Reforming General Education
As If It Matters—Because It Does
CONTENTS

SUMMER 2018

From the Editor ................................................................. 3

ANALYSIS

Grounding General Education in Principles That Matter
Loraine Phillips, Georgia Institute of Technology .................. 4

PRACTICE

Committing to Proficiency through Our Liberal Education Program
Kristian M. Twombly, Mark Springer, James R. Heiman, Kevin W. Sharpe,
and R. Jeffrey Ringer; all of St. Cloud State University .......... 7

General Education as a Gateway for Establishing Self-Directedness
Ian C. Chow, Paula Hodgson, Sze-Wing Tang, Wing-Hung Wong, and
Yang Yeung; all of The Chinese University of Hong Kong ....... 10

Telling Our Story of General Education Reform
Pamela Tracy, Heather Lettner-Rust, Larissa Smith Fergeson,
Sharon Emerson-Stonnell, and David Locascio; all of Longwood University .... 14

One Degree: Collaborating with Community College Partners for Student Success
Geoffrey Buhl, Amanda Quintero, Marie Francois, Michelle Pajka Hasendonckx,
and Kathleen Klompen; all of California State University−Channel Islands ... 18

Shifting Campus Conversations to Advance New General Education Programs
Rachel L. DiCioccio, Elaine Finan, and Eric C. Kaldor; all of The University of Rhode Island ....... 22

RESEARCH

From Application to Action Plan: How the Language of Gen Ed Reform Changes over Time
Ashley Finley and Erin Horan, both of AAC&U ..................... 25

REALITY CHECK

What Can Go Wrong When Everything Is Right?
Paul Hanstedt, Roanoke College ......................................... 31

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The title of a popular guide for first-year students published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) asks a question that has beleaguered general education advocates for years: Why Do I Have to Take This Course? In that publication, author Robert Shoenberg presents a clear case for curricular requirements and educates students about the broad learning outcomes developed in the major and general education courses during their undergraduate years. Shoenberg writes that general education requirements are not “hurdles to jump over or courses to be gotten out of the way, but rather the educational journey of a lifetime, the base on which to build a life as well as earn a living.” To paraphrase the above epigraph, general education helps students discover academic passions about which they didn’t know they were passionate.

General education has long been an important area of work for AAC&U. Much of this work is done in the Office of Quality, Curriculum, and Assessment, led by Vice President Terrel Rhodes, who offered guidance for this issue by identifying authors and provided support throughout the journal’s production. AAC&U’s general education initiatives aim to ensure that every undergraduate student experiences a relevant and challenging general education curriculum. To further this goal, AAC&U’s recent General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) initiative developed a set of principles—proficiency, agency and self-direction, integrative learning and problem-based inquiry, equity, and transparency and assessment—that, when incorporated into general education programs, can empower all students to develop their capacities through meaningful problem-based work as part of an intentional, coherent, engaging, and integrated educational experience. The GEMs principles are designed so that the next generation of general education programs will strengthen and integrate students’ broad learning across the liberal arts and sciences by connecting general education to big questions in society and to students’ major fields.

This issue of Peer Review features articles written by faculty of and participants in AAC&U’s Institute on General Education and Assessment (IGEA). That intensive summer workshop provides campus teams with opportunities to refine and advance general education programs and their assessment and build a campus learning culture that supports the GEMs principles. In this issue’s Analysis article, Loraine Phillips shares her experience working in statewide general education reform while actively participating in AAC&U’s LEAP States, Faculty Collaboratives, and interinstitutional assessment projects. The Practice section features reflections from five campus teams—St. Cloud State University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Longwood University, California State University–Channel Islands, and the University of Rhode Island—on general education plans that were developed at IGEA. Ashley Finley and Erin Horan’s Research article examines a range of campus action plans developed at IGEA and their execution and themes. Finally, Paul Hanstedt’s Reality Check piece ponders the right and wrong turns educators can take when implementing general education reforms. From the first to the last, these articles underscore the message of this issue’s cover line: general education matters.

Also on the cover is Dave Cutler’s inspired artwork that depicts a group of students, propelled by sails that represent the five GEMs principles, gliding toward a lifetime of educational exploration. No matter their major, students’ liberal education experiences will be key to their future achievements. As AAC&U President Lynn Pasquerella wrote in her recent Inside Higher Ed article, “Fulfilling the promise of American higher education requires a curriculum that emphasizes essential learning outcomes as necessary for all students’ intellectual, civic, personal and professional development and success.”

—SHELLEY JOHNSON CAREY
Grounding General Education in Principles That Matter

About a decade ago, a little advisory committee in the big state of Texas reflected on the way their college students experienced undergraduate and general education. The committee was concerned about successfully navigating the information-driven environment of the twenty-first century, maintaining and increasing the quality of education, and maximizing scholarship and current national best practices for the benefit of Texas students. With well over fifty general education outcomes—each with state-required assessment—institutions had many outcomes to teach but had little evidence of their success. So, when the state Undergraduate Education Advisory Committee (UEAC) made their recommendations to the Texas Commissioner for Higher Education, they advocated for redesign. In January 2009, the committee issued their report, *Designing Texas Undergraduate Education in the 21st Century*, thereby launching a two-year period of general education redesign.

After countless hours of study, review, and alignment, and armed with best practices from a broad range of institutions, states, and professional organizations, the UEAC submitted their next report to the commissioner in April 2011, *Revising the State Core Curriculum: A Focus on 21st Century Competencies*. Concerned with college completion and being accountable for students’ progress toward their degree, as well as asking larger questions about essential knowledge and skills for students to be successful in college, their careers, and their communities, the UEAC placed essential learning outcomes and their integration at the foreground of their general education redesign. By fall 2014, Texas public institutions of higher education had to be ready to implement their general education redesign.

**LESSONS FROM TEXAS**

As it launched a general education redesign, Texas also became the tenth state to join the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) States initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in 2014. Texas’s intent to weave the essential learning outcomes throughout general education and the majors was a big driver for joining the LEAP States initiative. Implementation of the state’s redesigned general education curriculum and the integration of the essential learning outcomes throughout Texas public institutions’ curricula needed ongoing support, shared good practices, and an avenue for collaboration that could reach across many miles. A group from Texas also participated in AAC&U’s Faculty Collaboratives project, which promoted two of the most important aspects of meaningful redesign—to create support for faculty and to promote collaboration.

Despite some limited success, integrating the essential learning outcomes across disciplines in general education and the majors continues to be a challenge. To facilitate continued adoption in both, institutions are engaged in ongoing discussions about what works and what does not, based on cycles of assessment of essential learning outcomes. Thus, general education redesign continues to be a popular conversation both locally and nationally.

To that end, AAC&U released a report, *Recent Trends in General Education Design, Learning Outcomes, and Teaching Approaches* (2016), which examined these common campus conversations. For example, 85 percent of AAC&U member institutions have a common set of learning outcomes for all undergraduate students, and there is agreement across institutions that these outcomes apply to a range of skills and knowledge areas. On the other hand, the report noted that educational leaders did not believe that students have a greater understanding of their intended learning goals. Regarding general education specifically, educational leaders noted general education redesign as a growing priority, with 67 percent placing an emphasis on the integration of knowledge, skills, and applications.

While subject matter “depth and breadth” used to be the most common elements of general education, now just one-third of educational leaders identify broad knowledge acquisition as the function of
general education. Instead, three in four of these leaders believe that general education programs have “clear learning outcomes.” More than two in three, 68 percent, believe that their institutions “assess student achievement of learning outcomes” in general education. While this important report reveals our need to continue our efforts in transparency and communication to students about the value of general education and essential learning outcomes in college and in life, it is yet another indicator of the commonality of this important conversation about general education redesign across our nation. This topic resonates particularly in my new home of Georgia, where I serve at an institution within the University System of Georgia. As such, 2016 marked Georgia’s beginning as a LEAP state. Since that time, the conversation about Georgia’s general education and core curriculum redesign has been swelling, along with a focus on essential learning outcomes, demonstrating the state’s further engagement in this already popular conversation.

**GENERAL EDUCATION MAPS AND MARKERS (GEMS) IN ACTION**

AAC&U’s General Education Maps and Markers (GEMS), a framework for designing and evaluating curricula and programs, emphasizes pathways for student success and progress and advocates for institutional consideration in the general education redesign process. With acknowledgment of students’ movement among institutions, as well as their own life circumstances, GEMS brings focus to redesign efforts for institutions, systems, and states. This issue of *Peer Review* highlights best practices in efforts from across our nation using the five GEMS design principles for general education:

1. **Proficiency**
   Proficiency, the first GEMS principle, focuses on clear statements of student learning outcomes that students can describe; that ground our development of general education programs, curricula, and experiences; and that are aligned with the twenty-first-century knowledge and skills sought by institutions, systems, states, and employers. In their article in this issue of *Peer Review*, authors from St. Cloud State University discuss how they are bringing proficiency to the fore of their efforts to redesign general education.

2. **Agency and Self-Direction**
   Second, students’ experiences should facilitate student agency, self-direction, and active participation, so students can master the skills and proficiencies that are needed beyond graduation for work and life. When students pursue and develop these proficiencies, producing high-quality work in accordance with their interests and aims, as shown by the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s article in this issue, then the institution is highlighting agency and self-direction in its redesign.

3. **Integrative Learning and Problem-Based Inquiry**
   Third, integrative learning and problem-based inquiry—in which students’ insights ultimately emerge from multiple areas of study—purposefully combine and integrate curricula, curricular programs, high-impact practices, and community-based learning for more focused and full comprehension and demonstration of skills. In their article, Longwood University prioritizes integrative learning and problem-based inquiry within their redesign.

4. **Equity**
   Equity, the fourth principle, is intended to shift how faculty, staff, and administrators approach inequalities in learning opportunities and promote practices, policies, and procedures that address potential differences among students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, returning adult learners, veterans, and others, and uplift the achievement of outcomes and proficiencies across the institution. In their article, authors from California State University—Channel Islands share how they create meaningful, pragmatic, clear, and well-communicated pathways for all.

5. **Transparency and Assessment**
   Finally, transparency and assessment—the fifth GEMS design principle—establishes the expectation that students, faculty members, and other stakeholders should understand what proficiencies are being developed in the general education program and how these might be demonstrated at key milestones in students’ progress and development by pointing to students’ college work. Students’ work, emerging from well-designed assignments, not only provides institutions with evidence of strong teaching and learning, but also gives demonstrable proof of learning and competence that students can carry with them into the future, potentially using ePortfolios as a repository, to show themselves and others that they have gained proficiency over time. In their article, authors from the University of Rhode Island describe how they used transparency and assessment in their redesign of general education.

**GEMS IN TEXAS AND BEYOND**

The GEMS principles particularly resonated in Texas. From its inception, LEAP Texas has sought “to provide Texas students with consistent high-quality higher education through implementation of outcomes-focused general education, authentic assessment, high-impact educational practices, inclusive excellence, and improved access to higher education” (LEAP Texas, n.d.). The organization was dedicated to:

- upholding the commitment of faculty across various institutions to provide a strong educational foundation for an increasingly diverse student body—one that prepares them for work and citizenship in the twenty-first century, well aligned with stated goals of employers;
- adhering to the required Texas Core Curriculum (largely informed by the LEAP
Essential Learning Outcomes: www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes), facilitating rigor and transferability within a context of innovation;

- responding to the increasing national focus on student learning outcomes; and

- applying the scholarship of teaching and learning (LEAP Texas, n.d.).

