

Essay 4. Ten Years of General Education Reform at UCLA

Introduction

UCLA selected General Education (GE) as a [theme](#)¹ for its last WASC review because of a widespread perception among UCLA administrators and faculty that this part of the curriculum could be improved so as to better provide students with general knowledge, integrative learning, ethical awareness, and strong intellectual skills. Towards this end, the Provost of the College, Brian Copenhaver, appointed Professor Judith Smith UCLA's first Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education in the fall of 1996 and charged her with reforming GE and improving the lower-division educational experience. Working with a faculty committee, the Vice Provost completed a blueprint for GE reform entitled [General Education at UCLA: A Proposal for Change](#)². This document called for a campuswide set of GE requirements that were "simpler, fewer, more coherent, and clearer in purpose," more rigorous GE courses, and thematic yearlong interdisciplinary first-year clusters.

The *Proposal for Change*, released in Spring 1998 when the previous WASC re-accreditation team was concluding its work, also recommended the creation of a faculty committee to initiate, supervise, and oversee the reform of the general education curriculum. This recommendation, strongly supported by the WASC team, led the Academic Senate to form a GE Governance Committee to advise the Senate and the Vice Provost on all matters pertaining to general education. As of Spring 2008, this annually appointed group will become a standing committee of the Undergraduate Council.

Over the last ten years (1998-2007), the GE Governance Committee has worked with the Vice Provost to implement the recommendations contained in the *Proposal for Change*. This collaboration has resulted in the creation of a [Freshman Cluster Program](#)³ and a [campuswide GE curriculum](#)⁴. The development and implementation of the cluster program, in tandem with other initiatives aimed at improving undergraduate education, e.g., the [Fiat Lux Freshman Seminar Program](#)⁵ and a discipline-centered [Writing II Curriculum](#)⁶, required the investment of new permanent funds—nearly three million dollars—from the Chancellor's Office. The particulars of this general education reform effort, including its achievements and ongoing challenges, are addressed in this essay.

The Freshman Cluster Program: A Cornerstone of UCLA's GE Reform

The *Proposal for Change* recommended that UCLA offer a number of yearlong interdisciplinary collaboratively taught "first-year clusters." These courses would be open only to entering freshmen, they would address broad topics such as the *global environment* and *interracial dynamics*, and they would be organized around academically rigorous 5-unit lecture/discussion courses in the fall and winter quarters, with a culminating seminar in the spring. In their 1998 [report](#)⁷, the WASC site visit team embraced this recommendation, seeing the cluster program as a way of engaging faculty in the design and teaching of new GE courses and strengthening freshman academic skills.

The Freshman Cluster Program started in 1997-98 with one "pre-pilot cluster," moved into a five-year pilot phase from 1998 to 2003, and was approved as a full-fledged academic program in 2004. During its pilot period, faculty developed four clusters (including the "pre-pilot") in 1998-1999. Additional clusters were conceptualized and developed during a two-year (1999-01) [faculty-affinity group initiative](#)⁸ funded by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Over 161 faculty members participated in 14 Hewlett Foundation affinity groups, and several new cluster courses emerged from this process. Since the inception of the program, 10,756 freshmen (~ 45% of each year's entering class) have enrolled in clusters, and 278 graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) and 345

faculty members from all areas of campus have participated in the instructional teams. A total of 493 spring seminars were also designed and offered, 40% of them taught by faculty and 60% by cluster TAs. All freshmen completing a cluster sequence satisfy 30% of their GE coursework, as well as their Writing II and GE seminar requirements.

A team of seven full- and part-time academic administrators and staff provides budgetary and logistical support for the cluster program, and also provides cluster TAs with yearlong instructional workshops on disciplinary writing and seminar development. Additional support for cluster instructional aims—information literacy, disciplinary writing, experiential education, and service learning—is provided by the College Library (see *Essay 6*), Writing Programs, Center for Community Learning, and Office of Residential Life. The budget for the program is supported by a permanent allocation of \$1.8 million, 85% of which directly supports teaching (faculty and graduate student instructors); the remaining 15% provides support for class expenses and administration.

In the fall of 2003, the cluster staff, with input from cluster teaching teams, completed a [Self Review of the Cluster Pilot Program](#)⁹. This comprehensive report included information on the history and administration of the pilot program, as well as the results of surveys and focus groups of over 4,000 freshmen, 102 TAs, and 73 faculty members. Freshmen reported clusters were highly demanding courses that helped ease their transition from high school to college. They also noted that these courses engaged them in a broad range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary subjects and methodologies, and strengthened their core academic skills in critical thinking, discussion, and writing.

