Process Principles Based on a Survey of the National Scholarship on General Education Reform

CCVC suggests the following principles to guide the process of general education reform:

Process Principle #1: Focus on Student Learning

Reform efforts should focus on improving student learning. Participants in discussions on general education reform should view themselves as "stewards of the university/college" and place the needs of students first.

It seems obvious that, above all, the interests of students are central to any general education reform process. But we need to state this explicitly and place it ahead of other process considerations. In addition to reminding reformers why they are doing this work, it helps to unify participants around the single goal of doing what is best for students. As Nancy Mitchell and her colleagues write, "Focusing on the overall goal of the students' welfare helps unify the process" (2010, p. 182).

Numerous case studies cited in the literature on general education reform attest to this important principle. For example, at the University of Michigan-Flint, reformers focused the campus discussion on the "interests and needs of our students," and as a result diffused "angst about credit hour losses or gains and territoriality about the curriculum. All faculty and administrators had a stake in meeting 'students' needs'" (Gano-Phillips 2011, p. 74).

As we focus on students, we must remember that student demographics are changing. In the environmental scan prepared for SD 2020, the CSB/SJU Strategic Directions Council emphasized that the traditional-age college population is changing: "As the population of color grows, colleges and universities across the country will have unprecedented opportunities to enroll a more culturally diverse

student body...At the same time, though, many of those new students will come to campus under-prepared for college level study" (Strategic Directions 2020 Environmental Scan, 2014, p. 12). The students served by the curriculum we design for the future are not the same as the students who enrolled at CSB/SJU when we created the Common Curriculum (We address this point again in more detail in Part B).

Focusing on student learning directs attention toward the outcomes we expect students to achieve, and makes the subsequent design of the general education curriculum more intentional. Ann S. Ferren, writing in the edited collection, *General Education & Liberal Learning*, contends that "when faculty members intentionally design curricula around the needs of students" they may "understand that a general education program guided by desired outcomes...is preferable to a program with broad distribution requirements. Institutions that adopt outcomes-directed programs accept their rightful responsibility for coherence and integration rather than simply assume that students will somehow draw together the disparate elements of their educational experience" (2010, pp. 26-27).

With reform of this magnitude, there is always the possibility that faculty who are "housed in departments with strong vested interests" can create "additional challenges to revitalizing the general education curriculum" (Pittendrigh 2007, p. 34). Such "preexisting conditions of secrecy and suspicion across disciplines or academic units" can thwart reform by preventing "honest and meaningful conversations necessary to realize significant progress" (Gano-Phillips 2011, pp. 66-67). But a focus on student learning makes this less likely. Writing in *The Journal of General Education* in 2011, Susan Gano-Phillips and her colleagues urge reformers to adopt a **"stewardship posture"** that places the needs of students above other considerations: "When leaders adopt a stewardship posture, rather than acting as proponents of their own programs, departments, or units, they transcend narrow views of the institution, and the needs of the whole campus relevant to the reform process become salient" (2011, p. 67).

When the "stewardship" approach has been adopted at other colleges, faculty have come together to implement meaningful reforms. Writing in the Winter/Spring 2015 issue of *Liberal Education*, Jennifer Dugan provides the example of Hendrix College, whose faculty "disagreed

without being disagreeable," and "began with what they could find consensus on, and kept the process student-centered. In the end, Hendrix did not tinker; it transformed. Hendrix adhered to a historic mission, even as it innovated" (p. 63). Given our Benedictine heritage, we believe the same results can be achieved at CSB/SJU.

Process Principle #2: Form a Task Force

A special committee or task force should be charged with the responsibility of guiding the process of general education reform. This committee should work within the existing faculty governance structure, and the Joint Faculty Senate should endorse the process, principles, vision and timeline.

So far, the Joint Faculty Senate has engaged in this best practice. It tasked CCVC to write this report and conduct campus conversations on general education reform. The literature confirms this is the best approach to take. Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff write in their book, *Revising General Education-And Avoiding the Potholes*, in 2009: "That curricular review should be conducted by the standing curriculum committee may seem reasonable. However, forming a special task force might be a better route to take. While a standing committee has its regular, time-consuming business to accomplish, a task force can devote all its energy to the single purpose of reviewing or revising the curriculum" (p. 10).

