

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2000, a team of ten faculty members embarked on a longitudinal study of student perceptions of their learning as it relates to the cross-disciplinary goals of the UND General Education Program (described on pages 25-27 in the 2001-2003 *Academic Catalog*). The study is part of two larger projects, one described in the *University Assessment Plan* and the other in the *Bush Teaching Scholars Program and the UND Assessment Teams*, a faculty development initiative funded by the Bush Foundation. Although there are a number of possible techniques for assessing student learning, this particular project is designed to elicit, over time, student perspectives on their learning. The two questions guiding the study are 1) What are our students' perspectives on what they are learning and how they are learning as it relates to our cross-disciplinary General Education goals? and 2) How can what is being learned be used to improve the General Education Program?

The faculty study team members have been interviewing students each semester over the course of their study at UND, using a semi-structured interview format. The methodology is qualitative and to some degree emergent. Originally 120 students were recruited to participate in the study, one group of 45 beginning the study in 2000 and the rest in 2001, although student attrition and graduation means that at this point, 55 students remain in the study. The study is currently in its fifth year; this report is an attempt to interpret the first four years of work by the Study Team so that those considering changes in the General Education Program can use the findings of the study to date. The report is based on 513 interviews.

Findings Related to Specific Cross-Disciplinary General Education Goals

Communication

Students consistently viewed communication and critical thinking as the most important GE goals. Both skills were usually considered important aspects of majors and of life after college. Students rated themselves highly in Communication skills compared to other skills, but at the same time, they felt they became better communicators, both in writing and speaking, as they progressed through their studies. A number of students spoke of communication improving as they became better thinkers. Composition classes were mentioned most often as those helping them improve their writing skills, but a variety of others were mentioned as well.

There was more variation in response to learning to be a better speaker than there was to learning to be a better writer. Many students report they saw no improvement in this skill during their first year, and several of these mentioned that large lecture classes were not conducive to learning this skill. Students' sense of improvement in spoken communication seemed to have much to do with overcoming reserve/shyness and finding one's own voice. On the other hand, there were references to a variety of courses (usually those that required presentations or which were small enough to enable discussions) which had led them to become better speakers. There was also considerable reference to non-academic experiences supporting the development of this skill.

Critical Thinking

This GE goal was also cited as an important one with growing frequency as students entered their majors and gained practical experiences. Students' understanding of what critical thinking is, it should be noted, varied a great deal. Most often it was referred to as the ability to analyze, to consider all variables, or to problem-solve. A fair number of students felt they were thinking critically when they had to apply theory to real-world practice. There were students who said all classes helped them with this, while others, at least early in their General Education work, thought none did. More often, however, students mentioned a wide range of particular classes that helped them become better critical thinkers. Some students thought that the simple process of having to "deal with people" improved their thinking skills. On the other hand, students did not report challenging authority in meaningful ways.

A number of students mentioned research projects as significant learning experiences. Although it was not a large number who talked about them, these projects seemed particularly pertinent to the development of critical thinking skills. Such research projects, when described, were as likely to have occurred for an extracurricular activity as they were to have occurred for a class.

Creative Thinking

It seems important to note that creative and critical thinking were often difficult to separate for some students, and "thinking about things in different ways" was considered as much a part of critical thinking as it was of creative thinking. Early in their education, many, but by no means all, students equated creative thinking with artistic activity and as a result were sometimes disappointed with themselves in this area.

Students' understanding of creative thinking seemed to waver depending on how it was talked about, and that, in turn, seemed to affect students' ability to clearly indicate places in their studies that encouraged it. Nonetheless, students were able to point to occasional courses in the Fine Arts, to particular experiences in Comp 110, and to particular kinds of classroom experiences (e.g., role play, group projects, but *not* lectures) as academic experiences that allowed creative thinking.

There was also reference to particular majors that students felt supported creative thinking. At the same time, other students that felt their majors allowed little room for it. There was a fairly large number of references to extra-curricular projects that enabled students to work creatively in satisfying ways, and several spoke of their own out-of-class, personal creative activities, such as poetry or fiction writing.

