

Restructuring General Education at the College of the Southwest  
Connecting the Dots Within and Among the Boxes:  
A Work in Progress  
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### **The Context**

The College of the Southwest (CSW) is a small, private non-dominational college in Hobbs, New Mexico. It has inherent identity, geographical and financial challenges. Aside from its name and isolated location there has been little to distinguish it academically from its market competitors in the southwest and beyond. It offers baccalaureates in a sampling of the arts and sciences, business and education majors as well as graduate programming education. A traditional general education program totaling 40 hours supports all baccalaureate programming.

Enrollment declines in the last two years have prioritized the need to develop an academic niche to establish unique identity. Within that context, a small group of CSW faculty and administrators began discussing how to develop a unique market identity within near draconian budget constraints. New majors were immediately discounted, as were major enhancements in existing majors. Both were considered too expensive and time consuming. The return on the investment, if resources could be found, would be beyond the immediate horizon. We quickly isolated our general education requirements that are the foundation of all of our baccalaureate programming as a target of opportunity.

### **The Opportunity**

General education's appeal was manifold. It is the underpinning of the entire undergraduate curriculum. By industry dogma and local acceptance, general education tends to be potpourri skills courses--composition, mathematics, speech, etc coupled with an array of arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences traditionally assumed to produce a well-rounded graduate prepared for the vagaries of life. The ubiquitous package of courses, wrapped in a patina of fuzzy justifications, is normally completed during the first two years of enrollment. By tradition these general education courses, as well as the remainder of the undergraduate curriculum, are taught in silos or bunkers. What is taught in the composition, information technology, mathematics and speech courses is assumed to migrate to the content courses. We have been extolling the values of general education for so long that we accept it without serious validation. The potpourri is also assumed to enable students to address life's opportunities and problems from an array of discipline perspectives

Recent reports dispel this dogma. National Assessment of Adult Literacy's studies reveal that college graduates have middling communication and mathematical skills. In additions, employers have long noted that newly minted graduates lack the analytical, communication collaborative and problem solving skills requisite in the competitive

global economy. Our goal emerged, break down the course silos and intentionally meld content and intellectual skills (communication, analysis, collaboration and problems solving into a whole.

**The Remedy: Connecting the Dots Within and Among the Boxes**

Intentionally melding these individual courses requires abandoning the general education, content and skill course silos. While our general education curriculum retains traditional content courses--arts, humanities, science and social science, the skills developed in the formally separate composition, etc courses are infused in the content courses. Students are required to practice and master communication or mathematical skills within the content context. Complementary skills, collaboration, and problem solving are also intentionally infused. This approach required a major redesign of the curriculum delivery.

Participating faculty have been guided by the following assumptions:

1. Complementary process skills, communication, quantitative literacy, collaboration, problem solving, etc developed but unused in the content courses tends to atrophy.
2. Students are more likely to accept the seminal relevance of complementary process skills if intentionally imbedded in the remainder of the curriculum and the general education component is the place to start.
3. Students unable to communicate effectively cannot utilize their newfound content knowledge effectively.
4. The silos are most likely to be eliminated by a team designed and delivered curriculum
5. A unifying theme will encourage students to approach problem solving from the perspective of multiple disciplines.
6. Problem based learning offers a promising vehicle for intentional integration of content and complementary process skills.
7. As their foreign language facility develops, students will be encouraged to expand their research into foreign resources
8. The merit of these assumptions will be validated by assessing the value added to a small cohort, 12 to 15, students.

The freshman year schedule is as follows

Required Courses Fall Semester	
Rhetoric and Composition	three credit hours
College Algebra	“”
Environmental Studies	“”
Introduction to Psychology	“”
Elective Foreign Language	“”
Free Elective	“”

Required Courses Spring Semester	
Composition and Literature	three credit hours

Probability and Statistics	“”
Introduction of Biology	“”
Logic	“”
Elective Foreign Language	“”
Free Elective	“”

The sophomore year schedule Fall and Spring completes the General Education and the 12 hour Foreign Language requirements.

### **The Process**

The cohort will register in four content and complementary skills courses each semester. In the Fall 2006 semester, the selected students will take four team-taught, interdisciplinary courses. With intentional woof and worf, both content and skills will be cross-pollinated throughout the general education experience. Each course will have its own instructor of record and end of course objectives. The complementary nature of the enterprise requires each instructor to contribute to the curriculum's unifying goals.

The Problem Based Learning approach will be employed to empower students to assume primary responsibility for the conduct of the learning experiences. Each cohort will be subdivided into four member teams. The teams will be assigned the same series of identical and progressively more complex problems to be solved. Solution development and presentation will require the integration of the content and skills courses. The participating faculty have designed the problems to assure that each requires the integrated utilization of the four core courses. Each student team will be required to present their solution to the cohort and the faculty. Assessment will be multifaceted-- individual and team with input from individual, group, cohort and faculty.

To use a sport analogy, each instructor will serve as a specialty coach with the group severing as the head coach. As the students work through their assigned problems, the coaches will advise and correct as the rhythm of the game evolves. No longer, the sage on the stage, the faculty will be the guide on the sidelines. Our process to date as developed a cross discipline solidarity that has already spread across the campus.

### **Conclusion**

Our approach expands upon the writing across the curriculum tactic. Writing, speech, quantitative literacy, interdisciplinary problem solving, etc are intentionally infused in all general education requirements. The expectation is that our students will be better prepared for the vagaries of the global village.

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