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General Education Courses: The Student Experience

SUMMARY Students weigh a variety of factors in selecting their general education courses, although the two most popular reasons were that “the topic was interesting” and “the course was required for my major”. Once students select and enroll in a general education course, the quality of instruction appears to be particularly important to students’ assessments of the course. When asked to describe the factors that made a general education course one of their “best” or “worst”, students’ responses focused primarily on factors directly related to the instructor or pedagogical techniques used.

A Focus on General Education

The first of this series of *Bulletins* focused on students’ attitudes towards the importance and value of general education. While this global perspective is very helpful in understanding the overall climate for general education at UMass, it is less useful in understanding students’ individual general education experiences. To provide insight into these individual experiences, this *Bulletin* focuses on students’ responses to course-specific issues. Here we study the reasons students give for selecting general education courses and the factors that make these courses particularly good or bad in students’ eyes.

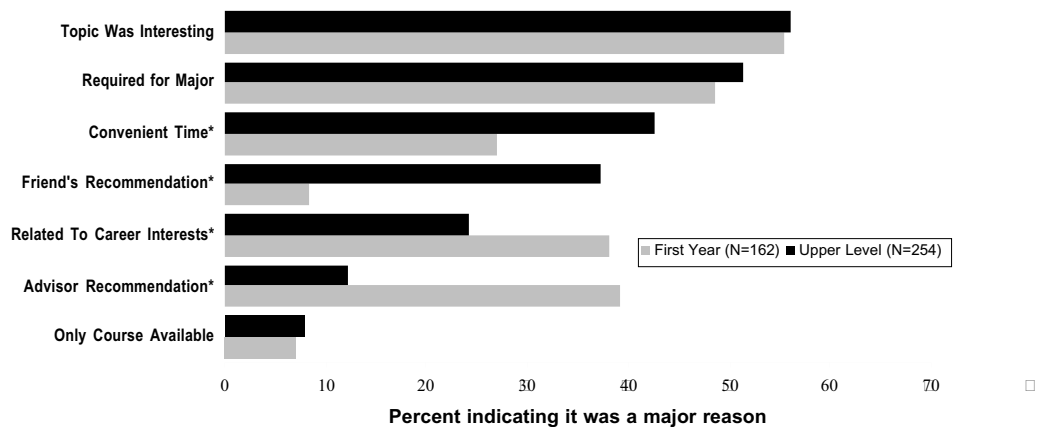
General Education Course Selection

With a wide array of courses available to satisfy general education requirements (in academic year 1996-97, 1236 sections of 343 courses were available for general education credit¹), students may sometimes be at a loss as to how to select among them. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some students may randomly select general education courses – either because so few are available within certain general education categories or because the course fits the opening they have left in their schedules. To explore students’ decision making processes, we asked students in a telephone survey² to select one of their current (or most recent) general education courses using a systematic selection protocol designed to ensure random course selection. We

then asked them to indicate whether each of a series of reasons was a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason for taking that specific course. Figure One shows the major reasons given in response. Because the results showed significant differences between first-year and upper-level (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) students we divided the responses into these two categories.

The two most common reasons for selecting general education courses, for both first-year students and upper-level students, were that the topic was interesting and that the course was required for their major. The least often cited reason was that the course was the only one available. These results conflict with a commonly held view

Figure One: Major Reasons Why Students Selected Gen. Ed. Course
By First-Year and Upper-Level (Sophomore, Junior, Senior) Student Status



¹ Office of Institutional Research AY 96-97 Course File.

² The phone survey was administered by Student Affairs Research, Information, and Systems (SARIS) in December of 1995. The survey sample consisted of a random sample of undergraduate students enrolled for that semester. Eight-two percent of those students who were contacted participated in the survey for a respondent sample of 419.

that students select general education courses randomly and for opportunistic reasons. At least when they are given a set of reasons from which to select, students do indicate that course selection is a rational and thoughtful process. A number of students appear to tie their course selections to their interest in the topic and its relevance to their major. Very few students report enrolling in a course just because it is available.

Upper-division and first-year students vary, however, in the extent to which they cite other reasons as major factors in their course selection. Upper-level students are more likely to indicate that they selected the course because it met at a convenient time or based on a friend's recommendation. First-year students are more likely to select a course because it relates to their career interests or was recommended by an advisor. These differences reflect, in part, differences in experiences for first-year and upper-division students. First-year students rely more on institutional advice (recommendation of advisor) while upper-level students use the informal network they have developed (recommendation of a friend) to make their selections. The responses also suggest that first-year students may take the selection more seriously, tying their decision to career interests. Upper-division students who still have general education requirements to fulfill are more likely to take an approach less relevant to educational goals (selecting a course because it's held at a convenient time).

Having made these observations, however, it is important to point out that in students' eyes these categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, most students indicated that more than one of these was a major factor in their selection of a specific course. For example, 39% of the respondents indicated that both "the topic was interesting" and "required for major" were major reasons for selecting their general education course.

Students also appear to have multiple reasons for selecting the group of courses they take in a given semester. The comments of a student who was interviewed as a part of a study of the first-year experience³ illustrate the complex process students use to select their general education

courses. When asked how he went about choosing his courses for that semester (all of which were general education courses), one student said:

Well, I just looked at what gen. eds. I had to cover... And you look at some that interest you, some that you think you're not going to hate, and that you are going to be able to handle...I look at times... and locations. I don't know, look at all that when you are choosing.