A few students said that they didn't like to think creatively. They preferred to be told exactly how to do something. Several others indicated in early GE classes, they felt that professors often actively discouraged creative thinking.

Recognizing Relationships

From the very beginning, most students responded to questions about this goal with examples of their own relationships with others. Early on the study team noticed this and began using the word *connections* when discussing this goal. In interview six, the team asked the students to "describe any connections...noticed between what you are studying in your major and what you are studying in your general Education courses" and "...between what you are learning in courses and your life otherwise at UND." When asked in this way, students pointed readily to connections between ideas, and skills

learned. Students especially appreciated teachers who helped them make connections between courses and between course content and events in their own lives.

Once in their majors, it became much easier for students to connect what they were learning in their courses. They could see how some General Education classes related directly to their major and how the courses in their major related to and often built on one another. By the beginning of the third year, a number of students were saying, "Everything is connected now," or "I see all courses as linked for the first time." Internships also provided excellent opportunities for students to make connections between their courses (both major and GE) and the "real world" of work. Though students valued these relationships when they were made, it's difficult to say to what degree GE courses promoted student achievement in this area.

Recognizing and Evaluating Choices and their Consequences

Of all GE goals, this one seemed to be the most clearly and consistently misunderstood. Students almost always spoke of learning in this area as it related to understanding the consequences of their own (and their friends') *personal* choices – regarding which they felt they learn a lot. For instance, many referred to watching roommates make bad personal choices (about drinking or lack of study) and learning from them; they also commented on similar poor choices they themselves made, especially during their first semester of college. Nonetheless, based on their self-rankings, students indicated a high rate of ability in this area from the beginning.

Interviewers had difficulty articulating questions that would prompt a response about experiences related to this academic goal. When asked if, *academically*, they had experienced the opportunity to "explore the choices others have made and what informed those choices" 70% said they had, but of this 70%, many students gave examples of things like choosing to study or come to class, etc.

Once students had entered their majors, they spoke of the importance of their making and evaluating professional choices. There was much less reference to courses that caused them to think of *others'* choices and their consequences, but these were occasionally mentioned. When asked directly, in a year three interview, about others' choices ("Are there any courses in which you've explored the choices others have made and what informed those choices?"), more students were able to articulate learning that moved beyond the personal.

Understanding World Cultures

At the point of analyzing the results of the first year's interviews, it became obvious to the study team that they had expectations for students' experiences and understanding of world cultures which did not always mesh either with the language in the Catalog or with the students' actual first year experiences. The conversation among faculty moved almost immediately to speaking of *diversity*, rather than *world cultures*. In any case, this GE goal generated a wide range of responses. Although almost all students felt they became more open-minded after a year or two of study at UND, some cited the lack of attention given to this goal in classes. A few, however, pointed to particular classes that had been intentional in this area, and most said (in general, unrelated to this goal) that class discussions and discussions with fellow students outside of class exposed

them to different thinking and ideas. Outside of class, the International Center was most often cited as a location for repeated exposure to other cultures.

Initial reaction to the cultural milieu at UND varied depending upon the hometown of the student. Whereas students who came from more diverse environments could find UND and Grand Forks homogeneous, students who came from small towns in North Dakota or Minnesota could find it amazingly diverse.

Most students seemed to enjoy meeting students with different experiences and backgrounds, but few sought them out, and they often chastised themselves for not taking advantage of the opportunities on campus for multicultural experiences. When students felt they had gained in this area, it was often because of a personal relationship they had developed. These experiences were most often outside of classes.

Some students wished that the University would be more intentional about this goal. On the other hand, there was often a gap in the depth of experience when instructors were intentional. Multicultural experiences did not necessarily result in a perceived increase in understanding of other cultures. For example, assignments that required students to simply visit cultural centers often did not lead to meaningful engagement. However, students who were required, for example, to interview Native Americans about the Sioux logo described engagement with that issue and its cultural implications.

