

Final Report: Compass System-wide Grant: Giving Students a Compass, Making Excellence Inclusive, California State University, Chico

Prepared by William Loker,
Dean of Undergraduate Education
California State University, Chico

on behalf of the GE Implementation Team and General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC)

Please send me a short final report (no more than 5 pages) by July 31, 2011. You're free to use the reporting template you've used before, but we're particularly interested in whether:

- a. you've made any discoveries of improved student success;*
- b. you've changed policy or practice based on the evidence you discovered;*
- c. you believe the work has become institutionalized.*

Before responding to these prompts, it might be worthwhile to briefly explore the relationships that emerged over the course of the project among its main actors: the AAC&U and Compass project leaders, the CSU system office and university representatives. Our university's goals as part of the Compass project were to catalyze a change process to which we were already committed. Our goals as a Design Team, and later during implementation, were informed in important ways, but not directed by Compass project goals. Rather, our work emerged in dialogue with principles articulated by AAC&U and Compass, ideas emanating from our campus, goals provided to us by the Provost in our initial charge, existing practices and aspirations for improvement in student learning. In other words, Compass did not provide us (nor did we seek) a template or directive for how to shape our GE program. As it evolved, the project provided conceptual support, a vocabulary for moving change forward, a national context that supported our insistence on curricular change, colleagues nationally and statewide for feedback on our ideas and, of course, financial resources that enabled change. All of these turned out to be essential to whatever success we have achieved, and we are grateful for the opportunity to participate.

a. Improved student success:

Our initial proposal to the AAC&U indicated that our proposed GE redesign would, among other things, build on successes noted for first year students in the use of campus-designed High Impact Practices (HIPs), especially the Town Hall Meeting. The Town Hall Meeting (THM) has now been joined by several other examples of "Public Sphere Pedagogy" in our current GE program. Looking at events such as the Great Debate (in oral communications classes), Budget Challenges (economics courses), Rough Cut film festival (Freshman composition) and Civic Displays in the freshman seminar course, we are probably reaching 75% of lower division students with one or more PSP events. Data shared with Compass representatives in May 2011 show clear effects of participation in PSP on student's academic engagement, academic performance, sense of civic efficacy, measures of well-being and persistence from first to second year and beyond. Preliminary evidence suggests that effects on persistence and civic efficacy continue throughout students' academic careers until graduation.

Compass funds heightened our determination to include HIPs in our redesign of GE. Many decisions taken by the Design Team, and pushed tirelessly by the Implementation Team, are

oriented to achieving inclusive excellence. These include crafting a statement of Mission and Values that explicitly includes an emphasis on civic engagement and active inquiry and curricular investments in writing intensive courses and capstone experiences – hallmarks of HIPs.

Compass funding was at least partially responsible for our success in securing a grant from the W.M. Keck Foundation focused on extending PSP or other civic pedagogies into upper division GE to ensure that transfer students are exposed to these HIPs and that native students encounter multiple examples of HIPs and opportunities to experience engaged pedagogy. This process is still underway as we increasingly focus on pedagogical approaches to effectively teaching the new GE program.

Compass funds catalyzed GE redesign efforts on our campus. The first period of the Compass grant was focused on GE redesign. The last 18 months have focused on Implementation. Discussions of curriculum have dominated both the design and implementation phases. In the remaining year (AY 11-12) before the new program goes “live” the discussion will shift to pedagogy. It is often said that faculty love to argue about curriculum but avoid discussions of pedagogy. We intend to make AY 11-12 the Year of Pedagogy. We will work intensively with faculty: through workshops, faculty learning communities and special initiatives such as [Academy eLearning](#), linked to larger projects of course transformation, to provide the tools that faculty need to make GE a transformative experience for our students.

A final piece of this effort will be the design of assessment practices to demonstrate student success and learning in the program. With guidance from LEAP outcomes, we have designed and are implementing an *outcomes based* GE program. Our challenge will be to integrate assessment into the fabric of the GE program and encourage faculty to view assessment of student learning as an integral aspect of teaching GE. The shift to a new learning management system, the creation of new organizational contexts for assessment (a new Curriculum Advisory Board and the structure of Pathways themselves), as well as other innovations in information technology can be creatively assembled to generate real-time, authentic assessments of learning that can inform our success and suggest areas for improvement. Clearly, this is a major challenge.

b. changed policy or practice based on the evidence you've discovered

In many ways, Chico's Compass grant was an exercise in changed policy and practice, focused as it was on a total redesign of the GE program in line with LEAP outcomes (translated into a Chico-specific context), strategic inclusion of HIPs and ensuring that all students are reached by HIPs (Making Excellence Inclusive). The very title of the grant program: "Giving Students a Compass" is embodied in our GE design of Pathways, which, in reality provide a direction for students to navigate GE: in other words, a compass!

Assessment of student success informed our efforts in multiple ways. An earlier round of GE assessment (carried out in AY 05-06, 06-07) provided the data that justified the rather enormous investment of time in reconsidering our GE program. A separate set of assessment data (generated in collaboration with the Bringing Theory to Practice project) provided us with the

confidence to label the THM and PSP as a HIP and advocate for expansion of these (and other better-known practices) in our redesigned GE program. While we lack assessment data for the changes we have instituted, we are both committed to generating that data and confident that the changes we have instituted will lead to enhanced student success.

c. institutionalization of the work.

