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# Developing High-Quality “General Education” Learning Outcomes for the Baccalaureate Graduate

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## Introduction

Examine the baccalaureate degree diploma hanging on your wall. What does it represent? More specifically, what knowledge, skills, and values does one assume they have garnered upon attaining the baccalaureate degree? Look again at the diploma, most will observe the term “Bachelor of Science” or “Bachelor of Arts” followed by a word or two in a smaller size of font stating the particular discipline to which the holder of the diploma can claim expertise. In essence, the degree granted by comprehensive universities and a host of other types of institutions of higher education located throughout the world is evidence that the student received both a liberal education and a career-launching education (Smith, 1978).

The culture and structure of most institutions of higher education, unfortunately, do not begin to sufficiently recognize the relationship between these two goals of a baccalaureate education. Indeed, while the diploma represents a student’s achievement in both areas, students, faculty, and administrators treat these dual outcomes as distinct, almost entirely unrelated, occurrences. Moreover, the sole concern of many students, parents, faculty members, and university administrators at the time the baccalaureate diploma is presented to the graduate is whether the student is sufficiently prepared to embark successfully on a career path; all stakeholders have long forgotten the general education program or, more importantly, that the baccalaureate degree represents that the recipient of the diploma has achieved a liberal education too. As a result, the quality of the higher education experience suffers.

This paper, and the successful grant project upon which it is grounded, is based upon three rather radical beliefs. First, the view that “general education” should not stop at the time a university student begins pursuing, in earnest, the requirements for their major. Also, and concomitant with the first belief, the notion that the entire faculty of a university should contribute during the career-launching course of study (which occurs generally during the

final two years of a four-year program) to the goal of building on the general education knowledge, skills, and values imbued in students typically during their freshman and sophomore years. Finally, that those of us within the Academe need to pay far more attention on student outcomes. Twenty years ago [Riley \(1980, p. 298\)](#) admonished: "Failing to discuss the aims of education unfortunately contributes to the minimal progress made in improving the quality of general education...." The fear exists that unless a change of the type suggested in this paper occurs, we will continue to perpetuate a program where much general education subject area knowledge, skills, and values atrophy while the student pursues their major field of study. This not only harms the student, but should this trend continue the entire foundation of the comprehensive university might well be threatened.

How can we re-focus our attention so that both goals of the baccalaureate degree are predominate at the time of graduation? The first step is to establish a process to develop high-quality expected learning outcomes for the baccalaureate graduate in general education areas. Given the tradition of ignoring this goal and of the "stovepipe" mentality that constrains faculty to perform in narrow roles on a university's campus, this is a daunting task. Yet the time is ripe for this examination, because it is increasingly acknowledged that learning outcomes are the appropriate starting point for curricular design ([Allan, 1996](#)). Included below is a description of a process that was successful in creating relevant learning outcomes.

The first section of this paper explains in greater detail the nature of this grievous oversight on the part of higher education. In the next section, the characteristics of a model process aimed at creating learning outcomes for general education areas are presented. Finally, a five-step process is described that was recently employed in the United States to create baccalaureate degree outcomes for academic areas traditionally covered almost entirely in a general education program during the first two years of a student's university or college education.

## **The Need**

Inherent within the process proposed in this paper to create general education learning outcomes is a recognition of two purposes of the baccalaureate degree: first, to generate a "liberally-educated" person, and, second, to create an individual who is prepared to embark on a chosen career path. For decades, the standard four-year curriculum for comprehensive universities has accomplished the first goal by requiring the student to matriculate successfully through a lower division set of coursework called "general education." The upper division coursework, on the other hand, is reserved almost exclusively for pursuing one's major. Upon receipt of the baccalaureate degree, the student either begins a career or enters into a post-baccalaureate program after which the individual then commences employment.

But, should we "give up" on general education at the end of the sophomore year? We postulate to students, parents, employers, and graduate schools that the graduate is liberally educated, in addition to being "career educated." But the notion of liberal education is given short shrift while the student pursues a major field of inquiry. In point of fact, statements of expected outcomes for general education at any level are seen infrequently. True, many universities will state in broad, general terms lofty goals for general education in a publicly available catalogue or within an internal memorandum geared for faculty consumption. But more detailed statements of actual expected student outcomes are not common. Some progress is evident in the past decade as greater numbers of universities state outcomes for individual general education courses. However, a statement of expected

student outcomes for the student who has completed an established general education program, usually at the end of their sophomore year, is rare. Yet even more scarce are statements of expected student outcomes in general education for the student about to receive their baccalaureate degree. It is to this end that this paper is directed.

