

General Education Student Focus Groups

December 9, 2011

Background: The General Education Council recommended in 2009 that the university conduct student focus groups involving 2 colleges each year as part of the assessment plan for the General Education Program. The groups were not conducted until 2011 because the university's financial problems precluded funding the groups. In the summer of 2011, as part of the university's strategic planning process, the provost made assessment of General Education a high priority and allocated funding. Mr. Phil Bartos, Executive in Residence in the Department of Marketing and Management and an experienced facilitator of focus groups, agreed to facilitate for a minimal fee, which he asked to be given to his department. The deans of the colleges of Business and Liberal Arts asked faculty members to provide lists of seniors who had taken all or nearly all of their GE hours at UCA to participate in the groups. From those lists, 10 student participants were selected from Business and 11 from Liberal Arts. The groups were held on December 9, 2011, with Mr. Bartos as facilitator and Travis Rhodes, a graduate student in English, taking notes. Students were asked to discuss three questions, which they were given ahead of time and asked to reflect on: 1) What did you find especially helpful about your general education experience? 2) What did you find unhelpful or frustrating? 3) Do you think the general education course requirements provided a well balanced program of study (cultural perspectives, sciences, mathematics, the arts, social sciences, etc.)? That is, do you think they helped prepare you in a balanced way to understand issues that you need to deal with as an informed student and citizen?

Students were compensated by receiving \$20 each in "Bear Bucks," which can be spent at campus facilities. Six of the students in Business and all 11 Liberal Arts students actually attended and participated.

Results:

Question 1--What did you find especially helpful about your general education experience? Students felt that GE courses helped them in discovering what they wanted to major in and also felt that many of the courses offered a foundation for the major (e.g. writing skills in both Writing and Literature classes). Liberal Arts students liked GE courses that were clearly designed for broad knowledge instead of specialized skills they would not need in the major (e.g. Chemistry in Society). Both groups of students mentioned that GE courses offered a break from the intensity of major courses, and also appreciated that some GE courses could also count as credit for the major. They liked the way GE courses encouraged them to become "culturally diverse and open-minded" and "well rounded." Business students especially appreciated the option of using CLEP and/or AP scores to receive credit for knowledge they already had.

Question 2--What did you find unhelpful or frustrating? Perhaps the most significant issue mentioned in response to this question had to do with the quality of teaching in GE classes. Students felt that some of their GE teachers were unqualified, that others were just going through the motions with little interest in the subject, that GE teachers and/or classes are looked down on by the department, and creativity in teaching and curriculum is discouraged. Students felt that often neither the students nor the teachers

wanted to be there. The suggestion was made that instructors be allowed to design their GE courses to better reflect their interests and/or specialties. Students also complained that many GE courses simply repeated material they learned in high school. They were also frustrated that more courses could not count for both GE credit and the major (e.g. Business Communication instead of Oral Communication). While Liberal Arts students focused mostly on the quality of teaching and engagement in classes, Business students expressed frustration that they had to pay for courses that did not count in their major, for textbooks that were used only once, and for the number of GE courses required (“The literature classes were enjoyable, but were they \$700 enjoyable?”) They also thought that Personal Finance should be a GE requirement.

Question 3: One important issue that emerged in both groups in response to this question was the quality of advising. Students felt that their major advisors were generally helpful, but that advising in GE was not helpful and often kept students from achieving a balance in their choices of GE classes. Students felt that advisors often treated them as “an annoyance” and advised them against their wishes. Students also felt that choices in some areas should be expanded (e.g. KPED, Mathematics) to allow students to take courses that seemed more relevant to their interests. Liberal Arts students felt that the program provides a good balance of subjects but mentioned that some classes could be better designed to teach application of knowledge, rather than just concepts. Business students felt that GE requirements took too much time, expense, and effort that could be better spent on their majors.

Preliminary Conclusions:

The remarks about the quality of teaching in GE courses point to the need for faculty development. The GEC is developing a faculty survey to help assess faculty views of and attitudes toward the GE program and to ask faculty what might be done to help them in teaching their GE courses. Hopefully this survey will help us identify ways to improve teaching in the program. On the other hand, a lack of enthusiasm for teaching probably can't be separated from the perception of an instructor that the course he or she is teaching has little relevance to his or her interests, and a review of the program should look for ways to address this issue. The Biology Department has taken a laudable step in this direction by offering three versions of BIOL 1400, one of which is the traditional introduction, one of which focuses on health issues, and one of which focuses on environmental issues. This approach seems likely to make the course more relevant to both student and instructor, and the GEC will be looking at course assessment in Biology to see if the more focused versions of BIOL 1400 are affecting student satisfaction with the course. The GEC has also been encouraging departments to consider proposing upper-division courses for GE credit, which might also help faculty approach the subject in ways that engage them and their students more readily. One issue that didn't come up directly but may have an impact on student and faculty attitudes is class size. It can be difficult for a faculty member to introduce creative approaches or work on skills such as writing when the number of students in the class makes nontraditional approaches or writing assignments difficult to manage. Finally, the perception that GE courses don't “count” when it comes to evaluating faculty performance really needs to be addressed. If our GE program is indeed the core of an undergraduate education at UCA, teaching GE courses should be treated as a valuable part of what we do, and not left to part-time or adjunct faculty who get little

institutional support or treated as a burden by regular faculty. We should be looking for creative ways to address this concern.

Advising is another important concern. To be sure, students can feel that they are advised against their wishes for a number of reasons; for example, the course a student wants to take may be full, so the advisor might recommend a different class that is open but that the student doesn't really want. Nevertheless, the perception that advisors treat students as an "annoyance" must be taken seriously. The GEC clearly should be working with the Advising Center to look for ways to convey the message that GE choices are important and to work with students to help shape a balanced and thoughtful approach to taking the GE requirements. Here again, moving some GE requirements to the upper-division level may help students understand that GE requirements aren't simply classes that they need to get out of the way before they can take major classes.

The student comments also point to confusion about the program in some instances. In some cases the confusion is quite specific—one student wonders why Business Calculus can't substitute for College Algebra when that substitution is spelled out on the GE check sheet. But there is also a larger source of confusion: The tendency of Business majors in particular to refer to a dichotomy between GE courses and "classes that will . . . help in life" suggests that we haven't done a very good job of demonstrating and communicating the ways in which the skills and knowledge provided in GE classes contribute to lifelong learning and students' ability to participate in a democratic society, not to mention success as an employee in a work environment that demands flexibility, critical thinking, and the ability to relate to people from diverse cultures. We need to do more to make these connections clear.

Overall the student comments reinforce our decision to review the program, as we have begun doing. As faculty members we need to remind ourselves of what we want the program to accomplish and look for ways of achieving that more creatively and communicating it more clearly, both among ourselves and to our students.