Student Opinions on 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 followed the 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).

Scholarly Literature	Inside Informants	Outside Informants
6 articles (2 on structure of gen eds at college, 2 on attitudes of students, 2 on benefits of curriculum)	6 student interviews with follow ups (3 undecided on major, 3 with a declared intended major)	3 interviews (1 expert on improvement science, 1 expert on reimagining teaching and 1 expert on teaching with a real-world focus)

Table A – Data Sources

Data Analysis

I synthesized findings from all data sources by writing case memos for each student informant and then searched for similarities and differences across my cases. For each memo, I answered the following analytical questions:

- What does this case say about the general education sequence?
- Why did this case enroll in their current courses?
- How Does the background of the student influence his/her opinions and reasons for enrollment?
- What are similarities and differences between my cases, and possible explanations for these comparisons?

Findings

Generic narratives were constructed based on each student's major and viewpoint 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 22.22% of general education courses satisfied pre-requisite requirements. This is causing general education classes to be more of a hinderance 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.

	Undeclared Major	Declared Major
General Education Courses are Beneficial	• Helps Individuals become more worldly and aware through enrolling in classes they wouldn't otherwise have taken • Possible interests, majors and careers could be found • Able to explore courses with little pressure • 100% of courses enrolled in were gen eds • 45.45% of gen eds were reported beneficial	• Could creatively search for classes that pertain to major / career while also fulfilling general education requirements • Were able to take classes for fun that do not relate to major • 60% of courses enrolled in were gen eds • 66.7% of gen eds were reported beneficial
General Education Courses are NOT Beneficial	• "getting rid of gen eds" mindset • Gen eds do not have application of studies or real-world context – cannot visualize how courses would translate to a career or major • Gen eds are not helping students clarify a major in which to specialize • 52.38% of courses enrolled in were gen eds • 9.09% of gen eds were reported beneficial	• "getting rid of gen eds" mindset • General ed classes do not overlap with prerequisites or major classes, resulting in additional unnecessary credits to complete • Hinderance in education • 27.27% of courses enrolled in were gen eds • 0% of gen eds were reported beneficial

Table B – Data Analysis

- **Students who view gen eds as beneficial are enrolled in more general education courses.** A student's schedule who views gen eds as beneficial is 74.19% gen ed courses while an individual who believes they are not beneficial only dedicates 43.75% of their schedule to general education courses. Individuals are less likely to find courses that complete multiple requirements and instead take the classes they are interested in if they view gen eds as beneficial. In contrast, students who viewed the gen ed sequence as unhelpful we more strategic in combining credits to quickly complete requirements.

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 freshman 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.

Acknowledgments

Bryk, Anthony S., et al. *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. Harvard Education Press, 2015.

Spradley, James D. "Descriptive Questions." *The Ethnographic Interview*, vol. 82, no. 4, 1979, pp. 44–61., doi:10.1525/aa.1980.82.4.02a00790.

Park, Sandra & Takahashi, Sola. 90 Day Cycle Handbook. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. 2013