An early and sustained focus for the LEAP initiative is “creating a capacity for large-scale, inter-institutional collaboration in robust and authentic assessment.” Through the support and leadership of two LEAP Texas assessment fellows, one from a community college and the other from a university, LEAP Texas was able to form the Texas Assessment Collaborative (TAC) of seven colleges and universities, a project that aimed to leverage “the newly redesigned Texas Core Curriculum for the overall improvement in undergraduate education, advancing the authentic assessment of student work in the Texas Core, and promoting the development and refinement of the capacity of authentic assessment” (King and Duke 2018). The TAC was designed as a state-level complement to the Multi-State Collaborative, a national large-scale authentic assessment collaborative sponsored by the State Higher Education Executive Officers’ Association (SHEEO).

Encouraged by the early and continued successes of the Multi-State Collaborative, the TAC set out to collect samples of student work and enlist faculty panels to score the work using AAC&U’s VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics. In response to the need for well-aligned assignments, NILOA and AAC&U launched the Charrettes and Collaborative Assignment Design, a collaborative assignment design process for educators designing and using assignments linked to proficiencies and the LEAP essential learning outcomes. Some Texas teams, as well as teams across the nation, were accepted into the NILOA Collaborative Assignment Design Charrettes, an intensive faculty-driven collaborative peer review process for assignments given to students. Two useful and expanding resources emerged from this effort: the Assignment Charrette Toolkit (www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/assignmenttoolkit.html) and the Assignment Library (www.assignmentlibrary.org/). The Assignment Charrette Toolkit provides excellent resources to empower faculty to conduct collaborative assignment design workshops on their campus or within their professional organizations. Many of the resources can be adapted to fit specific needs. The Assignment Library provides well-vetted assignments for broad proficiencies at various levels that can be adapted to specific classroom or institutional needs. Examples include assessment instruments that are frequently adapted from VALUE rubrics. Peer-reviewed examples for assignments from various academic disciplines and assignment characteristics are also available in the assignment library.

One of the LEAP Texas faculty fellows focused exclusively on assignment design. With expansive experience in faculty development, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and general education leadership, the faculty fellow set out to conduct Collaborative Assignment Design workshops across Texas, from Dallas/Fort Worth to Houston to San Antonio. After a whirlwind summer tour, feedback from faculty who participated indicated a strengthening of alignment in general education between the assignments given to students and the usefulness of the VALUE rubrics to speak to student achievement of learning goals.

Opportunities grounded in principles that matter await all who are called to redesign general education. Such work must be conducted in environments rich with collaboration, thoughtfulness, creativity, innovation, and inquiry. And ultimately, using the VALUE rubrics to score students’ work provides the best and most authentic evidence of their achievement and gains toward the expected—and essential—learning outcomes.

REFERENCES


For decades, St. Cloud State University’s attempts to operationalize our meaningful learning outcomes and assessment practices left faculty, staff, and administrators frustrated, structures ineffective, and successful implementation elusive. Furthermore, to ease transfer pathways within our state system, we took part in an alignment exercise for general education. This compliance exercise engendered similar frustrations and left our Liberal Education Program (LEP) in a state that evokes images of a buffet line at our campus dining hall.

Not long after, we were facing our periodic regional accreditation report and site visit and knew that there were some areas in our academic program in which the Higher Learning Commission would take keen interest. Institutional learning outcomes and assessment were the two most pressing areas of concern. After some reflection, we decided to throw caution to the wind and tackle these issues together, all at once.

**OUR HUSKY COMPACT**

Our efforts resulted in what we call “Our Husky Compact,” a shared promise that faculty and staff make to our students and that students make to their education. There are six dimensions to Our Husky Compact:

- Communicate effectively: relationship building, conflict resolution, proficiency in teamwork—all require effective communication.
- Engage as a member of a diverse and multicultural world: we are members of a global society impacted by a global economy.
- Think creatively and critically: the ability to think creatively and critically is core to overcoming challenges.
- Act with personal integrity and civic responsibility: nurturing ethical and productive difference-makers.
- Seek and apply knowledge: encouraging independence, informed decision making, open-mindedness, and motivation.
- Integrate existing and evolving technologies: technology is used every day to improve efficiency, better balance work/life, and access information.

These dimensions came from more than two thousand different program outcomes, as well as from work at the national level through the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Degree Qualifications Profile from Lumina Foundation.

We purposely drafted the dimensions as an extension of our LEP, where students gain a foundational skill set in their introductory courses that is intended to be refined in their upperlevel coursework. Our Husky Compact is a holistic, comprehensive attempt to align a liberal education skill set across the institution, in both curricular and cocurricular contexts. The six dimensions are by nature intended to permeate the silos created by major/minor programs, challenge the compartmentalization of the LEP, and grow ownership of Our Husky Compact as an institutional imperative.

One of the most significant and persistent challenges is the perception of the value of general education coursework and its connections across a four-year experience. We survey our graduating seniors each semester, and part of the survey includes the following item for response: The general education courses I took at St. Cloud prepared me for my major coursework.
We asked students to answer on a sliding scale: strongly disagree, disagree, don’t know, agree, strongly agree. Since 2014, about half of our students answered that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with that statement (a high of 57 percent and low of 47 percent). This is problematic, as we not only want our students to understand the value of a liberal education, but Our Husky Compact is intended to align our LEP with our program outcomes.

However, when we first tried to overhaul our LEP, Our Husky Compact did not yet exist. Our existing state-mandated general education outcomes weren’t yet in intentional alignment, and so it wasn’t surprising that both students (and faculty) had difficulty seeing the alignment between their general education coursework and upper-level courses for their majors.

It was in this context that a team of faculty and administrators attended the 2015 AAC&U Institute on General Education and Assessment (IGEA). There, we had the opportunity to discuss and develop a meaningful plan that would allow for increased connection between the LEP and the yet-to-be-finalized outcomes of Our Husky Compact, and for their infusion throughout our programs.

The team—faculty who were deeply engaged in making courses available in the LEP as well as the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, where 70 percent of LEP seats are offered—immediately identified alignment as a critical component of what became our institutional report and plan. While we always intended Our Husky Compact to encompass the learning outcomes of the Liberal Education Program, no formal alignment process had been designed or implemented up to that point.

Ideally, articulating alignment between the LEP and Our Husky Compact would eventually help us decontextualize the ten discreet goal areas of the Minnesota State Transfer Curriculum (the structure that organizes St. Cloud State’s Liberal Education Program) and translate these outcomes into the six dimensions of Our Husky Compact. The team imagined programs offering seminars and courses in the LEP that were interdisciplinary, reflecting a broad, integrative approach to learning. These courses would provide students with the kinds of skills that major and minor programs would continue building, culminating in capstone experiences. This integration of the LEP into programs as well as upper-level coursework could better prepare students for life, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century—our mission.

The team also considered an assessment structure, and again, embracing Our Husky Compact was a critical component of the plan. By more closely aligning LEP outcomes with the dimensions of Our Husky Compact, we’d be able to engage in a meaningful, holistic approach that simultaneously touched upon and assessed the LEP and major and minor programs, and reflected the integration of Our Husky Compact.

Ultimately, the IGEA team recommended viewing the Liberal Education Program as a cohesive collection of courses and experiences that was well integrated into each major and minor program offered. This perspective emphasizes integration and collaboration and provides a clearer mission to the curriculum process, which had been focused on LEP courses to comply with state expectations, rather than the LEP as a cohesive curriculum.

We left the institute energized and ready to tackle the plan’s implementation, but without a clear path forward. How could a small group of us begin to effect change? To move the needle toward the vision articulated in the plan?

**DRAFTING THE COMPACT**

Our university’s Strategic Planning Committee led this effort. The committee consists of members of each bargaining unit on our unionized campus, a large faculty contingent, administrators, and a pair of student leaders. In total, membership can be as high as forty members, and while the committee tackles critical issues that face our campus, it plays no formal role in the decision-making process, only acting as a recommending body to the upper administration.

While this structure may seem needlessly bureaucratic, the committee provided important feedback and guidance to the administration through several recent challenges, including reorganization and fiscal instability. With broad campus representation, the committee encouraged units with different needs and agendas to work together to find consensus. In fact, the committee’s motions were only forwarded if fewer than five objections were made.

Our president at the time, Earl H. Potter III, recommended that a faculty member attend a one-day workshop at Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana to learn more about a proposed national framework for authentic assessment using AAC&U’s VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics, following a model originally deployed in Massachusetts. As the faculty cochair of our university Strategic Planning Committee, Kristian Twombly attended the institute. Workshop participants learned about the rubric (in this case, the Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric), and then small groups at each table examined assignments and adjusted them to better express the outcomes defined by the rubric.

Twombly left this workshop energized and convinced that, combined with AAC&U’s LEAP initiative, this was the approach that St. Cloud State should pursue as we wrote our own institutional outcomes and developed a system of assessment of these outcomes.

Our timeline was tight. We adopted this project as our Quality Initiative for the upcoming accreditation cycle, and the drafting of our Institutional Learning Outcomes was to be completed in the upcoming year, with assessment beginning the following academic year. Lisa Foss,
administrative cochair of the Strategic Planning Committee and vice president of planning and effectiveness, recommended that we send a team to two different AAC&U summer institutes: the Institute on General Education and Assessment and the Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success. Our Husky Compact—in name and conceptualization—came out of the work done by the teams at these two institutes.

Our participation at these institutes helped clarify the moral imperative at the heart of this project—that our work ultimately had to reflect our shared values as a campus if the project were to have any chance of success. What began as an effort to write institutional learning outcomes and develop a robust system of assessment had become a set of values that reflected the bonds shared among faculty, staff, and students and the commitment that we make to our students’ education.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT
We elected to follow a very transparent and iterative process as we drafted the dimensions of Our Husky Compact and the ensuing implementation. Following the initial presentation during our fall convocation in the week prior to classes, the Strategic Planning Committee went through three additional revisions, with feedback and consultation achieved via meetings, workshops, presentations, and online surveys. Ultimately, we had just over 50 percent participation from all campus constituencies, including students, and sixty presentations. That’s over six thousand different members of the campus community that provided some sort of feedback.

Once Our Husky Compact was finalized, we needed to draft and implement an assessment protocol. The Ivy Tech workshop led to our participation in the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning, where papers and assignments generated by students in the classroom are scored against the VALUE rubrics. This method served as the model for our approach to assessment: we collect no more than ten artifacts from a single course and a group of faculty score them after grades have been submitted. We make every attempt to collect artifacts from across all academic units so that no one unit or program is overrepresented in the sample.

We also sample from both upper-level courses—mainly capstone courses, where mastery is demonstrated—and lower level courses, particularly in the Liberal Education Program. This allows us to set a baseline for results as well as provide critical data in terms of student learning in the LEP.

Addressing assessment in this manner served multiple purposes and institutional needs. Our assessment protocol had become stagnant and required refreshing before our imminent accreditation visit. The IGEA team noted the severe disconnect between our LEP and program-specific courses and that students were having difficulty seeing the value of these courses and experiences. And while our curriculum committee oversaw the LEP curriculum, all institutional LEP assessment efforts were halted and no committees were formed to assess student learning in the LEP. By integrating some LEP assessment with Our Husky Compact assessment, we have been able to show skeptical faculty that this work can be nonintrusive and valuable.

ADVancing through Continued Collaboration
Further integration continues to occur. Our University College, home to many of our first-year interventions and academic initiatives, has launched first-year seminars that are aligned with Our Husky Compact and still meet the state requirements for courses offered in the LEP. Our School of the Arts has created a course rubric that will allow the programs within the school to offer multidisciplinary courses, much like our School of Business and School of Health and Human Services already do.