We need to recognize that the message higher education is sending is confusing and disingenuous. We admit that the graduate has passed a course of study in a specific disciplinary field (largely taken in the final two years). But we also posit that the former student has attained a broad education, generally comprised of two years of work during the first years. The first two years are often dismissed by graduates as unimportant, and many question why they were "forced" to take a number of irrelevant courses before being able to pursue their major course of study. Moreover, those of us on the faculty often have difficulty articulating a solid rationale for many general education courses. Sometimes we state they are a necessary foundation for a particular major. Yet upon closer examination we find it difficult, if not impossible, to describe the relationship between the litany of categories of courses which comprise most general education programs and many major fields of study. Or, we pontificate that those first two years are aimed at making the student an "educated person," a term that carries with it a slightly incestuous tone as it is heard in response to a student's prompt. The truly perceptive student might ask in response, "Given the importance of being an 'educated person,' why is the curriculum for general education geared exclusively or almost exclusively to the first two years of a four-year program of study and there is nothing I am required to accomplish in the final two years which furthers this goal?" What we have is a house divided: the general education faculty perform a single function in one-half of the floor space of the house and the major degree faculty (largely in the professional fields) perform their function in the other half. Upon serious reflection, these two groups have more in common than is often expressed in campus hallways (Lynton, 1991).

Fortunately or not, this issue is no longer part of a discussion occurring only with the academy. Indeed, the walls of our formally cloistered "home" of higher education are crumbling. One author observes that "(t)he question of the effectiveness of colleges and universities has assumed a new salience in America" (Bess, 1998, p. 3). Another commentator more precisely states "(t)here is widespread discontent with the quality of education and levels of college student achievement" (emphasis added) (Jones, 1998, p. vi.). But even more telling is this quote from Brubacher: "The locus of power seems to be shifting from inside to outside the university, from the community of scholars to the public domain, from the university's historic position of privilege and immunity to one of responsibility and accountability" (Michael, 1998, p. 377).

These statements are touchstones for the idea that "quality" must be defined more exactly, more expressly, and with greater emphasis on factors other than a specific discipline's faculty judgment. We need to "demystify" quality as it relates to higher education. We have for too long judged quality on campus, according to Marchese (1993, p. 11), "by citing the opinion of insiders and peers; or quality has been declared 'ineffable' and therefore beyond discussion." Further, it is imperative that those of us within higher education lead ourselves through this "sea of change" (Newman, 1998).

This paper presents a successful method of creating expected student outcomes for general education subject areas by using a more inclusive approach that employs both traditional general education faculty and faculty from "career-oriented" disciplines. Let there be no doubt: we leave to the various individual disciplines the articulation of expected learning outcomes for major fields of study. Indeed, that area should be within the province of the

faculty from the relevant discipline. We explore, instead, issues associated with the other side of the higher education "coin."

### **Desirable Characteristics**

Formulating expected outcomes in general education areas for university graduates requires a process that possesses certain characteristics. The failure of any process to include each of these attributes will either doom the effort from the start or make the resulting statements less than sufficient for the long run. These requirements resonant with the theoretical and the practical, with the commonsensical and the political, with the traditions of the Academe and the current calls for a radical reexamination. But most of all, these requirements work.

*Faculty-driven teams:* The imposition of general education outcomes at graduation by a select group of advisory board members or campus administrators is ineffective. Faculty must be involved at each step in the process; moreover, faculty must direct the process. Any process aimed at generating expected outcomes must acknowledge the faculty's role in this respect. Faculty are one of several principal stakeholders in higher education. Of course, they are the predominate provider of service to their students. Faculty are charged not only with delivering the curriculum, but they are and should be intimately involved in designing the curriculum. In addition, their activities outside of the classroom in terms of scholarship and service are generally deemed to be supportive of the teaching function. Lasting change in the areas relating to curriculum is possible in large measure only when faculty are driving the process.

