

What Students Value in General Education Courses

The thematic diagram, "What Students Value in General Education Courses," was developed to provide a visual representation of UMass Amherst students' descriptions of their experiences in General Education courses. The diagram is designed to help inform General Education instructors in their course design and instructional efforts. The schema draws from two sources of data collected in the fall of 2007: an online survey and two focus groups. The student survey was administered through the General Education course "The Biology of Cancer and Aids" (N=423, Response rate = 89%). Responses were taken specifically from the following questions: 1) *Think of the best General Education course you have taken in college thus far. What is it about that course that made it the best course for you?* and 2) *Think of the worst General Education course you have taken so far at UMass. What is it about that course that made it the worst course for you?* The focus group responses were pulled from transcriptions of two focus groups (one of first year students, one of seniors) conducted to generate information about students' understanding of and experiences with General Education.

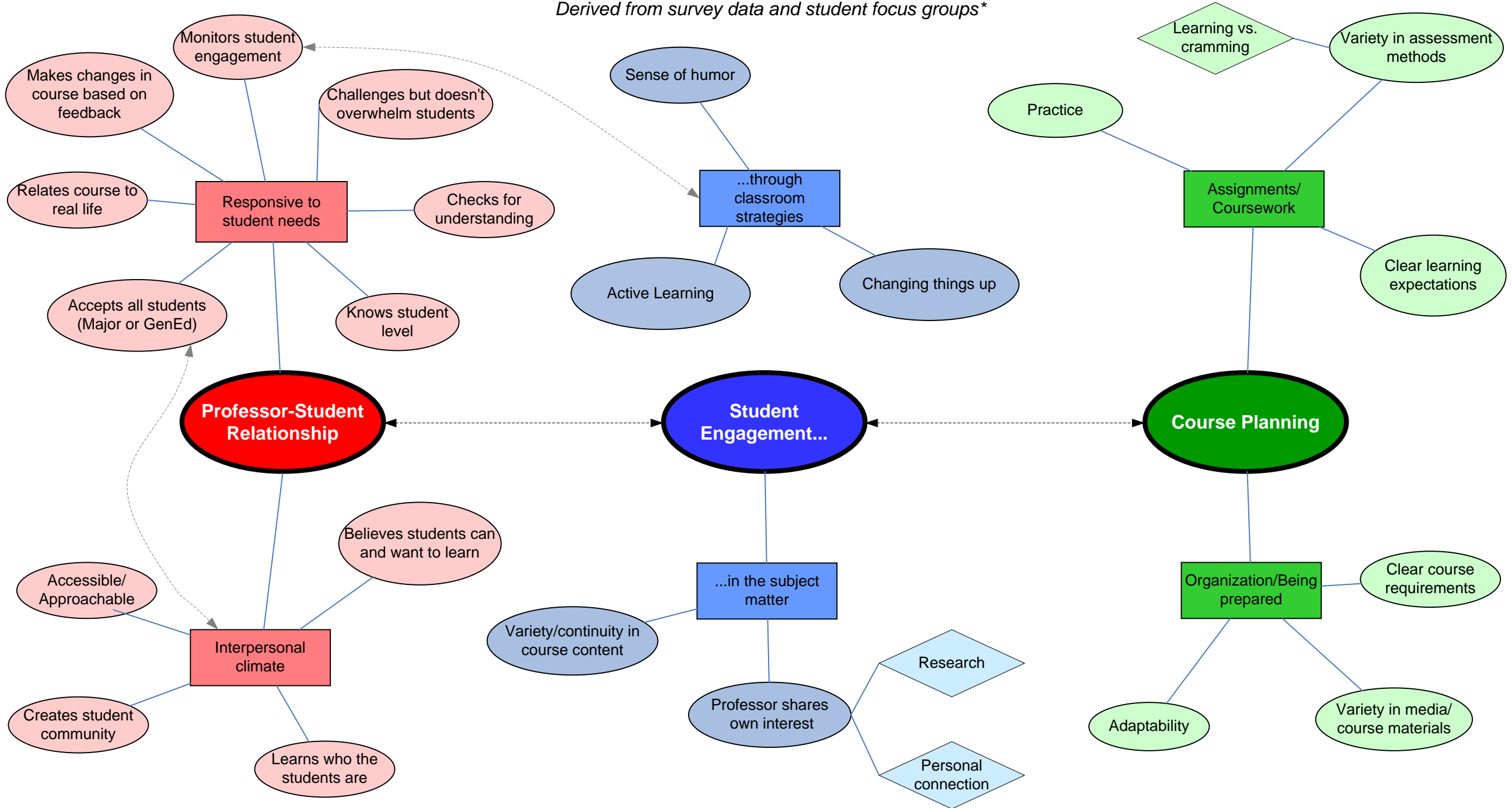
Student responses were coded and general themes developed. While information was collected from both positive and negative responses about General Education, this diagram represents the results in a manner that highlights the positive actions instructors can take to facilitate student engagement in their General Education course. The broad themes identified are: the professor-student relationship, student engagement, and course planning. The level of specificity increases at each level with the lowest level intending to provide concrete information about characteristics students value in their General Education courses. For example, within the theme of course planning, student responses fell into two main categories: responses mentioning assignments and coursework and responses mentioning the instructor's level of organization and preparedness. Within the category of "organization/being prepared", students' comments fell into three subcategories: clear course requirements, adaptability, and variety in media/course materials. These subcategories reflect a range of specific recommendations within each theme. For example, under "variety in media/course materials" students indicated they had preferences for the use (and not overuse) of PowerPoint, videos, course websites, and online assessments.

While this schema was developed in an inductive manner (drawing more general concepts from students' individual perspectives) the themes that emerged reflect those that are common across much of the research on effective strategies for teaching and learning and the well-established "Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education¹," first developed in 1987.

¹ Chickering, A., & Gamson, Z. (1987). Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. AAHE Bulletin, 39, 3-7. Retrieved April 24, 2008, from <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/pdf/fall1987.pdf>

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*Derived from survey data and student focus groups**



*Results map onto established principles of good practice in undergraduate education