When we began this project, the institutional perspective tended to be one of mere compliance. When our campus was required to align with the statewide requirements, we chose not to innovate, but to shoehorn our existing courses into the new system with little actual change. Similarly, since the state requirements are intended to facilitate transfer between two- and four-year institutions, we defaulted to a framework in which all LEP courses are lower-level, further exacerbating the rift between the LEP and major coursework.

And even though the report and plan that the IGEA team submitted was not immediately realized and implemented, the result has been no less effective or dramatic. Why? Because from that five-person team grew a set of champions and leaders. We had started the conversation and other stakeholders—including within the administration—had to participate.

We have made these advances through continued collaboration. The structure that oversees these initiatives is multifaceted, consisting of the Strategic Planning Committee, the Our Husky Compact Oversight Committee, the Assessment Steering Committee, and the Liberal Education Committee—not to mention a variety of less organized groups of faculty and staff—working together to bring Our Husky Compact to life and institutionalize these initiatives in a way that maximizes buy-in and participation without negatively impacting workload and being too intrusive.

We still have significant hurdles to overcome. Students who transfer their general education courses into St. Cloud State may not gain the same advantages of Our Husky Compact as those who started here and completed the LEP. However, by continuing to integrate the broad approach to student learning that is exemplified by Our Husky Compact, we hope to continue the conversation and collaboration.
General Education as a Gateway for Establishing Self-Directedness

The framework for General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs), a project of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), includes five principles and guidelines for educators to prepare our twenty-first-century graduates with a sound foundation for an ever-changing and dynamic way of life. This paper explores the agency and self-direction GEMs principle and examines how university students may be transformed in their journey to becoming independent with a positive self-conception as they prepare for multiple complex situations at work and in life. This means students are given a voice as they plan for their interests, work toward becoming self-directed learners, and learn how they can achieve their goals.

OUR INSTITUTE EXPERIENCE

General education is a core component of the four-year undergraduate curriculum at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Not only does it lay a foundation to prepare students for success in their academic study, but it also serves as a gateway to building transferrable competencies and proficiencies for their future careers in the increasingly connected world.

In 2006, CUHK adopted a strategic plan that emphasized student-centered learning and learning outcomes (www.cuhk.edu.hk/clear/qm/A1-1.pdf). As a result, campus leadership encouraged faculty to use outcomes-based approaches (OBA) in their teaching. OBA requires grade assignment to be criterion-referenced, and grade descriptors should yield a grade distribution consistent with university guidelines. (www.cuhk.edu.hk/clear/download/OBAwebsite_UGC_18April07.pdf). Despite the recommendation for OBA, grading at CUHK continued to be more distribution-driven (i.e., norm-referenced or bell-shape-referenced) rather than criterion-referenced.

In 2016, the authors of this article attended the 2016 Institute on General Education and Assessment (IGEA) as a campus team with the goal of learning more about criterion-referenced grading and creating a strategy for its implementation at CUHK. By the end of the institute we had created an action plan that uses criterion-referenced grading, which we planned to promote through talks and workshops on our campus. In December 2016, about six months after the 2016 IGEA, we organized a full-day teachers’ retreat. Teachers from various departments and administrators who oversaw general education participated in the event. During the retreat, the campus team shared what we learned from the institute and our experience in developing grading rubrics. We also suggested ways to map the grading rubrics to grade descriptors. In 2017–18, the Centre for Learning Enhancement and Research conducted several more seminars on criterion-referenced grading that were open to all CUHK teachers. Now, most of our undergraduate courses (not only general education courses) have adopted criterion-referenced grading.
GENERAL EDUCATION: FROM GRADING TO STUDENT WELL-BEING

The university’s mission statement describes the “educated world citizen of today and tomorrow” as a person who has been trained in “specialized subjects as well as inculcated with critical powers and cultural sensitivity.” The idea of global citizenship could be regarded as one iteration of the agency and self-direction GEMs principle, which says that “general education should play a critical role in helping all students understand, pursue, and develop the proficiencies needed for work, life, and responsible citizenship” (AAC&U 2015, 3). The general education program is offered university-wide and in individual colleges, complementing the formal curricula by delivering whole-person education and care.

Despite the vibrant nature of life in Hong Kong, the South China Morning Post reported in 2017 that the suicide rates of youths between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four have risen slightly over the past five years (Abraham 2017). Several university students were among the deceased, which caused our university to take note of this alarming reality. During the first six months of the 2016–17 academic year, five suicides happened on the CUHK campus. It was also reported that many other university students showed signs of depression, anxiety, and pressure. In a recent survey of 3,543 CUHK students, 860 participants “demonstrated some degree of disturbance or needed help.”

These incidents generated so much discussion on campus that the university took immediate action. Their first response was to provide mental health support, especially for the families and peers of the deceased. Long-term strategies included launching campaigns to promote positive thinking and peer support. As a direct response to the urgent need of foregrounding student well-being as a priority concern on campus, CUHK upgraded the Wellness and Counselling Centre and put more resources into promoting happiness and positive well-being by organizing campaigns and building a peer network. Training courses at the Wellness and Counselling Centre were provided for peer counsellors who want to help others and develop their personal potential and character strengths.

As these were top-down student well-being initiatives, campus community members also initiated a bottom-up effort. For example, in Chinese courses offered by the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, students can reflect on personal values and traditional culture through reading Chinese classics. Since the courses are taught in small groups, students’ needs and difficulties can be identified and addressed through in-class personal contact with students and their written assignments. A similar effort was initiated through the general education program. In 2015–16, as part of a first-year general education course, Chung Chi College introduced an assessment task, the Truth-Goodness-Beauty assignment, which allows students to engage in experiential activities beyond their study in their major. The Truth-Goodness-Beauty theme highlighted whole-person development and prompted students to contemplate the various possibilities they might pursue in life. Working in groups, students chose a topic that they believed could help improve their campus or in the community, attending a guest talk, participating in an open forum, visiting a gallery, appreciating a music performance, or exploring college history and heritage. The common goal of this activity was to discover positive values in these actions. For some students, that goal might be the reconstruction of the truth that scholars, visionary leaders, philosophers, outstanding youths, or the ancestors of the college have worked toward. For others, it might be to identify goodness that they saw in a monumental moment in the history of the college and consider ways for moving the same spirit forward. It could be participating in or organizing a community service activity, or the appreciation of the beauty in the harmony between nature and historical architecture. Students welcomed this special assignment and gave valuable suggestions for further improvement. For instance, web pages and annotated poems were later accepted as an alternative form of student work, and short videos were accepted the following year.

Chung Chi College offers three elective study schemes as capstone projects. The three schemes focus on different areas: (1) an analysis-oriented senior seminar, (2) service learning, and (3) an integrated study combining the formal curricula by delivering whole-person education and care.
In working with the Office of University General Education as part of the overarching project on student well-being, some teachers were inspired to explore a small project on student anxiety about taking science-related general education courses. Wing-Hung Wong, one of this article’s authors and a project coinvestigator, played an active role in studying cognitive and affective influences on students’ anxiety about science. Research shows that there is an optimal level of anxiety that can best motivate students (Desai 2001).

Garritz (2010) believes that teaching and learning should embrace the affective domain which entails “motivational beliefs, goal orientation beliefs, interest and value beliefs, self concept, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and control beliefs” (4). This is why we should investigate how students tackle problems and how the affective domain might affect the processes and outcomes of mental fluidity and flexibility. The intended outcome of this project was to assist teachers in making informed decisions about adjusting course content and pedagogy so that their critical reflection and renewed approaches might make a difference to those students. Subsequently, their work could enable other teachers to build an evidence-based understanding of anxiety and performance and how to promote students’ well-being while unbundling the complexity of learning tasks and fostering confidence and mastery through systematic and logical thinking about science.

While the general education curriculum has been well-established in the university and small design modifications to assessment activities have made a difference, others on campus have made efforts outside the general education curriculum. The Student Activity Fund was established in 2016 under the Office of University General Education. It was intended to encourage student-proposed activities for reading classic literature, which can help students acquire basic understandings of both Chinese and western civilizations while fostering academic ability and nourishing creativity. Hong Kong was a colony under British sovereignty for more than 150 years. Knowing oneself and identity have been and still are controversial phenomena among many Hong Kong people, even though this region has been under China’s sovereignty for more than twenty years. University students are adjusting from classical teacher-centered teaching in schools to a learning-centered approach in which the foci are on the learning processes (Kember and Kwan 2000). Inevitably, they will develop a strong quest for self-directedness. These students’ reading habits will serve as an essential academic success factor because critical evaluation and reflection of the classics can lead to the understanding of identity, a relationship with society and civic responsibility, and engagement with communities at large. Subsequently, these students become agents to spread and promote their experiences reading the classics. In the past two years, supported activities included reading camps, exhibitions,
book talks, and reading groups. Topics included Chinese philosophies, political theories, and human issues such as happiness, suffering, sexuality, hope, love, and faith. Students who organized these activities had to collaborate with peers and be creative when sharing their interpretations of classics with a public audience. By organizing these activities, students have gained both a sense of achievement and a more in-depth understanding of making meaning of human values.

In recent years, CUHK has explored the role of general education in promoting students’ well-being in the context of global citizenship. This exploration is still in the preliminary stage. In June, CUHK held the 2017 Institute on General Education cum Teacher and Student Conference. Among topics like course design, pedagogy, and general education course and program assessment, students’ well-being was also a focus through a lecture and in-depth discussion in a workshop. In December 2018, there will be another Institute on General Education cum Teacher and Student Conference. Global citizenship and well-being will be the central discussion topics for that meeting.

We understand global citizenship and well-being as two faces of the same coin. Understanding oneself as a member of a diverse and changing global community and understanding one’s inner world are both important, and both may present challenges for students. Our task is to assist students as they find and sustain their own well-being. Well-being is a matter of feeling educationally valuable, and this outcome will remain with us for a long time.

CONCLUSION

General education, which typically encompasses one-quarter of students’ study at CUHK, has played a significant role in preparing students for unmet challenges in life. Through the systematic design and delivery of teaching, students can become self-directed learners skilled at collaborative problem-solving by making plans, developing creative solutions, and embracing the diversity and creativity of individuals in different majors. Students in Hong Kong can further gain proficiency in reading Chinese and Western classics while deepening their identity as self-directed learners, and cocurricular activities can help them prepare for the professional knowledge and proficiencies necessary for lifelong learning. This takes determination and active, continuous inquiry on the part of teachers to communicate with students about the benefits of various activities in the general education program. Our collaboration for more innovation has only just begun.

REFERENCES


AAC&U MEETINGS

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January 23–26, 2019
Atlanta, Georgia

PRE-MEETING SYMPOSIUM ON THE VALUE RUBRICS

Is There a Rubric for That? A Decade of VALUE and the Future of Higher Education
January 23, 2019

FORUM ON DIGITAL LEARNING AND EPORTFOLIOS

ePortfolios and the Value of Higher Education
January 26, 2019

NETWORK CONFERENCES

General Education and Assessment
February 14–16, 2019
San Francisco, California

Diversity, Equity, and Student Success
March 28–30, 2019
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Global Engagement and Social Responsibility
October 17–19, 2019
San Antonio, Texas

Transforming STEM Higher Education
November 7–9, 2019
Chicago, Illinois

www.aacu.org/events
Prior to our attendance at the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ 2015 Institute on General Education and Assessment, Longwood University’s general education reform committee was pleased with the progress of our efforts to revise our program, yet uncertain about how best to move forward. Late in the institute, our team met with institute faculty member Yves Labissiere to share our concerns. He recommended that we design a model that reflected the identity and spirit of our institution and encouraged us to tell the Longwood University story. This advice synced well with that of institute mentor Kathy Wolfe, who had recommended that the Longwood team scaffold a more sequential approval process for our general education reform efforts. First, we needed to gain faculty approval of student learning outcomes in the program and then design multiple curriculum models for faculty consideration. She reinforced the importance of engaging the faculty as a whole rather than through departments alone.

