

Introduction

Dr. Janet Hecsh, Professor of Education at California State University, Sacramento, was invited to serve as the external evaluator for the review of CSU Chico's General Education Program. Prior to the visit, Dr. Hecsh reviewed the self-study prepared by the CAB Committee. The self-study documented the ambitious transformation of General Education at CSU Chico beginning in 2009 undertaken, first, by a design team incorporating the best practices and principles of Liberal Education (AAC&U) and Design Thinking (Meiner, Leifer and others) within a framework of a large scale initiative from the CSU Chancellor's office, Give Students a Compass <http://www.calstate.edu/app/compass/>. The proposal was carried forward to various stakeholder groups and recommended to the President by the Academic Senate. An implementation team, in concert with various stakeholders and committees oversaw the transition to the GE Pathways, fully implemented in Fall 2012.

In Fall 2017 the Curriculum Advisory Board (CAB) that oversees General Education at Chico State undertook a detailed review of the GE Pathways program and produced a 5 Year Report. The report included a detailed analysis of enrollment patterns; faculty, staff and student perceptions of the program; and a review of assessments undertaken since the program's inception in 2012. Drafts of the report were disseminated and discussed at several CAB meetings and ultimately provided to Dr. Hecsh as the framework for her evaluation. This detailed self-study provides evidence of a culture of reflection, a willingness to carry out difficult conversations amongst stakeholders, and the ability to carry out institutional change in the interests of supporting student learning. Indeed, it seems that the process of reflection and analysis of the various aspects of the program has led to some important changes underway (notably the shifting of oversight of a comprehensive writing program) and the identification of several shortcomings that will need to be addressed as the program matures.

Site Visit

The site visit was organized to provide maximum exposure to all aspects of GE at Chico. Dr. Hecsh observed a Lower Division Government class and met with more than a dozen students

engaged in first year programs as well as Nate Millard, Interim Director of the First Year Experience Program. The itinerary included meetings with Interim Dean of Undergraduate Education Kate McCarthy, Chris Nichols, Chair of the Curriculum Advisory Board (CAB) and various members of CAB. She listened to the perspectives of Department Chairs, faculty teaching GE courses, and faculty serving as Pathways Coordinators. She met with Provost Debra Larson, Vice Provost for Academic Programs Daniel Grassian, Director of Academic Advising Programs Kaitlyn Baumgartner, and William Loker, former Vice Provost for Academic Programs at Chico and one of the leaders of the design team for the Pathways GE .

Every aspect of the site visit was extremely well organized and the day was spent gaining the viewpoints of dozens of faculty, staff and students about this relatively new initiative. CSU Chico embarked on a very ambitious initiative to design a GE program that would be more than a set of discrete courses. The pathways approach, and the value added of the interdisciplinary GE minor, provide a framework for and an incentive to focus teaching and learning. At the same time, GE pathways structure a responsibility for students to take responsibility to direct their foundational learning and for faculty to reframe the curriculum in the pathways for thematic coherence. The latter is certainly the larger task and will take some time (and some adjustments) to reach an equilibrium.

Given that this program is still in very early days---GE programs typically take a decade to be fully institutionalized---Chico has the capacity and the institutional will to review, refine, and take the necessary steps to ensure that this GE structure affords all students a GE program that reflects the values and ideals of a Chico education at the foundational level.

The commendations and recommendations that follow reflect a careful examination of the program documentation provided in the self-study, understanding of the ethos of the GE pathways program from the perspectives of those with “skin in the game,” and the perspectives of Dr. Hecsh, former Chair of GE at Sacramento State with significant experience in GE reform and educational reform initiatives in Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) in regional comprehensive university settings in California and nationally.

Overall Commendations:

1. Successfully carrying out a collaborative and deliberative process of design, approval, and implementation of a GE program that reflects university values and priorities, including proven practices associated with success for underrepresented and minority students (URM)
2. Designing a GE Pathways program that incorporates proven High Impact Practices (HIPs)-- Public Sphere Pedagogy, Town Hall, U Courses, FYE--associated with student retention, progress to degree and academic achievement, particularly salient for first generation college attendees and students from low income, linguistically and culturally diverse communities
3. Carrying out a well-planned and well executed transition to Pathways GE for continuing students with minimal disruption via student advising, orientation and other services provided by Student Advising services
4. Instituting a system for integrated GE advising through the establishment of Pathway Coordinators
5. Carrying out continuous improvement processes and structures (CAB and Pathway Coordinators) to fine tune and improve GE to maximize foundational student learning in support of learning in the majors and the development of habits of mind essential for lifelong learning.
6. Designing an ambitious and rigorous programmatic assessment plan and, perhaps more importantly, having the willingness to make evidence based decisions and the institutional capacity to implement those decisions.