While the Faculty Handbook gives the Common Curriculum Committee the authority to "oversee the ongoing development of the Common Curriculum" and "propose revisions in the Common Curriculum to the Joint Faculty Senate," it also requires the committee to "review and act on proposals for Common Curriculum designations" (Faculty Handbook August 2015). This is time-consuming work, leaving little opportunity for committee members to immerse themselves in the literature on general education reform. In contrast, a special task force can devote its time to managing the general education reform process. Gaston and Gaff go on to argue that "a dedicated committee can work with less distraction, take advantage of opportunities for concentrated work such as that provided by the AAC&U Institute on General Education, and pursue a timeline more likely to bring results" (2009, p. 10).

Process Principle #3: Support Proposals with Research

The process of general education reform and the possible redesign of the general education curriculum should be supported with national scholarship, best practices, and research on general education.

As the conversation on general education reform continues on these campuses, it is critical that advocates support their claims with research on general education reform and pedagogy. In case studies of general education reform documented in the literature, authors have warned against assertions based on isolated personal experiences, memories of programs in the distant past, or positions motivated by self-interest and protecting departmental turf. Writing in their influential booklet, *Revising General Education-And Avoiding the Potholes*, authors Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff note that participants often "begin their deliberations by having members share their best ideas for improving general education. This approach can pool a great deal of ignorance and half-truths, and it frequently results in premature polarization of the group. By contrast, other task forces have embarked on a scholarly exploration of the topic and have consciously cultivated a spirit of inquiry so that each person learns to expand, refine, and alter his or her initial ideas. These task forces read the literature..." (2009, p. 19).

To determine national trends regarding general education reform, CCVC members reviewed prominent texts such as AAC&U's *College Learning for the New Global Century* and *Greater Expectations* reports, Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff's *Revising General Education-And Avoiding the Potholes*, Gaston's edited collection *General Education & Liberal Learning*, Andrea Leskes and Ross Miller's *General Education: A Self-Study Guide for Review & Assessment*, Susan Gano-Phillips and Robert W. Barnett's edited collection, *A Process Approach to General Education Reform*, and numerous articles from publications such as the *Journal of General Education* and *Liberal Learning*. This aspect of the charge involved review of multiple books, reports, and articles on general education reform, and continued throughout the 2014-2015 academic year. In preparation for the AAC&U 2015 Summer Institute on General Education and Assessment, CCVC team members read two recent reports: Paul Gaston's *General Education Transformed: How We*

Can, Why We Must (2015) and AAC&U's *General Education Maps and Markers: Designing Meaningful Pathways to Student Achievement* (2015). CCVC has worked to make this research available to all members of the CSB/SJU community by posting articles on the public Moodle site. In addition, community members can access most of the sources documented in the extensive bibliography at the end of this report through databases available on the library home page.

As our general education reform efforts continue, we anticipate numerous opportunities for community members to become involved in the conversation, including faculty forums, workshops, reading groups, and more, each with assigned and suggested readings, so that "both advocates for re-investing in what we know works in student learning and advocates for revolutionary change in teaching argue from good evidence" (Sullivan, "The Sustainable College," 2015, par. 20).

Process Principle # 4: Establish Process Before Discussing Content

A Reform Process must be established before discussion of models or curricular content.

It is tempting to move to a discussion of curricular models right away. CCVC members realized this was one of the "potholes" to avoid because "quick fixes" rarely work. Instead, a program for revising and improving general education "must be designed to embody each institution's character, the needs of its students, and the strengths and interests of its faculty" (Gaston and Gaff 2009, p. 8). CCVC has adhered to this principle to date, and we outline a specific design process and timeline in Part B.

A clear reform process helps keep the conversation focused on learning outcomes. "So often when it comes to curriculum, faculty immediately want to discuss additions and changes to courses and programs," writes Blase S. Scarnati in his article, "The Politics and Process of General Education Reform: Key Political Principles." However, in general education reform, "one must keep the discussion focused on student learning outcomes for the program, because it is at this level that meaningful curricular change can occur, be assessed,

and have its value demonstrated. This also focuses the discussion on areas of broad agreement (the institutional values that are captured by student learning outcomes) and keeps faculty from arguing about personal, disciplinary, or departmental turf" (2010, p. 194).

