A Thematic Approach through General Education

As approved by GERS - September 21, 2018 and revised November 2, 2018

Introduction

A thematic approach to general education helps to tell a meaningful story about a student's exploration of learning beyond their chosen major. Sonoma State's thematic approach to general education (Sea Lanes) offers participating students greater coherence in their General Education studies. Students may elect to join a sealane, enjoying exposure to the approaches of multiple disciplines related to a common theme or topic. Faculty and staff will work to provide advising and co-curricular support that enriches the meaningfulness of general education. Further, within thematic areas, some sequences may be developed and offered by associated departments and faculty, providing even greater coherence and community for students wishing a "cohort" model through their studies. Although thematic approaches to upper-division courses many be designed, they will not offer enough units to count as an official theme. Sea Lanes are primarily designed for those entering Sonoma State as first-year students.

The Basics. In completing a theme, students will complete approved courses in

- A minimum of 15 units.
- Courses in at least three different letter areas (A, B, C, D, E) of the general education program.
- Courses chosen to help students meet multiple overlay requirements in their General Education program.
- No more than three courses in any one program or department.
- At least one Upper-Division GE course, taken as the last course in the thematic cluster, which includes coursework dedicated to reflection upon both the theme and the overall general education experience. Ideally, this and other courses in the thematic cluster would address a "wicked problem" from several disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives

Advising and Planning

- The office of Academic Programs will assist faculty in planning curriculum for Sea Lanes. Sea Lanes are meant to provide coherence, but are not meant to be blocks to graduation.
- Ideally, each Sea Lane will offer multiple courses in each GE area it covers.
- Advisors and/or peer advisors associated with the Sea Lane will need to work closely with students so they can plan the rest of their GE program in the areas not covered by the particular Sea Lane (these will vary).
- Students may leave a Sea Lane at any time and complete their GE program without ill effect. Provided they are able to complete the requirements, students may also jump into a Sea Lane even if they did not start with it as a first-year student.

- All courses approved in themes are also approved for and will count towards the 48-units required in general education.
- Generally, larger classes will be developed early in the Sea Lane (such as First-Year Learning Communities and/or large lecture courses). As the student advances, smaller sections of related courses will be offered.
- The Office of Academic Programs will work with schools to address the best way to ensure available seats for students continuing in a Sea Lane. Not all students in a particular general education course will be taking it as part of a Sea Lane, but seats will be reserved for those who are.
- Departments & Programs offering a course for a theme will agree to offer it at least once annually for four years

Certificates/Recognition of Completion of Sea Lane

GERS strongly considered detailing specific requirements for a certificate to be awarded to students and identified on their transcripts. We feel planning should begin without limiting creativity with prescribed ideas about certificates.

1. The primary importance of Sea Lanes is to provide integrated educational experiences. We want faculty to develop thematic approaches that will be interesting to them and to students, allowing the intellectual practices of multiple disciplines to be explored around a common theme or problem. We want that multi-disciplinary inquiry, rather than certificate requirements, to drive planning for Sea Lanes.
2. We do not want to create additional roadblocks to graduation until we see how a thematic approach works in practice. For instance: How many students will persist in a Sea Lane after the initial course(s)?
3. Some in the GERS Committee were not sure that an area of Emphasis through General Education quite rises to the level of certificate. It may be that a more apt term could be used to recognize completion.
4. As Sea Lanes are developed beginning in 2019, the GE Sub-Committee can examine the proposals and work with Academic Programs to determine the viability of awarding certificates. Perhaps noting on transcripts that "An area of Emphasis through GE in _____ ') would suffice.
5. If a decision is made in AY 2020-21 (or 21-22) to recognize Sea Lane completion on transcripts, it could still be awarded to students who began in AY 2019-20.

Community Engagement & Co-Curricular

Ideally, Community-based learning of some sort would be featured in a well-developed Sea Lane. This is something that should be addressed when certificate requirements are determined. This could be accomplished with:

- a common service experience for students across a range of courses,
- a specifically designed service-learning course as part of the thematic approaches,
- an internship experience that addresses community needs.

As each Sea Lane will be devised to have students focus on a wicked program from multiple angles, it would be valuable if the Community Engagement experiences would be aligned with the "wicked problem."

Additionally, for some Sea Lanes it might work to include semester(s) studying abroad as part of an ideal program.

For all Sea Lanes, it would be appropriate to develop events in order to foster intellectual community. Some ideas include:
- Faculty panels discussing topics across courses
- Field trips
- Student presentations of their work

Proposals
The office of Academic Programs will develop protocols for soliciting proposals. During AY 2018-19, organization meetings will be planned to match faculty from across disciplines around possible topics. Once topics have been determined, calls will go out to the faculty at large to offer (new or ongoing) courses that might fit with a theme.

One Possible Model: Cohort Approach
A cohort would be a sequenced path through a particular theme. It would be an advising path and would not confer additional recognition on transcript. It would, however, provide opportunities for students to connect and re-connect over their years of study. Even more could be done to enhance education with co-curricular events and/or residential life experiences.

- Cohort models will allow for intense curricular planning amongst groups of interested faculty should they wish to do so.
- Cohort models should be constructed so as to complete the definition of a thematic cluster (Sea Lane).
- All courses in a cohort track should be sequenced with larger classes in the beginning, and fewer or smaller classes as the students progress.
- Departments and programs must commit to offering courses in the year promised to the cohort's students.
- Students may leave a cohort and still complete a thematic cluster on their transcript.
- Seats will be held in cohort classes for cohort students, but will be made available to other students to capacity.
- Courses in a cohort model must also be approved for inclusion in the area of thematic emphasis.
- Upon proposal, cohort models will be approved by the General Education sub-committee, with support and coordination from Academic Programs.

Not all areas of emphasis may include or lend themselves to cohort models. Some possible examples include:
- "The future of food" in Environmental/Sustainability"
- "Science-fiction crossings" in Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion (sample provided)
- "Labor movements past and present" in Social Justice
- "Service-learning as inquiry" in Community/Civic Engagement

<u>Changelog</u>
Revised November 2, 2018:
- Number of units reduced from 18 to 15
- Minimum of 6 sub-areas changed to minimum of 3 letter areas

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