

Key Outcomes of a Fall 2005 Faculty Survey about UK's University Studies Program

Introduction

As suggested by its title, *Assessing General Education: A Questionnaire to Initiate Campus Conversations*¹, is a survey tool to help generate discussion and facilitate improvement planning associated with General Education programs. This tool was used to collect UK faculty opinions about dimensions of our current University Studies Program (USP) in association with the program review process that is underway.

Response Rate and Representativeness of Respondent Group (Table 1 and 2)

- Of the 1232 faculty invited to participate, 309 completed the electronic survey during the month of October for a 25% response rate.
- Although a higher response rate was desired, the respondents were fairly representative of the overall population with minor exceptions (Table 1):

College Home Arts and Sciences faculty were somewhat overrepresented (35% invited vs. 44% responded) and faculty from other colleges were slightly underrepresented (e.g. Business & Economics, 4% vs. 7%; College of Education, 5% vs. 8%).

Tenure Status Tenured faculty were somewhat overrepresented (66% invited vs. 79% responded) and untenured/not tenure eligible were underrepresented (34% invited vs. 21% responded).

Academic Rank Associate Professors/Professors were overrepresented (66% vs. 80%) and Assistant Professors/Instructors/Lecturers were underrepresented (34% invited vs. 20% responded).

- Other background characteristics of the respondent group used to examine subgroup differences are provided in Table 2.

Program Dimensions (Table 3)

- In keeping with an interest in generating conversation, this summary is descriptive and focuses on patterns of responses rather than the application of statistical tests associated with hypothesis testing.
- Faculty gave ratings on 28 program dimensions using a 5 point scale. The scales are anchored at 1 and 5 with statements providing a significant contrast on the specific dimension. A low value (1 or 2) signals the respondent agrees with a statement representing an absence of, some difficulty with or a less than optimal practice involving the dimension. A high value (4 or 5) signals the respondent agrees with a statement representing presence of, some strength or a highly optimal practice with respect to the dimension.

Key Outcomes: Ratings (Table 3)

- Ratings on the 28 dimensions fall within a narrow range, generally between scale values of 2 and 3.
- Means (and medians) for 9 of the 28 dimensions are around 2 indicating a variety of areas for which attention and improvement are needed. These are listed below with segments of the statements defining the dimensions.

¹ Permission to use *Assessing General Education: A Questionnaire to Initiate Campus Conversations* was granted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

Dimensions with Mean Values of 2

3: Goals (*...is expressed primarily as a list of courses...*)
5: Coherence (*...fragmented...up to the students to search for commonalities.make connections.*)
7: Structure (*...reflects a distribution structure...*)
17: Faculty Student Interactions (*..rarely interact outside the classroom*)
18: Faculty Community (*..each teaches his or her own...little or no consultation or dialogue...*)
19: Coordination (*exists...as a list of course offerings...staff who verify...the requirements*)
21: Image (*regard...requirements as an obstacle...in the way of..their major...*)
23: Faculty Development (*support.. related to general education is minimal...*)
27: Assessment (*...no evaluation of our program as a whole*)

- These values suggest our faculty view the current program as reflecting a distribution structure in which goals are expressed primarily as a list of courses. Faculty ratings of program coherence suggest that our students likely experience USP as fragmented and disconnected, leaving them to search for commonalities and to make their own connections across their USP learning experiences.
- Further, faculty seem somewhat isolated in their efforts, having neither the benefit of collegial conversation about USP/general education nor satisfaction of student interaction beyond the classroom context. Coupled with low ratings on Coordination and Image, the courses may be perceived as obstacles for students and instructors alike.
- Means for 5 other dimensions are approximately 3 include: Multiculturalism, Articulation, Support, Improved Teaching and Course Evaluations. Although these slightly higher average ratings might appear as more positive, it is also suggested in open-ended comments that a rating of 3 indicates being unsure or neutral.

Subgroup Patterns

- To further illuminate information about these ratings, the 28 dimensions of a general education program were graphed using a number of subgroup contrasts.
- Although there are occasional differences the pattern is remarkably parallel across subgroups formed around background characteristics and in some notable cases (e.g. tenured faculty versus untenured faculty) these parallel patterns are consistently separated across almost all questions. Although these differences are unlikely to be statistically significant, the consistency is striking. **(Figures A-F)**
- Similar subgroup comparisons were constructed *just* for respondents who are actually teaching USP courses and while one might argue that some of the subgroup differences mentioned above are less apparent now, the clearest conclusion is that the nearly parallel patterns across items for different subgroups continues to be apparent. **(Figures G-K)**

Key Outcomes: Open-Ended Comments

- A frequent theme which emerged was the need for major changes to the structure of the University Studies Program. Thirty seven of the 122 comments received felt that “*the students aren't really learning at a level that we could call becoming well- educated*” and that the current program is characterized by a “*lack of specificity, clarity, and connection.*”
- Twenty-five of the comments suggest the current program could be salvaged if substantive changes were made to the requirements within the existing structure, by adding or deleting various courses; though it should be noted that for each respondent who suggested adding a requirement in a given area, there were an equal number who suggested removal of the same requirement. For example, as one faculty member noted, “*it*

is totally unreasonable that science majors must take so many humanities and social studies courses, but majors in the latter two subjects have so few science courses required.”

- An almost equally large portion of responses pertain to the political, economic and bureaucratic nature of the administration of USP, frequently noting, *“The USP is the means by which departments in this time of diminished and diminishing resources can lay claim to resources from their colleges.”*
- One minor theme which emerged was concern over the effect of increased enrollment on the quality of USP. Statements such as *“There are frequently too many students in a class and classrooms in many buildings continue to be uncomfortable”* and *“An increasing number of USP courses are being taught by graduate students and lecturers”* summarize concerns regarding enrollment.
- Five faculty respondents expressed ignorance regarding the details of the program, noting, *“I honestly do not know much about our general education program”* and *“what I know about our general education program is what I have read in the catalog.”*
- A small minority of respondents said they were *“overall satisfied with the general education program.”*
- A very small portion of the respondents express cynicism regarding the likelihood of reform and the reform process. As one faculty member noted, *“When the present rules were adopted there was no sense that there are historic precedents for general education. I am sure those will be ignored again.”*
- Seventeen faculty members expressed concern regarding the nature of the survey, its applicability, and relevance. One faculty member noted, *“General Education Program was not defined anywhere in this survey”* while another expressed concern over her *“little direct knowledge of many of the relevant issues.”*