We were inspired to build upon our strengths and leverage our resources—an institutional commitment to the reform initiative, a strong culture of faculty leadership and engagement, and a cadre of faculty who embraced integrative learning—but also to be mindful of the entirety of our institutional context. Initially, our timeline projected approval of the new curriculum in spring 2016, with implementation in fall 2017. That is not how it turned out. Consistent with the wisdom shared at the institute, we found faculty were not ready to move quickly. We delayed approval of the curriculum and engaged in a more inclusive, iterative, and deliberative process that emphasized explicitly including faculty as experts and learners in the program design. That process also capitalized on our current strengths and strategic initiatives. This focus on faculty engagement and context served us well and resulted in a new multiliteracy core curriculum—Civitae—that centered on inquiry and integrative learning. The reform process also initiated broader and more fundamental institutional changes that continue to unfold.

BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS
Our commitment to general education reform came from both faculty and administrators. Faculty had recommended revising the general education curriculum in an academic strategic plan developed in 2011–12. In 2013, new presidential leadership spurred the reform process, ensuring that general education revision became an institutional priority in the university’s strategic plan for 2014–18. Sensitive to the nature and rhythms of faculty work, the president also did not impose a timeline on curriculum development but encouraged faculty to dream big and develop an innovative curriculum that truly reflected Longwood. The president, along with the provost, empowered the faculty to drive the reform process and, most importantly, provided financial support consistently during development. The administration’s commitment to funding the new curriculum was critical to overcoming pockets of faculty skepticism.

Longwood’s strong shared governance model also ensured that faculty expertise would be at the center of the revision process. The Faculty Senate, composed of representatives from each of the sixteen academic departments in our three colleges, holds
monthly meetings and biannual faculty meetings. In addition, department chairs convene monthly as an advisory group to the provost. The senate leadership meets regularly with both the president and the provost and participates in quarterly board of visitors meetings. This governance structure, as well as the commitment to transparent and frequent faculty communication, created opportunities for continuous dialogue about the new curriculum design.

Committee Leadership
In fall 2013, the faculty senate appointed the Academic Core Curriculum Committee (ACCC), thirteen faculty members from across the three colleges, to lead the reform process. In addition to broad departmental representation, the committee members ranged from relatively new tenure-track faculty members to others with extensive experience in program or departmental leadership and faculty governance. This group included two former faculty senate chairs and six former or current department chairs. The breadth of representation and the stability of the committee proved valuable in building stakeholders’ trust in the reform process. Early on, the ACCC committed to a substantive redesign of general education and recognized that this would require a significant amount of time and energy, as well as a slower-paced, deliberative process. The committee met twice a week for seventy-five minutes over four semesters and for multiday meetings over two summers.

Looking Within
The current general education model featured one course with unrealized potential. Active Citizenship: An Advanced Writing Seminar was a capstone course that assigned interdisciplinary groups of students to use disciplinary knowledge to understand an issue represented in public discourse, research the issue through many lenses, and produce successful written communication for an intended audience. Some ACCC members saw students profoundly transformed by their experiences in this course. Those students gained the confidence to address the town council about walkways around town, join a citywide debate about relocating the minor league baseball team in our state’s capital city, and give talks to local community groups about predatory lending practices. Other sections of the course produced oral history magazines from citizens affected by our county’s public school closings during racial segregation, or visited Yellowstone National Park to study the stewardship of public lands. Despite these pockets of success, the faculty struggled to support and engage students in integrative thinking. Students could be led into integrative projects, but the on-ramp for this kind of learning was at times quite long and uneven. The strengths and weaknesses of this course shaped the reform process, inspiring faculty to design a curriculum that supported student practice with creative inquiry, writing, speaking, information literacy, and integrative thinking.

FACILITATING CHANGE
Gaston and Gaff (2009) identify general education reform as one of the challenges in higher education that have particularly high need for broad and collective faculty involvement. Based on the institute’s advice, one of ACCC’s goals was to foster an active committee-to-faculty feedback loop; how this process would unfold was less predictable. The goal was to facilitate rather than predict and control the entire process. As Rao (2014) points out, reform efforts often adopt an iterative structure without an explicit acknowledgment of the value of such processes. Through careful reflection, the committee came to recognize the value of a contemplative process for facilitating change. At times, outcomes were intentional; at other moments, we were building the ship while we were sailing.

Faculty as Learners
The committee developed a multimodal, learning-centered approach to engage faculty in the design process. An effective, learning-centered design process required careful attention to faculty readiness, a recognition of faculty as diverse learners, an inclusive mind-set, and a dynamic, flexible communication process. Apprehension, fear, and occasional hostility toward the general education reform needed to be taken seriously, recognized, and folded into the design process. This takes time to do well. Moving from a distributive general education program to a cross-disciplinary, integrated model represented a significant structural and pedagogical shift for most faculty. Framing general education revision as a collective act across the faculty, rather than as a matter for academic departments, disrupted established protocol. If the goal was to shift focus away from traditional department-based general education courses to general education centered on learning outcomes, we needed to engage faculty outside their disciplinary silos. The ACCC facilitated interactive workshops, created blogs to record responses and progress, and hosted informational meetings with all faculty.

Inclusive Communication
The ACCC members needed to practice effective communication as a team. A deliberative process is necessary when convening a diverse committee from multiple disciplines, particularly in the context of a high-stakes university-wide endeavor. As is typically the case, collaborative curriculum work requires attention to different communication styles and diverse disciplinary priorities and perspectives. Slowing down the process, listening across differences,
and taking time to review, reflect, and revise enabled a more inclusive committee process and built trust and camaraderie—all necessary to lead campus dialogue about this substantial curriculum change.

Our multimodal communication with faculty included a series of regularly scheduled workshops beginning in fall 2014 and continuing throughout the process. In total, we scheduled six faculty meetings or lunches, with at least one per semester from fall 2014 through fall 2016. On average, more than one hundred faculty and staff attended. The level of faculty and staff involvement intensified through the process as the reform proposals took shape and the discussions got progressively more granular. The meetings often involved break-out discussions in smaller groups. On one later occasion, participants circulated among tables engaging in discussions about the new design. In every case, we noted who attended, including what departments and majors were represented, and took copious notes on what was said. Committee members analyzed the discourse to look for cross-group concerns and insights; all of these data were later used to further the revision process. In addition, the committee cochairs made regular reports to the faculty senate, the university administration, and the board of visitors. Senators were asked on several occasions to provide additional updates on our work to their faculty constituents and to forward questions or concerns to the committee.

Critics and skeptics emerged at different stages of the design process. Gaston and Gaff (2009) endorse “deputizing members or small delegations to meet quietly with these critics, hear their concerns, and either incorporate features that respond to their concerns or explain why that cannot be done” (23). When needed, we had informal communication with some faculty members. We engaged the critics and the skeptics but did not nurture the cynics.

We also prioritized meeting with faculty who were enthusiastic about integrative learning, including innovators who had experience with interdisciplinary teaching or creative instructors on campus who had prior experience teaching the existing courses that most closely resembled the integrated, cross-disciplinary courses the ACCC envisioned within the new model.

The regular faculty meetings and email and blog updates fostered an iterative process through which the committee publicly acknowledged the importance of faculty engagement in the development of the new curriculum.

Collaborating across the Academy

During the institute, we realized the importance of opening the process to a broader collective of campus constituents. After establishing ongoing communication and feedback with faculty, the committee fanned out across campus. Cross-institutional collaborations with a variety of campus partners were necessary to the short- and long-term growth of our new program. We valued the student development expertise of our colleagues in the divisions of student affairs and student success. We extended invitations and welcomed discussions about how their student learning initiatives might overlap with and inform general education.

Other important collaborators included our Centre for Academic Faculty Enrichment (CAFE) and the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research. Once the curriculum was approved, they cofacilitated a day long, “train the trainer” workshop for faculty leaders responsible for category areas and assessment in the new curriculum. They focused on effective leadership practices and, using a modified backward design model as a foundation, facilitated an interactive session engaging these faculty in best practices for unpacking student learning outcomes. These leaders are responsible for mentoring faculty and academic departments interested in and committed to offering courses that most closely resembled the integrated, cross-disciplinary courses the ACCC envisioned within the new model.

Capitalizing on Campus Initiatives

We recognized campus initiatives and strategic priorities as opportunities to envision and realize the possibilities of integrative learning and teaching. For instance, Longwood University won the opportunity to host the 2016 vice presidential debate. In anticipation of the potential impact of this campus-wide event and the possible alignment with the new curriculum goals, the directors of General Education and the CAFE developed a grant-funded teaching program encouraging faculty to develop integrative courses focused on presidential elections and/or political debate. In fall 2016, Longwood offered thirty-three debate-related courses across fifteen disciplines. These courses, with more than one thousand students enrolled, involved all three colleges.

These debate-related courses served as examples of integrative learning, and the grant program demonstrated institution-level financial and philosophical support for integrating cross-disciplinary knowledge. This foundational work helped to build excitement about integrative learning and served as a preview to gauge faculty interest. It was an example of using current initiatives to help faculty and the wider campus understand integrative learning and build further support in the senate for approval of the new curriculum, which occurred in November 2016.
Using Existing Resources

Each year, CAFE hosts a one-day teaching and learning seminar. In May 2017, the ACCC committee partnered with CAFE to design and cohost Integrative Learning and the New Core Curriculum. The seminar focused on defining integrative learning for current and new courses. One concern addressed was how faculty could maintain curricular integrity to their major and the new Civitae core curriculum while adopting integrative learning strategies for all students. We brought in experts that year and the next to provide credibility and a new face to this teachable moment. Our keynote speaker was Paul Hanstedt, author of General Education Essentials: A Guide for College Faculty.

The following year, our seminar was a two-day workshop focused on developing coursework for Longwood’s new curriculum and on assessing and vertically scaffolding the integrative learning experience. Our guest speaker was Ashley Finley, coeditor of Civic Learning and Teaching and Assessing Underserved Students’ Engagement in High-Impact Practices. We created a program to help participants articulate what integration means at all levels of the curriculum and to understand how to meet the established outcomes associated with courses at each tier. Faculty evaluated course situational factors (Fink 2013), learned about backward design, and considered appropriate course-level assessments or assignments.

The teaching and learning seminars helped to create a positive energy around integrative learning and effective course design along with sequential curricular coherence. The collaborative efforts of the ACCC and CAFE stretched beyond these seminars and were mutually beneficial, contributing to the growth and positive influence of both programs. Faculty development centers serve as a critical resource for effective curriculum design and faculty engagement, and institutional reform helps to strengthen the importance of learning-centered curricula, which is a fundamental best practice for most teaching and learning programs.

TAKEAWAYS

Our takeaways and advice to others who are planning general education reform efforts are featured in the bulleted list below.

