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## **Basic Principles of the CSUN “Stackable” Curriculum**

### **What is a “Stackable” Curriculum?**

Many CSUN degree programs have a number of elective courses. Sometimes these electives are configured into more structured areas of focus (with a specified program of study – set of specified course that make up that focus of study) that are developed by the faculty in the department(s) in question and approved through formal CSUN approval processes at the departmental, college, and university levels at a recognized and structure “option” in the degree in question. Once formally approved, an “option” that area of focused study appears on the transcript and on the diploma for students who complete are the specified requirements for the option in question. Any given degree program can have multiple options each of which is developed by the faculty and approved through the formal CSUN approval processes to be a recognized part of the degree program in question.

CSUN also offer a number of graduate credit certificate programs that are defined by CSUN policy as comprising fifteen or more credit units in a thoughtfully and tightly structured curriculum that focuses on a specific field of emphasis usually in a professionally focused discipline. Such certificate programs may be developed to serve the post-baccalaureate and/or the post-masters student. Graduate credit certificates are developed by the faculty in the discipline(s) in question and are approved through the formal CSUN approval processes at the departmental, college, and university levels. Students who successfully complete a CSUN graduate credit certificate have the courses and the certificate earned recorded on the transcript and they receive from CSUN a graduate credit certificate issued by CSUN and signed by the president. As with a degree program, the completion of the certificate is verified through the Graduate Studies Office with a formal “grad check” before the certificate is approved and issued to the student in question.

The “stackable” curriculum is an approach that allows departments and colleges to create options as outline above in the first paragraph of this section that are also graduate credit certificates as outlined above in the second paragraph of this section. All the requirements for creating an option and for creating a certificate must be met. All required formal CSUN approval processes are required. For each individual option that is also a certificate a separate and complete approval process is required. The result is a CSUN degree program with and approved option that is also a CSUN graduate credit certificate and a student who successfully completes the degree program and all the requirements for the option/certificate earns both the masters degree and the graduate credit certificate in question. To apply for the certificate program, a student must meet all the requirements for admission to the degree program.

## **What is the Educational Purpose of a “Stackable” Curriculum?**

Over the last decade in many fields of practice post-baccalaureate study has become a requirement for advancement in the field and/or the masters (or professional doctorate) are required for professional practice in the field. The demand is growing worldwide for highly educated professional who have been professionally prepared in a university program that is thoughtfully designed, structured to provide both foundational and “specialization” preparation in a well-crafted program, and taught with instructional strategies that foster the development of a reflective and conceptually sophisticated practitioner. The stackable curriculum allows departments and colleges to develop advanced professional preparation degree programs that provide a strong preparation in particularly areas of professional practice in the field in question that is embedded in the program and recognized on the transcript.

In addition, in many fields, the areas of recognized specialization in have grown in number and in depth and breadth. This has led to a growing number of fields and subfields. While it can be impractical for a student to take multiple degrees to gain command of several interrelated fields in a discipline, it may be very valuable to have a structure grounding in more than one of the interrelated fields in a discipline once one has begun to think and practice at the more advanced level. The stackable curriculum allows those who earn a masters degree with one option/certificate embedded in it to return to the university post-masters to take additional options/certificates linked to the masters degree they have to gain both breadth and versatility of knowledge and conceptual skills and an advantage in career and career options over time.

Further, in many fields of practice, the lines between disciplines are shifting. For example, those working in civil engineering that having a structured program of study in urban planning or sustainability is a strong advantage as they reach the higher levels of professional practice and management in the field. The stackable curriculum approach also allows CSUN to support innovation in the development of cross-disciplinary programs. Related fields in different disciplines (across department and/or college lines) to easily work together to craft a program that may offer both disciplinary and cross-disciplinary options/certificates embedded in a given degree program. The development and approval processes for cross-disciplinary programs are the same as for single discipline programs (with multiple departments or colleges involved at the departmental and college level approvals as is appropriate before it moves to the university level).

Finally, the dynamic of careers has changed. Most people with change careers 3 to 5 times across their career-span – not just moving up within a particular career, but changing careers and areas of professional focus. It is no longer rare for individuals to have working lives that exceed 45 years in duration. The marketplace, professional practice, and an individual’s sense of focus and meaningful work is likely to change significantly over that span of time. In that light, the need for professional range and versatility at an advance level of professional preparations increases. Those with

advanced degrees are increasingly finding that the need to or wish to change career directions. Those that “wish to” are also growing in number as individuals graduating in more recent years often see their career as more in their own control that was typical in decades past – that is, they may choose to work in one area for sometime, to build experience that enhances their options in combination with their formal education, then to shift to another area of professional practice that allows them to use some of their acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities in a new context. This kind of career path is well served by the ability to come back to the university not just for a few courses but a structure program of study like the option/certificate in the stackable curriculum that allows one to build on what one has and take it in a new direction (perhaps one that has emerged in the discipline more recently). One see more individuals coming back for a second masters than in decades past, but that is not always the best option if what the mid-career professional wants is to add structure and focused knowledge and conceptual skills at a graduate level in the field in which they have ground their career.

### **What is the Development Process for a Stackable Curriculum?**

The process is the same as for any standard degree program or standard graduate credit certificate.

