**GE AREA D STUDENT REFLECTION PAPERS REPORT**

**July 2022**

**Background/Description of GE Program ePortfolio:**

Fresno State developed a proposal for a new system of evaluating GE student learning outcomes during the 2014-2015 AY. The proposal was approved by Fresno State’s Academic Senate in May 2017 and the University President in August of 2017. Essentially, all freshmen and transfer students admitted to Fresno State beginning in Fall 2018 will submit one designated assignment aligned to one GE student outcome from lower-division (for freshmen) and upper-division (for freshmen and transfer students) GE courses to a GE Program ePortfolio. Students will also write 300-word reflections (freshmen write three and transfer students write one) about their learning and submit these to the GE Program ePortfolio. The GE Program ePortfolio was set up by the Director of Assessment and students were automatically enrolled. The ePortfolio Canvas course includes prompts for the reflection papers and a link for submitting these papers.

The GE Assessment Subcommittee was established to review and analyze work submitted to the students’ ePortfolios. This group functions as a subcommittee of the University GE Committee and it includes faculty members, the Director of Assessment, and one student representative. Faculty members are appointed by the GE Committee through the normal “call for service” process used by the Academic Senate (Fresno State APM 215). The GE Assessment Subcommittee evaluates student work in each GE Area and is evaluated on a rotating basis.

**Process for Review of Student Reflection Papers in AY 2021-22**

In AY 2021-22, student work in Area D, Social Sciences, was assessed. At Fresno State, Area D now includes one course in American History (Area D1) and one course in Social Science (Area D2).

Part of that assessment was a review of student reflection paper submissions. These reflection papers are an example of an *indirect assessment.* Indirect assessment “approximates what students have learned without providing a concrete demonstration of that learning” (Natasha Jankowski and Staci Provenzis, “Making Student Learning Evidence Transparent: The State of the Art,” National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, November 2011, p. 6). Indirect assessment can be contrasted with *direct* assessment, concrete evidence of student learning, such as exams, papers, presentations, or portfolios (ibid.). To gain a complete picture of student learning at an institution, both direct and indirect measures should be evaluated (ibid., p. 38). Our accrediting agency, WSCUC, also recognizes that both direct and indirect measures can be used to collect evidence of student learning (WASC, 2013 Handbook of Accreditation, revised April 2015, p. 48).

The prompt for student reflections from their Area D GE coursework was as follows:

**Reflection Area D Prompt:**  
 During the courses you took, what were the most memorable aspects of learning about the social, political, and economic institutions within and outside the United States? How do you think you will be able to apply this learning in any way outside of these courses?

The Co-Chair of the GE Assessment Subcommittee, Dr. Luis Fernando Macías from the College of Social Sciences, directed the review of student reflection papers. Two additional faculty members, Dr. Luis Gordo Peláez from the College of Arts and Humanities and Dr. Miguel Pedroza from the Jordan College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, collaborated with Dr. Macías on the review. The University Director of Assessment selected forty student reflection papers for Area D from the students’ ePortfolio submissions.

In their papers, students referenced coursework in the following subjects:

* American Government
* Chicano and Latin American Studies
* Criminology
* Economics
* Political Science
* Psychology
* Sociology
* U.S. History
* Women’s Studies

The reviewers met and collaboratively decided on the process they would use to review student papers and analyze the results. The reviewers analyzed themes discussed in student papers, students’ reflections on how their classroom experiences are connected to life outside of the university, level of detail in the reflection papers, and student suggestions.

**Results of Review of Student Reflection Papers**

The faculty members had the following feedback, based on their review of student papers.

General Conclusions

Reading students’ reflections on their Area D coursework was very enlightening for many reasons. It served as a reminder of the impact that our courses can have on bright student minds as well as the need to have gauges that can help us strengthen and uphold those impactful classes.

The strongest essays were not necessarily those that were grammatically the strongest but rather those that were able to articulate essentially why classes like these (Area D) are essential. They are asking students to think critically, become civically engaged, and understand the fundamental structures of society.

Themes in Student Papers

Two of the most common themes noted by the reviewers were the U.S. electoral system and the history of U.S. political institutions and its impact on modern social constructs. Individual student responses coalesced around several different topics as noted below:

*U.S. Government*

* Rights and responsibilities of persons living in the United States
* Importance of the political process, including voting
* Self-government
* Comparison of U.S. system of government with other types of governance

*History*

* The American Revolution
* The history of U.S. government
* The institution of slavery in the U.S.
* The Civil War
* How history can shape the present and future

*Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*

* Racial and gender inequality
* Issues affecting people of color, women, LGBTQ+ persons
* Greater understanding of Hispanic/Latino culture
* Diversity
* Patriarchy

*Critical Thinking*

* Identifying reliable sources
* Distinguishing biased information in the media
* Critical media consumption

*Civic Engagement*

* The experience of volunteering at a foodbank
* The immediate applicability of a service-learning course

*Economics*

* Money management
* Supply and demand
* Gross Domestic Product
* The supply chain
* Behavior of producers and consumers in the U.S. economy

*Criminology*

* Criminal behavior

Application of Course Content

The faculty reviewers also analyzed student responses to the question “how do you think you will be able to apply your learning outside the courses?”

