-based budgeting, some large classes are necessary in order to subsidize an adequate offering of seminars and mentoring in both General Education and in the majors. Thus, it remains an important challenge for academic planning to determine the optimal mix of instructional modes within the general education curriculum. We suggest that students might be better with larger course in 200 and 300 level courses, rather than their first year classes.

Recent evidence suggests that Sonoma State University's lower division SFR is excessive. For example, in fall 2000, the overall SFR at Sonoma State was 21.2, while the upper division SFR was 18.6 and the lower division SFR was 29.7. In order to determine the optimum SFR for GE, the task force recommends that the GE Subcommittee, in consultation with APC, EPC, and the Freshman Seminar Curriculum Committee, undertake to:

- Develop a pedagogical and staffing model for the core freshman year curriculum (see First-Year Package above.)
- Incorporating the recommendations that will be developed by the recently formed APC-EPC Task Force on Large Classes and in consultation with School curriculum

committees, develop a pedagogical and staffing model for Areas B, C, and D that define an appropriate balance between large classes and non-traditional pedagogies on the one hand and seminars and laboratory experiences on the other.

- Develop a pedagogical and staffing model for a university-wide capstone GE experience.

Assuming that the implementation of the above recommendations will require a substantial reduction in Sonoma State's lower division SFR, the Task Force recommends that APC and EPC work closely with the administration to find ways to reduce the lower division SFR. One particular way in which this can be achieved is by bringing EMT and Freshman Seminar under a General Education umbrella to create the Freshman Year Experience. This should be done without unduly disrupting the upper division curriculum, and particularly without adding to the burden of those majors that are already overextended.

In addition, the GE Task Force recommends that the GE Subcommittee work closely with the VPBAC, particularly with the school deans, to develop a university-wide resource allocation policy that supports the priorities established by the GE Subcommittee, EPC, and the Academic Senate. This need not imply that the current distribution of resources among schools participating in the GE Program would be dramatically altered. However, it would require that the utilization of resources within schools should be based on priorities that are determined on a university-wide basis. (Appendix D; Growth Policy Task Force Draft Outline)

### **Timeline**

It seems inadvisable to take such a large step as this proposal is without full disclosure to all stakeholders, and substantial time to debate, collect additional data (The GE Subcommittee is currently running a survey student satisfaction, with a survey of faculty to follow,) plan, and implement. However, we strongly recommend that a time-certain for action be set. The Task Force recommends that the current GE system be phased out for the 2006 Catalogue, and that a new one takes its place at that time.

## **Appendix A**

### **STATEMENT OF THE MISSION, GOALS & OBJECTIVES OF GENERAL EDUCATION AT SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY**

Unanimously approved by the GE Subcommittee, and sent to EPC, October 23, 2002.

Unanimously approved by EPC, November 14, 2002

Unanimously approved by Faculty Senate, March 6, 2003 (as revised)

#### **MISSION**

General Education (GE) at Sonoma State University (SSU) investigates the complexity of human experience in a diverse natural and social world, and promotes informed and ethical participation as citizens of the world.

#### **TEACHING GOALS**

To achieve this mission, in concert with the specific needs of various GE Areas of Study, the GE program asserts the following fundamental goals for all GE approved classes:

- I. Teach students to think independently, ethically, critically and creatively
- II. Teach students to communicate clearly to many audiences
- III. Teach students to gain an understanding of connections between the past and the present, and to look to the future
- IV. Teach students to appreciate intellectual, scientific, and artistic accomplishment
- V. Teach and/or build upon reading, writing, research, and critical thinking skills

#### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

1. Acquire a foundation of intellectual skills and capacities
  - a. Develop intellectual curiosity (Supports Goals I, II, III, IV, and V)
  - b. Develop research skills (I, III, IV, V)
  - c. Write and speak effectively to various audiences (I, II, V)
  - d. Evaluate everyday experiences critically (I, III, IV, V)
  - e. Develop capacity to reason quantitatively (I, IV, V)
  - f. Work collaboratively to achieve defined goals and objectives (I, II, V)
  - g. Develop skill in the use of information technology (I, II, V)
  - h. Imagine, design, and execute scholarly and creative projects (I, II, IV, V)
  - i. Translate problems into common language (I, II, V)
2. Develop social and global knowledge
  - a. Understand and appreciate human diversity and multicultural perspectives (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - b. Prepare for active engagement in the community (I, II, III, V)
  - c. Understand and be sensitive to the global environment (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - d. Understand social justice issues (I, III, IV, V)
  - e. Engage with challenging moral and ethical human dilemmas (I, II, III, IV, V)

3. Understand and use multiple methods of inquiry and approaches to knowledge
  - a. Understand and appreciate math and science (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - b. Understand and appreciate fine and performing arts (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - c. Understand and appreciate historical and social phenomena (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - d. Recognize and use perspectives of diverse disciplines (I, II, III, IV, V)
  