In a session with the CCVC, Dr. Lee Knefelkamp mentioned the University of Southern Maine (USM) as a model for reform because it devoted separate attention to designing goals and outcomes. USM began with a review of its old curriculum, followed by a process document, then discussions about the vision and purpose of the program. Then they moved to deliberations over learning outcomes, which provided a framework for a new curriculum. The process from review to implementation took six years. Although it was a "slower and more labor-intensive process, it ultimately produces a better-designed curriculum" (AAC&U, Campus Models and Case Studies, June/July 2007). This was confirmed by a team from another institution who attended the AAC&U Institute and reported back to its faculty: "Perhaps the most profound insight we developed is that a formal *process* for general education must be developed and approved by the faculty *before* discussions of curricular *design*" (Roach 2010, p. 151, emphasis in original).

Finally, a well-designed process ensures that faculty are entrusted with the key decisions about general education reform. As Susan Gano-Phillips et. al. point out in *The Journal of General Education* regarding their own experiences: "We decided to *define a process and time line* explicitly for developing and selecting our new GE curriculum before we discussed the content of that curriculum. In this way, the leadership respected faculty governance and ensured that decision making, both for the curriculum itself and for the process of arriving at that curriculum, remained in the hands of the faculty" (2011, p. 75).

Process Principle #5: Establish a Timeline

It is also important to agree on a timeline with specific action steps and milestones. In our research, we encountered numerous case studies where general education reform took six years or longer. But we believe "engaging in general education reform with a clear timeline in place can help shorten the curricular reform process" (Gano-Phillips

and Barnett 2010, p. 14), especially since two years of work has already been done by CCVC and its predecessor. We have established a timeline for the reform process and present it in Part C.

There are other reasons to adopt a timeline. It can make the broader community aware of the process. Stephanie Roach explains: "A clear timetable for reform should be established by the General Education Reform Steering Committee so everyone is aware of the process as it unfolds" (2010, p. 152). A clear timeline establishes the seriousness of the work ahead, as Terrel L. Rhodes contends: "Having a timeline with periodic decision points for moving the process forward, though, is essential for actually accomplishing change...Demonstrating early in the process that the reform process is taken seriously, including honoring the timeline, sets a tone that the work is important, valued and necessary" (2010, p. 252). Finally, a timeline ensures progress and work completion prior to 2020, the goal date set in the strategic plan. Kathleen Rountree, Lisa Tolbert, and Stephen C. Zerwas confirm this point: "Clearly articulating stages in the reform process and identifying specific deadlines for different stages helps reinforce a sense of progress and closure" (2010, pp. 33-34).

Process Principle #6: Devote Resources to the Work

The general education process committee should receive appropriate resources and support to carry out its work.

To this point, CCVC has operated without a budget and its members have completed the charge given to the committee despite other significant service obligations. Clearly, this level of work is not sustainable without resources. After reviewing effective general education reform efforts, Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff come to this conclusion: "Too many task forces try to effect massive curricular change without adequate support... Unless adequate support is given, a task force or committee cannot be expected to provide creative and effective leadership for curricular change. Allocating budget resources to this initiative is a major way in which academic administrators can demonstrate institutional support for educational improvement" (2009, pp. 10-11).

We have identified three specific areas of need for the task force as it

continues its work:

> *Course Release Time for CCVC Chair or Co-Chairs*

Reassigned time for the task force chair is essential for the success of the reform effort, as confirmed by Gaston and Gaff: "We have learned that reduced teaching assignments can be essential, at least for a committee chair, if there is to be sufficient time and energy to provide leadership for curricular revision" (2009, p. 11).

> *Support Staff and Student Employee Assistance for CCVC*

If the JFS endorses a new charge for the committee (the text of a proposed charge is in Part C of this report), there will be numerous community outreach activities and workshops to collect feedback at each stage of the process, and to prepare for the design and possible implementation of a new general education curriculum. Secretarial assistance will be needed to help organize and document these efforts. "Adequate resources must be provided to ensure the short- and long-term success of general education reform, including resources in support of...staffing, communications, consulting, and community building" (Roach 2010, p. 152).

> *Dedicated Budget for CCVC Outreach Activities*

Many of the workshops, retreats, and reading groups CCVC intends to host over the coming two years (see timeline in Part C) will require funding to secure consultants, guest speakers, and reading materials. "Further, task forces need modest funds to purchase materials, hold retreats, invite consultants, reproduce papers for campus distribution, and, perhaps, send a team to the AAC&U Institute on General Education and similar meetings" (Gaston and Gaff 2009, p. 11).

