

State of California
M e m o r a n d u m



To: Deans
Associate Deans
Department Heads/Chairs
Chair, Academic Senate
Chair, Curriculum Committee

Date: November 14, 2001

From: Paul J. Zingg
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

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Subject: Reduction of Minimum Number of Units
Required for Baccalaureate Degree

In my memo to you of October 22 on this same topic, I reviewed the background for the Trustees' resolution that called on the campuses in the CSU to "establish and maintain a monitoring system to ensure that justification is provided for all program requirements that extend the baccalaureate unit requirement beyond 120 units [i.e., 180 quarter units]." The Trustee resolution is particularly aimed at high-unit programs which do not have the oversight of professional accrediting agencies. Further, I indicated the intention of Academic Affairs to "implement the resolution in such a manner that any resulting curricular changes can be developed and approved by the faculty in time for inclusion in the 2005-2007 Catalog at the latest." Accordingly, David Conn and I will follow-up with the Academic Senate's Curriculum Committee to determine the shape and guidelines for the monitoring system that the Trustees have called to be established.

Let me in this memo, though, offer some comments on the task before us as I both understand the Trustees' resolution and intend to follow it.

The Trustees specifically direct that "all program requirements" for the baccalaureate degree be examined. This means, in terms of unit-generating elements, the major, general education, and free electives. It is expected, then, that all three of these elements will be examined as part of our explanation for the total number of units in our baccalaureate degrees and as part of any unit reduction strategy. I bring no predetermined sense to the outcome of the review before us -- that is, no predetermined

sense of which degree elements to "target" for reduction, if reduction is to occur -- and, I hope, that will be the case with all of you. I do expect, though, that each of these degree elements will be examined and that no one should assume that the burden of reduction -- again, if reductions occur -- will only rest elsewhere.

Regarding the construction of majors at Cal Poly, with very few exceptions, our programs match or are slightly under Systemwide averages in those majors that exist at Cal Poly and elsewhere. In many cases, the reduction of units in our majors over the last 7-8 years has been greater than what can be attributed just to the general education program's reduction from 79 to 72 units. Nevertheless, that is not the case in many programs, especially in those instances where, despite the unit reduction in the GE program, the unit requirements for majors have actually increased. The reduction of GE was not, in and of itself, meant to be a signal that the major could increase. Majors that have increased their unit totals, or reduced them less than the GE reduction, may be particularly vulnerable to scrutiny. I strongly encourage those major programs, in particular, that have not reduced their unit total by at least seven (i.e., the GE reduction) to examine what they are doing, and why, for these are the questions that are being asked as part of this Systemwide directive.

Regarding general education, as noted above, our new GE program, the consequence of strongly-supported Senate action, is now at 72 units. This is the minimum number of units required by Executive Order 595 and represents a 9% reduction in the size of our general education requirements. The new GE program also has considerably more flexibility than its predecessor, particularly regarding the ability of all majors to double-count all appropriate lower-division courses. It is not unusual, in fact, for some majors to double-count as much as 50% of their GE courses. Other features of the new GE program include the development of learning objectives consistent with the curricular objectives of professional and regional accrediting associations and the opportunity for all University departments to offer GE courses, as long as they address GE learning objectives.

I will continue to urge the GE program to balance flexibility with its other principal concerns -- quality, integrity and learning goals -- but it is important for all to realize that the Senate-approved template for the GE program, fully endorsed by the President and me, does not direct any changes in the GE program until after the program has been in effect for two years. That is, there will be no formal review of the GE program until 2003-2004. Consequently, departments need to recognize that the current GE template will exist for at least two years, before a mandated review of GE occurs. Even then, unless EO 595 is changed, and there is no indication that either the Chancellor or the Trustees are interested in changing or challenging EO 595, the GE unit total for a quarter calendar campus will continue to be 72. Departments, in other words, should not assume that the burden of unit reduction can be shifted to GE or that the outcome of the GE review in 2003-2004 will result in further unit reductions of our GE program. As it does now, though, the GE Director and Committee will continue to encourage any department to develop GE courses that address the GE program's goals and objectives and that can simultaneously provide an enriching curricular experience for their and other majors.

Regarding free electives, the general baccalaureate guidelines of the CSU aim to guarantee at least 8 free electives for all students. This degree element, however, is the least "protected" and has been routinely compromised in the face of accreditation requirements and other (GE, for example) considerations. There are 24 Cal Poly majors (representing all of the colleges, except Business) that provide fewer than 8 free electives in the normal construction of an undergraduate degree program. Again, although free electives are easy targets, I urge that they not necessarily be the first or only target as they serve an important purpose in providing our students with vital opportunities to explore their own values and interests through greater exposure to the faculty and disciplines of the University as a whole.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you. Although none of us are particularly thrilled to undertake the mandated task ahead of us, it does give us an opportunity to affirm what we do and to identify the quality within our curricular designs -- both majors and GE. Our responsibility, first and foremost, to our students and the State of California is the highest quality teaching and learning environment that we can provide given our resources. Unit reduction for the sake of facilitating progress to degree is a valid strategy. But unit reduction that compromises academic quality, or Cal Poly's distinctive identity and reputation, serves no one. I am confident that, if unit reduction occurs, it can be done fairly and appropriately, and the President, David Conn, and I will work to ensure that is the case.