Further, it is critical that the staid and traditional faculty "committee" structure be discarded for this process. Any process geared to create statements of learning outcomes must have a laser-like focus. All too often the standard committee structure lends itself to wide-ranging forays into irrelevant areas. Further, processes based on a committee structure tend to have open-ended timelines; creating statements of learning objectives must occur over a definite and reasonably short period of time. Instead employing committees, a "team" approach should be adopted. Simply using the term "team" connotes the type of radical thinking and working that is needed to create the statements. Further, research suggests that any teams should consist of no more than twelve members in order to achieve optimal effectiveness and efficiency ([Katzenback & Smith, 1993](#)).

*Involvement of multiple campuses:* This requirement is truly an offshoot of the benchmarking notion included in Total Quality Management principles. The idea of benchmarking in TQM practice relates to the procedure of comparing one's institution, program, etc. to other institutions, programs, etc. similarly situated. But for purposes of determining expected outcomes in general education at the time of the baccalaureate degree is conferred, we adopt the theory behind the principle but go further in actually creating partnerships with similarly situated universities. Given the rapidity of change within higher education over the past decade, it is advantageous to take advantage of multiple-perspectives in forming the team that develops those outcomes. Also, any biases attendant to one institution are eliminated. Further, acceptance of the resulting expected outcomes may be more easily accepted if faculty from several institutions are involved.

"Provider" and "Recipient" faculty equally represented: Historically, the purveyors of general education would be the same set of faculty who teach those courses: our colleagues from the liberal arts and sciences. These faculty "provide" students to the major degree disciplines. There is no question that these individuals are experts in the particular general

education field in which they teach. For example, written composition, oft a staple of the freshman's coursework during their first semester at the university, is generally taught by someone in the English department. While not commonly acknowledged on first glance, these faculty also bring with them an understanding of high school writing curriculum and an understanding of the abilities of the university neophyte to write. Yet the predilection of most campuses who attempt to form learning objectives for general education is to limit participation to the general education faculty. Unfortunately, this shortsighted view stalls any attempt to achieve educational excellence and efficiency for two reasons. First, the student does not quit writing (for example) upon exiting the general education course in written composition (or for that matter, after fulfilling the requirements of the two-year general education curriculum.) Also, written composition instructors may understand the meaning of proper composition from their discipline (usually, English), but most disciplines emphasize specific aspects of composition. In short, students matriculate out of a composition course without all of the skills they need to write well within their discipline.

The necessary addition, of course, is the perspective of disciplines which are predominate in the majors. The faculty from these disciplines are the "recipients" of students who have matriculated through the general education program. Often, these faculty are from education, business, or engineering. From a student viewpoint, the perspectives of the faculty who assist them in attaining expertise in their chosen field is quite sensible. And the faculty from non-English disciplines, for example, provide two critical perspectives. First, they are intimately aware of the specific demands of the major course of study; it is, after all, their discipline. Moreover, these faculty are equally aware of the demands which will greet the student upon graduation. If many of their majors go on to graduate schools, then these faculty are aware of what particular written composition skills, for example, the baccalaureate candidate should possess.

University students are working toward a diploma that represents their attainment of being both an "educated person" and an "expert" in a chosen field. Under the current scheme, they achieve the former during their first two years, while spending the final two years achieving disciplinary expertise. Unfortunately, faculty generally do not see their mission to contribute to both aspects of the student's education. Faculty see themselves as either a contributor to the student's general education (first two years) or career-focused education (last two years). Any successful model process must change this paradigm. It must engage faculty from general studies to look at the needs of the students as they pursue their major, and it must engender in major degree program an active participation in continuing the work of the general education faculty. The students are expecting that their diploma represents both liberally educated person and one who is prepared to embark on a career. The two "camps" of faculty should be driven by the desire to contribute to the student's "total" diploma. Further, the model process should allow for equal representation of the two faculty groups, a move that symbolizes the need to work in concert.

*Two-tiered team structure:* The successful structure for developing the needed outcomes statements would incorporate two groups of faculty and provide a means of integrating the two teams. One team would exist on each campus, comprised of both provider and recipient faculty. Several advantages are drawn from faculty associated with a common campus pursuing tasks associated with the overarching goals of the process. First, some members may already know each other, or know of each other, thus potentially speeding the process of creating a highly functional team. Also, they are no doubt familiar with, and imbued with, the culture of the campus. In addition, they most probably have a common understanding of the politics associated with their campus, a necessary knowledge base for the potentially explosive nature of the project. The second team would consist of representatives of the

participating campuses, thus allowing for faculty involved to take full advantage of the multi-campus nature of the process. Lastly, there must be a method of allowing communication from the campus team to the multi-campus team and vice versa. Enlisting selected faculty to serve on both teams would best perform this critical integrative function.