In recent [longitudinal studies](#)¹⁰ of seniors, all former cluster freshmen, the majority of respondents indicated that the spring seminar was the “highlight” of their cluster experiences, because they were encouraged to explore a topic of their own choosing and challenged to be “creative and independent.” This type of inquiry-based, entry-level seminar helps prepare students for upper-division work, and to engage more productively in capstone experiences as seniors (see *Essay 5*). Also, a majority of respondents agreed that the interdisciplinary nature of clusters and the faculty’s collaborative approach to teaching helped them to understand a topic from alternative perspectives and aided their ability to synthesize knowledge from disparate fields. These data suggest that clusters provide a useful model for expanding interdisciplinary education for undergraduate students at UCLA (see *Essay 7*).

Faculty reported that conceptualizing, developing and implementing a yearlong interdisciplinary course required considerable time and effort, as well as openness to new forms of pedagogy. They also noted that the collaborative teaching format of these courses provided them the rare opportunity to interact with and learn from colleagues in different fields. TAs reported that teaching in the clusters entailed a heavy workload, but they also noted that these courses afforded them the chance to design and teach a seminar based on their own research interests, as well as the opportunity to work with faculty and graduate students from across campus. Both faculty and TAs agreed that clusters fostered a high quality of teaching and learning, and this has been affirmed by both a prestigious [Hesburgh Certificate of Excellence](#)¹¹ and four UCLA Distinguished Teaching Awards for cluster faculty.

The Academic Senate carried out its Academic Program Review (defined in *Essay 2*) by forming a team of internal and external reviewers that conducted a site visit. The resulting [report](#)¹² in the spring of 2004 praised the cluster model “as one of the jewels of undergraduate education at UCLA,” and provided the institutional support needed to make it a permanently funded “program.” The comment by an external reviewer (Christina Maslach; UC Berkeley) succinctly summed up the review:

The UCLA Freshman Cluster Program is a truly innovative program within higher education....Clusters introduce students to a broader interdisciplinary perspective on key issues, and to a more intense workload in terms of reading, writing, and educational projects. Clusters also place an enormous value on the quality of teaching and the culture necessary to sustain it.

Foundational Areas of Knowledge as a Basis for UCLA's New GE Curriculum

From 1999 to 2000, UCLA's new GE Governance Committee worked with Vice Provost Smith and her staff, as well as with faculty and administrators across campus, to develop a proposal for a common campuswide GE curriculum and course list. A consensus emerged during this period of reflection and discussion that general education should provide all lower-division students at UCLA with a set of cornerstone or "foundational" experiences aimed at introducing them to the fundamental ideas and "ways of knowing" typical of scholars in the arts, humanities, social, and natural sciences. This idea of a foundational GE curriculum was given more substantial form when faculty workgroups from the College and professional schools agreed to a common GE framework for the campus that would comprise three Foundations of Knowledge: *Arts and Humanities*, *Society and Culture* and *Scientific Inquiry*. In their comprehensive [reports](#)¹³, each of three workgroups developed a mission statement that articulates the educational objectives for its foundation area, and agreed that GE offerings should be rigorous 5-unit courses designed to promote general knowledge, integrative learning, sensitivity to difference (diversity), responsible citizenship, and strong intellectual skills.

These deliberations culminated in the adoption of the Foundations of Knowledge GE framework and common course list by the College in 2002 and by the professional schools with undergraduate programs in 2004 and 2005. As of Fall 2006, all incoming UCLA freshmen satisfied their GE requirements by taking a requisite number of courses across three foundational areas of knowledge (see [GE Requirements Chart](#)¹⁴). With the institution of this common GE curriculum, all courses carrying GE credit, old and new, have been reviewed by the GE Governance Committee, its *ad hoc* workgroups, and the Undergraduate Council according to the criteria set forth in the mission statements and course guidelines the UCLA faculty developed for the different foundation areas.

To ensure that general education course offerings continue to adhere to the goals and practices adopted by the faculties of the College and professional schools, the Undergraduate Council approved Vice Provost Smith's proposal to inaugurate an eight-year program review for each of the GE foundation areas. Like other Academic Senate Program Reviews, this process (outlined in *Essay 2*) takes three years to complete and involves a period of self review and a site visit by a team of campus and extramural scholars. A review of *Scientific Inquiry* took place in 2005-07, and will be followed by reviews of the curricula in *Society and Culture* (2007-09) and *Arts and Humanities* (2009-11).