When asked if anyone helped him choose these courses, he went on to say:

Yeah, if you hear someone liked the class...Because last semester I talked to this kid who was a psychology major and I was thinking about possibly majoring in psychology...so he was telling [me] that he liked that class.... Or if you just hear from someone that they took a class last semester that was easy you just take it because you need another class and you figure you might as well have an easy one.

Table One

Reasons General Education Course Was "The Best"	N	% of Total
The Instructor (specifics vary: e.g., well-organized, dynamic/enthusiastic, interesting, got class involved)	107	42.5
Course was interesting	29	11.5
Topic was of interest to me	25	9.9
Learned a lot/required to think in new ways	19	7.5
Relevant (to real issues/future/my interests)	12	4.8
Easy	10	4.0
Other statements (less than 10 responses each in various categories including: class interaction, exposure to diversity, class material, course organization, etc.)	50	19.8
Total	252	100.0

Once Enrolled: What makes a course good...or not?

We concluded the phone survey by asking students who had completed at least one general education course⁴ to think about the best and worst general education course they had taken and identify what made the course the best or worst. The majority of students were able to identify a course in both categories as well as provide specific

³ Sixteen first-year undeclared students were interviewed during their second semester on campus (Spring 1997). Half of the students had participated in the Patterson Project (a pilot living-learning community) and half had not. In addition, students were selected to represent diversity in commitment to the University, gender, and ALANA representation.

⁴ Sixty-three percent of the respondents (N=266) had actually completed at least one general education course at the time of the survey. Responses to the items described here are those of this smaller group. Because of this selection criterion and the timing of the survey, the number of first-year student respondents is very small (N=19).

reasons for their assessment.⁵ Students' responses to these open-ended questions were coded for primary themes. Table One provides students' responses regarding their "best" general education course.⁶

As this table shows, the instructor plays an important role in shaping students' perceptions of their general education experience. By far, "the instructor" was the most often mentioned reason given for the "best" course. While many of the responses coded in this category were somewhat vague (e.g., "the teacher" or "excellent professor") some students provided further explanation. These students used adjectives like "enthusiastic," "dynamic," "personable" to describe the instructor or made statements like these:

The professor was organized, flexible, and a fair grader.

Professor's interest sparked students' interest.

Professor wasn't business like – he interacted with students.

Teacher made me think. It wasn't just a straight lecture and the class was small."

The professor didn't just lecture. [There was] plenty of class involvement.

It's important to point out that only those comments that directly mentioned the instructor were coded under the instructor category. As these students' responses make clear, however, there are many elements to good instruction and a number of the themes coded separately from "the instructor" are still directly related to pedagogy (even though the student didn't directly mention the instructor). For example, "the course was interesting", "the course made me think", and "the course topic was made relevant to students" are all related to teaching methods. Within this broader view, the impact of the instructor is even greater than the 42.5% figure would suggest.

A similar observation can be made when students' responses regarding their worst general education course are considered (see Table Two).

Again we see the important role of the instructor and pedagogy on students' assessments of their general education courses. Clearly students place a great deal of

the burden of success on the instructor and, even when the instructor is not mentioned directly, students' comments critique instructional pedagogy (e.g., "make it less boring", "have more interaction or discussion", etc.).

While the importance of instructional pedagogy is the primary theme emerging from these responses, another issue emerges which seems related both to students' assessment of their general education instructor and their attitudes towards the course: student interest in and motivation for taking the course. The extensive course evaluation literature shows that students' ratings of instruction are affected by their interest in taking the course. Instructors are more likely to receive higher ratings in courses where students had a prior interest in the subject or where they took the course as an elective rather than a requirement.⁷ Clearly motivation and interest are also relevant to students' assessments of general education instruction. As the first *Bulletin* in this series showed, student interest in the general education requirements is mixed at best (even though they know the requirements are "good for them"). Therefore, students' assessment of the instructor (and the extent to which the instructor was responsible for the course being the "best" or "worst" general education course) may well be moder-

Table Two

What Would Have Made "Worst" General Education Course Better?	N	% of Total
Different instructor	106	47.3
Smaller class size	17	7.6
Less difficult/heavy workload	17	7.6
Make it less boring/more interesting	15	6.7
Different focus (too broad or too narrow)	13	5.8
Different topic	11	4.9
More interaction/discussion	10	4.5
Other statements (less than 10 responses each in various categories including: better course material, more relevant, different testing/grading, etc.,)	35	15.6
Total	224	100.0

ated by their interest in taking the course in the first place. While sorting out the complexities of the relationship between students' motivation and their course

⁵ Of the 266 undergraduates asked these questions, 95% (n=252) gave codable reasons for their best general education course and 85% (n=224) for their worst course.

⁶ Due to the small first-year student sample size for this question, a comparison of responses by class-level was not conducted.

⁷ Cashin, W. E. (September, 1995). "Student Ratings of Teaching: The Research Revisited." *Idea Paper No. 32*. Kansas State University: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development.

assessments was beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that current efforts to improve general education should directly address this issue of student engagement and motivation.

General Education Outcomes

In the next *Bulletin* in this series, we focus on students' perceptions of progress they have made in terms of general education goals. We will also highlight current students' and recent graduates' overall evaluation of general education.

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What do you think?

The Task Force on General Education is interested in your thoughts on general education reform at UMass Amherst. Please contact the Task Force Chair, John Jenkins, at jenkins@admin.umass.edu.

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