Challenges and Opportunities in General Education

The thematic diagram, “Challenges and Opportunities in General Education,” was developed to provide a visual representation of UMass Amherst students’ perspectives of and experiences with General Education. The schema draws from the results of two focus groups (one of first year students, one of seniors) conducted in fall 2007 by the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) to gather information about students’ understanding of and experiences with General Education.

Student responses were coded and general themes identified and categorized as positive elements of General Education (green), negative elements (orange), or mixed elements (green and orange combined). This diagram represents the results in a manner that highlights the challenges and opportunities that students experience in their General Education courses. The broad themes identified are: purpose/value, utility, operational, course experience, and course options. For example, within the theme of utility, student responses fell into both positive and negative responses while, when referring to course options available, only negative responses were recorded. Within utility, students mentioned specifics such as General Education being useful in helping choose a major/minor and providing the opportunity to meet new people. They cite the lack of overlap with their major and redundancy of courses as elements of General Education that are not useful to them.
Challenges and Opportunities in General Education

Results from Focus Groups of Freshmen and Seniors
December 2007

Purpose/Value
- A common set of experiences that all students share
- Teaches you how to adapt to new circumstances
- Makes for better-rounded students
- Broadens your exposure outside your major

Utility
- Helps you choose a minor/major
- Good for a break, enhances other learning
- Meet new people outside major
- Lets you know what you’re interested in, what not
- Relevance to student’s interests/needs
- No overlap with major
- Repeat of high school content: redundant, repetitive
- Lowers GPA
- One class can satisfy two requirements
- Teaches you how to work the system

Operational
- Flexibility in requirement completion (@ beginning or spread out)
- Teaching that engages you in the topic/discipline*
- Must spend energies working the system
- Transferring in credits is difficult
- Courses are not always offered or are full or their times conflict with other courses
- Advising is not always personalized and advisors are not always informed. Advising is not helpful.

Course Experience
- Breadth vs. Depth
- Scope too broad, seems unfocused
- Memorization hinders learning
- Courses are too large and impersonal
- Technology

Course Options
- Few easy classes, lowers GPA
- No pass/fail option
- Not enough upper-level courses offered
- Requirements are not flexible
- Limited assessment methods (e.g. multiple choice tests)
- Few easy classes, lowers GPA

Key:
Orange/Red = Challenges
Green = Positives
Rainbow = Mixed Responses

*See handout What Students Value in General Education Courses
Office of Academic Planning and Assessment • University of Massachusetts Amherst • May 1, 2008