The concept and core values of General Education (GE), as a designated part of the liberal arts tradition, have been around for centuries. Over recent decades, GE has experienced renewed interest and scrutiny in higher education as we prepare our students for a knowledge-based global economy. For AASCU institutions, an effective GE program plays a significant part in fulfilling the “stewards of place” notion that has begun to define our value to the regions we serve.

History

The current GE program at Cal State L.A. was established back in the 1990s and, with few modifications, has seen little change since then. Beginning in 2009, as part of its upcoming WASC reaccreditation, the university initiated a series of campus conversations to solicit suggestions and explore options to revise the GE program. This effort was given greater impetus by the appointment of a new provost in fall 2010, which brought renewed energy and urgency to the endeavor. He worked with the senate chair to create a GE Revision Committee (GERC) made up of select members of the faculty and administration. The charge to this committee was to revise GE and bring it into alignment with the newly identified priorities of the university’s strategic plan, the Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs), as well as state and California State University (CSU) system mandates. The GE goals also included mastery of core competencies, outcomes-based assessment, and adoption of high-impact educational practices (HIPs).

The need to revise GE was further underscored in 2011 by the mandate of a CSU Executive Order (EO) to incorporate Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) outcomes identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities into the GE program at every campus. The GERC enthusiastically embraced this challenge and focused its initial efforts on developing and aligning the GE Learning Outcomes (GELOs) with the LEAP outcomes, the provisions of the EO, and the ILOs. Working with a consultant, the proposed GELOs were shared with the campus in several town hall meetings in 2012-13. The GELOs were revised and improved as a result of thoughtful responses that were submitted by the campus community.

In spring 2013, the CSU chancellor approved the conversion of the campus calendar from quarters to semesters, effective fall 2016. As a result, the need to revise GE became even more urgent. The GERC worked through the spring and summer of 2013 to draft a GE framework designed to achieve the GE outcomes and to incorporate best practices and HIPs to the extent possible. By the end of summer 2013, the draft framework was completed and shared through a series of GE faculty forums in the fall. As with the development of the GELOs, the GERC incorporated the responses from the campus to revise and improve the proposed GE framework.

In November 2013, the GERC submitted its recommended “Policy on the Definition, Philosophy, Student Learning Outcomes and Criteria for General Education Breadth Requirements” to the Academic Senate. Over the next four months, extensive discussions ensued, with some modifications winning approval. In March 2014, the Academic Senate approved the amended proposal, which the president then signed into university policy. The new GE policy will be effective with the semester calendar in fall 2016.

Distinctive Features

In a campus-wide email, Cal State L.A.’s new president, William Covino, wrote that this new GE policy “represents a great step forward for the university.” Indeed, the new GE framework carries distinctive and innovative features, such as a new civic/service learning requirement, an enhanced writing
component, an integrated and interdisciplinary science option, and a strengthened and expanded diversity requirement. Closely aligned with the university’s strategic plan, this new GE program has the potential to transform undergraduate education at Cal State L.A.

Civic Engagement—The civic/service learning requirement, the defining feature of our new GE policy, requires that every first year student take two courses that feature engagement with the surrounding multicultural communities and the greater Los Angeles area.

Writing Intensive Instruction—One of the significant challenges for a campus where over 70 percent of the entering freshman are not college ready in English composition, is meeting the learning outcomes for writing without increasing time to degree. The new GE framework addresses this challenge by requiring four courses in writing, three of which double count for other requirements, including a course in critical thinking that includes instruction in writing.

Diversity—Cal State L.A. students will be required to complete two courses certified as diversity courses. The concept and core values of diversity, as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement back in the 1960s, have been a requirement of our GE program for decades. However, developments in American society and a quickly transforming world have created new dynamics for higher education. Today’s graduates need cultural competencies, in addition to their professional training, in order to compete in a global economy. Indeed, these new and emerging circumstances demand new understanding of diversity and require changes in our current GE curriculum.

The newly adopted GE policy has redefined the diversity requirement with two added characteristics. First, it requires that at least one of the two diversity courses taken focuses on issues of race and ethnicity. Second, diversity courses must explore the intersectionality between race and ethnicity, with other social categories that structure inequality in society.

Implementation Plans

We realize that a program framework is only the first step for GE reform at Cal State L.A. The campus has now moved to the stage of design and implementation, which involves three crucial elements: curriculum development and delivery, faculty development, and program administration.

Curricular Development—The Office of Undergraduate Studies has organized a series of GE forums and workshops to provide a collegial environment for faculty to develop guidelines and rubrics and share their ideas regarding the development of course proposals. These forums will offer a summary of suggested pedagogical strategies for developing the semester-based GE course proposals.

Faculty Development—In order to develop and sustain a core group of faculty to deliver the GE program, the Office of Undergraduate Studies, in collaboration with the Center for Effective Teaching and Learning, has recommended summer faculty seminars, GE faculty learning communities, and other support opportunities to build a strong network of faculty dedicated to teaching GE.

Finally, an effective GE program requires an effective assessment system. The Office of Undergraduate Studies works with faculty members to address this challenge by researching best practices and developing sound assessment instruments for faculty.

Program Administration—To institutionalize GE, we need to consider the kind of structure that will coordinate the delivery and assessment of the curriculum, conduct GE faculty training, and organize GE seminars and workshops. As we transition to the new semester system, these issues will play an essential role in the successful implementation of the new GE program at Cal State L.A.