

General Education: Juniors' Attitudes and Experiences

SUMMARY OAPA surveyed a sample of juniors, asking them questions about their experiences in general education at UMass Amherst. Students' experiences in general education courses are mixed. Over three-quarters said they were able to get into the general education courses they wanted and were satisfied with both the quality of the instruction and the general education courses themselves. However, only half felt that their courses were even somewhat helpful in developing the ability to reason mathematically/quantitatively. They also felt their general education courses were not very challenging and they had difficulty seeing the relevance of the requirements to their own academic and career interests.

The University's General Education Task Force spent the last few years reviewing the General Education curriculum at UMass and developing strategies for enhancing undergraduate learning. In the early stages of the Task Force's work, the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) reviewed survey data and conducted focused dialogues with groups of students, faculty, and administrators to identify the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum and interviewed first-year students about their experiences with general education.

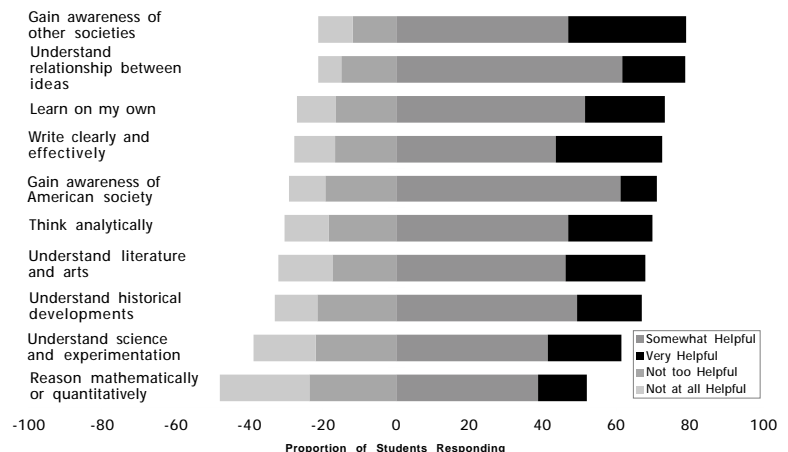
More recently, OAPA continued its investigation through a survey of students near the completion of their general education requirements. In collaboration with Student Affairs Research, Information, and Systems (SARIS), we conducted a phone survey of a random sample of juniors in December 1998. Of the total sample (996), 427 were surveyed for a response rate of 42.9 percent. Of those who were actually contacted, 82.5 percent agreed to participate in the survey.

By their junior year, most students have taken a variety of general education courses and are, in many cases, near the completion of these requirements. Therefore, their perspectives are particularly useful in understanding the cumulative effect of the general education experience. The survey focused on three significant issues in the ongoing efforts to revise and improve the current curriculum: (1) the success of general education in helping students achieve the primary learning goals of the curriculum; (2) students' attitudes towards the requirements; and 3) students' evaluations of the general education courses they took.

General Education Learning Goals

In 1985, when the current general education curriculum was approved, the Faculty senate identified ten specific learning goals for the curriculum. We asked juniors to rate how helpful their general education courses were in achieving these 10 general education goals. **Figure 1** shows their response.

FIGURE 1: UMass Juniors' Rating of Gen. Ed. Courses



Overall, little variability exists in students' ratings for each of the general education goals. Between 60 and 70 percent report that their courses were at least somewhat helpful in achieving most of these goals. Within this general framework, however, there are some important differences. First, the ratings are lowest for the two goals most closely related to science and math. This is particularly true for "reasoning mathematically/quantitatively"

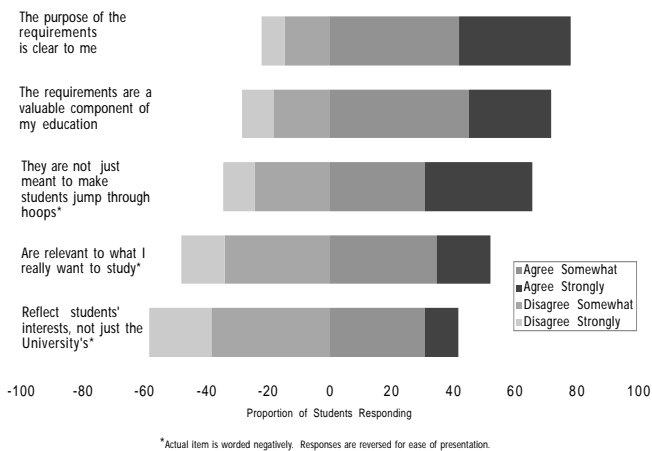
where only half of the respondents felt their general education courses were even somewhat helpful.

