Student Opinions of General Education Sequence

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Introduction

During a student’s freshman and sophomore years at UNC, general education course requirements fill their schedules. The general education sequence features multiple and sometimes conflicting goals. I explore the tension between the sequence goals of widening students’ perspectives on learning (goal 2) while also preparing students to specialize in a future major (goal 4). My experience as a freshman inspired this project, as I found that my general education courses provided little clarity on a possible future major or career pathway.

Research Aim

The aim of this study is to understand students’ perspectives on general education courses and whether the goals of the sequence are achieved in productive ways or if the requirement is distracting students from furthering their career studies.

Methodology

Paradigm

This study draws on improvement science as a paradigm for problem-solving and testing ideas for change (Bryk, 2015). I focused on the improvement principle of user-centric problem definition principle. Specifically, I explored students’ opinions of the general education sequence and compared these insights with input from outside informants and academic literature.

Data Collection

I implemented a 2-2-1 scanning strategy (Park & Takahashi, 2013) and Table A summarizes my data collection through the process. I started by reviewing scholarship on the topic of general education at universities by reputable scholars and then tracked who these scholars cited and who cited them. At the same time, I interviewed 6 undergraduate freshmen class peers and 3 outside informants. Although a sample of convenience, these informants helped me explore a personal problem while not burdening the system with vast data collection. I drafted semi-structured interview protocols to capture participants’ perspectives on key areas of interest to my project (Spradley, 1979), then compiled an informative memo where I answered questions concerning each student experience and interview. In addition to these primary data sources, I supplemented my analysis with artifacts from the student’s course syllabi and their course schedules from each semester. I completed 3 cycles of the 2-2-1 scanning process (from 3/20 to 4/25).

Findings

Generic narratives were constructed based on each student’s main goal towards the general education sequence. Conclusions were drawn from each of the four narratives and compiled in Table 2. Through comparisons of these profiles, I identified possible factors contributing to tensions between general education sequence goals.

Main Findings

• Many pre-requisites and general education class do not overlap. Across all the narratives, only 22.2% of general education courses satisfied pre-requisite requirements. This is causing general education classes to be more of a hindrance in education and the required courses students must take increases. Therefore, leaving less room for flexibility and expression.

• Students’ backgrounds influence their viewpoints. Aspects of an individual’s academic background shaped their perceptions of the gen ed sequence. Relevant factors included whether the student is focused or declared, if they are a first-generation college student, or if they are admitted into an accelerated or early acceptance degree program.

Discussion

Students at UNC. Chapel Hill have differing opinions on the general education sequence requirements due to their personal backgrounds and major requirements. Next steps in this research process could include surveying all freshmen students to understand the prevalence of the four profiles as described in this study in a larger population. Additionally, my findings suggest that university leadership should talk to undergraduate students to fully understand their perspectives on the general education sequence when making future revisions to the program. When engaging students, university leaders should speak with students from varied backgrounds and major pathways.

Limitations

Improvement science is designed as a team-based task that takes years to develop and implement. My research project had a time constraint of a couple months and was completed singlehandedly, which restricted the quantity and scope of my research. Additionally, due to the safety protocols set in place at the university and the isolating nature of the pandemic during this past year, I was not able to interview a larger and more representative sample of students and faculty participating in the general education sequence.

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