

Rationale for Breadth Approach to Explorative Track of General Education:

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All of these are my suggestions, looking for conversation.

Principle on Liberal Arts and Sciences Education: Sonoma State encourages students to investigate the academic world broadly, across many disciplines.

Our faculty members do not uniformly agree with the notion that all aspects of a liberal arts education must necessarily be integrated or “blended” as part of a larger program. Many of our concerns have more to do with the quality of intuitional support for general education courses than with notions of integration. Our current program structure, however, does suggest a coherence in form that is lacking in actuality. Some faculty members want to use integrated and coherent GE planning throughout the 51-unit GE program.

The current “new path” for General Education proposal provides opportunities for integrative learning in the First Year Experience and in an integrative capstone experience in the General Education program. These should provide models for exploring the benefits of integration. FYE should prepare students to move into their explorative phase of general education, while a capstone experience will provide opportunities for synthesis of and reflection upon that experience.

I support the idea that henceforth the “GE” designation be removed from all other courses and the concepts of “Breadth requirements” serve as the governing principle for the explorative section of general education. These would be 20-24 units of breadth requirements spread between what our current program regards as areas B, C, D and E. The number of units is not crucial at the moment; we must first consider the rationale for making this change and whether or not this will work for our campus. Obviously, some specific courses will remain as “skills” courses required for all students. I imagine these will be courses in our current program such as Poli Sci 200, History, Biology, lab, math and writing, which all serve either basic skills and/or statutory requirements. Ideally, these skills courses should also be balanced across the schools. The ethnic studies designation could remain in place as it functions today, allowing students a wide range of courses to select with that designation.

Benefits in terms of Institutional Support for Core Liberal Arts and Sciences Instruction

At the GE Faculty retreat several years ago, the small group of which I was part determined that many of our concerns with GE courses had to do with the institutional factors. This proposal seeks to accomplish the following:

- reduce the reliance on “GE” courses as FTE generators
- reduce the reliance on non tenure track professors to teach “GE” courses
- work towards a balanced SFR across the lower and upper division course offerings
- allow departments flexibility and autonomy in determining which of their course offerings might best be suited for non-majors.

If our planning processes indicates that larger courses are needed to support our educational mission at Sonoma State, we should not designate our **core liberal arts courses** (otherwise known as “GE”), to sustain this FTE burden; rather, large courses (if needed) should be spread across our curriculum.

Preservation of major courses. Two strategies may be employed:

- One, courses may be restricted to majors only. This will often be appropriate, given curricular and instructional needs of programs.
- Two, effective use of prerequisites. An advanced course on the poet John Milton may not be suitable for all non-majors, however, some may have the skills and/or prerequisites needed in order to use that as a breadth requirement in Area C.

One could imagine a scenario where all current non-GE courses might be restricted to majors in some disciplines that found it appropriate to do so. In this case, this part of the pathways proposal would have little effect on that program or department.

From a student point of view, the statement we’d be making would, however, be quite different from our current approach.. We’d be saying to them: These courses are major courses for particular reasons,” rather than saying “those courses are general education courses” (a claim vaguely substantiated in our current approach to General Education).

Assessment: Current approaches to the “assessment” of what makes GE courses particularly “GE” may be misguided in their attempt to offer integration as the sole model for the intellectual and pedagogic purposes of a liberal arts and sciences curriculum. Many times it is breadth of intellectual experience that we want to offer our students. That being said, our current GE “program” is unjustifiable on either grounds. The courses designated as “GE” do not necessarily speak in some special way to general education, nor do they foster a sense of intellectual progress through a coherent program.

If our course offerings in General Education are neither integrative nor specifically geared to the purposes of general education, then on what grounds do we restrict a student's choice of courses taken to satisfy breadth requirements?

For my discipline, this means why force a student from Math to take ENGL314, World Literature (currently in area C2) when she might have a more valuable (for her) experience taking ENGL 371, The African American Novel. This leads to another, crucial and concluding principle:

Explorative General Education should be student-centered. Departments will determine which courses MUST be reserved for majors. Beyond this, allow students to choose the classes they feel will best round out their education. This will allow students to feel greater ownership over their course selection and they will get a better educational experience as well. Why? "GE" students will not be arbitrarily channeled into large classes (often taught at the least desirable times by those on campus with the least amount of institutional clout or academic citizenship, i.e., lecturers). Students will feel they have selected actively rather than feeling that they have simply "filled in a box" at the instruction of their advisor. Students will be empowered to choose a path through the breadth requirements that makes sense on the basis of their own intellectual curiosity and/or academic pursuits.