Many students seemed interested in the opportunity to study abroad, but others seemed to have no interest. Many envied others' study abroad opportunities but didn't see it as something they themselves could do because their choices were so heavily limited by what their majors demanded in terms of electives and General Education courses, or because they felt they could not afford it. Those who did step out of their culture often spoke of these experiences as being the most eye-opening. In a few cases, students had become engaged in research projects that caused important learning in this area

Students generally ranked themselves lower in this skill than in the others. 20% also ranked it as the least important of the General Education goals when asked.

Other Findings

What Else Do Students Tell Us About the General Education Program?

This section highlights points about the general education program that are not related to *specific* cross-disciplinary goals.

Students saw the General Education Program as serving a number of different functions. Early on, students' perceptions of the purposes of General Education varied. Some saw no purpose; many believed it was to gain general or basic knowledge or to provide a well-rounded education; others saw its purpose as introducing options for possible majors, exploring interests, or forming a foundation for further learning; and some saw it as developing useful skills. Students continued to see various purposes for the General Education Program but later those purposes dealt more with choosing and preparing for their major, for their careers, and for acquisition of general knowledge.

The language of general education was initially strange to and unexamined by students. The meanings they brought to the language were not always the same meanings intended by the University.

To students, a more meaningful categorization of classes than GE and non-GE might be “elective” and “required.” Starting in year three, students talked about gaining cross-disciplinary General Education skills in their major more than in their General Education courses (although this varied somewhat based on the specific GE goal.) When asked why, they pointed to GE courses as general lecture courses that didn’t promote cross-disciplinary skills because of structural constraints.

At the same time that students seemed thoughtful about themselves related to GE goals, they didn’t show thoughtfulness about the General Education *Program*. In years three and four, students were looking forward and thinking about life after college, and although they didn’t necessarily see the relationship between General Education *courses* and their majors, they were now seeing connections between the GE *goals* and the majors.

Courses in the major were seen as more challenging, relevant and attention-grabbing, especially early on in the major, although often there was acknowledgment of the importance of many GE courses later in the major. By their third year, 77% of the students responding said there were clear-cut connections between major courses and GE courses while 23% said there was no evidence of any connection. Most often students noted connections based on skills or on specific knowledge. For example, they saw the writing skills gained in composition as important to their writing work in upper-division, major courses; or, they saw that general level courses like biology had given them useful basic knowledge for upper level courses in their majors like genetics.

Composition courses were mentioned the most often as those that help students’ learning related to GE goals. Sociology, history, psychology, and religion were also frequently mentioned. Also, many non-GE courses were mentioned by students as courses that had helped them reach cross-disciplinary GE goals.

What Else Do Students Tell Us About Their Learning?

The following are some student perspectives which, though not directly connected to the University’s plan for general education, can nonetheless offer food for thought to those who want to know what matters to students, and thus indirectly can help us think about our General Education Program.

Self Knowledge and Growth

At the University students say they gain the freedom to be “who you are.” Not only did they move from holding their parents’ ideas to having their own, but there was enough room and diversity to enable each person to be him or herself, relatively free of what other people might think of them.

Students spoke of increased independence and figuring out how to negotiate college as two major things learned in their first year. Growth in confidence, after the first year, was quite clear for most of these students. Many saw their friends at home as staying the same while they themselves changed.

Most students mentioned their religions, and for some coming in contact with other religions was a powerful learning opportunity. As a result, many worked at

bringing clarity to their beliefs. Interview talk about religious beliefs, nonetheless, was most prevalent in the first interview; discussion of this topic diminished greatly over the course of the study.

Academic Learning

Many students came to UND wanting to improve their communication skills, to improve their thinking skills, or to develop leadership skills, (usually because they saw these as valuable skills for a career).

Students often spoke of getting more serious about their studies after the first or second semesters. In particular many talked of taking their major courses more seriously because these, they said, would form the basis of their jobs.