- Be open to a fluid and transparent process that involves a great deal of communication and listening.
- Maintain a continued pragmatism with an attitude toward experimentation.
- Adopt a stance of confident humility, in which you acknowledge you may not have all the answers or be able to anticipate all the questions, but that you will work together to discover them.
- Recognize that large-scale curricular change is a process involving individual faculty, academic programs, and the larger institutional culture.
- Convene a diverse committee representing stakeholders with varied experiences with general education, institutional history, and leadership responsibilities.
- Understand academic culture, faculty readiness, and external and institutional administration expectations. Then, use this knowledge to determine when it is appropriate to challenge the status quo of institutional culture.
- Recognize and acknowledge the contradictory emotions inherent in individual and institutional change.
- Listen to and do not immediately discount your skeptics. Their unique perspectives represent institutional knowledge that may reveal oversights and potential impacts on major programs.
- Incorporate the expertise of campus partners at strategic points in the process.
- Take advantage of unique institutional opportunities.
- Build on what your institution or faculty does well and identify current practices that provide working models representative of your reform vision.
- Keep student learning at the heart of the reform process.
- Understand that faculty are learners, too. Create professional development focusing on skills and knowledge necessary for integrative teaching and learning.
- Consider new initiatives to provide faculty with experiential learning opportunities to practice or pilot the new curriculum.
- Accept that this kind of learning takes time, practice, and patience. At Longwood, we took three years to build our program and are now in a three-year implementation process.

Our new Civitae core curriculum mirrors Longwood’s mission to develop “citizen leaders who are prepared to make positive contributions to the common good of society.” The curriculum focuses on broad preparation in the liberal arts and sciences, while also enabling students to explore civic engagement and to develop the communication, thinking, and collaboration skills expected of citizen leaders. The deliberative and iterative process enacted by ACCC ensured we achieved our vision—to weave integrative learning throughout the new curriculum.

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One Degree:
Collaborating with Community College Partners for Student Success

- Geoffrey Buhl, Professor, Mathematics and Chair of General Education, California State University–Channel Islands
- Amanda Quintero, Executive Director, Student Academic Success and Equity Initiatives, California State University–Channel Islands
- Marie Francois, Director, University Experience Program, California State University–Channel Islands
- Michelle Pajka Hasendonckx, Assistant Director, Student Academic Success and Equity Initiatives, California State University–Channel Islands
- Kathleen Klompien, English Program Faculty, California State University–Channel Islands

In 1909, Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) was a comprehensive community college serving a diverse regional student population with a range of academic and vocational goals. SBCC offered associate’s degree and certificate programs, as well as transfer programs that provide the first two years of study toward the baccalaureate degree. Dedicated to the success of each student, the SBCC mission was to provide “students a diverse learning environment that inspires curiosity and discovery, promotes global responsibility, and fosters opportunity for all.” By fall 2017, Hispanic/Latinx students made up 40 percent of SBCC’s total enrollment, and SBCC is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) since it has an enrollment of at least 25 percent Hispanic students and satisfies other student financial eligibility requirements.

Founded almost a century later in 2002, California State University–Channel Islands (CSUCI) became the newest institution of the twenty-three-campus California State University (CSU) system. CSUCI is founded on a student-centered mission of emphasizing learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches and community service, with multicultural and international perspectives. CSUCI began as a transfer-majority institution, welcoming transfer students in fall 2002 and admitting its first freshman class in fall 2003. In fall 2017, 49 percent of total enrollments were transfer students and 50 percent were Hispanic/Latinx students. Of all undergraduate students, 49 percent came from low socioeconomic-status backgrounds and 60 percent were first-generation college students. As an HSI, CSUCI collaborates with community college partners such as SBCC to serve a regional and diverse student population.

“ONE DEGREE” PHILOSOPHY
Receiving an HSI (Title V) cooperative grant in 2014 created new opportunities for a cross-institutional partnership between SBCC and CSUCI that spurred dialogue about transfer success and degree completion. Through our partnership, we share students, a large population of overlapping faculty, and a common purpose as two HSIs in our commitment to student success and equity for all students. For example, a group of SBCC faculty also work as part-time lecturers at CSUCI. As such, they have the opportunity to shape students before they come to CSUCI and welcome students as they start their educational pathway at CSUCI. Yet, part-time lecturers at SBCC and CSUCI often have the least access to professional development opportunities. Students in our region often attend two or more community colleges before transferring to CSUCI, and some continue taking community college courses while enrolled at CSUCI. Together, both institutions provide the coursework for which the baccalaureate degree is awarded.
The fact that both institutions are partners in this one degree anchors our approach to our General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) Pathway project through the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Our GEMs Pathway partnership intentionally focuses on improving transfer pathways, building a unified vision for shared pedagogy, facilitating student engagement through high-impact teaching and high-impact practices (HIPs), and increasing successful transitions to baccalaureate degree completion through peer mentoring (Kuh and O’Donnell 2013).

In 2016, a team from CSUCI and SBCC attended the AAC&U Institute on General Education and Assessment. The guiding question that framed our experience at the institute was, “How do community colleges and universities have a conversation about general education across institutions, and in our case, across systems?” We learned that under current general education models at both CSUCI and SBCC, the burden is on students to integrate coherent learning experiences as they move through general education courses within and across our institutions. Our action plan theme, “aligning to one degree,” recognizes that credits earned at different institutions are wrapped into one baccalaureate degree. The action plan identifies opportunities for changes to institutional structures and practices to explicitly focus on educational equity in the transition from community college to the first year at a university. Shared commitment to equity outcomes is especially important for Hispanic-Serving Institutions, where HSI designation is a function of enrollment with few incentives to ensure that all students, especially those of Hispanic/Latinx heritages, successfully complete a baccalaureate degree (Schneider, Kelly, and Carey 2010).

Our action plan is equity-minded by design, requiring responsive actions to address barriers to transfer and inequities in educational outcomes among transfer students. The plan focuses our efforts on a threefold strategy:

1. Explore alignment opportunities:
   - Build on prior learning experiences for success within the students’ program of study.

2. Promote engagement and equity-minded pedagogy:
   - Invest in faculty development to expand the integration of HIPs in the general education curriculum at both SBCC and CSUCI.

3. Examine successful transitions:
   - Connect students and faculty across institutions through information and data sharing to increase understanding of inequities in the transfer experience from both student and institutional perspectives.

Our theme of “aligning to one degree” set the expectations for our partnership. We embraced a culture of collaboration and innovation centered on designing equity-minded pedagogy by aligning curricular pathways, teaching pedagogies, and the transition from SBCC to CSUCI. We identified three practices already on each campus to focus our efforts on: learning communities, peer mentors, and HIPs training for faculty teaching general education courses.

Through funding from HSI grants at both institutions, CSUCI and SBCC faculty have created learning communities consisting of general education courses with embedded peer support. The curriculum in these courses is designed around various HIPs and engaged-learner pedagogies, both of which are supported by faculty development. Collectively, these practices build a sense of community, help students integrate their learning, and support them as they move towards completing a baccalaureate degree.

At CSUCI, the first-year experience (FYE) integrates three HIPs: first-year seminars, learning communities, and embedded peer mentors. CSUCI students enrolled from 2011 to 2016 in the FYE persisted to the second year at an average rate that was 6 percent higher than first-year students who did not participate. For racial and ethnic minority students, the average second-year persistence rate was 6.3 percent higher for FYE participants. The SBCC iPath, a program designed to ease the transfer process, offers general education courses that are led by instructors trained in the use of HIPs. This integration of multiple HIPs addresses affective barriers and equity gaps at our respective institutions.

At both institutions, HSI grants offer professional development opportunities responsive to affective barriers of belongingness, noncognitive and social-emotional learning, and structural inequities in the academic experience. By sharing cross-institutional high-impact practices, CSUCI and SBCC faculty have access to common engagement and equity-minded pedagogical strategies. Each campus has designed faculty development programs open to all faculty—part-time, full-time, lecturer, and tenure-track—that promote engagement and equity-minded pedagogies. SBCC faculty, particularly those who teach in the iPATH program, participate in the Faculty Experiential Learning Institute. Similarly, CSUCI HIP faculty fellows explore a range of teaching pedagogies that are responsive to inequities in the educational experience.

Data from a CSUCI transfer student survey give us insight into the cultural and structural barriers that impede transfer success. We have a better understanding of how cross-institutional communication and pre- and post-transfer peer mentoring impact transfer to CSUCI and increase student understanding of expectations within majors.

**Learning Communities.** Both CSUCI and SBCC create learning communities by linking general education courses focused
on basic skills with other general education courses. Students in these linked courses are supported with embedded peer mentors or tutors.

CSUCI first-year seminars are critical-thinking courses that are linked with other general education courses in a variety of first-year learning communities. Learning communities are aligned with different aspects of CSUCI’s mission, fostering a sense of belonging among new first-year students through a cohort model and culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, the Michele Serros Multicultural Living-Learning Community—named for the late nationally recognized Chicana author and poet who was from the local city of Oxnard—engages students in critical dialogue on educational empowerment, creativity, community advocacy, multiculturalism, social justice, and equity. This learning community fosters a sense of family and support for the students in its two linked courses, First-Year Seminar and Chicana/os in Society. Students in this learning community also share common housing. Other examples of CSUCI learning communities include international learning communities, the undergraduate research integrative learning community, and the outdoor adventures learning community, which links the first-year seminar with an environmental science course engaged in service learning. These learning communities provide faculty with space to experiment with curricula that will become thematic general education pathways similar to SBCC’s iPath pathways.

SBCC has also created learning communities that pair required general education courses with a college-level math or English course. Students in iPATH general education courses benefit from peer support, shared curriculum in the form of contextualized assignments and readings, and close faculty collaboration with embedded tutoring in each learning community. Similar to CSUCI learning communities, iPATH courses have a smaller than average class size and emphasize student success. Each iPATH course features an embedded peer tutor and interactive learning and engagement using HIPs. Additional support services, such as academic counseling and career counseling, are built into the program. These courses are linked by instructors working to solve equity issues in the classroom by practicing high-impact teaching and learning strategies to include noncognitive/social-emotional learning.

Peer Mentors. Peer mentors from various programs (SBCC’s tutors, CSUCI’s outreach mentors and embedded peer mentors) facilitate successful transitions between our respective institutions by providing wraparound support. Peer mentors engage with SBCC students in the first or second year, through matriculation to CSUCI, and until successful completion of the baccalaureate degree.

SBCC students have embedded tutors in each general education and major field course that is part of iPath. Tutors provide both in-class tutoring and appointment times in the Cartwright Learning Resources Center and/or the Gateway to Success Tutorial Center. Course completion rates and college persistence rates of students enrolled in courses with embedded tutors at SBCC have averaged 10 to 15 percent higher than sections of the same courses without embedded tutors.

Using a peer-led student empowerment approach, CSUCI outreach mentors (typically former SBCC transfer students) receive extensive training to facilitate successful transitions between our respective institutions before and after transfer. CSUCI’s student success campaign provides students with peer mentors to support them with social transition and engagement in university campus culture. In addition, the campaign seeks to create a culture of student success by providing opportunities for families to be part of the students’ academic support structure. Former SBCC students are paired with CSUCI peer mentors, often in their major, who serve as student success ambassadors. The first point of contact between SBCC students and CSUCI outreach mentors occurs at the SBCC annual university signing ceremony, where students who will attend CSUCI meet CSUCI staff and peer mentors. Other campaign elements include: Transfer Student Success Academy, a one-day outreach event designed to promote transfer pathways; CSUCI Transfer Bootcamp, in partnership with Academic Advising, which provides incoming transfer students with resources needed to successfully begin the academic year; ongoing coaching in academic success strategies; and drop-in peer mentoring services.