GE Program Recommendations:

1. Continue the GE Pathways initiative making the adjustments indicated by the self-study and by other best practices related to scheduling, processes for communicating policies regarding substitution etc.
 - a. Combine some pathways; add courses to the Upper Division pathways to lessen bottleneck/demand

- b. Review substitution patterns and establish exceptions and processes
 - c. Review the roles and responsibilities of the Pathway Coordinator and make the compensation consistent with those roles (3 units=45 hours=3 hours/week or similar)
2. Map the GE pathways to the ILOs (see Institutional Recommendation #1 below), establishing expectations (benchmarks) for demonstrating achievement at the level of foundation (lower division) and advanced GE learning outcomes (upper division) in concert with the major program learning outcomes
3. Limit the number of SLOs in lower division GE Courses to 3 or fewer
4. Work with majors to ensure that at least 2 of the SLOs (complementary to or overlapping with the program major) are identified for upper division GE courses
5. Provide the resources for a GE Assessment director to work with the Pathway Coordinators to identify a GE assessment process that is informative, but not onerous, to provide annual reviews and reports. This might alternate areas, upper and lower division, or some other process that is rigorous but not overly regulated.
6. Revisit, revise, and provide resources to support the work of the Pathway Coordinators to efficiently advise students and incorporate collaboration within the pathways (See 1C above) in keeping with similar program coordinator responsibilities.

The commendations and recommendations provided above are specific to the work of Academic Affairs and within the purview of the faculty in terms of their responsibility for oversight of the curriculum, including the learning objectives, outcomes and assessment of student learning at the level of the course and at the level of the institution. The recommendations below are broader and will require articulation and communication between various divisions and other program centers in the university, including Student Advising and Institutional Research.

Institutional Recommendations

1. Carry out the necessary processes to establish and ratify Institutional Learning Outcomes that include the WASC Core Competencies and the three major campus initiatives (Sustainability, Diversity and Global Engagement, and Civic Engagement) or something similar to the LEAP Essential Outcomes.
2. Make the use of Smart Planner mandatory for students
3. Build the pathways into Smart Planner and connect Smart Planner with Schedule Tool used at Chico
4. Pursue some lines of inquiry to learn more about how the schedule may impact the GE Pathways course offerings and availability to students depending on major and/or co-curricular participation—athletics, arts, and so on.
5. Disaggregate the student demographics for the GE Pathways program, identifying patterns that unpack the impact of students pursuing minors and the ways it does or does not affect and/or influences time to degree and academic success overall.

Dr. Hecsh acknowledges the very diligent work of the various individuals and groups in designing, implementing and now, evaluating the GE pathways program as it reaches its five year mark. It is very challenging to re-structure any program, much less the foundational academic program constituting about 40% of the curriculum. In most institutions in the CSU, and nationally in fact, GE is at most a collection of courses, each developed within the curriculum frameworks of the program areas—the departments. With rare exceptions, there is little coherence across the university with respect to foundational learning. Chico leveraged its already existing structures of interdisciplinarity and found a creative way to create pathways for meaning-making by students, ideally facilitated by integrated advising and curricular renovation.

While there are shortcomings and areas for improvement indicated from the self-study and the external review, the CAB, the faculty and the administration in Academic Affairs are committed to the success of the initiative and are encouraged to continue to work on improving the program as the work related to Writing underway indicates. Concerns about the GE Minor

provide an opportunity to revisit the concept of the minor across the university to ensure that the criteria for a minor are consistent in GE and non GE minors.

Key Take-Away:

Probably the most important finding, after studying the review document and meeting with all the stakeholders is this: The Chico GE program is very well received by students in the demographic category of first time attendees and those from minorized (URM) backgrounds. This finding alone, that the students who represent the New California have a favorable impression and an appreciation of the intentionality of the GE Pathways program, indicates the value of the initiative and the need to stay the course while making institutional and programmatic changes to further improve an already cutting edge program.