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General Education: Students' Perspectives

SUMMARY In a survey of their attitudes towards general education, undergraduates rated the importance of specific goals and the value and relevance of the general education requirements. The majority of students rated all the goals as important. However, those goals representing broadly defined skills and knowledge received higher ratings than goals reflecting specific academic disciplines (particularly math and science). With respect to their attitudes towards the requirements, most students believed the requirements were valuable and helpful to them, but didn't necessarily view them as relevant to students' interests. The implications for current general education reform efforts are discussed.

A Focus on General Education

The content and delivery of general education in American colleges and universities has received increased attention in recent years. The debate touches not only on areas of content that make up general education curricula but also on how to make general education both conducive to student learning and cost effective. UMass Amherst shares these concerns. The recent strategic planning process raised the question of whether the current general education curriculum (implemented in 1986) is adequately meeting its original goals and responding to emerging societal needs. In response to the specific recommendations of the Task Force on Teaching and Learning and the Chancellor's Strategic Action Plan, a Task Force on General Education was appointed in December 1996 to review General Education at UMass Amherst and make recommendations to the Faculty Senate General Education Council.

In its discussions, the Task Force (with over 50 members, representing a wide variety of faculty, staff, and student perspectives) raised many questions regarding the purpose, experience, and quality of general education at UMass. The questions raised are complex, requiring a variety of investigative approaches. The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) is working with both the General Education Council and the Task Force to explore general education from various perspectives, using different data sources and methodologies. This is the first in a series of *Assessment Bulletins* reporting on that research.

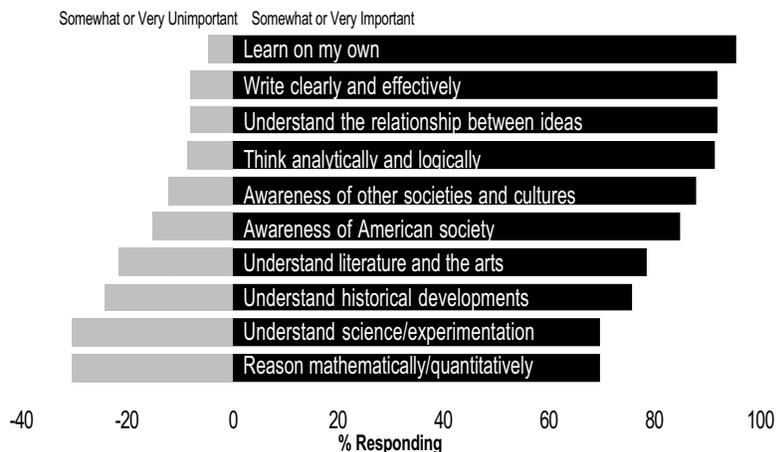
In a telephone survey,¹ students were asked a series of questions about their experiences with general education at UMass. Here we focus on their responses to questions reflecting their attitudes towards the purpose and value of general education.

Current General Education Goals

UMass Amherst's current general education curriculum was developed to provide students with the opportunity to experience breadth in their education through exposure to a variety of academic disciplines. The curriculum is also intended to contribute to students' development as life-long learners capable of the independent pursuit of knowledge. We asked students how important each of the goals of the UMass Amherst general education curriculum (as expressed in the original Faculty Senate action in 1985) was to them. Figure One shows students' ratings of the importance of each goal.

The majority of students view all of these goals as important, although the goals

Fig. 1. Students' Rating of Importance of General Education Goals

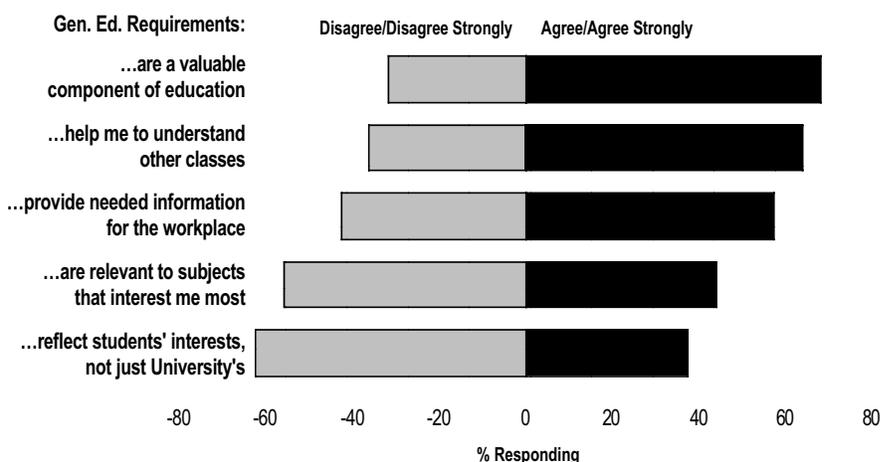


related to science and mathematics receive lower ratings. In addition, students rate the goals representing broadly defined skills or knowledge (i.e., ability to learn on one's own, ability to write clearly, ability to think logically) as more important than those goals reflecting, at least implicitly, specific disciplines (i.e., awareness of American society, understanding of literature and arts, understanding historical developments, understanding science and experimentation, and reasoning mathematically and quantitatively).

Attitudes Toward General Education

In addition to understanding students' feelings about the goals of general education, it is helpful to have some sense of how they feel about the "idea" of general education; do they see it as something of value for their education? We asked students in the sample who had completed at least one general education course² if they agreed with a series of statements about the general education requirements at UMass (see Figure Two).

Fig. 2. Level of Agreement with Statements Regarding UMass Amherst General Educ.



As this figure illustrates, students' attitudes are varied. Generally, students' assessments of the value of general education are positive. Two-thirds feel that it is a valuable component of their education and contributes to their understanding and enjoyment of other courses. Fewer, but still over half, believe general education provides information that they will need for the workplace.

