

NEXA Program on the Chopping Block

Pioneering Interdisciplinary Humanities Program Could be Discontinued as Early as Next Fall

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The nationally acclaimed and nearly 30-year-old SF State science and humanities convergence program known as NEXA, is planned to be discontinued as early as next fall. NEXA is derived from the word 'nexus,' which is another word for connection or focus. The program's courses are centered on areas of interest or concern shared by a variety of disciplines and perspectives such as the humanities, sciences and, recently, the creative arts.

For example, the Nuclear Revolution, a NEXA class offered this semester, studies the scientific and literary aspects of the nuclear revolution; the physics associated with nuclear weapons and relationships of the nuclear age with ancient myth and modern poetry. A signature trait of the program is team-teaching where some courses are taught with two instructors from different departments, such as the NEXA class Cosmologies and Worldviews which is taught by

English professor Geoffrey Green, who is also the director of NEXA, along with Susan Lea, professor of physics at SF State.

But this pioneering program might be no more after next spring because, according to the dean of humanities and the dean of science and engineering, the program is no longer as innovative as it used to be, and with regard to such dramatic budget cuts, discontinuing the NEXA program is the right thing to do under the circumstances.

The authors of the proposal to discontinue NEXA, Paul Sherwin, Dean of the College of Humanities, and Sheldon Axler, the Dean of the College of Science and Engineering submitted the proposal to the Academic Senate on September 23. And since learning of the deans' recommendation, supporters of the NEXA program and its faculty have been adamantly fighting the program's elimination.

While the deans acknowledge the program's "important contributions to General Education at SFSU since the mid-1970s, as well as its

compelling vision of 'convergence,'" according to the written proposal, their proposal to discontinue the program came "under pressure to help offset drastic permanent cuts to Academic Affairs' base budget." But tight money is only one of the reasons why NEXA is being considered for discontinuance, according to the deans.

"NEXA's claim to be one-of-a-kind doesn't hold up to scrutiny in my opinion," said Sherwin. "I don't think that eliminating NEXA would be a 'crushing blow to SF State.' Most departments think in interdisciplinary terms, more and more programs have interdisciplinary approaches that were not there 10 years ago," he said.

"They're not at the cutting edge now and that's part of the problem," said Axler.

According to Sherwin, "those who have been involved in teaching NEXA have been there for a long, long time." NEXA has not been able

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to attract new faculty to program and the sign of a vigorous program is one that attracts new faculty, said Axler.

Also among the deans' chief concerns is a decline in team-teaching, from 14 of 19 classes in 1994-95 to only 6 of 19 in 2003-04, and the fact that "almost half" NEXA's courses were taught by lecturers as opposed to full-time faculty the year before the Academic Program Review or Memo of Understanding (MOU) in 2001-02. Sherwin explained that lecturers are not hired after the same nationwide search for which tenured or tenure-track professors are sought and it is not an obligation of lecturers to be as "professionally active" (as tenured professors). However NEXA's rebuttal counters that it is not reasonable to assume that because NEXA currently employs lecturers, that the quality of the program has deteriorated.

While NEXA endorsed all the recommendations for improvement noted in the program review, circumstances have changed since the MOU came out, said Sherwin. "The institution decided that it needs to look very, very carefully at hard choices we have to make."

He also adds that NEXA hasn't advanced toward realizing the major goals that were argued in the MOU. "There are things they could have done to meet the recommendations; new faculty could have been recruited to teach, [they could have] had better enrollments," he said. "If you look at what NEXA has been doing the last two years, they have classes that haven't been filled. In the last two years, there were 250 seats that could have been filled in NEXA courses." The proposal also indicates that "just three students have received the B.A. in Liberal Studies: Concentration in NEXA over the last nine years," while acknowledging that that as of fall 2003, 14 students have declared their intention to earn a Liberal Studies NEXA B.A.

"We very strongly support interdisciplinary work. We encourage it all the time," said Axler. "This is not something that is done only through NEXA," he said. Sherwin said that there are whole departments in BSS, in ethnic studies, that are basically interdisciplinary departments.