A review of the *Scientific Inquiry* GE curriculum was conducted by an *ad hoc* faculty committee jointly appointed by the GE Governance Committee and Vice Provost Smith. This *ad hoc* workgroup focused on several issues, including the overall pedagogical aims of the foundation area, as well as the quality of the courses offered, and issued its [Self Review Report](#)¹⁵ in Fall 2006. This report was reviewed by the GE Governance Committee and used by the review team, which conducted a site visit in Spring 2007. The [Academic Senate Program Review](#)¹⁶ of the Scientific Inquiry area, while very positive, recommended more frequent monitoring of selected course syllabi and the development of GE courses in new science fields. Another recommendation was improved communication with students and counselors about differences between the two categories of science GE courses: general science courses and pre-major science courses that fulfill GE requirements.

In addition to assessing GE courses and the curricula of the three foundation areas, UCLA has been interested in systematically collecting information from graduating senior students who have completed the new GE program. In the newly established UCLA College Senior Survey, questions concerning the GE experience were included for 2005 and [2006](#)¹⁷. Results from these surveys indicate that the majority of respondents (55%) enjoyed exploring topics and disciplines outside of their major areas of interest (85% agreed or strongly agreed) and were challenged by new ideas and ways of thinking in their GE classes (82% agreed or strongly agreed). Also, nearly one-third of the respondents selected a major after taking a GE course in the area, while 20% selected a minor area of study.

Next Steps: The Continuing Transformation of General Education at UCLA

A 2002 [monograph](#)¹⁸ addressing UCLA's efforts to transform its GE curriculum, prepared for the Higher Education Research Institute by Vice Provost Smith's staff, noted that in most universities general education reform is "time-consuming, painful, contentious, and requires not only considerable patience, but also a marked willingness by all the involved parties to compromise." As this essay makes clear, GE reform at UCLA was a lengthy and often difficult process that entailed:

- A broad-based dialogue about the aims, practices, and importance of general education.
- A high level of administrative support and the allocation of new funds for GE.
- The creation of an advanced training program for TAs in the Freshman Cluster Program.
- The establishment of a campus GE Governance Committee.
- Campus-wide adoption of a new GE curriculum with a common course list for all students and a clear mission statement for each of the three GE foundation areas.
- A systematic process for the periodic evaluation of the GE foundation areas and courses conducted by the Academic Senate's Program Review process (as outlined in *Essay 2*).

This GE reform effort inspired new curricular initiatives that also enriched the UCLA undergraduate education experience. For example, faculty involved in the *Modern Thought*, *Global Environment*, and *Global Economy* clusters spearheaded the development of new minors in [Social Thought](#)¹⁹, [Environmental Systems and Society](#)²⁰, and [Global Studies](#)²¹. The innovative *Biotechnology and Society* cluster provided faculty in the [UCLA Center for Society and Genetics](#)²² with a model for a new interdisciplinary minor in *Biology and Society* (see *Essay 7*). And the success of the *Frontiers in Human Aging* cluster has brought renewed interest to UCLA's [Gerontology Minor](#)²³.

The Freshman Cluster Program's much praised spring seminars have also inspired a three-year pilot initiative known as [GE Seminar Sequences](#)²⁴. Launched in 2006-07 by Vice Provost Smith with the College deans, this program affords students unable to enroll in a cluster their freshman year the opportunity to study a particular subject in some depth over two quarters. These GE and Cluster seminars provide experiences that encourage freshmen and sophomores to integrate course materials over a two or three quarter span and to design a term project of their choosing. These are valuable experiences for students who will later complete a senior-level capstone project (see *Essay 5*).

Working with departments and interdepartmental programs, UCLA's GE Governance Committee has also linked or "bundled" GE courses together around a variety of broad themes, e.g., *Western and Non-western Religion, Mythology, and Folklore*; *Cultures and Identities*; *The Search for Life in the Universe*; and *Society and the Environment*. These [thematic course lists](#)²⁵ are being used as advisory tools by academic counselors to help students plan out ways of both satisfying their GE requirements and exploring an area of interest in some depth from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The Committee also hopes that these thematic GE bundles will lay the groundwork for future curricular efforts aimed at linking together traditional courses to create interdisciplinary sequences.

Closing Comment. UCLA has created a campuswide GE curriculum, provided clearly articulated educational objectives for each GE area, and included a periodic program review that will guide our progress in the future. UCLA's curricular transformation has captured the attention of universities and national groups engaged in discussions of GE reform and the first-year experience. Those involved at UCLA have been frequently invited to share their [experiences](#)²⁶; these dissemination activities have been helpful to others as well as to us. Recently, UCLA's commitment to the improvement of its GE curriculum has been singled out in the 2007 [report](#)²⁷ of the University of California Commission on *General Education in the 21st Century*, which noted that "the combination of significant budgetary resources, aggressive leadership, and an atmosphere of campus support has enabled UCLA to emerge as something of a model among the [UC] campuses for innovation in general education."