4. Develop capacities for integration and lifelong learning
  - a. Evaluate alternative career choices (I, III, IV, V)
  - b. Recognize the importance of lifelong learning (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - c. Integrate general education experiences (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - d. Cultivate ways to empower the learning of others (I, II, III, IV, V)
  - e. Engage in responsible citizenship (I, II, III, IV, V)

## **Appendix B**

'Area A' lab Final report (separate document)

## Appendix C

### Freshman Year Experience Outcomes (Karen Brodsky and Christine Renaudin, May 2003)

While the academic content varies from institution successful FYE programs have are the result of collaboration between faculty, staff, and administrators and have certain universal outcomes. By the end of the freshmen year, students should:

- Feel comfortable relating to faculty members
- Feel comfortable with peers and the university classroom environment
- Understand their responsibility in building a productive learning environment
- Know about academic programs offered by the university
- Know about academic requirements: how to use of the catalog as a reference, how to use a class schedule, understand prerequisites, know add/drop procedures, understand academic probation, know number of required GE units, etc.
- Have the ability to effectively use important university documents such as course syllabi, course catalog, schedule of classes
- Have developed skills needed to succeed in academic career such as note taking, time management, study skills, public speaking, etc.
- Have developed experience with a variety of types of writing
- Have gained experience with critical thinking in a variety of approaches
- Have obtained a basic understanding of the concepts of Information Competence and be comfortable approaching the library
- Know about services offered by the university to aid in academics and personal welfare: tutorial center, writing center, career resource center, library, service learning opportunities, health center, counseling center, associated students, honor code, etc.
- Be aware of the university drugs/alcohol policies as well as issues of personal choice and responsibility
- Be aware of the university sexual discrimination and sexual harassment policies
- Have developed short and long term academic goals
- Have explored possible career goals
- Know about diversity issues from a variety of perspectives
- Know how to meaningfully contribute to group outcomes in the form of research projects, presentations, etc.

In developing a more fully articulated FYE program for SSU, we believe that the foundation of academic success begins with a coupling of a strong FYE (currently called EMT) with General Education.

It is our recommendation that any first year course involving freshmen should include the following learning outcomes:

- Students feel comfortable relating to faculty members
  - Students feel comfortable with peers and the university classroom environment
  - Students understand their responsibility in building a productive learning environment
  - Students develop skills needed to succeed in their academic career
- Note taking, time management, public speaking, study skills, etc.

- Students can effectively use important university documents such as course syllabi, course catalog, and schedule of classes
- Students know about diversity issues from a variety of perspectives
- Students know how to meaningfully contribute to group outcomes in the form of research projects, presentations, etc.
- Students have been offered numerous and meaningful opportunities for developing writing
- Students have been given numerous and meaningful opportunities for developing critical thinking skills
- Students have been provided with numerous and meaningful opportunities for using the library and developing information competence skills

## Appendix D

Growth Policy Task Force Draft Outline (Ellen Thatcher, 4/18/03)

### Implementation Recommendation

Growth planning should be intimately tied with fiscal planning. If we approach our strategic planning correctly, we should be able to better support long-range plans and visions for the schools and the campus as a whole. We can do this by focusing on high SFR programs and courses, which can in turn support smaller specialized programs and courses.

Since our growth has been primarily fed by an increase in first-time freshman, we need to address the needs of this population. A fresh look at how we provide GE to the lower division students is a priority. Although growth planning as a whole is quite complex, it is our recommendation to make GE the core focus at this time and use it as a pilot project for continued growth planning in the future.

The Faculty Senate unanimously approved the *Statement of the Mission, Goals & Objectives of General Education at Sonoma State University* on March 6, 2003. Planning needs to begin to implement this guideline for GE. We suggest the following task list to accomplish this project:

#### Phase I: Getting started

- A. Define criteria in each category of GE
  - 1. Campus-wide: Identify general core criteria.
  - 2. School-wide: Identify specific area criteria- skills and core knowledge.
- B. Articulate GE in the rest of the curriculum
  - 1. Majors and programs define needs from GE for support.
  - 2. Define service criteria for programs, since some courses serve multiple purposes.
- C. Integrate criteria and articulation needs

#### Phase II: Planning GE courses

- A. Sort existing courses into new criteria/articulation matrix
  - 1. Match by described course syllabi and existing course criteria
  - 2. Note “goodness of fit” of courses to the matrix
  - 3. Note courses that do not fit well into the new matrix
- B. Revise existing courses with less than ideal fit.
- C. Identify areas lacking courses and resolve
  - 1. Identify departments/schools most suited to develop courses
  - 2. Consider interdisciplinary solutions where appropriate
- D. Develop GE advising plan to support revisions