In comparison, students rated some of the broadest goals most highly. Specifically, 79 percent of the students rated their courses as at least somewhat helpful in gaining an awareness of other societies/cultures and in understanding the relationship between ideas. Note also the goals where juniors were most likely to say their courses were very helpful: approximately 20 percent of the students rated their courses as very helpful in gaining an awareness of other cultures and in writing clearly and effectively.

Juniors' Attitudes Towards the General Education Requirements

In the interviews and focus groups we conducted, students provided a variety of perspectives on general education requirements. While a number indicated that they recognized the importance of general education requirements in attaining a broad education, many also questioned the relevance of the requirements to their own academic goals. To examine how widely shared these perspectives were, we developed survey items that reflected these students' comments. **Figure 2** illustrates the results.

FIGURE 2: Agreement with Statements Regarding Gen. Ed. Requirements



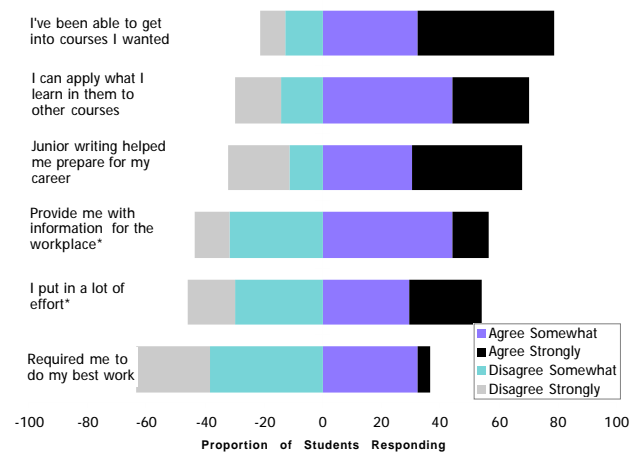
Over 70 percent of these juniors felt they had a clear understanding of the purpose of the requirements and viewed the requirements as a valuable aspect of their education. To a somewhat lesser degree (66%), students also believed the requirements weren't just in place to

make students "jump through hoops". Taken together, these findings suggest that most students appreciate the value of general education at UMass. When asked to rate their interest in some of the general education requirements, however, the students were more critical. Indeed, only half (52%) felt the requirements were relevant to what they wanted to study and even fewer (41%) felt the requirements reflected students' interests.

Experiences in General Education Courses

Finally, we asked students to evaluate their general education courses. These results are shown in **Figure 3**.

FIGURE 3: Agreement with Statements Regarding Gen. Ed. Courses



With respect to students' experiences with general education courses, the most positive marks come for the availability of general education courses, with 79 percent of respondents agreeing that they were able to get into the courses they wanted (47% strongly agree). General education courses are rated relatively positively in two other areas as well. More than two-thirds (70%) of the respondents felt they were able to apply what they learned in their general education courses to courses in their major. A similar number (68%) felt that the junior writing course helped with their career preparation (37% strongly agreed).

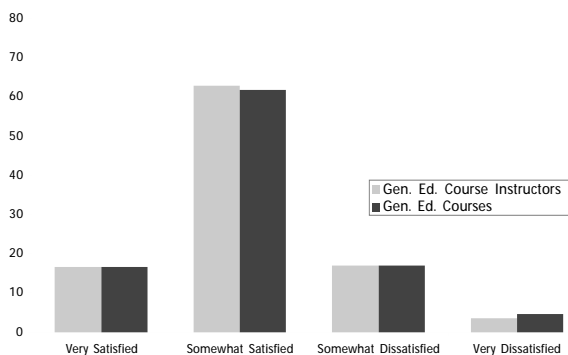
Students' level of agreement drops, however, on the final three statements. While students viewed their Junior Writing course as helpful to their career, they were less likely to see application between their other general education courses and their future workplace. They also

indicated that general education courses were not challenging enough to require them to submit their best effort or do their best work.