"When you weight everything on balance, if we eliminate the NEXA program, it's more important to do that than to lose what we would have to lose when we have to absorb those costs," said Sherwin. "Dean Axler and I agreed that they could do a lot better if [NEXA] had a lot more money, but they're not going to get any more money. Everybody is getting cut," he said when referring to the reduction of the university's budget. But Geoffrey Green strongly disagrees with the dean's opinion on the declining luster of the NEXA program.

"We believe this is over hasty and ought to involve input and consultation from the campus community," said Green.

According to the rebuttal, the discussions that the deans conducted with their college councils and with the Liberal Studies council were meetings of which the NEXA Program was not informed nor invited. The early discussions "did not sufficiently allow the program to advocate for itself," said Green.

However, Sherwin said that there were no "secret" meetings. "It's a complicated and difficult process, I think everybody has been honest," he said. He explained that he and Dean Axler wanted to "gauge the opinion of the chairs" and that they weren't formally recommending discontinuance. "This is something Axler and I have discussed as one of the possible ways that we can save money for the university."

Still, Green and NEXA supporters indicated their "fervent and passionate belief" that the program should remain in existence.

Green who has been the director of the NEXA program since fall 2002, has gathered over 1,500 signatures, in petition to save the NEXA program with the assistance of NEXA faculty

and students, according to Green.

"[The rebuttal] is our statement of why the NEXA program is important and plays a crucial interdisciplinary role at San Francisco State and should not be discontinued," said Green, who has been teaching in NEXA since 1984. He added that the department has received many letters and emails in support of the program including a letter from the Harvard University's Project Zero which studied NEXA's type of teaching and learning.

Harvard University's Project observed that the depth of cross-disciplinary thinking in NEXA is quite uncommon in interdisciplinary programs and that the program encourages creative thinking, allowing students to see how disciplinary knowledge may be complementary rather than oppositional, according to the study.

Green asserted that NEXA's curriculum supports SF State's mission of "providing curricula that reflect all dimensions of human diversity and that encourage critical thinking and social and cultural awareness." However, the proposal minimizes NEXA's primary function in general education, as well as the impact it will have on students and lecturers who will be displaced as a result of the program's discontinuance, according to Green. "Interdisciplinary programs that contribute primary to general education have university wide importance that individual colleges might not consider under a budgetary emergency scenario," Green said.

This year, NEXA contributes to four Segment II categories and 11 Segment III clusters and contributes courses to four areas of liberal studies. NEXA lecturers would lose their employment and the approximately 700-800 students taking NEXA classes in an academic year, "with a vast majority taking them to fulfill Segment II or III requirements," according to the discontinuance proposal, would have to seek unfilled GED classes and other departments and programs would need to accommodate any remainder by increasing enrollment caps or scheduling additional GE classes.

"Current students below junior rank would lose their ability to apply NEXA for GE credit; at least two complete segment three clusters would be lost, countless others would need to be reorganized, reauthorized, and reassessed," said Green. In addition, "The 25 NEXA concentrators (students majoring in liberal arts with a concentration in NEXA) and five additional on the waiting list would simply have to find another educational pursuit."

NEXA's contribution to the engineering department's GED is considerable according to professor V. V. Krishnan. "NEXA courses form the backbone of GE segment III clusters available to engineering majors. Four of the six segment III clusters for engineering rely very heavily on the NEXA courses and are simply not viable without the NEXA program," he said in a letter of support.

Professors Paula Levine and Stephen Wilson in the art department also support NEXA's role in general education. "Over the last 20 years, NEXA has served our students in the art department extremely well. Its courses are the most popular GE courses."

Nia Hill, a senior in creative writing taking a NEXA course to fulfill her Segment III requirement thought it was "shocking" that NEXA is planned for discontinuance. "The NEXA class gives me more insight into Freud and the artistic movement," she said. "I'm sure there are freshmen students here who came here thinking they can take it all four years."

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