If departments/colleges are going to create a stackable curriculum in which there are options that are also graduate credit certificates, the graduate credit certificate curriculum has to be developed and approved and then embedded in the degree as an approved option/certificate.

If it is an entirely new degree program for CSUN, it must go through formal approvals up to the Chancellor’s Office level.

If the degree program in question exists but is being modified to include a new option/certificate, it must go through the formal approval process at the department(s), college(s), and university level for the certificate and then to embed that as an option in the degree. The approvals can be done at the same time, but there must be a clear and distinct set of proposals and curriculum plans that justify the certificate as well as the reason to create the option/certificate in the degree in question.

### **WASC and Special Accreditation Approvals**

Any new degree must be added to the WASC list of approved programs once it has gone through all required CSUN and CSU approvals. For self-support programs that are handled by the WASC lead in the Tseng College working with the CSUN WASC liaison. For state-funded programs that are done by the associate dean in the college in question working with the CSUN WASC liaison.

If a college or program has special accreditation for the college as a whole or for specific programs, the requirements of that special accreditation may limit the flexibility that field has for development options and/or “stackable” curricula. The dean and associate dean in the college in question should look carefully at special accreditation requirements before planning a “stackable” curriculum approach.

## **Applying to a Graduate Program with a Stackable Curriculum**

Masters degrees with a stackable curriculum are designed to require application to the masters degree to take the full program or only the option/certificate. Most students enrolling in these programs take the full masters degree start to finish. If the program in question is offered by CSUN via self-support, it is typically offered in a cohort format that fosters this study approach.

If the program in question is designed to allow students to take a given option/certificate first and then complete the masters degree if they wish, students still must apply to the masters degree and meet all admission requirements. The reason for this is that often students who take the option/certificate in a given field then find that with half the degree program done, it may be an advantage to them to complete the full degree. Degree programs with a stackable curriculum can be designed to allow this approach but there is often parameters limiting this options (for example, requiring that someone who successfully completes the option/certificate first and wishes to complete the degree must do so within a specified number of years to ensure that the students command of the option/certificate content is current enough to successful mesh with and build on the other components of the degree).

Students who already have a masters degree still apply again for the full masters but can identify their intention to only complete a particular option/certificate.

## **Financial Aid**

Masters degree programs with a stackable curriculum have the same financial aid options as any other masters degree programs. The range of options for standard masters degree and for masters degrees with a stackable curriculum vary depending on whether the program is state-funded or self-support (the primary difference is the CSU policy for State University Grants).

Students who already hold a masters degree and choose to pursue on the graduate credit certificate are generally not eligible for financial aid.

Student who pursue a second (or third) masters degree have the same eligibility for the masters degree with a stackable curriculum as they would for a standard masters degree programs (with the state-funded and self-support variation).

## **Marketing a Masters Degree Program**

It is important when marketing a program (in the catalog, on websites, or in digital or print marketing materials) with a stackable curriculum to present clearly and fully the advantages of the stackable curriculum and be precise and clear about the student earning both the degree and the graduate credit certificate that the option comprises when the program is structured that way. This is a significant career advantage for the student and a clear statement about the thoughtful and innovative structure of CSUN programs.

All requirements (including applying to the full masters degree and meeting all admission requirements) should be made clear.

### **What Are the Steps to Graduate for Master's Students in a Program with a Stackable Curriculum?**

**Formal Program:** Once classified, a student may submit the Formal Program, if the program is not live on the CSUN Degree Audit Reporting System (DARS) (department chairs and/or program directors/managers should verify with Graduate Studies Office if they are not sure if the department and program in question is live on DARS). The form on DARS for each program is a department specific form that lists all of the classes that are required for the master's degree in question. This form must be approved by the departmental advisor and the department's graduate coordinator as well as the assigned CSUN graduate evaluations specialists.

**Application for Graduation (form available online):** Students should be directed by the program director/manager to apply for graduation the semester before they plan to graduate. The application and the application fee (currently a \$47) should be submitted to CSUN's Office of Admissions and Records (located in the lobby of Bayramian Hall). There is no deadline for applying for graduation; however, the later a student submits the application to graduate form, the later a CSUN graduate evaluator the will be able to send the student a completed CSUN master's degree graduation evaluation report. This report tells the student what requirements he/she still needs to complete to earn the degree in question (or what paperwork the student still must turn in to complete his/her file).

**Project Planning Form:** Students who are not taking a Comprehensive Exam must file a Project Planning Form for a culminating project. The CSUN project planning form deadlines are listed on the CSUN Electronic Thesis/Dissertation (ETD) system.

**Culminating Enrollment:** Students who have already enrolled in the 698 (thesis/project/abstract) course and were given a grade of "RP," but still require an additional semester to continue working on their thesis, graduate project, or abstract may enroll in the Culminating Enrollment with department approval. This form allows the student to remain enrolled in the University and provides library privileges, but not health center services, and has no unit value. The fee is paid to the Tseng College. In order to enroll, a student must have: applied for graduation (or if previously applied for graduation, file a date change form with the CSUN Admissions and Records Office and pay the required change fee (currently \$8 ); classified standing, and filed a formal program with the Graduate Studies Office. Culminating Enrollment registration is subject to the "two-year time limit for completion of thesis/project."