Overall Satisfaction

Finally, we asked students for their overall evaluation of their general education instructors and their courses. Students' evaluation of instructors and courses are quite similar. Over three-quarters of the students were at least somewhat satisfied with both their instructors and the courses themselves, although only 17 percent were very satisfied (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Overall Student Satisfaction with General Education



Discussion

This survey serves as a follow-up to our 1995 general education survey of a sample of all undergraduates¹ and, in a number of ways, these results support the findings of this earlier study. For example, students' judgements of the success of the curriculum in meeting its intended goals are quite similar in both surveys. Among the most striking findings is the consistently low ratings students give to the curriculum's success in helping them meet the two goals most closely related to scientific inquiry and mathematical reasoning. Of course, since the 1995 survey also showed that these are among the goals students rate as least important to them, we must keep in mind that students' own motivation plays a role in their evaluation.

In addition, in both surveys students rated the curriculum as particularly successful in helping them gain an awareness of other societies and cultures. The inclusion of the diversity requirement into the general education program initiated many debates on campus. While it isn't possible to definitively attribute these consistently positive responses to the diversity requirement, the results do suggest that the general education curriculum is having some success in meeting this aspect of its intended purpose.

¹Reports from this study are available from OAPA.

This study also bolsters earlier findings of students' somewhat bifurcated response to general education. On the one hand, most of the juniors responding to the survey said they understood the purpose of the general education requirements and viewed them as a valuable component of their education. At the same time, however, they didn't necessarily view the requirements as relevant to their interests. Although these results may appear somewhat conflicting, student comments from the focus groups and interviews help elucidate. A number of students said that it was important to have the requirements to "force" students to educate themselves more broadly. These students believed that, left to their own devices, they would focus solely on courses most relevant to their current interests and avoid other, more diverse, educational experiences.

Finally, this study supports earlier findings regarding the general education courses themselves. Students are able to get into the general education courses they want. However, they often don't find these courses particularly challenging nor do they believe the courses motivate them to do their best work.

As well as confirming earlier findings, this study provides new information regarding students' experiences in general education courses. Responses on a number of items suggest more positive experience than some anecdotal evidence might suggest. For example, while it is the intent of the requirements to provide students with exposure to topics that can inform the rest of their studies, it is not always clear that students actually make these connections. This study provides preliminary evidence suggesting many students do make these types of connections. In fact, two-thirds of the students reported applying what they learned in general education courses to courses in their major.

In addition, the curriculum receives relatively high marks for the writing preparation it gives students. Almost three-quarters of the students surveyed said that their general education courses were helpful to them in developing the ability to write clearly and effectively. In addition, two-thirds of the students rate the junior writing course as helpful in preparing them for their careers. While one might wish these percentages were higher, they are still among the most positive findings in the study.

Which brings us to the final, particularly vexing, question that emerges from this study -- are these results good news or not? One of the challenges in using survey data to inform practice is determining whether the results suggest change is necessary. On one level, these results can be

viewed as fairly positive. The majority of students seem satisfied with their general education courses and instructors. They find the courses helpful in attaining a number of general education goals, and acknowledge the overall value of the general education curriculum.

The results can also be viewed as rather modest. Even on the items with the highest positive responses, the percentages do not reach 80%. And, in the items garnering the highest ratings, the bulk of the positive responses reflect middling support ("somewhat" satisfied, "somewhat" helpful, etc.) rather than strong support (i.e., "very" satisfied, "very" helpful, etc.). Finally, on three issues (helpfulness of courses in mathematical/quantitative thinking, relevance of general education to students' interests, and the level of challenge provided by courses) fully half of the students respond negatively.

Is this level of support the best we can expect from juniors? Perhaps satisfaction levels of less than 80 percent are the standard for students at this stage in their college careers. When we compare these responses to other survey results, however, this does not appear to be the case. In a recent survey of another random sample of

students at UMass conducted by SARIS (1997 Cycles Survey), 90 percent of the juniors reported satisfaction with their university experience (17 percent were very satisfied). In items more closely related to the academic experience, the differences are less dramatic but still more positive than these general education results. Eighty-five percent of these juniors expressed satisfaction with their academic experience (17% very satisfied) and 87 percent were satisfied with their current schedule of courses (21% very satisfied). All of these percentages are higher than the 78% in the general education survey who expressed satisfaction with their general education courses.

While the ramifications of the overall satisfaction results may be less definitive, there are three areas where these data suggest attention is warranted. These include: (1) improving students' opportunities for developing mathematical/quantitative reasoning skills; (2) articulating and reinforcing the relevance of the general education requirements to students' own academic and career interests; and (3) increasing the level of performance and academic challenge required in general education courses. Taking action on these three issues would address the areas where the greatest student dissatisfaction and criticism exists.

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The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas:

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- **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program.
- **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals.
- **Developing strategies** for undertaking systematic reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation and other purposes.

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