Three key courses are embedded within CSUCI’s general education curriculum: a first-year seminar, second-year seminar, and transfer-year seminar. All three courses feature trained, embedded peer mentors. These mentors are paid instructional student assistants who collaborate with faculty partners to empower students with tools to successfully navigate university campus culture and build support networks. Partnering and training with faculty in general education seminars, embedded peer mentors serve as liaisons between faculty and students, modeling engaged learning and faculty-student interactions inside and outside of the classroom and working together to validate the experiences and abilities of their students. They have a toolkit (named after our campus mascot, a dolphin) of over one hundred activities to use in seminars or in smaller group meetings called Dolphin Interest Groups (DIGs). Mentors tailor activities to their students’ needs, coaching them in academic success strategies, building self-efficacy and self-advocacy skills, troubleshooting challenges, and promoting a sense of belonging through culturally relevant pedagogy. In DIGs, mentors do community-building activities, model note-taking and critical-reading approaches, review time management strategies, and encourage participation in clubs, organizations, and events.
All CSUCI peer mentors (embedded and outreach) participate in extensive training to facilitate small and large group activities, listen carefully and manage difficult conversations, and refer students to services such as the Writing and Multiliteracy Center, Academic Advising, tutoring centers, disability services, counseling services, and career development services.

Professional Development. General education reform that includes efforts to retain and graduate students with diverse educational experiences requires institutional commitment to preparing all faculty to adapt their teaching practices in order to effectively teach all of their students.

In the CSU system, as of 2016, tenure density hovered below 40 percent. At CSUCI it is 29 percent. The likelihood that students in general education classes will be taught by tenure-line faculty is even lower for community colleges, where, according to a 2006 study by the American Association of University Professors, 79 percent of all faculty are contingent. (Schuster and Finkenstein 2006) As Witham et al. (2015) suggest, “appropriate incentives” need to be made available to adjunct faculty to reimagine equitable higher education so that they are “engaged co-constructors of a new institutional paradigm” (30).

Therefore, an essential part of pursuing equity at CSUCI is making equity-based faculty development available to all faculty teaching general education courses. Faculty (primarily lecturers, but some tenure-line) come to workshops with existing assignments and actual student work and design high-impact practices, learn to scaffold signature assignments, and apply common rubrics across a variety of assignments and teaching environments. Faculty also discuss the concept of signature assignments, in which students are asked to analyze and apply knowledge and skills from the whole of a course, and then convert and adapt existing materials accordingly to meet the needs of current students. When faculty are prepared to teach from approaches that make the most of our students’ lived experiences and funds of knowledge, we work together, regardless of status within the university or cultural background, to be agents of change (Witham et al. 2015).

The SBCC Faculty Experiential Learning Institute is a multiday faculty-led forum on developing teaching approaches to build community and promote student belongingness on campus. It invites faculty, staff, and counselors to be exposed to student equity issues and introduces faculty to noncognitive/social-emotional learning teaching strategies. In their classes, faculty incorporate the community cultural wealth (funds of knowledge) that students bring to the classroom. The program ties in the use of community-building technologies to help faculty explore the use of desktop or mobile apps that allow class discussions to be mediated on the cloud. This institute helps faculty develop signature assignments that prepare students to do work in higher-level courses upon transfer. These assignments must be assessable, collaborative, long-term, and inquiry-based projects with scaffolded sub-assignments that lead to an end-of-semester deliverable.

CONCLUSION

Like many institutions, SBCC and CSUCI face pressure from the completion agenda. With recent passage of the California state budget, California community colleges adopted a new performance-based funding model that provides additional funds based on performance outcomes. The CSU Graduation Initiative 2025 also calls for increasing two- and four-year graduation rates and eliminating equity gaps.

It is imperative that our work move beyond articulation agreements to aligning equity goals to better serve California’s increasingly diverse student population. The SBCC-CSUCI GEMs Pathway Partnership is reframing transfer pathways with our “one degree” philosophy by building on well-developed articulation agreements to create shared student experiences. With that in mind, this partnership has identified common aspects of general education on both campuses that advance practices aimed at achieving the full spectrum of learning outcomes for all students regardless of their backgrounds. With new student-centered and student-informed curricular practices, this partnership creates educational experiences across institutions that share learning communities and peer mentoring and shift campus culture through faculty professional development.

In the next five years, the number of HSIs could increase significantly with 492 HSIs identified in 2016–17 and 333 emerging HSIs nationally (Excelencia in Education 2018). HSIs like SBCC and CSUCI have an important role in reframing the college completion agenda to explicitly include equity. The success of students depends on a moral approach to college completion, an approach that casts general education with equity outcomes. When institutions do nothing to change their institutional structures and practices to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations, then historically underserved students are at greater risk of failing. Institutions must be intentional about cultural and structural changes to general education in order to advance equity outcomes.

REFERENCES


All the summer institutes given by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) have a common structure—campus teams explore different approaches from innovative institutions, exchange ideas with other teams in similar situations, and consult with their mentors on the institute faculty. These exchanges help teams develop action plans appropriate to their institution. The final assignment is to develop a very brief (five to eight minutes) presentation of this action plan for a specific audience. Teams could easily feel the presentation is meant to force them to complete their action plans. However, our University of Rhode Island (URI) team realized that this presentation or “pitch,” as it came to be known, was the central component of our action plan, and the closing days of AAC&U’s Institute on General Education and Assessment (IGEA) provided an invaluable opportunity to create, revise, and rehearse it. In retrospect, we should have recognized the importance of a well-developed communication strategy early in the first year of a new general education program, but instead we stumbled into the realization through our dialogues with one another, other teams, and our mentors at the institute.

By sharing our story, we hope that other institutions in similar situations will benefit from some of the lessons we learned. Below we describe the central features of the first year of our new general education program and chronicle the origins of the pitch and the campus response. Drawing from our experience, we close with six principles of an effective communication strategy.

**URI’s General Education Backstory**

We suspect we are not the first institution to confront a loss of campus momentum after the faculty completed the hard work of designing and legislating a new program. Despite our previous best efforts to introduce the new program to students, generate new courses, and follow the implementation and assessment process set by the faculty, the campus climate seemed to plateau, hindering the enthusiasm necessary to ignite the faculty’s ongoing commitment to the program.

In September 2016, URI launched a new general education program that focuses on the knowledge, competencies, and responsibilities critical for students to pursue meaningful careers and lives in the context of the global and national challenges of the twenty-first century. In tandem, the provost established the Office for Innovation in General Education with the primary goal of ensuring student success by promoting the value of the program, guaranteeing access, and pursuing continued improvement of the curriculum. After the first year, we identified several critical issues essential for determining the future trajectory of the program.

With a student success framework in mind, the director identified the most pressing issue as the need for more course offerings for several of the learning outcomes new to the general education program. This issue was directly related to key faculty concerns, including faculty members reporting frustration with the course proposal process and uncertainty around the requirements and implications of a new assessment model. In combination, these factors contributed to a widespread sense that the initial implementation process was burdensome without the promised benefits for...
faculty and students. These perceptions became obstacles to a fully successful implementation by the end of year one and served as the impetus for our participation in the 2017 IGEA.

To address immediate accreditation and program needs, the director of general education partnered with the Office for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (ATL) to identify and train teams of faculty members to vet each of the twelve learning outcome rubrics and provide feedback to develop a long-term assessment model. This assessment process was distributed over two years and involved nearly 240 instructors. With this early phase of assessment scheduled to end in spring 2018, we sought to design a more permanent approach to the assessment of our general education program. Therefore, at the end of year one, we believed the highest priority was designing a long-term assessment plan with detailed logistics including timing, sample and faculty involvement, data collection and analysis, and technological solutions. These goals led us to assemble a team to attend the summer institute. The team was composed of stakeholders with distinct perspectives, expectations, and experiences with general education at URI. Members included administrators responsible for oversight of the program; faculty members who had proposed, reviewed, and taught general education courses; and professional staff who support teaching and learning.

ORIGINS OF OUR PITCH
While our focus entering the institute was on pragmatic assessment concerns, we soon recognized that we first needed to address the campus conversation in order to build a culture that would support the innovative program we promised. Attending the institute provided the space for our team to have the necessary discourse to design an overarching communication strategy to directly address the cultural challenges. Our focus shifted to identifying strategies that would bring faculty and administrators together to invest in the future of the program.

Faculty members on the team emphasized that the communication strategy would need to build relationships to support the program and make clear to the faculty that they are valued and that the program requires their active engagement and commitment in order to flourish. In the final days of the institute, we created a presentation of our action plan for an imagined institutional audience. Our team took this opportunity to construct a pitch for departments and colleges to become more involved in the general education program. The pitch was directed towards deans and department chairs as the target audience to create connections, gain input, and build alliances that would help the office better support and engage faculty. The message incorporated three components: a concern, an idea, and an opportunity.

Our concern addressed the most significant problem after the first year of the program—alarmingly low course offerings for a significant portion of the program learning outcomes. Although faculty developed many new courses, several areas continued to be underrepresented. Too few seats available across learning outcomes meant there was a real risk of students being unable to complete the program in four years. Numerous course options needed to be available for each outcome immediately. To drive our point home, we asked deans and chairs to see this concern from the perspective of their students. Our top priority was to partner with deans and chairs to identify, recruit, and help faculty to develop and submit courses in these areas. Earlier attempts to increase course proposals involved direct appeals to faculty without prior coordination with deans and chairs. This marked an important shift in how we sought new course proposals.

Our idea focused on promoting the value of past and current faculty contributions to general education in order to encourage a more positive view of the program. Many URI faculty members had already created

Sharing and celebrating success stories within the new program is an important way to recognize the accomplishments of colleagues and to inspire the broader community to make their personal contributions to the program.

incredible courses that resulted in meaningful and valuable learning experiences for their students. The entire university community needed to know about their efforts and to know that those efforts were valued. Sharing and celebrating success stories within the new program is an important way to recognize the accomplishments of colleagues and to inspire the broader community to make their personal contributions to the program. In the pitch, the director described a vision for an annual publication to highlight and promote faculty and student success stories. We encouraged every dean and chair to provide the director with frequent updates about exciting general education experiences created by their faculty for their students.

Finally, the opportunity we presented offered faculty members a means to
directly participate in solving our concerns about the dearth of course offerings. In collaboration with ATL and the Faculty Senate’s General Education Committee, we developed a four-part workshop series that took participants from the beginning to the end of the course design and submission process for two of the underrepresented areas of the program. We requested that deans and chairs have a strategic discussion with their faculty and identify options for revising existing courses or proposing new courses for the program. The deans and chairs recommended faculty members to the director, who personally invited them to participate in the workshop series.

Ultimately, the goal of this three-part pitch was to initiate a strong working relationship with the deans and chairs in order to create a network of faculty leaders to collectively address implementation issues and to continue to move the program forward.

**CHANGING THE CAMPUS CONVERSATION**

With our well-crafted pitch in hand, we began year two by scheduling presentations at the meetings of department chairs held by the college deans. These meetings not only provided the right audience for our message, they also integrated our efforts with the deans’ strategic vision for their curriculum. Enlisting and mobilizing deans and chairs to help engage faculty had both short-term and long-term benefits for the advancement of our program.

These conversations resulted in a much-needed increase in course proposals for our targeted areas. In contrast to year one, when the director reached out individually to faculty, deans and chairs recruited a much broader array of faculty to propose courses for the program. Critical to this process, deans and chairs identified the right faculty and encouraged them prior to any formal invitation from the director to participate in the course proposal workshops. Having a more strategic approach to seeking and supporting course development for the program was key to not only increasing the number of offerings, but also to establishing important communication networks among academic leaders and growing a shared sense of responsibility for the program.

