

GENERAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE

REPORT TO

THE ACADEMIC SENATE

GE-017-256

New GE course proposal:

Liberal Studies 2112 – Landscape, Place, and Power in California

New GE Area 3B (Humanities)

and GE Area 4A (Social and Behavioral Sciences)

General Education Committee

Date: 3/11/2026

Executive Committee
Received and Forwarded

Date: 3/11/2026

Academic Senate

Date: 3/18/2026

Background

An interdisciplinary view on California's biogeographical changes, enhancing students' information literacy and civic responsibility. Using diverse sources—Native American oral histories, explorer accounts, 19th-century scientific writings, newspaper articles, and perspectives from ecology, conservation, and fire management—it explores how land and waterscapes have evolved from the deep past to today. Highlights on spatial and temporal principles behind the distribution of plant, animal, and human communities and examines connections between California's natural environments and its historical power dynamics.

Students will

- Develop theories and methods for collecting, analyzing, and mapping information.
- Identify the ways California's physical geography and diverse land and waterscapes shape its history.
- Describe the geography, economic activities, oral traditions, traditional ecological knowledge, and cosmologies of Native Californians.
- Identify factors influencing California's water system development and how it relates to land use changes and environmental justice issues.
- Describe California's main economic activities—mining, agriculture, entertainment, recreation, aerospace, electronics, and trade—in relation to its landscape.
- Summarize the interconnected effects of Spanish exploration and colonization, the mission system, the rancho system, the Gold Rush, and their influence on agricultural, industrial, and other land-use practices.

Required Assignment: Nature Journals, Mapping Labs, Reading Discussions, "Sense of Place" Research Project Poster

Required Content: Overview of California's topography, and social, cultural, and environmental transformation from the capture of fire to the pyrocene. See below for more details.

Course Outline

"It is hard to *find* California now, unsettling to wonder how much of it was merely imagined or improvised; melancholy to realize how much of anyone's memory is no true memory at all but only the traces of someone else's memory, stories handed down on the family network." --Joan Didion

Readings

Isenberg, Andrew C. Mining California: an ecological history. Macmillan+ ORM, 2024.

In addition to the required text, additional materials will be **posted on Canvas**. These readings can be found within each course module in a folder called "Readings, Videos, and Recorded Lectures." Be sure to regularly check the syllabus and module folders to stay updated on the assigned readings for each week. It's essential to read the syllabus and understand which readings are assigned every week. Reading is a skill that improves with practice over time. Additionally, it is crucial for the course; if you don't read, you may have trouble understanding the assignments, and your overall course experience will be less fulfilling.

Schedule

1. Finding California: Ancient histories, theories, and the enduring mysteries of early California; Conceptual Issues: Frontiers, Borders, Many Wests; The Golden State?
2. Indigenous California; The Aboriginal Waterscape: Manipulations and Near Harmony; Pre-Hispanic Herbaceous Vegetation [focus on *pasto* and *zacate*]
3. Global California and the New World: Comparative Colonialism and the Mission Era; Spanish Water Practices: Community and Authority; Invasion of Franciscan annuals, grazing, and California pasture in the 19th century;
4. Secularization; The Rancho Economy; The Nature of Industry/The Industrial Frontier
5. West of the West; The Great Ocean
6. How Eden Lost Its Garden: Destinies Made Manifest; The Anglo-American Takeover; Laissez Faire, Localism, and Monopoly
7. Eureka: The Gold Rush; Labor, Race, and Mining; Going There, Getting There: Dreams and Nightmares of Overland Travel
8. California and the Nature of the Civil War
9. Urban Imperialism: Tale of Two Cities; A Century of Bromes and the Fading of California's Wildflowers
10. Southern California Beckons; Progressivism: The Cult of Hygiene; The California Shape of Resistance
11. Hydraulic Society Triumphant: The Great Projects; A World War and Global California; Dreams in Photographic Motion;
12. The Hydrocarbon Revolution; Suburbanization and Automobiliation
13. Hydraulic society on the defensive/Water policy at a crossroads
14. Lessons from the Rose Parade; California and the Pyrocene
15. The Paradox of Place: What Does California Mean?

