Challenges and Opportunities in General Education

The thematic diagram on the next page, “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).

This diagram represents the results of these focus groups in a manner that highlights the challenges and opportunities that students experience in their General Education courses. These challenges and opportunities are organized around five themes: purpose/value, utility, operational, course experience, and course options. The specific dimensions of each theme are categorized as positive elements (green), negative elements (orange), or mixed (green and orange combined). For example, within the theme of utility, student responses fell into both positive and negative elements while, when referring to course options available, students only offered negative responses. 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.

It is noteworthy that while students are critical of some aspects of their General Education experiences, they do express and appreciation for the value of General Education.
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
- Memorization hinders learning
- Lowered GPA
- Meet new people outside major
- Helps you choose a minor/major
- Good for a break, enhances other learning
- Broadens your exposure outside your major
- Lets you know what you’re interested in, what not
- Good for break, enhances other learning

Utility

- 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
- 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

Operational

- Flexibility in requirement completion (@ beginning or spread out)
- Teaching that engages you in the topic/discipline*
- One class can satisfy two requirements
- Teaches you how to work the system
- Must spend energies working the system
- Transferring in credits is difficult
- Freshmen-only, majors-only restrictions
- Advising is not always personalized and advisors are not always informed. Advising is not helpful.

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

Course Options

- Requirements are not flexible
- Few easy classes, lowers GPA
- No pass/fail option
- Not enough upper-level courses offered
- Limited assessment methods (e.g. multiple choice tests)
- Breadth vs. Depth
- Scope too broad, seems unfocused
- Memorization hinders learning
- Professor is uninterested
- Outdated content
- Courses are too large and impersonal

Course Experience

- Flexibility in requirement completion (@ beginning or spread out)
- Teaching that engages you in the topic/discipline*
- One class can satisfy two requirements
- Teaches you how to work the system
- Must spend energies working the system
- Transferring in credits is difficult
- Freshmen-only, majors-only restrictions
- Advising is not always personalized and advisors are not always informed. Advising is not helpful.

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*See handout What Students Value in General Education Courses

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