The pitch has led to several long-term benefits as well. Perhaps most significantly, the director has established a more systematic communication and coordination with deans and chairs that allowed for wider engagement of faculty across the university. This new open line of communication has led to a much richer exchange of ideas and collaboration on both practical issues and innovative opportunities to advance the program. These relationships have become an organic foundation for sustaining the dynamic general education program originally envisioned by the faculty. We believe these connections are the linchpin to our success.

A second lasting benefit of the pitch has been the elevation of faculty contributions to general education. While at the institute, faculty members on our team had emphasized the importance of recognition to motivate faculty engagement. Responding to the idea outlined in the pitch, chairs and deans highlighted faculty who have brought creativity and passion to the new program. The Office for Innovation in General Education developed an annual spotlight publication describing outstanding courses and instructor stories. In addition, the office initiated two annual Excellence in General Education Awards for faculty members nominated by students. We believe these forms of recognition will have a contagious effect, inspiring other faculty members to value and contribute to the ongoing growth of the program.

A third benefit emerging from our communication strategy is the recent establishment of the Scholar Advocates for General Education. This new faculty team, composed of nine members representing disciplines and faculty positions, will guide and champion the program as it moves forward. In the near future, this team will be tasked with revising rubrics for the learning outcomes based on faculty feedback. In the long term, we imagine this team will become a powerful voice in developing a shared understanding of the program’s learning outcomes and serve as campus experts for teaching and learning in the general education program.

**CRITICAL INSIGHTS**

Revitalizing and maintaining broad faculty engagement in a general education program requires an effective communication strategy. Our approach includes the following six principles:

- Focus on addressing the current campus climate before attending to implementation details.
- Build relationships with academic leaders and faculty members who have the ability to shape change.
- Employ copresenters to highlight the broad commitment and coordination of those supporting the program.
- Deliver a single message that is meaningful for multiple audiences to drive campus engagement.
- Incorporate the student perspective and experience when discussing concerns.
- Present concerns alongside structured opportunities for faculty and administrators to contribute to the solution.

Reflecting on the past year, we’ve accomplished much to reengage our campus community with the new program. New partnerships with deans, chairs, and faculty leaders have bolstered our ability to address new challenges as they emerge. Although the pitch is now retired, the process of developing and delivering it was illuminating. Working to shift the campus conversation is a daunting task, but by sharing our general education reform experience, we hope that our insights will have value beyond the gates of our institution.
For over twenty-five years, campuses have been sending teams to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Institute on General Education and Assessment (www.aacu.org/summerinstitutes/igea/2018). Every summer, teams comprising of at least five people, typically including faculty and senior administrators, come ready to dig in and “fix general education.” The fix is largely about making general education more relevant for students, better understood by faculty, and better aligned with institutional missions and priorities. Teams arrive hopeful and ambitious. They are not seeking ways to simply save general education. They are seeking the ways to make general education flourish.

The process for selecting teams for the institute begins with an application. The application is designed to get a sense of what the team’s priorities are, how they are approaching the work ahead, and what they see as primary areas of strength heading into the reform process. The application specifically prompts teams to consider areas of need or interest pertaining to the General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) design principles for general education: proficiency, agency and self-direction, integrative learning and problem-based inquiry, equity, and transparency and assessment (www.aacu.org/gems). Teams selected for the institute may be at any stage of general education reform—planning, developing, implementing, or refining. Because of space constraints, not all applications submitted can be accepted. The primary criteria for selecting teams for the institute are elicited by two questions: “Does the team have a sense of what they want to accomplish while at the institute” and “Why does this summer’s institute matter for advancing the work?”

The goal of proposal reviewers is to determine which teams might be helped the most by the allotted team time, faculty expertise, and session attendance.

Though the applications offer insights into a team’s goals for the institute, it is expected that their foci will shift over the course of the institute as participants reflect, collaborate, and work on professional development. All teams must produce and present an action plan at the completion of the institute. Action plans encapsulate the steps and priorities for carrying the reform work forward once team members have returned to campus.

The goal of this examination is to identify the thematic, sometimes subtle, shifts in language and areas of reprioritization that underlie general education reform efforts.

Plans typically include (re)articulations of vision statements or imperatives for undertaking general education reform, timelines for engaging stakeholders (particularly faculty), and strategies for implementation (typically assessment and/or high-impact practices). Table 1 provides the prompts given to teams to complete institute applications and for creating action plans. It is important to note that while the institute application explicitly guides teams to consider AAC&U’s GEMs principles of general education reform, the action plan prompts are more broadly conceived so as to enable teams to authentically articulate their own pathway forward.
In this article, we present an analysis to understand how team priorities and objectives change from the time they submit their institute applications to when they deliver their action plans. The goal of this examination is to identify the thematic, sometimes subtle, shifts in language and areas of reprioritization that underlie general education reform efforts. Though the time from application submission to action plan completion is relatively short—a span of about five months—a good deal can change with the completion of an academic year, professional development at the institute, and time for reflection. Because of this, the following findings are offered as insights for any campus undertaking general education reform to increase their odds for success by illuminating the path from starting point to actionable steps.

**METHODOLOGY**

For this analysis, we used the applications and action plans submitted by the forty-eight teams who attended the June 2018 Institute on General Education and Assessment. Table 2 shows descriptive information about the teams and their institutions. We analyzed applications and action plans using NVivo 12 Pro qualitative data analysis software to identify common word counts within and between the two different documents. The NVivo software helped us identify trends in the use of language and thematic areas of focus across teams from their applications to their action plans.

**FINDINGS**

When looking at simple word clouds (see figs. 1 and 2) of words used in team applications and action plans, the words that were used most often in the texts appear in the largest font size. The five most frequently used words in both applications and action plans were “faculty,” “students,” “educational,” “assessment,” and “general.” However, a closer look at the use of words and topic areas yielded noticeable differences in the frequency and use of language between the two documents. Findings indicate rather substantive shifts in the language used to indicate priorities around assessment, high-impact practices, equity, and timelines for action steps.

It is no surprise that teams undertaking general education reform are interested in assessment. The word “assessment” appeared 764 times in the applications of campuses attending the institute in 2018, far more than any other term analyzed. However, in the analysis of action plans, the term appears only 434 times, a decrease of 43 percent. A thematic review of action plans suggests this decrease is not because teams are less interested in assessment. Rather, it appears to be due to teams becoming more focused on the role and execution of particular elements of the assessment process, namely rubrics and assignment design. The institute provides multiple sessions on the background, national use, and campus application of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics as part of a comprehensive strategy to support direct assessment in general education.

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**TABLE 1. APPLICATION AND ACTION PLAN PROMPTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPLICATION SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS</th>
<th>ACTION PLAN QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“[P]lease tell us briefly about your expectations for the institute in terms of topics, issues, or interests related to the components of AAC&amp;U’s General Education Maps and Markers Framework”:</td>
<td>• Where do you hope the university will be in five years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Integrative Learning and Problem-Based Inquiry that Builds Institutional Capacity for General Education Learning Outcomes Proficiency</td>
<td>• What can you do to help the university meet these goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Equity and High-Impact Models of General Education to Maximize Learning and Improve Delivery</td>
<td>• How will you know the work has been successful? At the student level? The faculty level? The institutional level?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Agency and Self-Direction as Essential for Student Success and Making Excellence Inclusive</td>
<td>• Can you succinctly describe the goals of the plan in a few sentences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intentionality, Transparency, Authentic Assessment, and Strategic Use of Evidence</td>
<td>• Can you briefly describe the process you envision for accomplishing this plan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the barriers or roadblocks you foresee to accomplishing this work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Who are the campus champions, stakeholders, or decision-makers needed to facilitate this work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is your communication strategy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the short-term and long-term measures that will gauge your success?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2. INSTITUTIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR FORTY-EIGHT TEAMS ATTENDING IGEA 2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>31</th>
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<td>Private Not-for-Profit</td>
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<table>
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<th>Two- or Four-Year</th>
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<td>Two-Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Four-Year</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>AAC&amp;U Member Status</th>
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<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Member</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In August, the CSB/SJU faculty come together for an all-faculty workshop. We created a plan for this workshop. After a very brief overview, we will facilitate small-group discussion and an activity centered on creating signature assignments that would go into student ePortfolios, based on our themed courses that faculty from all disciplines will contribute to. This workshop will introduce faculty to the implementation timeline and processes, and we want excitement to continue to develop around the Integrations Curriculum.

—College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University

Our previous assessment cycle indicated that the assignments that are being used to assess our outcomes are not providing the data that we need. Recognizing this need and then benefiting from some excellent instruction at the conference has given us many ideas for the development of signature assignments with a more reflective pedagogy. Professional development that focuses on creating signature assignments that clearly link back to our general education outcomes will be a key piece to accomplishing this. . . . In addition, we will plan on developing clear curriculum maps that map assignments back to general education outcomes. This will hopefully identify gaps in our assignment structure that will help inform the professional development that we can offer in these areas.

—College of Southern Idaho

Year 2—Faculty professional development. Signature assignment training in addition to VALUE rubrics. (VALUE Institute in 2019—certified to be a scorer).

—Our Lady of the Lake University

These ideas [for our action plan] centered around helping faculty better design assignments, changing the course approval/review process, improving the supporting materials the college offers faculty, and improving how we assess information literacy in student ePortfolios.

—Salt Lake Community College

(www.aacu.org/value/rubrics). This strategy requires the careful construction of assignments to reflect the broad learning outcomes of general education and associated rubrics for assessment. Thus, while mention of rubrics tended to increase from applications to action plans, the increased mention of “assignments” (by 129 percent) was particularly notable. The following quotes from action plans help to illustrate this point:

Workshops for faculty on developing ‘signature assignments’ that directly assess CapCore learning outcomes and/or how to translate current assignments to directly assess CapCore learning outcomes.

—Capilano University

To assist with assessment best practices, we will create common ‘signature [general education] assignments’ and rubrics across the university.

—Clark Atlanta University

In August, the CSB/SJU faculty come together for an all-faculty workshop. We created a plan for this workshop. After a very brief overview, we will facilitate small-group discussion and an activity centered on creating signature assignments that would go into student ePortfolios, based on our themed courses that faculty from all disciplines will contribute to. This workshop will introduce faculty to the implementation timeline and processes, and we want excitement to continue to develop around the Integrations Curriculum.

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—Salt Lake Community College
Though it is hard to know exactly what this shift in language means, given the emphases of the institute curriculum we posit that teams are better able to specify their assessment plans over time. The “need” for assessment that is broadly and vaguely articulated in institute applications becomes honed with the development of action plans. Campus teams replace the language of assessment itself with more specific language around the tools for execution—rubrics and assignments.

**CONNECTING THE DOTS FROM HIPs TO EPORTFOLIOS**

Similar to the trajectory of assessment design, the NVivo analysis also revealed a compelling trend in how teams articulated the role of high-impact practices in general education reform. As with assessment, global references to “high-impact practices” or “HIPs” decreased from applications to action plans by 67 percent. References to specific high-impact practices, such as learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, writing-intensive courses, and internships also, collectively, decreased by 54 percent. This is unlikely to be because teams thought less about the value of these practices, particularly given the extent to which these pedagogies were promoted as powerful tools during the institute. There is plenty of research to suggest HIPs are beneficial for student learning, which is widely cited across the institute curriculum. A more likely explanation for teams’ use of the term “HIPs” occurring less often may have something to do with the increased use of the term “ePortfolios.” This term increased by 60 percent from application to action plans as teams likely considered the role of this high-impact practice among the breadth of HIPs already employed on their campuses.