Core Assignments

1. Sense of Place Project: Research Project & Poster

The assignment is scaffolded. Students develop their final draft through several independent steps throughout the term. "Sense of place" is about defining oneself in relation to a specific space or region. It is a key social function of regional differences for most people. Considering place from spatial, ecological, and historical perspectives helps preserve a region's cultural heritage and social history, fostering social connections among and within communities. This project requires students to critically analyze how the history, environment, landscape, land use, and other factors have shaped a sense of place in a California region and its borderlands of their choosing.

- Your **description** could include landscape, cultural aspects, family connections, essential relationships, and/or a sense of community.
- Include details you've learned about the **Indigenous** history, **environmental** history, or **ecological issues** of the present.
- Drawing on what you've learned in readings, lectures, and mapping labs, write about how this place has influenced you—**who you are**, **where you live**, and/or **where you're from**.
- Include at least **4 images** from your Nature Journals/Mapping Labs/Outside Research (with annotations) that work as evidence/examples of your unique sense of place.
- Reflect on how your experiences in this place have influenced who you are, what you value, and what future you want to work towards. Relate personal experiences to concepts, patterns, and ideas you came across during your research this term.

- Look for cause/effect, comparisons, classifications, and change/endurance over time. Draw upon historical facts, scientific facts, or your observations. Show evidence of thoughts/feelings, questioning, comparing, connecting, or interpreting what you've learned.
- Consider your audience. Imagine that you are trying to make this place familiar to your classmates. Help them see it through your eyes.
- Space on a poster is limited, so pick wisely what to present. Your display should be self-explanatory and have a logical flow—others should be able to follow the order even if you are not present.
- Place your title at the top of the poster, and make sure the text is large (usually at least 2 inches in height) and clear. Include your name and major, the name of your faculty mentor and his/her department name, the name of your school and the names of other co-authors. Incorporate appropriate graphics in your poster. Label or describe any charts, tables, figures, graphs, or photos you use. Make sure all edges line up evenly.
- Edit, review, and spell-check all the elements of your poster display.
- Remember, write with purpose, organization, voice/tone, and specificity.

Poster Style Guidelines

-Don't use more than two fonts. Instead, use bold, italic, and font size to set type differently. Times New Roman, Arial, and Garamond are suggested typefaces.

-Words should be large enough to read from several feet away, but don't use all caps.

-Stick to a color scheme (try a couple that complement or contrast with each other, such as black or navy on white).

-Be consistent with your white space between sections of text, figures, and headings; white space should be ample so the poster doesn't look cramped.

2. "Lightning Talk" Presentation

Each student delivers their research project "elevator pitch" in no more than five minutes.

3. Nature Journal (Multiple entries throughout term)

-Nature Journal #1

Take a walk or post up somewhere outdoors. Take mental (or physical) notes of what you see, hear, smell, feel. Sketch, take notes, photographs, or collect flowers/leaves/etc. to press. Contemplate the emotions, thoughts, memories, or wishes your experience conjures.

-Nature Journal #2

Go outside in the early morning, dusk, or at night. Take mental (or physical) notes of your experiences of the sky—what you see, hear, smell, feel, and remember. Reflect on your ethnic, cultural, religious, or political background. How do you think your cosmologies have shaped your views of the sky? Of twilight/darkness/night. Of nature, place, or space?

-Nature Journal #3

Reflect on the sense of belonging and a sense of place. What does it mean "to belong"? Where is "home," and how does the sense of place shape your sense of home? What is the role of space and place in bringing a sense of belonging?

-Nature Journal #4

What does wilderness mean to you? Reflect on your ethnic, religious, political, or class background and experiences. How have these influenced your perceptions of “wilderness,” “nature,” and the environment? Which course materials (readings, lectures, images, songs, etc.) have helped you better understand those beliefs? Of yourself? If so, why or how? If not, why not?

-Nature Journal #5

Reflect on the semester. How have your views of space, place, nature, and people changed over the term? How will this change affect your life choices moving forward?

Suggested Texts

-Anderson, Kat. *Tending the wild: Native American knowledge and the management of California's natural resources*. Univ of California Press, 2005.

-Barbour, Michael, Todd Keeler-Wolf, and Allan A. Schoenherr, eds. *Terrestrial vegetation of California*. Univ of California Press, 2007.

