Inviting a Broad Range of Faculty Participants in Campus Change Efforts

Very early in my tenure as Associate Vice President, Undergraduate Studies, Ken O’Donnell, Senior Director of Student Engagement at the California State University (CSU) Chancellor’s Office approached me about working on a project on the Degree Qualification Profile (DQP: http://degreeprofile.org/) for the CSU system and AAC&U.

In conversation with our CSUN Institutional Research Director, Bettina Huber, I had been thinking for a while about the larger problem of general education (GE) on our campus. We are one of the largest campuses in the largest state university system in the country. Our student population is increasingly made up of first generation students, many of whom are from traditionally underserved groups. Our general education program is informed and driven by both state law and campus tradition: it has predicated itself on a combination of traditional liberal arts breadth (a hallmark of the American educational system) and the adaptation of that breadth with the more inclusive curriculum that emerged in last quarter of the twentieth century. Our GE program had grown and grown and currently consists of hundreds of class choices in seven general areas. How was any student to make sense of those courses? More importantly, Bettina had discovered through her analysis that we were most likely to lose students in their first or second year. Once students reached sixty units at CSUN, they generally graduated. Students at the community colleges followed the same pattern. If they could get to sixty units, they transferred and graduated. Most did not get there. So, it seemed to me that we faced a core problem. How could we get students engaged with general education in such a way that they wanted to stay enrolled in the lower division at CSUN? Perhaps even more critically, how could CSUN partner with our largest “feeder” community college, Los Angeles Pierce College, to encourage their students to persist through the lower division core and then transfer to CSUN?

CSUN had twice engaged in GE reform in the 1990s and 2000s. The first time the reform stalled. The second time it went through, but took a lot of time, a lot of effort, and didn’t change the character of the GE experience much (it reduced the number of units). I had no interest whatsoever in engaging in GE reform again. Beyond that, I knew that we wanted to partner with Pierce and that while their GE
structures are equally controlled by state law, they are not the purview of CSUN faculty (or administrators).

It also seemed crucial that we engage faculty – at all levels – in the project, keeping in mind that CSU faculty take governance very seriously and are unionized. Without faculty engagement, we were very unlikely to engender student engagement. How, then, do we go about doing what we wanted to do, namely:

- make GE engaging and meaningful to lower division students at two campuses,
- increase retention at CSUN,
- increase transfer rates from Pierce, and
- create faculty engagement to promote student engagement?

We also wanted to try to do all of this while testing the Degree Qualifications Profile and creating a replicable model for California (and preferably beyond). Moreover, we needed to accomplish our goals with the relatively modest grant provided by AAC&U and we wanted to get started quickly.

The core of what I wanted to do was to create themes within general education. It seemed to me that the themes were probably already there, but we needed to tease them out. Our sister campus in Chico has created a General Education Pathway structure that themed GE. They had done so from the bottom up and students liked the program. CSUN and CSU, Chico have some commonalities, but also have some crucial differences: we are an urban campus, we have a more diverse student body, and while we are increasingly a center for our community, we are not a residential campus.

I thought it better if we shaped themes from the inside out. In other words, rather than engaging in GE reform, we would invite faculty to connect across subject areas and general education sections to highlight interdisciplinary thinking. We would also try to embed High-Impact Practices (https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips) into GE, again following Bettina Huber’s findings that revealed underserved lower division students were more likely to persist if they participated in two or more High-Impact Practices in their first year of education.

I started with the faculty. I needed the right faculty leaders to head up the project while I managed the budget, the system, and the cross-campus logistics. Patricia Juarez-Dappe, a tireless, enthusiastic, interdisciplinary professor of history and an expert in Latin America emerged quickly as the ideal faculty director to lead the CSUN effort with me. We decided to start with three Paths (because
our student affairs colleagues had a career center product of the same name, we couldn’t call the project Pathways). The first three paths also needed faculty leaders, and we were lucky to find Suzanne Scheld, a cultural anthropologist specializing in Africa, to head up Global Studies; Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrens, a historian specializing in Central America, to head Social Justice; and Kristy Michaud, a political scientist specializing in environmental and public policy, to lead Sustainability. These faculty leaders and I chose the three themes to represent broad interdisciplinary themes we thought could be found across the courses already in our GE. Each of these faculty members would teach a course in the theme, but obviously we needed more faculty.

