

# General Education at CSU Chico

## Five-Year Review Concluding Essay

The General Education program at Chico State was launched in Fall 2012, following a comprehensive redesign process that culminated in a 2010 EM 10-001 (superseded in 2018 by EM 18-005). The 48-unit program consists of 18 units of foundation courses in oral and written communication, critical thinking, mathematics/quantitative reasoning, and physical and life sciences (Areas A & B), 6 units of American Institutions, and 24 units in breadth offerings in the arts, humanities, and natural and social sciences (Areas B, C, D, & E). The breadth courses are organized into ten thematic Pathways. Students must complete nine upper division units in the same Pathway. These GE Pathways further serve as the basis for optional interdisciplinary minors that students can complete by choosing 18 GE units – the nine upper division and an additional nine lower division – in a single Pathway. The GE program embraces ten Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), including four foundational and 6 values SLOs. Each General Education course addresses at least one GE SLO, and each Pathway is designed to include all ten SLOs.

The Curriculum Advisory Board (CAB) is the body that oversees the GE program, manages the number and thematic content of Pathways, and makes recommendations to the Provost or designee on the implementation, monitoring, and development of the GE program. It also is responsible for the coordination of GE program assessment and the addition or deletion of courses and proposed substitutions. US Diversity and Global Cultures graduation requirements, which can be but are not necessarily fulfilled via General Education, also fall under the purview of CAB. Effective Fall 2018, Writing Intensive (WI) and Capstone (Z) requirements, which had been part of the General Education program and the responsibility of CAB, became part of a campus writing requirement under the oversight of the University Writing Committee.

## Self Study and External Review

In Fall 2017, CAB undertook a detailed review of the GE Pathways program and produced a 5-Year Review self study. The self study includes 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 in March 2018 a final version of the self study was provided to the external reviewer Dr. Janet Hecsh, Professor of Education at California State University, Sacramento, as the framework for her evaluation. Dr. Hecsh conducted a site visit and submitted an External Review Report that commended the design and implementation of the program; the incorporation of High Impact Practices; the transition to the new program for continuing students; the implementation of advising through the establishment of

Pathway Coordinators; the commitment to fine tuning and improving the program; and the willingness to undertake meaningful assessment. She concludes,

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.

For Dr. Hecsh, these “institutional and programmatic changes” include, for Academic Affairs units:

- combining some Pathways
- reviewing substitution patterns
- reviewing roles and responsibilities of the Pathway Coordinators
- establishing Institutional Learning Outcomes that include WASC core competencies
- limiting the number of SLOs in lower-division GE courses
- ensuring that at least 2 of the SLOs are in upper-division GE courses
- providing resources for a GE Assessment Director
- identifying new GE assessment processes
- providing resources to Pathway Coordinators to efficiently advise students
- incorporate collaboration within the Pathways

And, beyond Academic Affairs:

- making use of Smart Planner mandatory for students
- building Pathways into Smart Planner
- examining how scheduling may impact the GE Pathways course offerings
- disaggregating student demographics for the GE program

These recommendations amount to “adjustments” to the program, but the self study proposes more significant measures to address the “shortcomings and areas of improvement”: (1) rethinking the GE SLOs; (2) rethinking the GE Pathways; and (3) rethinking the GE course restrictions. In regard to #2, rethinking the GE Pathways, the self study concludes, “a consensus of CAB members is that the Pathway program be simplified by removing Pathway designations from lower-division courses. The effects of this change would include no longer offering Pathway minors, or significantly re-engineering them.” This recommendation, along with others discussed below, contrast with Dr. Hecsh’s report. The 2018-19 CAB membership revisited the 2017-18 CAB recommendation. The conclusions of the self study and external review were discussed on August 29, September 12, September 26, and October 10. Implications of those discussions will be further explained below.

