

DISPATCH FROM THE WAR ABOUT GE

The argument over GE at CSUN has become an exchange of ultimatums between the CO and a committed coalition of faculty and students. The great mass of faculty, staff, and students has not engaged. But the haze of battle and the rumors of war dismay many of them. I know; I have talked with dozens of graduate students, undergraduates, faculty, and staff the past year.

The CO claims that the chancellor's executive orders have the authority of papal bulls, ending debate. Urban myth has encouraged some people to believe that the CO and Trustees author the education code; they do not. Rather, the education code is a section of the general legal code in California. The code compiles and sequences, both topically and historically, piecemeal legislation over time. (Title 5 consists of the administrative rules that the agency develops to make the code operable.) The CO also has hinted, at times, that only its anointed can interpret the educational code. Indeed, to some in the CO, shared governance with faculty on the campuses appears to be sacrilegious.

Meanwhile, the committed resistance of students and faculty at CSUN still defend the nullification of the executive orders in 2017. They invoke a local history of hard-won struggles to teach and learn diversity. Both sides see disaster ahead, if their views do not prevail. The CO fears that twenty-three campuses will spin out of orbit if central force is not compelling; there will be no regularity in system functions like transfer. Many in the campus resistance fear that white totalitarianism impels the ethnic "purification" of GE, then ethnic programs, and then ethnic students; they all can topple like dominos.

For the CO, as for the advocates of ethnic/diversity studies, much more than GE is at stake, much more than improved rates of graduation. The legislature already compelled the community colleges to revamp their approaches to basic skills. These old approaches assumed a "deficit" in the student. This deficit required delay for remediation. Instead, many academic reformers outside the CSU argue that "just-in-time" assistance boosts students' skills quickly. The CO wants to ride this wave, not be overtaken by it. Its credibility to external stakeholders is up for grabs in Sacramento and DC and among philanthropists like Gates and Carnegie. CSU leaders forget, though, that change must be credible to internal stakeholders. And one must make the case, if one wants people to believe. (This interpretation is, of course, speculative. I intend it to explain, not exculpate.)

Failure to consult adequately on a plan for large-scale change across twenty-three campuses and over one hundred programs accounted, in large measure, for the CSU-wide resistance to the executive orders in 2017-18. Presumption aggravated the conflict. The CO did not need to make the case or get credibility. It claimed the right to originate curriculum and frameworks for curriculum; it trivialized joint governance. It ignored specific attributions of authority to the campuses in the education code. By May 2018, the CO retracted most of these claims in a peace treaty with leadership in the Statewide Senate. The CO had confounded its undeniable power to implement the education code with the right to interpret the code, which it shares with faculty in academic matters.

The prolonged fight between CSUN and the CO seems to have resulted, in part, from irresolution about interpretative authority over academic matters within the CO. I know that sounds unlikely but hear me out. For brevity, I focus on one example. In spring 2018, with the agreement of the CSU chancellor, the CSUN president commissioned a task force to recommend how to reconcile CSUN's GE with the education code. The task force received no response from administration until, in summer 2018, the president reported that the CO now required that CSUN conform its GE—with an exception for area F—to the executive orders.

The distinction between the education code and the executive orders is fundamental. The code (and Title 5) operationalize breadth in GE carefully, in the context of a system of twenty-three self-governed universities. It requires broad categories of courses to align across the campuses. But it allows each campus to determine the proportions (and subdivisions) of those categories, as well as the specific content in courses. These practices spring from the principles and institutional precedents of academic freedom. The executive orders in 2017 usurped from the campuses the power over the categories, granted by the legislature.

So, was there a bait and switch? In spring, consult; in summer, renege. Several influential faculty and students think so; we heard so in the open meeting of the senate last Thursday. More likely, I speculate, there was a disconnect in the CO on the role of campuses (read faculty) as interpreters of the educational code. This disconnect became clear at CSUN. It explains the swing from the charge to the GE task force (comport with the educational code) to the assertion of the unilateral authority of executive orders (as the final word) in summer 2018. I suspect that the CO was aware of this contradiction. But the CO, I speculate, could not manage it, given ideological differences among administrators and given lines of authority that do not converge—and rarely consult—in the bureaucracy of the CO. (I believe that the CSU administration is far too busy to conspire on bait and switch.)

