

Changing General Education Perceptions through *Perspectives* and the Interdisciplinary First-Year Seminar

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Introducing the general education curriculum in a required first-year seminar can be challenging. However, it provides a great opportunity to influence students' perceptions. The results of this study indicate that doing so increases student appreciation for general education and increases student confidence in general education course selection. This should enhance the classroom learning environment for all as students approach general education classes with greater interest and understanding.

General education is rooted in educators' belief that its courses should teach students knowledge for life (Bastedo, 2002). More specifically, it should develop skills that foster students' achievement in their academic pursuits and beyond (Glynn, Aultman, & Owens, 2005). In a broader sense it can offer a variety of learning experiences to educate students on how to be responsible, caring members of society (Benander, Denton, Page, & Skinner, 2000). As a result of their general education, students should be better able to view diverse cultures, lifestyles, and backgrounds from objective and informed perspectives (Glynn et al., 2005). It is no surprise then that colleges and universities persist in general education curriculum inclusion as a way to fulfill their institutional missions.

General education, in a broad sense, is comprised of a grouping of courses in the liberal arts. They represent various disciplines in the arts and humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, quantitative reasoning, and sometimes foreign language. At some institutions this grouping is a set of prescribed courses more focused on skills development. At others it is a selection of elective courses from each area designed to broaden perspectives (Warner & Koeppe, 2009). A combination of required and elective courses is also common. The number of credit hours in the general education core varies with anywhere from 20 to 60 credit hours of the typical 120 credit hours needed to earn a bachelor's degree. Although some general education courses are offered as third- and fourth-year courses, most are designated as first- or second-year courses (Lemann, 2004). The goal is to provide a greater appreciation and understanding of human civilization beyond the discipline-specific depth found in a particular field of study.

However, students often view courses that fulfill a general education requirement as unnecessary or not related to their interests or major (Gump, 2007). They do not see the relevance of such courses and sometimes contribute minimal effort to understanding the material and making connections to other fields of study, including their own academic major. This can be

manifested in the general education classroom with superficial dialogue, distracting behaviors, and even poor attendance. In response, those involved in developing the general education curriculum want to offer courses that motivate students and engage them in learning (Weissman & Boning, 2003). This is a sound approach given that students tend to do better in courses that they find more interesting (Keller, 2002).

Introducing students to the general education curriculum and the courses available to fulfill the general education requirements early on can influence student motivation by equipping them with knowledge and access to faculty. The first-year seminar provides a great opportunity to set the tone for academic expectations as students can develop a sense of ownership over their scholarly pursuits from active learning exercises in this course (Ishler, 2003). This is particularly true for in-class experiences that relate to choices, such as academic major or course selection, which they will have to make in their collegiate career.

A first-year seminar is typically an extended orientation program, study skills class, a full length academic course, or some combination of these (Griffin & Romm, 2008). Although the content, format, and delivery often vary, first-year seminars are common among community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and research universities across America. For those institutions that offer the first-year seminar as a course, it may be required, offered as an elective, graded or not, and it may range from one to three credit hours or not carry any academic credit. Variation is common as each program reflects a unique institutional focus such as student retention, engagement, intellectual development, or career exploration to name a few (Tobolowsky, 2008).

Of the colleges and universities who participated in a national survey, 85% reported offering some form of first-year seminar (Tobolowsky, 2006). Ultimately, the goal of most first-year seminars is related to student retention although many set out to increase social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993). Social connections can come from campus events as well as student

activities and organizations. Academic connectedness is fostered by course instructors and the course content. Of the institutions offering a first-year seminar, the majority (64.2%) cite academic skills development as a top objective (Tobolowsky, 2006).

Part of fostering academic skills is disseminating, analyzing, and integrating information. As a result many first-year seminars draw on material from the liberal arts. In fact approximately half (50.4%) of institutions that offer a first-year seminar for academic credit allow the seminar to apply toward general education requirements (Tobolowsky, 2006). Yet the extents to which general education requirements are introduced in the first-year seminar and to which seminar students perceive, understand, and appreciate general education courses are limited.