-Davis, Mike. *Ecology of fear: Los Angeles and the imagination of disaster*. Verso Books, 2022.

-Deverell, William. *Whitewashed Adobe : The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520932531>.

-Garcia, Cecilia, and James David Adams. *Healing with medicinal plants of the west: cultural and scientific basis for their use*. Abedus Press, 2005.

-Haas, Lisbeth. *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936 / Lisbeth Haas*. 1st pbk. printing. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520918443>.

-Hackel, Steven W. *Children of coyote, missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish relations in colonial California, 1769-1850*. UNC Press Books, 2017.

-Hundley, Norris. *The great thirst: Californians and water—A history*. Univ of California Press, 2001.

-Iglar, David. *The Great Ocean : Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush / David Iglar*. 1st ed. Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2013.

-Isenberg, Andrew C. *Mining California: an ecological history*. Macmillan+ ORM, 2024.

-Minnich, Richard A. *California's fading wildflowers: lost legacy and biological invasions*. Univ of California Press, 2008.

-Pyne, Stephen J. *Tending Fire : Coping with America's Wildland Fires / Stephen J. Pyne*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004.

-Pyne, Stephen J. *The Pyrocene: How we created an age of fire, and what happens next*. Univ of California Press, 2022.

-Smith, Stacey L. *Freedom's Frontier : California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction / Stacey L. Smith*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

This course provides Liberal Studies majors with foundational regional knowledge essential for teaching in California. It covers the core information literacy skills necessary to develop critical analysis and interdisciplinary research abilities, which are crucial for success in upper-division courses within the Liberal Studies major. The course offers students many opportunities to synthesize knowledge and enhance their written and spoken communication skills. For LS general studies majors, it supplies fundamental knowledge and civic literacy to help them become informed community members. Additionally, the course supports students in building community and developing networking skills within the department and college. Please see the chart below for more details on PLOs and Assignments/Assessments.

PLO1: The course will give students basic knowledge about California and its peoples, focusing on their semester-long “sense of place” research project.

PLO2: The course helps students develop critical thinking skills through readings, images, songs, and other materials, while also learning about different peoples and perspectives.

PLO3: Students will synthesize the knowledge they gather on California into an interdisciplinary research project combining their nature journals and mapping labs.

PLO4: Students will develop a deeper understanding of the links between environmental justice and social justice in California, ultimately becoming more critically minded educators and democratic citizens.

PLO5: Students will gain experience writing for professional and public audiences through their mapping lab assignments and their “sense of place” poster.

PLO6: Students will practice their public speaking skills through the course’s “lightning talk” assignments. These short presentations provide students with low-pressure opportunities to develop effective oral communication in front of their peers.

Students will connect knowledge and relationships that highlight the diversity of human experience and expression through several key assignments. Their semester-long Nature Journals and “Sense of Place” project enhance students’ cultural self-awareness, worldview, and recognition of intersectionality. Students will practice responsibly identifying, locating, and critically evaluating various sources of information and voices essential for in-depth inquiry. They will use their knowledge of these complex relationships to address disciplinary questions while applying intercultural knowledge to promote positive social change. To improve their presentation and public speaking skills, each student will give a “lightning talk” on their research posters at the end of the semester. Students will also participate in mapping lab assignments and use digital tools to address real-world problems by applying knowledge about historical power structures, fostering self-discovery, and developing a sense of responsibility toward the community. Please see below for more details.

3B

This course equips students with the tools and experiences necessary to make informed and responsible moral decisions, while also cultivating a comprehensive understanding of history. Through selected readings, group discussions, digital mapping labs, and outdoor excursions, students gain an understanding of the values that underpin a free, democratic, and humane society. The course enables them to critically examine philosophical ideas and theories that have shaped different societies across different times and places.

Further, the course assignments and activities help students develop their own reading methods and writing styles as they cultivate their unique voices. Along the way, they also enhance their intellect, imagination, sensitivity, and awareness of the diversity among peoples, other organisms, and landscapes. The nature journal assignments, for example, encourage students will practice both subjective and objective responses to aesthetic experiences, focusing on emotional and intellectual reactions. This course helps students make sense of place and their sense of themselves.