Although students did not find Introduction to University Life challenging, they did recommend it for the help it gave them in navigating the University and university life.

Initially few students considered themselves responsible for their own learning. Especially in the first two years, but even beyond, most students identified the teacher as the most important component in determining the quality of their learning experience and environment. By the time they entered their majors, however, the subject matter could determine the efficacy of the class. By the end of the second year, they were accepting more responsibility for their own learning

Many students spontaneously attributed positive changes they noticed about themselves to general maturity, rather than to their education. On the other hand, they also pointed to particular academic experiences that stimulated changes.

Research activities – for courses and for extracurricular projects – (at least those worthy of mention in the interviews) were usually engaging and strongly educational.

By year three, most students were strongly committed to a major and happy with their choices of major. Those that weren't (and 14% did not indicate that they were happy) felt as if it were too late to change at this point.

Financial Realities

The stark reality of the cost of education usually hit after the first or second year. When this occurred, students might try to finish as quickly as possible, which often meant going to summer term or not taking anything that might not "count" for one's major. Sometimes it led to not changing a major, even when a student had decided his or her chosen major was not their top choice. It also might lead to working more hours and a second job, thus leaving less time for academic concerns.

Recommendations

The goals of General Education describe the expectations we hold in common for the university graduate. At a time when both students and the general public see higher education as more and more work- or career-focused, it is important to reaffirm these common goals and bring new life and meaning to the ways we address them within the University. One way to do this is to make the concept of general education, its purposes and meanings, both more visible and more fully embedded in the culture of UND. Toward this end, the General Education Longitudinal Study Team makes the following recommendations.

The recommendations are in no particular order. Although they are necessarily presented separately, they are in fact interrelated and sometimes overlapping. Each recommendation is followed by a list of possible strategies for addressing it. However, many of these considerations and strategies are only representative – they are not comprehensive – and each may address more than one recommendation.

Since the concept of general education is sometimes confused with a specific set of required courses or course options, lower case is used to indicate the *concept, idea, or philosophy* of general education; upper case is used when referring to specific *programs or courses* (e.g., General Education Program, GER courses).

Recommendation 1. Create more opportunities on campus for regular discussion of general education, its meanings, purposes, and methods. In doing so, consider all audiences that could benefit from increased attention to the aims of general education (e.g., students, faculty, potential students, parents, high school teachers, advisors, student services personnel) and plan effective strategies for reaching them.

Recommendation 2. Ensure that the purposes and goals of general education are integrated throughout the University – not just in courses designated as fulfilling General Education Requirements.

Recommendation 3. As changes in the General Education Program are considered, draw on the results of this study to refine the present goals.

Recommendation 4. Re-examine and articulate more carefully the goal of "World Cultures." Clarify its meaning and develop strategies for embedding meaningful experiences related to it into students' education.

Recommendation 5. Although some General Education courses clearly play a foundational or pre-requisite role for certain major courses, others may be especially valuable when linked with major courses or taken later in students' academic careers. For this reason, encourage students to integrate their General Education Requirements "vertically" through their course of study rather than layering them "horizontally."

Recommendation 6. Establish new ways to increase student-faculty interaction and mutual understanding.

Recommendation 7. Provide faculty development opportunities focused on designing courses to meet general education goals. Reinforce and support pedagogy that students say works for them (e.g. smaller class sizes, limited and effective use of PowerPoint, project work, mitigated use of straight lecture, opportunity for discussion and interaction, presentations and other comprehensive projects, experiential learning opportunities, opportunities to see topics from varying perspectives, etc.).

Recommendation 8. Re-examine the structure of advising with an eye to making it more developmental and more intentional in reinforcing the common purposes and goals of a university education.

Recommendation 9. Develop and implement a comprehensive and continuous assessment plan that documents student learning as it relates to general education purposes and goals. It should include both direct and indirect assessment of student learning.

Recommendation 10. Fund initiatives that support the above recommendations and strategies.