*Formula for political acceptance:* A process geared at establishing general education outcomes for the individual about to receive their baccalaureate degree must be structured in such a manner that the outcomes statements generated will be respected. Even though provider faculty and recipient discipline faculty are engaged in this process at both the multi-campus and individual campus levels, there are not enough agents of change involved to substantiate a change of the magnitude needed. Therefore, any successful process to create outcomes must incorporate other means of securing counsel, and ultimately ownership, of the product of the process.

### **A Model Process**

A successful process for developing high-quality learning outcomes in general education subject areas for students graduating with a baccalaureate degree was developed by three comprehensive universities within the California State University system with funding provided by the Office of the Chancellor of the California State University. During the fall 1998 semester, the campuses at Chico, Sacramento, and San Francisco adopted the five-step process described below to create joint statements of learning objectives for written communication and mathematical reasoning. These two general education areas were chosen because they are considered foundation disciplines for a university education.

*Form Multi-Campus Teams (Step One):* The first step requires that the sponsors of this initiative determine which general education areas will be the focus of the project. It might be helpful to start with two or three during the first year. Also, a timeline should be established with the aim of completing all five steps in five months, but certainly not more than an academic year. The budget for the project is created and approved at this time. This step also includes selecting a project director. This member of the faculty is charged with overall responsibility for implementing the project, so it would be helpful for this individual to be familiar with broad aspects of general education curricula and possess experience in higher education administration, probably at the departmental chair level.

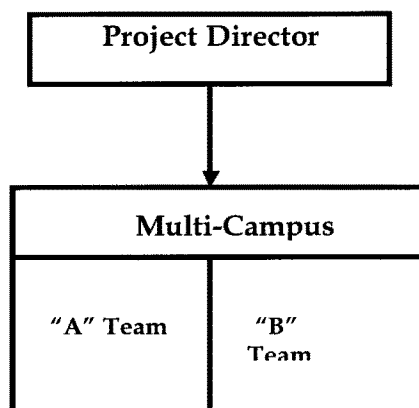
After determining the number of campuses and which campuses are to be involved in the project, representatives from each participating institution are selected. In order to keep the work of the multi-campus team moving smoothly and efficiently, it is suggested that each campus appoint only two team members. As indicated previously, one-half of the membership of the multi-campus team devoted to determining the outcomes in a targeted general studies area should come from that discipline and possess considerable recent experience in teaching general education courses in that discipline (i.e., "provider" faculty). The remaining members of the multi-campus team should come from popular major fields and teach primarily or exclusively juniors and seniors (i.e., "recipient" faculty). While each campus determines who it asks to serve, the project director is consulted before a final determination is made to ensure against the possibility that one major field dominates a multi-campus team.

Once the multi-campus team members are selected, it is critical that they meet together. At this meeting the project director explains in detail the goals of the project, the five steps of the project, and the timeframe for completing the project. But most importantly, this

meeting serves as the setting in which the members of the multi-campus team begin to bond into a committed group.

**Figure 1**

**Process Chart - Stage One**



**Note:** In the California State University project, the "A" teams worked to create statements of expected student outcomes in written communication, while "B" teams were directed to generate statements in the mathematical reasoning area.

*Create Individual Campus Draft No. 1 (Step Two):* The multi-campus team members become the co-leaders of their respective individual campus teams. They participate in the selection of campus team members, making sure that equal members of the faculty from the targeted general education area and from major field disciplines are chosen. The total number of faculty on this team should not exceed twelve, including the two co-leaders.