This study was designed to investigate whether student appreciation for general education could be increased by implementing a new component to a required first-year seminar. This new component involved faculty members from all disciplines in the required liberal arts general education core. The innovation here came from the coordinated efforts of faculty members across disciplines, academic support staff, course scheduling, and utilization of campus facilities. The initiative was supported by faculty members and endorsed by the university administration. It was also hoped that this institutional initiative would result in an increase in student confidence in general education course selection. This would allow students to pursue courses of interest and enhance the classroom learning environment as more students enroll in general education courses by choice and not by default.

First-Year Seminar and the *Perspectives* Sessions

This research took place at a public liberal arts college in the northeast with an enrollment of approximately 1,400 students. First-Year Seminar was only required for new students who had less than 18 earned college credits, thus most transfer students were not required to participate. The year of survey administration was the first year the university required new students to take the 3-credit hour First-Year Seminar. In the past it was offered in a modified format as an elective.

The First-Year Seminar goals included (1) building a freshman class community and identity, (2) introducing students to the academic and social life of the campus, and (3) fostering an appreciation for the liberal arts general education curriculum. It was hoped that student satisfaction with First-Year Seminar would also translate into more positive experiences in general education courses.

Each of the 17 sections of the course had its own topic of study related to a particular major offered by

the institution. For example, two sections entitled *Venture Out* were offered for business-related majors, a section of *The Beatles* was offered for prospective communications students, and a section called *A Sense of Place* was scheduled for potential environmental science majors. Students were assigned to sections based on their intended majors. Students in the same major were also assigned to the same first-year composition section, math course, and one course from the general education core. This type of block scheduling forms a learning community in which students connect with a smaller group with similar interests.

Undecided students were assigned to an inclusive section, e.g., *Career Exploration*, and additional sections were reserved for nontraditional students. The nontraditional student sections met in the evening as most were unavailable during the day due to job or family responsibilities. This helped those in a life stage rather separate from typical first-year students to connect with each other. Course requirements common to all sections included attending various campus events and visiting several campus resource offices via course instructor referrals.

A major common component was the weekly *Perspectives* sessions in which additional faculty members introduced students to various disciplines in the liberal arts general education curriculum. Several individual sections of First-Year Seminar that met at the same time came together in a lecture hall for class. This is not so different from frequent multiple section gatherings in other learning community contexts such as undergraduate research (Kaul & Pratt, 2010) or multicultural studies (Jehangir, 2009). In this way the liberal arts faculty only had to lead three sessions, not one for each individual section of the course. In these sessions faculty challenged students to consider issues in contemporary society from various *Perspectives*. Instructors were specifically asked to prepare active learning class exercises rather than taking a passive learning lecture-style approach.

The idea was that each liberal arts discipline offered a meaningful and diverse *Perspective* on contemporary society. Points of view are expressed in varying overt and sometimes necessarily subtle ways. Taking the multiple perspectives as a whole provides a more critical, informed, and balanced knowledge set to make sense of contemporary society and one's role in it. This includes how an individual influences society and is influenced by it.

For example, one week a theater professor, a music professor, and an arts professor led the *Perspectives* session on the creative, fine, and performing arts. This session included listening to several classical musical works to highlight how various elements such as anger, sorrow, or humor were expressed by the music in the

absence of lyrics. This served as a commentary of the time and place during which the composer lived. During another week, professors from English and creative writing addressed literature and language. This included developing progressive poems in groups (each student adding words) and analyzing the resultant works. Students were also asked to offer reflections on the lyrics from a contemporary song regarding the artist's view of contemporary society.

Other *Perspectives* sessions included natural science faculty members discussing brain chemistry and function, an anthropology professor using the NACERIMA article by Horace Miner (1956) as a class exercise, and psychology and sociology faculty members discussing college students and deviant behavior. These sessions gave first-year students a chance to meet faculty members who were not First-Year Seminar instructors but whom they would meet in other courses in general education later in their college experience. Students were required to submit weekly reflection papers based on their experience with that week's *Perspectives* session. The reflection papers accounted for 30% of the grade in First-Year Seminar.