Compass-funded initiatives have been institutionalized in a couple of senses. First and foremost, we have a new GE program that will endure for some period of time as part of the fabric of our campus; indeed as a potential source of distinction for a Chico State education. A new curricular structure that affects all students at the university and shapes 40% of their educational experience is in place thanks, in part, to assistance provided by the Compass project.

Aside from this obvious, but critically important aspect of institutionalization, there is another sense in which the work we have accomplished (and are still striving to complete) has become institutionalized. Now, when the university leadership -- including faculty leaders -- contemplates substantive changes, the model of inclusive consultation and communication employed by the Design and Implementation Teams is cited as exemplary and a model to follow. Chico State has a strong tradition of co-governance and faculty inclusion in decision-making.

Our campus also frequently and loudly claims to be student- and learning-centered. The Design and Implementation Teams took those principles very much to heart and "walked the walk" of shared governance and inclusion in particularly transparent and bold ways. While avoiding the most cutting edge communications technologies (Twitter and Facebook), we made good use of communications technologies to keep the campus fully apprised of our collective work and continually held up our conclusions as truly reflecting campus consensus or ideas regarding how the curriculum should evolve. We also consulted students as openly as possible and seriously weighed their views on the current GE experience and how it might be changed. University staff from Academic Advising to Evaluations and the Degree Audit Project were all invited to participate and did so. Whether we call this shared governance or crowd sourcing, the result was a program that the campus truly feels it owns, rather than a program imposed either by administration or a cabal of faculty working toward their own ends.

Again this is relevant to institutionalization because at least under the current academic leadership, the *process* employed in the GE redesign process is frequently cited as a model for how to move forward with alacrity but inclusion on questions of important academic change. A final dimension of "institutionalization" refers to levels beyond our campus: to the CSU system and national debates over GE. This is more difficult to gauge from where we sit in Chico. Clearly, the Compass project chose to work with state systems of higher education to try to leverage and accelerate academic change. Perhaps some of the same lessons that apply to our campus can also be applied at the state level. It would be folly to think that Chico State's new design for GE should be implemented across the CSU. But it might not be so far off the mark to think that some of the processes and practices employed on our campus might provide guidance on how to conduct GE redesign. The notion of the use of a design team was initially suggested to us by participants at AAC&U conferences on GE. (The experience of GE redesign at the University of Michigan, Flint was one particularly relevant example.) The idea of employing a

relentless campaign of communication and consultation, of eliciting ideas from all quarters: faculty, staff and students, of compiling ideas, then mirroring these back to stakeholders -- all seem to be good principles for moving complex academic changes forward. A Design/Implementation Team approach provides a balance between focused leadership provided by a relatively small group of highly committed people, and the high degree of consultation necessary for inclusive decision-making. Perhaps this model can be shared and replicated with other CSU campuses. It might even inform policy-making processes at the Chancellor's Office itself.

Some of these insights are also relevant nationally. I already mentioned the fact that a design team approach was adopted at Chico based on comparing a variety of GE reform efforts aired at AAC&U meetings on general education. Attending national meetings in which diverse universities shared their successes and failures in terms of change processes was very informative for Chico State's effort. Exchanges of experiences are the *raison d'être* for organizing these conferences and the Chico team benefited from our participation in these efforts. On a similar note, publications centering on both processes for moving change forward (for example *Revising General Education - And Avoiding the Potholes: A Guide for Curricular Change*) as well as models for change (LEAP, HIPs, etc) are extremely helpful for affecting positive change across the fragmented landscape of US (global) higher education. Continual assessment and updating of academic change across AAC&U institutions ("How're we doin'") and systematic dissemination of these results is an important function of the AAC&U from which Chico has benefitted.

d. conclusions

The three most important aspects of the Compass Project for CSU, Chico were:

1. Ideas for moving GE forward ranging from LEAP goals, the definition and importance of HIPs and the emphasis on inclusive excellence. While the campus had to find its own way toward instantiating these concepts, they provided valuable benchmarks.
2. A national and statewide context for acting now on GE redesign. Participating in a national project helped us answer critics who viewed the times as too perilous to act. Statewide support was helpful in exchanging ideas with other beta sites and receiving encouragement and constructive criticism from our statewide liaison.
3. Financial support was modest given the scope of the project, but was critically important. We held off spending most of the funds until they could be effectively invested in faculty partners who had to work incredibly hard to pull off this project. Probably 85% of the Compass funds went to faculty doing curricular and implementation work. These funds were strategically important in demonstrating good faith and in conveying to faculty the value of their work.

As in the best externally funded projects, in the case of the Compass project and CSU, Chico there was a clear and compelling intersection of interests between the funding organization and the grant recipient that led to a seamless integration of project activities and goals in line with the

desired outcomes of both parties. The Compass project has been a great partnership for our campus. It is our sincere hope that the experience gained has been equally valuable for all involved, and that the hard work invested to date results in enhanced engagement and student learning for years to come.