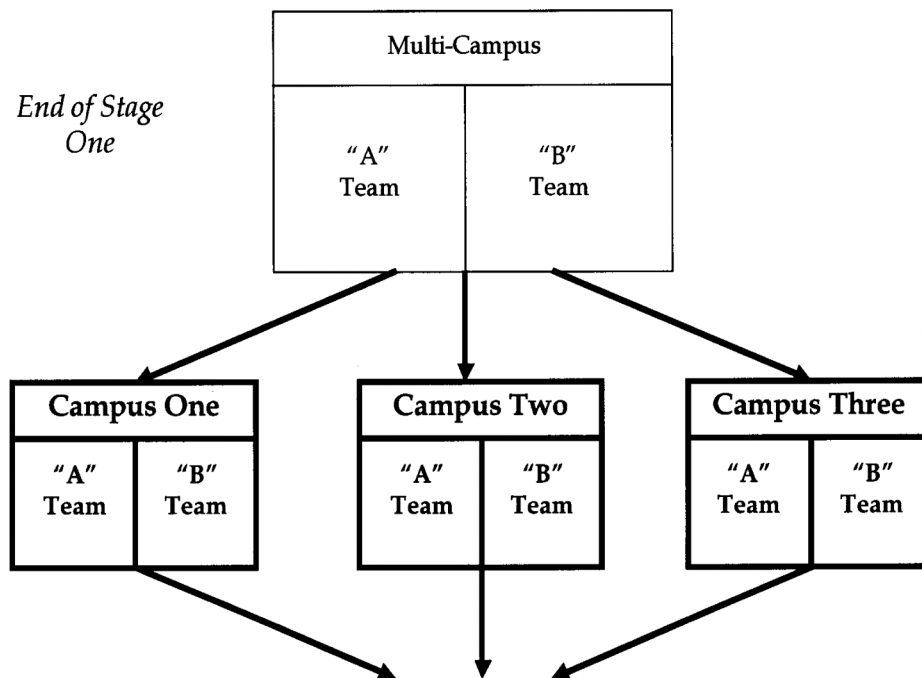
The individual campus team is charged with creating a draft statement of expected student outcomes in a particular general education area for the student about to graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Experience teaches that campus teams often begin by examining the attributes freshmen bring to campus, along with understanding the objectives of selected high school programs in the targeted general education area. The campus team also will generally spend a considerable amount of time learning what the extant general education program provides a student on their campus during that student's freshman and sophomore years. The team will most likely wish to review any expected course or general education program outcomes statements and indicators that those outcomes are being achieved. As critical as it is to understand the target discipline faculty member's perspective, the campus team also examines the perspective of the major field faculty member. Thought-provoking discussions by these individuals provide all team members with information on the abilities of students after they have completed the lower division coursework in general education. Moreover, these faculty can communicate the abilities in the targeted area that a student needs in order to complete the degree. Hopefully, there is also a discussion by these faculty of ways in which general education knowledge, skills, and values are furthered through the coursework provided in the student's major. Finally, these faculty provide to other members of the campus team an understanding of the knowledge, skills, and values a graduate



should possess in order to be successful in either graduate school or their career. The draft statement emanating from the campus teams will, therefore, reflect the entire spectrum of views moving from pre-university preparation through university experience to post-university settings.