This disconnect played out at CSUN just as the CO pledged transparency and shared governance to the Statewide Academic Senate. The symmetry is revealing. In spring, the CO met with representative faculty leaders in the Statewide Senate to repair shared governance. In summer, it met with an unrepresentative group of faculty leaders (no ethnic studies faculty, for example) at CSUN to implement the CO's interpretation through executive orders. (If I had a dime for every time poor communication in summer caused chaos in the next academic year, I would retire. Wait, I am retired.)

On the one hand, we can see this conflict as normal eruption. It expresses the tension that builds up in a system of universities that also is an agency of the state with a coordinating headquarters. This is the third time that I have seen an intense clash over these issues in the CSU over thirty years; and I saw such a clash once in Minnesota, over four years.

On the other hand, well. . . the clash created a trying situation for CSUN faculty leaders who wanted resolution. One faculty president flamed out; the next is imperiled. Academic leadership, in the offices of the provost and undergraduate studies, was shredded last year. The antagonism threatens the interims in the provost's office this year. Two CSUN leaders of major task forces on GE issues have seen their reports stuffed since 2017. Several department chairs feel that they

have been used, as have members of the task forces. Yes, they all signed on for the jobs. Still, senior executives in CSU flee the fight and the triage. Instead, they deputize academic leaders, from faculty ranks, to take the heat. The spectacle is demoralizing. It feeds all sorts of distrust, in many directions.

The CO has made concessions. I even concede that! Timeline and F are prime examples. But the effect has been swamped by distrust. Here are more reasons why. CSUN administration scheduled courses in math that were not approved by curriculum committees, to placate the CO. No one in the CSU administration yet has defended to CSUN, on academic grounds, the proposed changes in basic skills. This failure has allowed mis-information to foment among faculty and students. The CO has affirmed the continuation of F, alongside the revised A-E. So far, neither the CO, local administration, nor faculty has shown publicly how this might work. As a result, proponents of ethnic/ diversity studies, many of whom are students, protest publicly. Their response is understandable. In fact, it is no easy trick to reconcile F with the new subdivisions in A-E, without swelling credits, over-riding new subdivisions, adding new subdivisions, or diluting something.

So, what should be done? Some of what should be done is out of the hands of CSUN. If my speculations are right, the CO should address troubling disconnects in its conception of how shared governance works. If the disconnect is not there, then it is between CO and CSUN administrative leadership.

Meanwhile, nullifiers should consider acknowledging concessions. It is gratifying and, at times, tactical to rain invective on faculty leaders fumbling to apply parliamentary procedure in rumbling open meetings. But for a solution to be reached, subtler communication that signals point of flexibility must come into play.

The principal parties to the dispute must solve F immediately. The “solution” cannot subscribe literally to the executive orders; but it must comport with the education code. CSUN administration should accept most, but not necessarily all, of the recommendations of the GE task force. At that point—which could be very soon—the president (invested with the authority of the chancellor) and the Faculty Senate leadership can endorse a GE fix for consideration by the appropriate academic bodies in CSUN. Of course, the campus nullifiers of the executive orders then should stop nullifying. I understand that the ethnic studies/ diversity advocates have concerns that will not be addressed by a fix to GE. Well, let’s capture momentum and attack those issues now, like right now. I understand that anger and despair drive people away from committing to organizational change. But I ask you to sign up again, for the students and future faculty and staff. Indeed, much good work already has been done; this blight, too, will pass. Ah, yes, there will be blights ahead. And so it goes.

The principal parties should meet, in advance of the senate meeting on dis/approving GE, on the parliamentary procedures for stepping out of the shadow of the nullifying resolution in 2017. There is no sense in proceeding to debate until process has been settled. This work might require the appointment of an ad hoc rules committee, consisting of emeriti senators.

These steps are short-term. Experienced moderators/mediators are needed to work out long-term rules of engagement among the principal parties to the dispute. Neutral observers should be asked to identify these parties.

Normal curricular processes should resume.

It is incumbent on the university (and the system) to detail, analyze, and remedy this breakdown in its upcoming accreditation report so that lessons are learned. It is incumbent on faculty and administrators, in or linked to academic affairs, to forgo the idea that CSUN can hire its way out of this dilemma. All finalists for leadership positions should receive, appropriately, a summary of where matters stand.

I advise strongly that a process like this be followed before/instead of filing motions of censure and/or no confidence in anyone.

I do not know how else to build trust. It will be earned by a series of small gestures—humane courtesies that one can never identify. But these gestures cannot occur until we get re-accustomed to walk and talk with each other again. It is God's grace to us. For, if we knew what those gestures were, we surely would screw them up.

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