The timeline we propose assumes these resources will be available for the committee to continue its work.

Process Principle #7: Encourage Open Communication

At all stages of the process, it is essential to have open, inclusive, and transparent communication.

Given the scope of possible changes to the general education program, it is essential to include community feedback at all stages of the

process. Scholars of general education have emphasized the importance of open and inclusive communication in the reform process. As Kathleen

Rountree, Lisa Tolbert, and Stephen C. Zerwas explain, "The need to maintain open, transparent communication about the reform process and content is critical for creating broad faculty support" (2010, p. 32).

Process Principle #8: Engage a Variety of Audiences

A variety of constituents need to be engaged and included in the process of revising the general education learning outcomes and designing a new general education curriculum.

While faculty have primary responsibility for changes to the academic curriculum, feedback should be sought from a variety of campus stakeholders. Susan Gano-Phillips and her colleagues consider this as a critical feature of reform efforts: "An essential component of this collaborative leadership involves the development of trust and common purpose in revitalizing the GE curriculum, and *it is through engagement of a wide variety of campus constituents that such trust and a sense of institutional stewardship are achieved*" (emphasis in original, 2011, p. 81). In particular, student voices need to be considered and included in the process. Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff put it this way: "Faculty members typically regard the development of the curriculum as their prerogative and sometimes neglect the important contributions students can make to the process" (2009, p. 14). In 2015-2016, CCVC had two student members (one from each campus) and hosted feedback sessions with both student senates.

Process Principle #9: Discuss Vision and Learning Outcomes Prior to Design

The faculty should establish a vision for general education at CSB/SJU. The faculty should also re-examine and revise the general education learning goals.

Prior to the development of specific curriculum proposals, the faculty should draft a vision statement for the general education program. "My experience is that curriculum committees or task forces tend to

rush too quickly into the design of a new curriculum," writes Jerry G. Gaff. "It is important to take enough time to discover what is common among the faculty and to secure basic agreement about what they think students should learn and about what qualities should characterize a high-quality, coherent college education" (2004, p. 5).

These qualities are typically summarized in a vision statement that describes the purpose of the program. A well-crafted vision statement helps direct the drafting of the learning outcomes, and gives purpose and meaning to the program overall. As described on its homepage, the purpose of the Common Curriculum is "to provide all students with a solid academic foundation and the fundamental tools necessary to continue developing their intellectual abilities through a broad liberal arts education." We feel the purpose statement for the general education program could be more inspiring. In their pamphlet, *General Education: A Self-Study Guide for Review & Assessment*, Andrea Leskes and Ross Miller argue: "A broad understanding of both the purpose a campus assigns to general education and how the program embodies mission needs to precede the definition of learning outcomes and design of a curricular structure" (2005, p. 5).

Leskes and Miller identify several steps that colleges should take when reforming their general education programs. The first step is to "start the review," which includes a review of the national scholarship and trends and a review of the institution's current program (accomplished by CCVC in 2014-2015). The second step, according to Leskes and Miller, is to "Agree on major parameters" which includes a vision statement for the program (CCVC began community conversations on vision in 2014-2015). The authors suggest the following inquiry:

1. Elucidate the purpose of general education

> What is the purpose of the general education program in our entire undergraduate curriculum (foundational, integrative, summative, or a combination)?
> What kinds of learning do we want general education to further (e.g., essential intellectual and practical skills, a knowledge of many disciplines or modes of inquiry, integration across disciplines, experiential learning)?
> Is the approach based on competencies, the disciplines, or is it

interdisciplinary?

2. Illuminate distinctiveness

> How does the general education program reflect our mission, culture, history, and values? Are the answers sufficiently clear and widely known?
> How is the nature of our student body reflected in our approach to general education?
> What makes our general education program distinctive?
> What makes it essential for students? (Leskes and Miller 2005, p. 5)

The conversation about the vision for general education can begin with these categories and questions but does not need to be constrained by them. We think it is important to think about these questions but not to be paralyzed by disagreements over terminology. Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff make this suggestion: "Avoid becoming mired in disagreements over the definition of terms; reach a working consensus and move on" (2009, p. 31).