## Student Learning Outcomes

The first major “shortcoming and area of improvement” noted in the self study concerned SLOs. The GE Pathways program calls for assessment at the program level, rather than the prior method of reviewing individual GE courses. This necessitated the development and implementation of assessment plans for each of the 10 SLOs. While each SLO was assessed at least once in this five-year period, each using artifacts from multiple GE courses, assessments varied in quality and usefulness, and it is not clear that significant program improvements have resulted from the considerable effort expended. Assessment was more successful for the program’s core competency SLOs (oral communication, written communication, critical thinking, mathematics/quantitative reasoning, and active inquiry [assessed as information literacy] and sustainability than for the other GE “values” SLOs (diversity, creativity, personal and social responsibility, and global engagement). A particular challenge was correlating a single assessment tool with the diverse “signature assignments” from multiple courses that meant to address these SLOs. Additionally, while the Pathways are designed to include all SLOs, not every student in a Pathway is guaranteed to experience all 10 SLOs.

CAB members recognize, though, that the difficulty of assessing a program outcome is not justification for eliminating it. The values SLOs represent important campus priorities with long institutional histories. Options to improve this aspect of the GE program currently being considered include (1) maintaining the current set of SLOs and working to improve assessment processes; (2) maintaining the values of the GE program but not including them in the set of SLOs to be assessed; and (3) eliminating the values SLOs altogether, with the assumption that they be instantiated in the curriculum through other means. Dr. Hecsh’s external reviewer report recommends the establishment of Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for the campus, and correlating them with GE SLOs. CAB members agree that the current year’s campus strategic planning process offers a good opportunity to pursue these efforts.

A conclusion drawn from extensive CAB discussion and review of the five-year data and the external report is that learning outcomes are only as good as the processes for assessing them and for implementing the program improvements they compel. The work of assessment is substantial and requires expertise, time, and coordination. The support for Pathway Coordinators has been reduced by half in 2018-2019, making it unrealistic to expect Coordinators to take on additional work related to GE assessment. Especially if (some of) the GE SLOs come to serve formally as campus ILOs, it may be the time to invest in a fully supported campus assessment office and director. Indeed, one of Dr. Hecsh’s recommendations included “provid[ing] 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 investment could also significantly benefit the various student success initiatives for which we are increasingly accountable.

## Pathway Minors

The second major “shortcoming and area of improvement” identified by the self study included Pathway minors and the related issue of GE course restrictions. EM 18-005 explains, “a Pathway connects

courses structurally in an intellectually cohesive course of study that explores an issue or area from a multidisciplinary perspective. Pathways must be broad enough to include different disciplines and narrow enough to maintain thematic cohesion. Pathways will be designed to provide the opportunity for both intellectual coherence and exploration.” Nearly eight years since the approval of the Pathways program, as the self-study data and recommendations make clear, “intellectual coherence and exploration” in the Pathways remains difficult to achieve. In response, the self study proposes removing Pathway designations from lower-division courses. It notes, “the effects of this change would include no longer offering Pathway minors, or significantly re-engineering them.”

CAB recommends the retention of Pathway minors. As noted in the External Review, “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.” This statement highlights the intended outcome of the creation and implementation of the Pathway minors when the switch was made from Upper Division themes to the General Education Pathways. In an attempt to support and increase student learning, the interdisciplinary minors were an ambitious initiative, and although we recognize its shortcomings, a majority of CAB believes the Pathway minor can be re-engineered to better meet the initial proposed objectives of the program. Improving the thematic coherence of the Pathway minors would, in turn, result in more meaningful and cohesive learning for our students.

## Next Steps

In Spring 2019, CAB will propose revisions to EM 18-005 to comply with EO 1100-R, including a required merger of Lower Division D1 and D2. Between now and then, CAB will also discuss whether or not to propose further changes to the EM concerning GE SLOs and Pathway minors, increasing the number of courses per stone, adding a Languages Other Than English requirement, etc. CAB hopes to complete a draft of revisions to the EM by the end of Fall 2018. At this point, CAB has made no determination about the nature of the changes, besides a general commitment to continue Pathway minors in some form. CAB does not expect that specific courses will forfeit GE status as a result of possible changes to the Pathway program. Nevertheless, these initiatives have wide-reaching implications, and CAB meetings to discuss “significantly re-engineering” Pathways will be advertised and open to the public. CAB will report regularly to EPPC for the remainder of the Fall 2018 semester.