

Common Core for college

BY SANDRA GUY

Staff Reporter

Last Modified: Apr 6, 2014 02:28AM

College students throughout the Chicago area will soon face their own version of Common Core — a higher-education program that requires they meet 16 criteria that show they can think critically, work hard and become valuable citizens of the world.

The so-called essential learning outcomes cover civic engagement, ethical reasoning, creative thinking, global learning, information literacy, intercultural knowledge and other skills. Titled LEAP, for Liberal Education and America's Promise, the movement works with colleges, universities and community colleges that enroll large numbers of minority and first-generation students, as well as with schools that have a strong liberal arts tradition.

“We need history, English and political science majors, of course, but to remain a global leader, the United States needs its engineers, business leaders and health professionals to be liberally educated as well,” said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which spearheaded the movement, in an exclusive interview with the Sun-Times.

One early adopter is Governors State University in University Park, which in the fall will admit freshmen and sophomores for the first time in its 45-year history. The university also for the first time will have students living in a residence hall on-campus — in the new \$20 million, 300-bed Prairie Place residence hall.

GSU President Elaine Maimon, one of the founders of writing across the curriculum, said the university started implementing LEAP practices two years ago as it prepared to expand to a four-year institution from a two-year university.

The reorganization means freshmen will follow a set schedule that ensures they obtain 15 credits per semester; be able to work on campus as much as possible, and be taught by new and veteran full-time professors rather than by part-time or adjunct professors.

Freshmen classes will be limited to no more than 30 students, except for freshmen composition class, which will be limited to 15 students.

Other Chicago-area universities that have embraced the LEAP project are Elmhurst College and Northeastern University in Illinois and Valparaiso University in Northwest Indiana, Schneider said.

Unlike Common Core, the higher-education outcomes originated not from state and federal elected officials, but from university faculty and administrators and their membership associations.

“We started first with faculty,” Schneider said. “But we soon discovered, both through dialogue and then through national surveys, that employers strongly endorse the Essential Learning Outcomes as well.”

The assessment arm of LEAP is called VALUE, for Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education.

Under the VALUE system, students will start getting scored on how well their classroom work — papers, portfolios, videos and other materials they produce in class — reflects some of the essential learning outcomes starting in Fall 2015.

Schneider said she is disappointed that Arne Duncan, a Hyde Park native who is Obama’s U.S. Secretary of Education, has recently depleted his higher-education team in favor of strengthening his K-12 reform team.

“I would have hoped that Secretary Duncan, who benefited from a very high-quality liberal education himself, would recognize the need to strengthen the quality of learning for the nation’s millions of first-generation students,” Schneider said. “But when it comes to higher education, the Obama administration has been far more focused on raising completion rates than on ensuring the breadth and quality of students’ college years.”

Yet, she said today’s students need much better understandings of the links between college study and graduates’ readiness to succeed as future employees.

About half of the students who attend the association’s member schools are first-generation college-goers, and the association’s focus groups have shown many have no idea what they are supposed to do in college, Schneider said.

“They don’t know how to make the best use of college,” she said. “We’re preparing students to be adaptive and to understand that an investment in their own future and the hard work of taking rigorous classes are their best route to career opportunity and career success.”

Email: sguy@suntimes.com

Twitter: [@sandraguy](https://twitter.com/sandraguy)