**Figure 2**

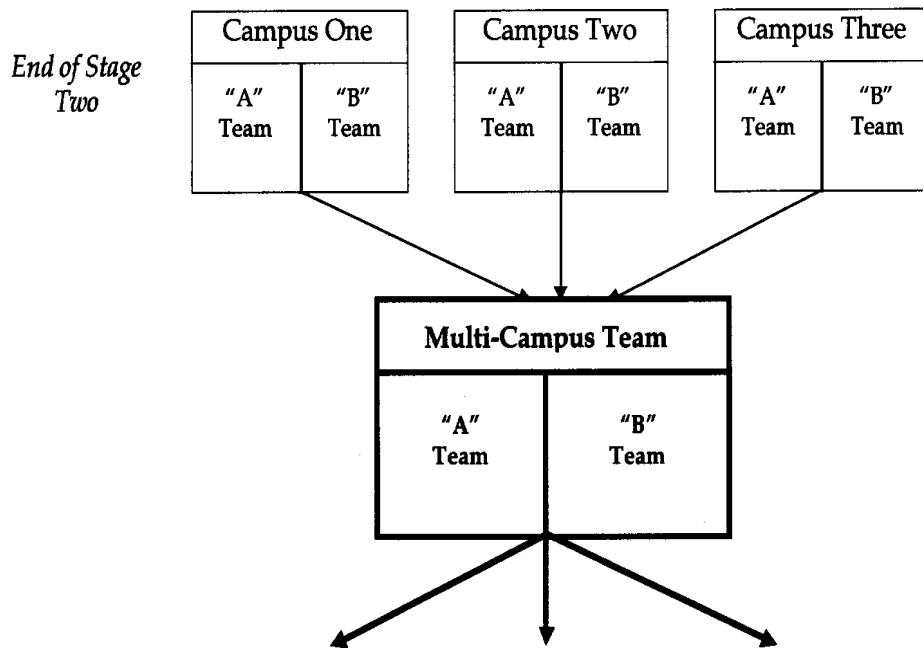
**Process Chart - Stage Two**



*Write Multi-Campus Draft No. 1 (Step Three):* With individual campus team drafts of learning outcomes statements in hand, the multi-campus teams meet to generate a common draft statement drawing on the strengths of the efforts of each campus team. At least one face-to-face meeting is necessary for the purposes of continuing the team-building process, airing major campus team draft differences, and formulating a plan to create the first multi-campus draft by a specific date. One possible approach includes having representatives from each campus provide both a review of the materials consulted by the campus-based teams and a summary of the issues raised on each campus.

**Figure 3**

**Process Chart - Stage Three**



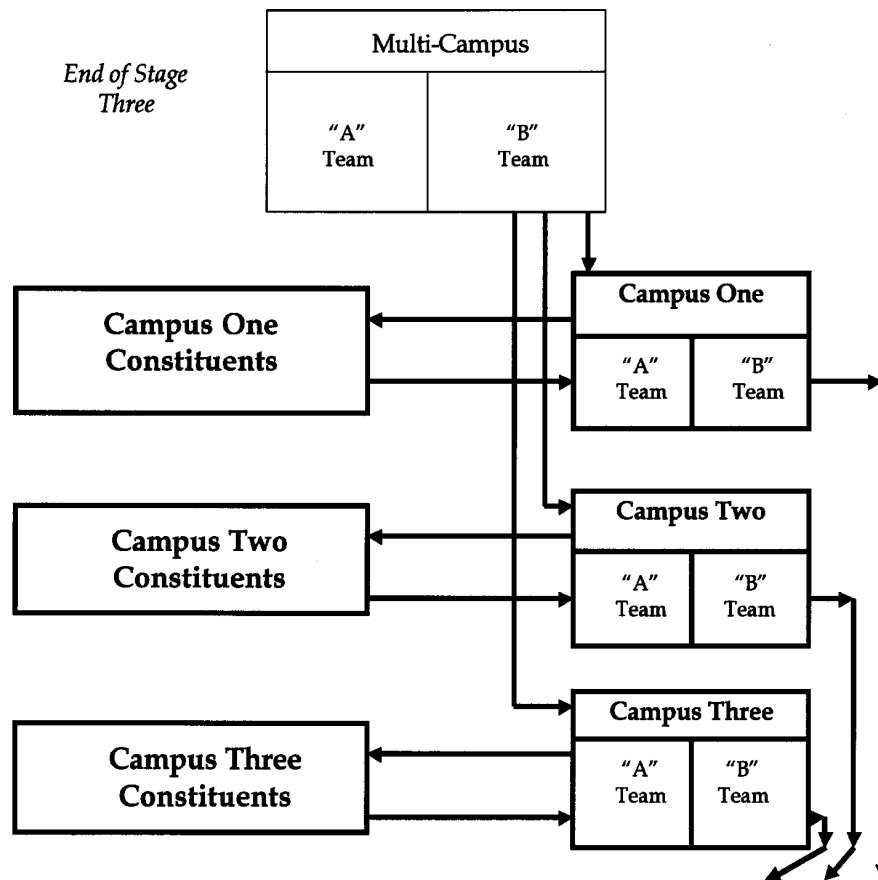
*Solicit Comments from Campus Constituencies (Step Four):* The campus teams should familiarize themselves with multi-campus team draft number one. As step four is the most politically sensitive of the five steps in this process, each campus team member should be well-prepared to discuss the draft with all levels of the university. Comments from department chairs, college deans, university-level administrators, academic senators, general education committee members, student groups, and other constituencies are invaluable in ensuring that the outcome from the two levels of teams is of the highest quality. Comments can also be obtained by distributing widely a hard copy of the draft or posting the draft on a campus web page. The process of discussing the draft with various faculty and administrators also serves to challenge the level of understanding team members possess. But no doubt of equal value, this step necessarily means that faculty and administrators (generally with their "stovepipe" mentality generally intact) will be contacted, and hopefully educated, regarding the overarching goal of directing all appropriate resources of the campus toward the dual goals of the baccalaureate degree.