Though the institute offers multiple sessions on ePortfolio pedagogy and national ePortfolio experts are part of the institute faculty, these factors alone are not reason enough for this trend. The visible placement of ePortfolios within the institute is intended to emphasize the utility of this tool for learning and assessment. In short, ePortfolios are touted as a powerful medium for transparently and coherently connecting the dots between courses, academic learning, cocurricular learning, and institutional outcomes. In many ways, ePortfolios are the workhorse of general education reform because they can be used to address multiple issues (e.g., transparency, engaged learning, reflection, direct assessment). But, as the action plans also reflect, that comes only with careful planning, messaging, and implementation. For example, the following action plan excerpt details how ePortfolios will be used across all four years of a student’s college career:

*This fall (August 2018) we will introduce our plan for the ePortfolio along with the current literature and best practices related to Folio Thinking to our first-year seminar and first-year writing course faculty. . . . Workshops focused on ePortfolio course and assignment design will be offered multiple times during [the year]. These courses will also include signature assignments and reflections. During the sophomore experience, students will take a required sophomore seminar. During this seminar, students will explore off-campus problem-based projects. The work of this project might be a mini-portfolio in itself. This course will provide a guided opportunity to do signature work and reflection, resulting in material ready to be used in the larger ePortfolio. Our juniors will also have a focused portfolio reflective piece that must be completed by the end of the junior year. . . . Advisors will discuss the creation of this reflective piece with students during . . . registration, as a discussion about the curation of the student’s story up to this point and the future curation of their story. . . . The feedback [on the portfolio from students’ advisor or designated staff] will be provided before the start of their senior year. The senior ePortfolio experience will document capstone work in programs and majors.*

—Cornell College

Another institute team detailed how their institution would develop and implement the ePortfolio alongside a robust plan for direct assessment:

*Our proposed timeline is as follows:*

**This Summer 2018**
- small work groups to further develop ideas (core pathways, ePortfolios, structure, etc.)

**Fall 2018**
- small work groups expand to engage full faculty and other stakeholders (staff, students)
- ePortfolio pilot with selected faculty/courses
- identify and begin collecting baseline data for later comparison

**Spring 2019**
- New Course and Core Curriculum Committee (NC4) to establish process for course/core approval
- expand ePortfolio pilot to include more faculty/courses
- continue collecting baseline data

**Spring and Summer 2019**
- faculty development for course revisions/alignment

**Fall 2019**
- implement new core for first-year students
LEVERAGING FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Equity is a core component of the GEMs framework and, therefore, an important area of emphasis for the institute curriculum. Teams are encouraged to consider not only how they will reform general education, but how students, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, will be differentially affected and supported by the resulting curriculum and outcomes. These are not easy discussions to have, at the institute or back on campuses. Thus, along with strategies for disaggregating data to examine equity gaps, teams receive guidance on how to structure faculty development opportunities and to meaningfully engage colleagues in discussions around data, equity, and the reform process.

Perhaps because of this, action plans reflect far greater intent to engage faculty than referenced in applications. For example, though the word “communicate” was used roughly the same number of times between applications and action plans (fifteen instances and twelve instances, respectively), use of words like “faculty development,” “retreat,” and “workshop” collectively increased by 63 percent. Notably, the term “buy-in” was used 72 percent less often in action plans. Institute faculty tend to advise teams against aiming for “buy-in” because it can imply a kind of blind adoption or selling of others’ ideas (usually the administration’s) without fully engaging stakeholders (usually faculty) in owning or even understanding those ideas. Additionally, the term “stakeholder” also increased by 97 percent from applications to action plans, a reflection perhaps of the institute’s response to the growing interest among teams to engage colleagues from across campus, particularly from student affairs, in general education reform.

The following quotes from action plans exemplify how campus teams describe their intent to engage a spectrum of stakeholders through a combination of intentional communication strategies and professional development:

“Develop a communication strategy to engage and inspire relevant stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrators, institutional support areas (Student Affairs, Student Advising, Institutional Research, and Information Technologies).”

—Capilano University

To encourage others to join the conversation we need the support of the coordinators and course managers. To help get there we will use the faculty who are currently doing the work, the assessment fellows, and the general education committee. Students are the stakeholders and we need to be inclusive of their voices, including as consultants for the General Education Committee. We do have the necessary resources to accomplish our work.

—Hostos Community College

Stakeholders: Students, provost, deans, associate deans, faculty, advisors, recruiters, librarians, registrar, Chancellor’s cabinet.

—University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Long Term: Explore and develop support resources such as a mentor program, faculty and staff retreats, faculty development workshops, conference attendance funding, and additional funding (stipends, etc.) to support campus constituencies in engaging in general education assessment.

—Adams State University

MAKING A MOVE

It is of little surprise that action plans contain a good deal more practical planning than the applications. The word “timeline” increased by 223 percent from applications to action plans. However, it is the specificity of those timelines that is noteworthy. Higher education is often pilloried for its “glacial pace,” a stereotype that does not bode well for teams undertaking general education reform. Institute teams must not only refine or adjust their thinking to new paradigms for organizing curricula, but they must also shake the persistent notion that anything they undertake will take years to accomplish. In fact, the timelines presented in action plans reflect an earnest desire for change to happen sooner rather than later.

We’ve developed an aggressive but realistic timeline for our reform agenda. We are not under the impression that these changes will not be met with some skepticism or even resistance; however, we feel confident that we will be able to effect enough important changes to our general education program to make a difference in students’ lives and to engage faculty with a renewed excitement in teaching and learning.

—The University of New Orleans

—Clark Atlanta University

Establishment of a certificate program for general education advisors. How to use learning goals to drive assessment? How to use an ePortfolio during advising?

—College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University
We have identified a number of actions to be undertaken when we return to campus, and we’ve organized those actions into three major areas: process/assessment, communication, and faculty development. Each action has been placed on a timeline for that area which includes immediate, ongoing, and future action. For example, actions labeled “Now” are items we can initiate as soon as possible post-institute; actions labeled “Ongoing” are items we can start developing and will continue to develop over a longer period; and actions labeled “Long Term” are items we may not start right away but will become priorities in the future. . . . We have identified a number of actions to be undertaken when we return to campus, and we’ve organized those actions into three major areas: process/assessment, communication, and faculty development.”

—Adams State University

We have developed a timeline of tasks that aligns with our program review process. In 2018–19, we will do a pilot, revising the seminar learning outcomes and taking the social, cultural, and historical revision proposal through the Senate process for approval to test the revision process, communication with the campus, and implementation of changes. Then in 2019–20, review the [general education] learning outcomes. In 2020–21 we implement changes and return to standard new course designations and renewals.

—Saint Mary’s College of California

The first year of our timeline will be comprised of a self-study in which we will conduct surveys of faculty (and instructional academic staff) and alumni and focus groups of faculty/staff, students, and alumni. . . . The second year of our timeline will be a “sandbox year” of design and faculty development. We will present the results of the self-study to the campus community and brainstorm as a community possible models and revisions. . . . At the end of the second year, we expect there to be a vote of some sort on moving forward with the revisions. Following that vote, our expectation is that the third year of the process will involve piloting of some possible revisions. . . . Finally, our immediate action plan for the rest of the summer is to revise (and formalize) this timeline and present it to several stakeholders: administrators (including our new Director of Assessment) and our General Education Committee.

—University of Wisconsin–Platteville

Our immediate action steps upon return to campus include a multiphase, multimedia communication plan; development of a set of faculty surveys based on proposals received by our June 15 deadline; and finalization of the format and advance preparation for the Fall Faculty Workshop.

—Valparaiso University

Campus teams participating in the institute are expected to complete a brief six-month follow-up survey. Because six months have not yet passed, this follow-up has not been completed for the 2018 institute cohort. However, a supplemental analysis of postinstitute reports from previous years indicates teams make significant advancements even within just six months. This is perhaps the most illustrative quality of the five case studies contained in this issue of Peer Review. Each campus that has attended the institute within the last three years, and even a campus just a year out (Longwood University), has made significant strides. This does not mean every action a campus takes is successful or that every proposal on learning outcomes or a new general education model will pass a faculty vote. But as Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his May 1932 address at Oglethorpe University, “It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

CONCLUSION

Language is powerful, but it is not absolute. The qualitative findings presented above are intended to provide a snapshot of how language adjusts over time as campus teams embark upon and further general education reform efforts. It is expected that applications are often the first time campus leaders have reflected upon particular processes of what will ultimately become a new general education curriculum. Action plans are not the intended end point. These documents are only an initial indicator of the potential changes to come. Actually, action plans are not just likely to be altered, they are expected to be. Perhaps our biggest hope is that teams that attend the institute remain nimble and resilient as they move forward. More than anything, the space between applications and action plans shows that the path of reform is not linear. Plans change. Paradigms shift. Timelines get adjusted. The institute itself provides perhaps the two most critical ingredients of any reform process—collaboration and time. These are the words that underlie much of the preceding analysis and much of the potential for success when teams return home.
I was on a campus last week talking about general education and the need for more holistic, integrative models that better prepare our students for a complex world, when a faculty member raised his hand and said, “Integrative models sound great and all, but tell us: What can go wrong with this approach?”

I knew he was playing devil’s advocate, but I answered the question the best I could: plenty can go wrong. With integrative models. With nonintegrative models. With any model, really. The administration can fail to provide the support necessary for faculty development; powerbrokers on campus can make cynical attempts to undermine the reform; assessment plans can be left until the last minute, turning an elegant, self-articulating model into a big ugly mess.

I love the AAC&U Institute on General Education and Assessment. It is, no exaggeration, my favorite week of the year (seriously, it’s probably the only time I ever hug my kids goodbye while still smiling). Part of it is the faculty for the institute: they’re all smart, funny, and selfless. Part of it is the work itself: What could be better than helping teams from universities all over the world develop action plans to take back to their campuses with the aim of leading dynamic, meaningful conversations about how to improve the education of their students? What could go wrong?

Well . . . a lot. Teams could develop plans that are essentially marching orders for the rest of campus (because you know how much faculty love to be told what to do!). Teams could return to campus and get mired in politics, losing sight of the ideals and careful research that shaped their experiences at the institute.

And—this might be the worst possible wrong turn—teams, and then their campuses, could get caught up in conversations about structures, about distributions, about how much of this and how much of that, forgetting that it’s not just about what students study, but how and why. Students should have opportunities to work across the disciplines and develop powerful, transferable skills in a lot of different areas. Life after graduation requires multiple literacies.

Even an integrative class in, say, mathematics or literature can fail to achieve its goals if the final exam asks the same old questions, if the papers assigned require the same old research, the same old kinds of thinking. Further, we have ten years of research on proven high-impact practices that transcend simplified disciplinary discussions (www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices). If reform is truly going to happen, if we’re truly going to make progress toward preparing our students for a very messy world that very much needs fixing, then we need to be willing to restructure, rethink, redesign from top to bottom, from our most ambitious institutional goals down to that exam question that asks students to take their learning in one setting and apply it to another. And we need to assess for high-impact learning.

In the end, you know you have a model that’s going to have an impact when professors from across campus are talking about their goals for their students and about how to attain those goals, or when faculty are demanding development and support for new kinds of teaching, new kinds of course structures, new ways of doing things.

So yeah. There’s a lot that can go wrong. But oh, Lordy: Can you imagine what will happen if we can get it right? ▶

Paul Hanstedt, Professor of English and Communications Studies, Roanoke College
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