The most-discussed applications centered around involvement in the political system. Several students referred to increased political awareness and a greater understanding of voting rights and responsibilities. They also discussed how the knowledge they gained would serve to educate other family members about the history and the process of registration and voting. In a similar manner, students who reflected on Sociology and Women’s Studies courses reported a need to share knowledge gained with others and serve in the community.

Other students related information learned to future career plans. For example, one student connected information about supply chains to their aspiration to open a small business. Another, a future teacher, discussed the desire to impart what they had learned to their students. A third found the information learned helpful to their future career as a lawyer.

There were also applications related to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. One student reflected on recognizing the contributions/importance of Chicanas in her CLAS course. Another mentioned a better understanding of Latino culture and family roots. A third discussed the importance of examining patriarchy from multiple perspectives as a key to improving social relations and mental health. A fourth noted connections between their history class and current movements such as Black Lives Matter.

Reflections also discussed how students could use course concepts (especially in Economics classes) in their lives, for example in self-purchasing behavior and better management of personal finances.

Reflection papers that made little or no connection to how course knowledge could be applied tended to write in generalities, without providing concrete examples. Other responses were vague, especially if students attempted to cover all the courses they took in Area D.

Level of Detail in Papers

The faculty reviewers rated the level of detail in the papers on a scale of one (few or no details) to five (extensive details). Two faculty members scored each paper in detail and the results were averaged. The following scores were assigned:

4.5-5.0 1

4.0-4.49 0

3.5-3.99 14

3.0-3.49 7

2.5-2.99 8

2.0-2.49 8

1.5-1.99 1

1.0-1.49 1

Most of the scores were in the mid-range of the scale, indicating that the students generally did a satisfactory job of supporting their response. The reviewers had suggestions for how we might change the prompt to elicit more details in the future.

Student Suggestions

The prompt did not ask students to provide suggestions about the Area D courses they took. However, a number of papers did include feedback and their voices should be included here. Students made the following comments:

* Wanted more online course options
* Faced challenges taking virtual courses during COVID, including time management
* Wanted more small group learning
* Interested in expanded CLAS curriculum
* Needed more time to review online course materials

**Ideas for Future Analysis of Reflection Papers**

Faculty reviewers offered several ideas for revising the reflection paper process in the future. One was to change the prompt to elicit more useful information. Here is one suggestion:

“From your Area D courses, (1) Select one course from Area D that helped you to better your understanding of social, political, and economic institutions, and (2) Explain how the course had an impact in your daily life. Make sure to include concise examples that describe if the course was able to influence your behavior, or way of thinking about social, political, and economic institutions.”

Another potential revision of the prompt was to ask students to reflect on one or two GE courses in that area that they found meaningful, rather than expecting students to reflect on all their courses they took in a GE area.

Finally, students might be asked to make connections between the course content and students’ current lives, rather than writing about the future.

A second possibility would be to establish criteria for evaluating reflection papers, such as the following:

* Number of themes mentioned by students
* Student demonstrates understanding of the selected topic (1 to 5 scale)
* Student includes an analysis of social/political/economic institutions
* Student provided examples of how the themes applied to their daily life

The reflection papers submitted provided helpful evidence to assess what students perceive that they have gotten out of their Area D GE courses. Additional detail in reflection papers would have added to the quality of that evidence. The prompt requires a 300 word student reflection and it is difficult for students to fully reflect on a GE Area in a paper that is approximately one page long. The challenge is that students are being asked to write a reflection for which they will receive no academic credit or other direct benefit. There is a question about how much it is fair to require when many of our students are busy with coursework, their job, family responsibilities, and other time commitments. If there was a way to provide students with a reward for crafting a reflection paper, it would be more reasonable to expect a longer paper.

**CONCLUSION**

Dr. Luis Fernando Macías (chair), Dr. Luis Gordo Peláez, and Dr. Miguel Pedroza reviewed and analyzed forty randomly selected student reflection papers. These faculty members considered a number of topics in their analysis, including themes mentioned by the students, application of course content outside the classroom, and the level of detail in student reflections.

Student papers identified a number of topics from their courses that were memorable to them, including the U.S. system of self-government, important periods in U.S. history, equity and social justice, critical media consumption, and principles of economics. Several papers focused on the rights and responsibilities of self-governing people, including the right to vote and the process for registering to vote.

Student papers also made a number of connections between course content and their lives beyond the classroom. Some students planned to share what they had learned about the U.S. political system with other family members. Other students discussed using course concepts in their careers and personal lives. A number of reflections also discussed a greater awareness of issues related to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

The level of detail in the papers was mixed. Additional detail would have helped the subcommittee to learn more about student reflections from their coursework. Revised prompts and incentives for students to write longer papers could provide richer feedback for use in assessment.

Student reflection provided evidence that Area D courses have a significant impact on our hard working and talented students. In addition to learning about important topics in the social sciences, students have plans to use what they have learned beyond the classroom. In a number of cases, these plans include civic engagement and sharing what they have learned with friends and family members.