Curriculum Change and Institutional Legacy

Faculty discussions regarding changes in general education or institution-wide course requirements are complicated at best. The process can be hampered by conflicting disciplinary interests such as protecting student enrollment in particular courses or unwillingness to consider a different pedagogical approach. Either concern is well founded as they may necessitate major revisions for particular faculty members. However, change is not impossible. As outlined in the discussion section of this paper, the process can be proactive and collegial if the conversations are focused on student benefits and if incentives for the faculty as a whole are clearly articulated. This is enhanced when administrative support is evident and faculty members are presented with compelling evidence which suggests that making change will be beneficial for students, faculty, and the institution overall. This was the case in proposing to make First-Year Seminar with the *Perspectives* component a required course in the general education curriculum.

Method

A mixed methods approach was utilized by performing a quantitative analysis of student survey responses and a qualitative analysis of content in student writing. A survey was administered during the last week of class to 29 sections of various courses at the second through fourth-year level as well as all 17

sections of First-Year Seminar. The survey included multiple choice questions focused on demographic and behavioral variables as well as a question inquiring about whether or not they completed First-Year Seminar. Follow up questions utilized a Likert-scale to inquire about their level of agreement with various statements regarding First-Year Seminar (for those who completed the course). Data was entered into SPSS and then analyzed using ANOVA at the .05 alpha level. Randomly selected student reflection papers were also analyzed to determine themes and assess experiences related to the weekly *Perspectives* sessions.

Results

The survey was administered to 617 students with 445 completed responses. The actual response rate was likely somewhat higher than the calculated 72.1% as some students were enrolled in more than one course where the survey was administered thus they were not asked to complete it multiple times. Gender and classification was rather balanced with 52.1% female respondents as well as 46.1% first-year students. Second-year and above students were represented by 14.2% second-year, 16.4% third-year, and 23.4% fourth-year. Second-year and above students (none of which were transfers to the institution) were asked to reflect on their first semester of attendance experience when completing the survey.

Table 1 displays the survey results regarding student perspectives on the general education curriculum using level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree) at the end of their first semester of attendance. Students who completed the required First-Year Seminar with the *Perspectives* sessions were well versed with the general education requirements, appreciated the course's value to a greater degree, and seemed more comfortable in making general education course selections.

Several themes were apparent in the student reflection papers. Students expressed that they had a greater awareness regarding the course content of various general education subjects as a result of attending the *Perspectives* sessions. The following student quote was representative of this theme: "It showed me what I am capable of doing and it made me think of making my minor English or Writing."

Students expressed how the *Perspectives* sessions helped them to consider other views and how various disciplines in general education are not only related to each other but also to their particular major. The following two student quotes is reflective of this theme:

- "The creative process is an integral part of cognition in general. If we cannot see one line of a poem or one line in a story and interpret it

Table 1
General Education Curriculum Student Perspectives

Survey Item	First-Year (<i>n</i> = 205)	Second-Year + (<i>n</i> = 240)	Difference
I have a good level of understanding of the general education curriculum.	3.85	3.41	+0.44*
I see the importance of the general education curriculum.	3.71	3.05	+0.66*
I am confident about selecting courses in the general education curriculum that are of interest to me.	3.83	3.25	+0.58*

Note. Mean level of agreement (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree)

* Significant at $p < .001$

in different ways, how can we address a problem in the business world when one of our methods has already been exhausted? Critical thinking, open minds, and varying perception of situations will make us very versatile candidates for future jobs and endeavors.”

- “Although I am a Psychology major, I think that the information given will be valuable to me in the future. For some of my elective courses, I may decide to take a writing or poetry class. I find it important to take as many different courses as possible so I can gain more knowledge in different fields of study. These sessions are helpful in doing so.”

Students also expressed a greater confidence and enthusiasm about which courses they might take to fulfill the general education requirements. This theme is represented by the following student quotes:

- “I’m definitely thinking about taking some different courses now as a result of these sessions.”
- “This kind of knowledge would have never been available to me if it was not for the perspectives sessions. Without this information I would not have an idea of what I would be getting myself into when registering for courses.”

