

Date: Wed, Oct 29, 2008 at 7:06 PM
Subject: GEN ED

Dear Jaye,

You and your CEP colleagues have done a really masterful job of creating intelligent, patient and meaningful discussion about general education issues. I am grateful to you all.

Had I spoken today, this is what I would have said:

When we think of both General and Introductory education at UCSC (different from each other), we should shape our courses and programs within the context of being a research institution. When I taught my Oakes College core course sections and designed my Writing 1 and 2 courses, I was always mindful of the fact that such courses ought to resonate with the research mission of the university. Even beginning students, so far as I am concerned, should know that they are in a research environment. All of our Gen Ed courses ought to invite students to develop and enact the habits of mind that characterize academic research. That's where faculty derive a huge amount of their motivation and pleasure, and students can too. Moreover, our society needs people with these capacities, I'd say.

I have in mind habits of mind like paying attention to others' scholarly work before expecting one's own ideas to be taken seriously; expecting to identify evidence to support one's claims; accurately representing views with which one disagrees; sustaining inquiry and avoiding premature conclusions; putting one's ideas out in the marketplace of ideas; writing both to discover one's ideas and to engage others in thinking about them; developing a generative self-consciousness about one's intellectual life; figuring out how to sustain dialogue with a diversity of people... etc.

I have come to think that we don't ask enough of our students. I mean, enough in the way of creative, sustained, imaginative and rigorous thinking, where we guide them to discover their interests in each others' presence. Fortunately, learning theory suggests that active engagement is better than passive, "banking" education, and a research environment provides infinite models of such active engagement. My experience has been that even first-quarter students rise to the occasion to do meaningful research (in their trajectory as learners) , and they come to appreciate what it means to have enrolled at UCSC and not at a community college or even a UC campus where research opportunities are postponed until way beyond the first year.

So I believe in giving students guided opportunities to pursue real inquiry. For that reason, it occurs to me that Gen Ed could consist of students selecting from a wide diversity of courses in order to pursue research on an issue that requires both time and access to more than one discipline. In a way, I want all students to do what students pursuing individual majors used to do in greater numbers than they now do. Perhaps as a Junior year requirement (one way to satisfy a major GE component) students should produce a junior research essay that makes use of work in some number of appropriate courses. This Junior year research could also evolve into a student's Senior Thesis, where that's an option.

When I taught a Writing 1/2 that began and ended with the question: "Should beauty and justice be in the same conversation?" I had mostly frosh and sophomores. The course resembled a graduate seminar in terms of student initiative in choosing research subjects, developing a sense of responsibility to each other and to the scholars we were reading, and respect for oneself as a writer. I felt as though in this class we were enacting what marks UCSC as so special: combining basic level writing instruction with profoundly challenging intellectual (and political) material in a learner-centered classroom. Mostly, it worked, and Gen Ed for the campus should evolve from the best rendition of academic research we can embrace.

Hope this isn't too long-winded. The work that you've done is so important, and I'd like to see it succeed.

Best wishes,

Don