There is a higher guarantee of success if formal approval of the draft statements is not sought. The purpose of this step is solely to solicit commentary from various campus

constituencies directly pertaining to the draft statements and indirectly relating to the suggested process. Miring the project in sub-committee analysis, formal debate, and other parliamentary processes decreases the power of team members at both the local and multi-campus levels. Further, the intent is to generate a set of outcomes that will have multi-campus appeal without unduly immersing the project in the vat of disciplinary interests that so often repel initiatives for change.

**Figure 4**

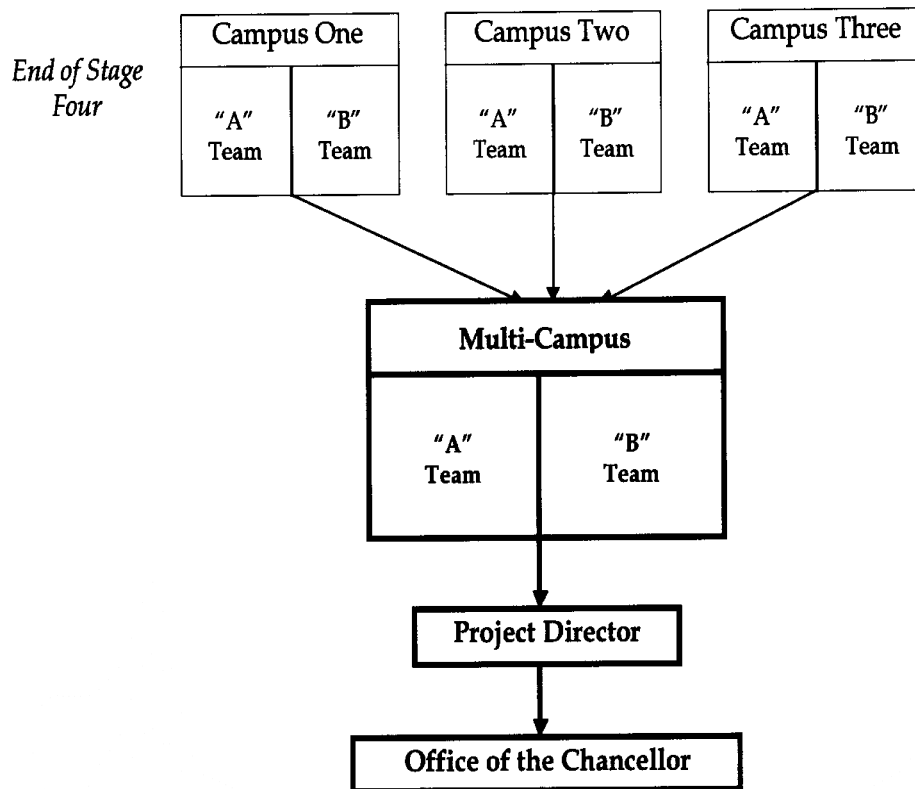
**Process Chart - Stage Four**



*Prepare the Final Multi-Campus Statement of Expected Outcomes (Step Five):* The multi-campus team meets one final time to consider the comments gathered during the previous step and then prepare the final multi-campus statement.

**Figure 5**

**Process Chart - Stage Five**



A review of this five-step process reveals that each characteristic of a successful model described previously are represented in the process undertaken by campuses within the California State University system. Within a five-month window, all five steps were completed and the teams developed expected learning outcomes statements for written communication and mathematical reasoning for the baccalaureate graduate. That is, there now exists well-crafted, well-researched, and well-accepted statements of learning outcomes that individual campuses can adopt using whatever traditional means are appropriate. Additionally, as a direct result of this project, "provider" faculty and "recipient" faculty have new-found understanding of their traditional teaching roles and an impetus to create a broader conceptualization their role as a university faculty member.

**Conclusion**

Universities must increasingly struggle with defining and attaining "high quality" student learning outcomes as we move from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered mentality in higher education. This paper suggests one avenue available to comprehensive and other types of universities to achieve higher levels of quality outcomes (even though resources

may be limited) by engaging the entire faculty of the university in the process of establishing learning outcomes in general education areas for the baccalaureate graduate.

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