The challenge, then, became how to define whether the theme was “in” a class. Our University Assessment Director, Bonnie Paller, helped the faculty leaders create Path student learning outcomes (SLOs). Patricia and I put out a call for participation. We asked faculty (both tenure/tenure-track and lecturer) to submit courses for inclusion in the Paths. In order to be included, faculty had to demonstrate alignment to three or more of the SLOs for that Path (most Paths had six SLOs). As for an incentive, we offered faculty who wanted to participate a small stipend to adapt their course to the Path of their choice (provided the course still “fit” the original description in the catalog). We also arranged faculty development working groups within each Path for faculty to connect with one another within and across departments.

From the beginning, there was a lot of excitement about the project from faculty across departments, disciplines, and contract/tenure lines. It is important to note that since adjuncts teach many of the courses at both institutions, we felt it was critical to include adjunct faculty from the outset. Despite the excitement, some colleagues expressed concern about the fact that the project had not gone through faculty governance, and interestingly enough, often the concern and enthusiasm came from the same departments. One person was an engaged participant and another was skeptical of any number of inferred “issues.” The issues ranged from the potential administrative imposition of the Paths to the long-held distrust between the ethnic studies departments and the history department.

While trying to build the project and team at CSUN, we engaged with the team from Pierce College: Barbara Anderson, Raymond Lim, Mia Wood, and later Anna Bruzze. They provided input for and then adopted our Paths and SLOs. Rather than going faculty member by faculty member, they decided to make whole courses align with the Paths. This choice on their part made the tracking of students from Pierce to CSUN much easier. Students who complete the lower division portion of the Path at Pierce have the appropriate designation on their transcripts in order to “finish” the path with the
upper division GE at CSUN, which offers a minor in sustainability. We are finalizing a minor in civic engagement for students in the other paths.

We met with the Pierce College team often, but each leadership team engaged in building the Paths at their home campus. In order to make the project work, we needed to acknowledge where we intersected (e.g., shared students, the GE structure, the desire to increase student success) and where we diverged (e.g., larger numbers of full-time faculty at CSUN and initially less available money at Pierce).

The project grew fairly quickly at CSUN, in no small part because Provost Harry Hellenbrand and I agreed that we would put additional monies into the launch. We also committed additional, ongoing dollars to sustain the project. Initially Pierce had to work with the AAC&U money only. Fortunately, Pierce’s President, Kathleen Burke, saw the attention and energy the project received and provided ongoing funding to keep Raymond Lim as the project director.

The splashy launch, followed by the faculty leaders’ deep sustained effort, has allowed Paths to thrive at CSUN. For 2014-2015 alone, we offered 167 sections of courses across the breadth of GE to more than eight thousand students in six Paths, and we had our first set of students finish a Path and graduate. There is some preliminary evidence that participation in two Path courses increases retention rates.

Faculty and student learning communities (especially in the three original Paths) have thrived, and all the Paths have well-attended events, speakers, and symposia. Additionally, we saw the formation of the GE Path Student Association the 2014-15 academic year and continue to have faculty engaged in assessment of the Path courses with positive results. We are also talking to Glendale College about their campus adopting the Paths to increase transfer and retention from that partner community college.

There are still faculty who express concern about the project, and we have had a slow time of it creating the minor. The latter challenge is resolving itself, as one of the most outspoken critics of the project agreed to spend the summer of 2015 redeveloping the proposed minor so that it integrates both the Paths and the non-Path courses offered by our large ethnic studies departments.

The one piece that was hard to make the case for, was integrating the DQP into the core of the project. We did, however, build the project around High-Impact Practices with an emphasis on civic and
community engagement (one of the DQP principles). The minor-in-progress, in fact, is a minor in civic and community engagement. Furthermore, the emphasis on civic and community engagement was much more evident (through service learning, volunteer work, etc.) at CSUN than it was at Pierce. The disparity was surely a result of the much larger budget CSUN was able to dedicate to the project.

Having the backing of the CSU system (through the great work of Ken O’Donnell and Debra David) allowed a fair amount of exposure for the project across the state through conferences arranged by the system under its “Give Students a Compass” effort (http://www.calstate.edu/app/compass/). CSU, Fullerton used our inside-out model and created Path(ways) for their incoming freshmen starting in fall 2014 (after a spring 2014 faculty workshop!). CSU, Stanislaus and Modesto Community College are talking about creating a project similar to the CSUN/Pierce model.

As the project matures, I hope we find that the initial goals of increased retention, transfer, and graduation are realized. The stakes for the students at CSUN and Pierce could not be higher.