In addition to a general education vision statement, and prior to a discussion of curricular details, the faculty should determine what our undergraduate students should know or be able to do upon graduation, and frame these as well articulated statements of learning outcomes. In the reform process at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nancy Mitchell and her colleagues posed the following question to their colleagues and to the students: *"What should all undergraduate students-irrespective of their majors or career aspirations-know or be able to do upon graduation?"* (2010, p. 181). If the conversation can be kept at this level, it will be less likely to fracture due to turf battles. Blase S. Scarnati writes: "Institutional values, captured as student learning outcomes, ground any set of initiatives in the common space that is easiest for various constituencies to embrace. If the conversation can be kept at the level of shared values, then it is unlikely to fracture along lines of disciplinary self interest and departmental turf" (2010, p. 196).

Leskes and Miller suggest three tasks for this stage of the process, each with a set of corresponding questions:

1. Clarify important outcomes

> Have we articulated clear learning goals and outcomes?
> How well do our goals and outcomes align with the growing national consensus about the important aims of college study?
> How do our outcomes describe the complex content knowledge, intellectual and practical skills, and dispositions students and society will need for the complexities of the twenty-first century world? Have we made certain to include important outcomes even if they are difficult to measure?
> How have we articulated the aspects of personal and social responsibility necessary to the reflective, engaged citizens we want general education to develop?
> In what ways do we acknowledge, over time and across courses, the developmental changes students undergo to achieve general education's key learning goals and outcomes? Have we collectively developed clear expectations for novice, intermediate, and advanced levels of performance?

2. Relate goals to mission

> In what ways are our learning goals and outcomes aligned with the institution's central aims and mission?
> How do these goals and outcomes reflect our distinctive values, culture, history, and student body?

3. Show centrality of learning goals and outcomes

> Do our students, faculty, and administrators accept and possess common language for describing the goals? Are the "owned" by the faculty as a whole?
> In what ways have the learning goals and outcomes taken on a real life at the center of our undergraduate program? What is our process for using them to shape curricular structure, course design, and the choice of teaching methods?
> Have we refined the outcomes into assessable objectives (clear statements of what students are expected to know and be able to do)? (2005, pp. 6-7)

In answering these questions, it is important to remember we do not need to start from a clean slate. The Common Curriculum already has learning goals, and these can be modified as necessary if the faculty

feels only modest changes are needed. In fact, revisions to the Theology and Mathematics learning goals have recently been passed by the JFS.

Over the past two years, CCVC has collected feedback from the community, and this data provides an excellent foundation for the creation of a vision statement and learning outcomes. (It is worth noting that these larger questions were not discussed fully at the time we created the current Common Curriculum.) We summarize this feedback in sections A.5-A.7 of this report. As a result of this work, CCVC has drafted a vision statement for general education (in Part B of this report) that we expect to be further modified as the community discusses the learning outcomes for the program.

Further, AAC&U has developed a set of "Essential Learning Outcomes" which can advance conversations on revising learning goal and outcome statements (see Appendix E). Agreeing on revised learning outcomes can also make the discussion of models easier, as the statements provide a foundation for the development of a general education curriculum. Susan Gano-Phillips et. al. discuss their own experience with this approach: "The learning outcomes provided an agreed-upon foundation that could be referred back to at times of disagreement. This foundation fostered a trust that stakeholders were moving toward a mutual goal that enabled them to see the good of the whole, to tend to the public garden of the university and not just their own small patch" (2011, p. 78).

In our review of the scholarship, we benefitted from the work of others who had been charged to review their general education programs. Consistently, the institutions that were successful in reforming their programs had started by crafting a vision statement followed by revision of learning outcomes. For example, the general education task force at Washington State University made the deliberate decision not to propose models at a similar stage of the process. The task force explained in its report, "Such a structure would be premature, and not grounded in a set of outcomes agreed upon by the faculty." The task force argued that the "highest priority among next steps is for the learning goals to be rearticulated and realigned into the foundation for curriculum and requirements. This is a necessary step in re-engaging faculty in the aims and values of general education. Faculty

participation in the process should be broad, even at the risk of slowing the timeline down a bit" (General Education Visioning Committee, 2009, p. 18).

Throughout this report, CCVC demonstrates how it has followed these process guidelines to date, especially its efforts to involve a variety of campus audiences through feedback and listening sessions. We summarize the results of these sessions in the following sections (A.5-A.7).

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