Discussion

One goal of the newly required First-Year Seminar with the *Perspectives* sessions was to foster an appreciation for the liberal arts general education curriculum. Survey results and student written reflections indicate that the seminar was successful in

reaching that goal. The *Perspectives* sessions not only raised awareness but also increased student appreciation for the liberal arts general education curriculum. This appreciation was manifested not only in knowing what particular general education courses are about, but also in knowing how they relate to contemporary society. For example, students connected how works of literature resonated with social elites who had the power to inspire a transformation movement much the same way that the Internet is now used as a medium to foster change among the technologically advantaged.

Students also connected how taking courses that they were more interested in (out of the choices provided) would enhance their learning experience. This reduced anxiety or confusion about course selection and thus increased their motivation and enthusiasm. They saw general education courses as opportunities to learn rather than requirements to endure. Further research will help determine whether this change in attitude carries over to the classroom setting to enhance the learning environment for all students as well as the instructor. Continued analysis may also help determine if this change in student knowledge about course selection better prepares students regarding expectations and thus should reduce student attrition as a result.

Perhaps course selection familiarity could easily be imparted during a one-time session using a handout clearly articulating the general education requirements. This may have some success; however, it lacks the benefit of students experiencing what a course in a particular discipline might be like firsthand. For example, in high school students may be exposed to geography or history via a class in social sciences, but appreciating the difference between archeology and cultural anthropology may not be so apparent. Thus, not only is course sequencing an important element

influencing student retention: it is a valuable part of the college or university experience (Barefoot, 2004).

Making a significant change in the general education curriculum is a daunting task. Sometimes faculty members perceive that they are not empowered in the process but at the same time administrative support is often needed to implement the modifications (Lindman & Tahamont, 2006). It may be possible to make change if well planned and communicated to the university faculty. It is helpful to start small with a targeted objective that is tied to a larger goal for the curriculum (Kanter, 2000). The goals in this case were clearly defined and communicated to faculty members at the outset. The inclusion of the *Perspectives* sessions was designed to enhance the general education experience which hopefully could translate to a better learning environment in the classroom which was positive for all instructors. Empowering students with information also relieved faculty advisors somewhat with regard to having a commanding knowledge of the general education curriculum and the nuances associated with each course.

Getting faculty to participate by leading the *Perspectives* sessions was not as difficult as some concerned administrators assumed. Faculty quickly realized that the benefit of having access to the entire first-year class to expound on their particular discipline (namely, potential increase in their course enrollments with students who were interested in being there) outweighed the cost of their preparation and delivery time. They ended up appreciating the enjoyable diversion from their regular teaching duties during a particular week as an opportunity to positively contribute to the general education curriculum.

Getting the university faculty to adopt the First-Year Seminar as a required course in the general education curriculum was also not as challenging as first thought. The course with the *Perspectives* sessions ran as a pilot for one year. First- to second-year retention for students who were enrolled in First-Year Seminar was 84.6% compared to only 67.9% for those who did not take the course. This convinced the academic administration that the new format was worth implementing campus-wide. The faculty voted in favor of adopting the course as a requirement in the general education core at the same time that they eliminated the longstanding Senior Colloquium, which was source of discontentment with faculty and students alike. Circumstance certainly played a role in swaying faculty members; however, so many of the instructors had been involved in the pilot in some way, either as a course instructor or as a *Perspectives* session leader, that they were able to speak of the benefits to their colleagues not associated with the course.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study are significant, but some caution should be exercised before making application to other contexts, as is the case with most primary research. The sample population was limited to one institutional setting. Administration – faculty cooperation can vary depending on campus size, teaching expectations, and campus collegiality. Also, there is a great variety of components included in first-year seminars across the country, whereas only the initiative utilized by the host institution was considered in this study.

Future studies could focus on faculty perspectives to see if the approach used in the first-year seminar in this study influenced the motivation of students in general education courses over time. It would be interesting to see if enrollment in particular general education courses increased as a result of introducing the general education curriculum in the first semester. A final line of inquiry could be longitudinal in nature and include students' perceptions measured over time to determine if they in fact do select general education courses that are of interest to them or if they use some other criteria such as time of day the course is offered, classroom location, or reputation of the instructor.

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