At the same time, however, students are critical of the extent to which the requirements are reflective of their interests, with less than half viewing the requirements as relevant (to either their own interests or those of students generally). This conflict between students' support for the value of general education and their criticism of its relevance to the topics that interest them most suggests

that students know these requirements are "good for them" even though they don't necessarily like them.

Summary

These survey data, supported by statements from first-year students (see page three), provide a useful overview of students' attitudes towards general education at UMass. They are less helpful in understanding students' specific experiences with general education. This reflects a fundamental challenge in studying general education. Students do not experience a common general education curriculum. With the wide array of courses available that fulfill the requirements, the individual courses, patterns of courses, and timing of courses varies greatly among students.

None the less, the data presented in this *Assessment Bulletin* provide some useful insights into students' perceptions of general education at UMass and suggest some areas in which a re-examination of general education could focus.

Two findings are particularly striking. The first is students' weaker interest in the general education goals most directly related to specific disciplines (particularly mathematics and scientific inquiry). This poses a challenge for instructors teaching these general education courses, since interest in a topic and motivation to perform well are clearly linked.

The second finding is students' somewhat bifurcated response to general education. On the one hand, the majority of students view general education as valuable and useful.

On the other hand, the majority do not view the requirements as relevant to their or their peers' interests. Again, this presents challenges for those charged with delivering general education to students.

These findings raise important questions for those charged with reviewing general education: How important is it that students view general education as "relevant"? What would a "relevant" general education curriculum look like? Is the problem less with the content of general education and more with the message students receive? (For example, anecdotal evidence from Task Force discussions suggest that the primary message many students receive is to get their gen. ed.'s "out of the way" – which certainly

Student Attitudes Towards General Education: In Their Own Voices

In spring 1997, a small group of first-year students with undeclared majors was interviewed on a host of topics, including their understanding of general education.¹ To complement the survey data presented in this *Bulletin*, we share these students' voices² as they express their views of general education. The fact that these students were relatively new to the campus, and had not experienced the curricular structure of a major, makes their perspectives particularly interesting.

The Purpose of the Requirements

A recurring question in General Education Task Force meetings is, "Do students understand the rationale behind the general education requirements?" When asked, "Why do you think the University has general education requirements?", students responded fairly consistently. While they used different words, students seemed to understand that the purpose of the requirements is to provide a varied (or broad) education.

Two variations, however, emerge. The first is the sense of general education requirements as the "enforcer." Some students saw the requirements as forcing students to be "well-rounded" in their education:

To make people that would normally not take certain classes take them.

...just so they know that they have some basic knowledge of every kind of field. Well, not really field, but, ...they're not giving degrees to people that just took all English classes, or whatever. That they got a diverse education.

The other variation that emerges is the sense of requirements as the introduction to possible majors or areas of interest.

... because they think it would help students find a major. I think that's definitely a good thing. ...because in high school, you only have certain classes and they don't give you classes like... Women's Studies. They would never have that in my high school. And I think with gen. ed. courses, it gives you such a broad aspect on what to choose from. It helps freshmen who have no idea. They'll just take all kinds of courses and then they can narrow it down from there. I think just taking regular English and math, it's just not enough.

Do Students Think They Are a Good Idea?

Students were also asked, "Do you think the requirements are a good idea?" Most of those interviewed agreed.

I think the gen. eds. are a good idea because if I didn't have the gen. eds. to go by, I probably would just take

all of one type of class. I hate math and science ... so I'd probably just take all literature and theater and forget about those. But they kind of force you to broaden it out a little bit.

I think it's fair. I'd rather not do it, just because there's certain things that I don't want to take, but I think it's a good idea, and I think I'll benefit from it and obviously learn something from it. And, I mean, the more courses I take the more it opens my eyes to different things. Even though I may not want to take it, I think it's still good for me.

Again, we see students viewing the requirements as the "enforcer" – making them do something that's good for them but that they wouldn't do on their own.

Some students' responses, while positive, were not as global in their appreciation for general education. Some said, "Yes it's a good idea, but..." there are too many requirements or not enough options for some general education categories. Dislike of math or science or both is at the heart of a number of these qualified comments:

...maybe there are too many. But I don't think it's a bad idea just to have a few, but I wish I didn't have to take math.

Most of these things I'm not interested in. I don't like Biology, I don't want a three hour lab for a class that I really don't care about ... I almost took Chemistry, or Biology, and then I saw the three hour lab and said 'No way – not a chance that I'm doing that.'

I guess it's a good idea, but...I don't know. I hate science, and they're making me take science.

One of the three students who said the requirements were not a good idea had a similar comment regarding math and science:

No, because I hate science. And I hate math. I really do not like it. I find it completely uninteresting. And I'm not good at it either. I don't like sitting there and figuring out X minus.... I can't devote a lot of time to it. ...I guess what they're trying to do is round people out and some people can't be rounded out.

Note that the same themes emerge here as in the survey results presented in the main text of this *Bulletin*: students' bifurcated view of general education and their limited interest in the mathematics and science requirements.

¹ Sixteen first-year undeclared students were interviewed during their second semester on campus. 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.

² The quotes used here are drawn directly from transcriptions of the interviews. To aid the reader, some editing of filled pauses has been undertaken.

could have an impact on its perceived relevance.) At the heart of students' bifurcated view of general education is their seeming inability to make the link between general education and those topics of greatest interest to them. A curriculum that helps students develop that connection would make an important contribution to their intellectual growth at UMass.

Next: General Education Courses

The next *Assessment Bulletin* will focus on students' general education experiences at the course level by exploring why students select the courses and what makes a general education course "good" in students' eyes.

¹ 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.

² Sixty-three percent (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.

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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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