This interdisciplinary course helps students connect fragmented information and draw conclusions. It deepens students' understanding of issues within their disciplines by exploring topics in contemporary, historical, and cultural contexts, demonstrating that human institutions and behaviors are interconnected. The course readings, mapping activities, and nature walks encourage students to investigate the principles, methodologies, value systems, and ethics used in social scientific research. The course content presents issues in both contemporary and historical contexts, and includes significant global, cross-cultural, and transnational perspectives.

Resources Consulted

LS provided both an ECO and example syllabus for the course, uploaded to Curriculog.

On November 26, 2025, General Education Committee sent out a solicitation email to the following constituencies:

- Department chairs
- Deans and associate deans

We asked to provide input via online survey to ensure that new GE course proposals aligned with the existing GE policy, including learning outcomes and concerns surrounding expertise. Responses were collected through mid-December. GE Committee received **1 responses** about this course. This response came from the English Department: "The course proposal focuses on natural environment, geography, archeology, economics, infrastructure/urban planning, and history. This course does not meet the Area Description for 3B (humanities), which highlights literature, languages, philosophy, and civilization. Section III.C of the ECO argues that "The course enables [students] to critically examine philosophical ideas and theories that have shaped different societies across different times and places" but neither in II.A nor in II.B does ECO mention philosophical texts. This is a geography/history/environment course, and 3B is not an appropriate category for it."

Discussion

GE Committee received this referral on November 13, 2025. This course is being evaluated to ensure compliance with CPP's General Education Policy (GE-001-245), passed by the Senate in 2024.

This course is applying for two designations: **GE Area 3B: Humanities** and **GE Area 4A: Social and Behavioral Sciences**. In addition to meeting the core subject matter requirements for this area, for GE Area 3B: Humanities, new courses must include the learning outcomes **Intercultural Engagement** and at least one of the other SLOs for both of these areas. To meet GE Area 4A: Social and Behavioral Sciences, new courses must include **Information Literacy** and **Civic Literacy**.

This course examines California's landscapes as products of ecological change, colonization, economic development, and shifting power structures, integrating environmental history, geography, Indigenous knowledge, and spatial analysis. Students study biogeographical transformations from precolonial ecosystems to contemporary water policy and fire management, using readings, digital mapping tools, and field observation to analyze place and power. Assessment includes nature journals, mapping labs,

reading discussions, a scaffolded “Sense of Place” research poster with a short presentation, and participation across thematic modules.

The course, in its current form, does not adequately meet GE Area 3B Humanities area requirements. The course does not clearly center the study of humanities as defined by GE policy, nor does it consistently cultivate aesthetic response through works of the human imagination in the way Area 3B specifies. While it incorporates historical reflection and moral inquiry, it is not structured as a literature, language, philosophy, or civilization course that critically examines the philosophical ideas and theories around which different civilizations have been organized, so alignment with 3B remains limited without substantial reframing.

The course has strength in its alignment with Area 4A: Social and Behavior Sciences by centering the study of social and behavioral science, examining California’s landscapes and power structures through historical and contemporary contexts and across diverse cultural perspectives. It prompts students to engage principles and methodologies of social scientific inquiry, analyze how human social, political, and economic institutions are inextricably interwoven, and connect fragmented environmental, historical, and cultural information without emphasizing professional skills development.

The course claims the appropriate learning outcomes for each area. For GE Area 3B, the course claims Intercultural Engagement and at least one other SLO. For GE Area 4A, the course claims Civic Literacy and Information Literacy. The course provides a reasonable assessment strategy, with criteria mapped onto each GE SLO.

Members of the committee discussed the concern raised by the English Department and echoes some of these concerns in our evaluation of the GE Area 3B Humanities area requirements.

The syllabus should also include the copy of the text of the GE Meaning and Purpose Statement.

Recommendation

The GE Committee has completed discussion of this proposal and identified substantive concerns regarding alignment with current GE policy in both the ECO and syllabus. The committee will vote open on March 9, 2026 and results will be available on March 11, 2026. This timeline is intended to allow sufficient time, if appropriate, for a first reading before the end of the academic year. The final recommendation will be transmitted to the Executive Committee upon conclusion of the vote.