

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

American Indian Studies

Catharine Beyer, Office of Educational Assessment
Elissa Washuta, Academic Adviser, American Indian Studies
August 2014

INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines¹, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.² Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

METHOD

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning of those experiences³; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.⁴ Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 32 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

¹ Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

² Beyer, et al., 2007.

³ Merriam, 2001.

⁴ One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students.

Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method⁵, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories of response on students' comments.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Although this approach meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES RESULTS

The American Indian Studies Department was one of the UW ACES' participating departments. Elissa Washuta academic adviser in American Indian Studies (AIS) invited all nine students who were applying for graduation to participate in the interview study, and one declined. The 8 students who provided interviews represent about 89% of the 9 seniors who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.⁶

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

One of the students had one quarter left before graduation, and another had three quarters to complete before graduating. The remaining six had two quarters to finish, including the quarter in which they were interviewed.

⁵ Merriam, 2001.

⁶ The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (https://bitools.uw.edu/views/16-DegreeSummary-UnitComparisons_0/16-Dashboard#1)

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, students listed a total of eight courses. Two students identified 200-level courses as their most challenging, and one said that his most challenging learning experience involved a 300-level course. Five of the eight students who were interviewed identified 400-level courses as their most challenging, including two students who mentioned the special topics course on the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights, and a third student who also mentioned the challenges in this topic for her AIS 451 course.

AIS 202

AIS 240

AIS 370

AIS 451

AIS 499

Indians and Museums

UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights, Special topics (2)

1. Students' Greatest Challenges

Students were asked: *"What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major."*

In speaking about their most challenging work, all eight AIS majors agreed that the most challenging work they experienced was writing a specific paper for the courses they mentioned. Several students noted that the research involved in writing the paper was challenging, and one student mentioned the reading involved as being challenging. The following examples illustrate these responses:

- *I think the most challenging was in the class on the UN Declaration on Indigenous Women's Rights, [focusing] on Indigenous peoples worldwide that you don't even think about. That twelve page paper really stretched my thinking and it really frustrated me quite a bit to have to keep rewriting the same paper over and over again.*
- *It was probably the researching the Indians of Western Washington class. We had to write a paper similar to a thesis or dissertation but it was only ten pages long.*
- *Writing really long papers, like for the Museums class. There was just a lot of writing, and it was really time consuming.*
- *I think that it was last year I had to do a 15-page research paper. I've never had to do one that long. I had to go into extreme detail and make connections throughout the paper.*

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

Next, students were asked to note what it was about the activity or the class they had described that made it especially challenging. Two students mentioned more than one challenge. Three themes—ideas mentioned by more than one student—emerged from students' responses to this question.

Research. Three students said that aspects of the research required for the papers they were writing presented challenges for them. In the words of two of these students:

- *The challenge came from having to develop and maintain a research plan and have a clear direction and allow for a change that's going to come, and the other big challenge was having to contribute something new to a discussion. A lot of what's out there—unless you're collecting new data—is already thoroughly discussed so contributing something new is difficult.*
- *That I had to do my own research to fulfill the requirements and length. I had to go to the library and find books, interview a person, find videos, not just look it up online.*

Creating my own original topic. Two students—including the student talking about research in the first bullet under that theme—mentioned the challenge of having to identify their own writing topic or argument. As the second of the two students noted:

Having to choose the topic myself was the most challenging and not being told what to do. I came to the realization that I had actually learned a lot while I was here. It was a good challenge.

Broad application of issues to indigenous people in other countries. Two students said that their work in the classes they identified was challenging because they were looking at indigenous people all over the world. As they put it:

- *The fact that it was incorporating philosophy into all aspects of life—global, Indian, non-Indian, local, urban, and rural.*
- *We had to talk about tribal sovereignty and how it related to other nations, and, not knowing anything about Australia and New Zealand, that was hard for me.*

Other: In addition to these themes, single individuals noted the following challenges:

- Being unfamiliar with the topic of the course
- Classes that built on each other
- Not knowing how to write

3. What enabled or helped students to meet those challenges?

Three sources of help were mentioned by more than one of the students interviewed for the study.

Aspects of the course. Six students mentioned aspects of the course that helped them meet the challenges they had described. Of that group, four spoke of the importance of the course readings in helping them with challenging work and two spoke of class time as being helpful to them. In the words of two of them:

- *I learned to keep up with the reading and take notes with the reading for myself.*
- *I read and went to class.*

Started writing early. Two students mentioned that they had learned to start writing projects earlier than they would have. As one of them put it:

Since I took the class my second quarter here, I learned that I needed a lot of time to write and couldn't just start papers the night before. I learned to keep up with the reading and take notes with the reading for myself.

Contact with community members. Two students noted that they had received help by interviewing or talking with family and community members about their projects. For example:

Networking, asking for references, people of knowledge, books that might help me. I went to the Indian College, the community college in Auburn, and asked the teachers there about what they thought or what they were teaching as far as living in WA. My project was about food, native foods, food sovereignty. I got to ask about how they were bringing it back, what was different about this area.

Other. In addition, individuals noted the following as things that helped them meet the challenges they described:

- Studying with groups and discussing issues with classmates
- Learning to do research from the class
- The professor's help

4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?

Finally, we asked students what they believed they had learned by completing the challenge they had described. Four themes emerged from their responses. These themes and the number of students who identified them were as follows:

- Content (3)
- How to conduct research (2)
- How to write better papers (2)
- How to manage time and organize large projects (2)

In addition, individuals spoke of learning:

- How to communicate with others
- That we share challenges with people all over the world
- To know something, you have to understand all of its parts

Because there were so few students interviewed, we have included all of their responses about what they learned by completing the challenging work they described below:

- *A more well-rounded view of what indigenism or indigenous thought is. You know it's there, but you don't explore it in a lot of AIS classes. This was a good way to explore it.*
- *I definitely have a lot more knowledge on tribal sovereignty and the UN Declaration. I didn't even know that there was a declaration. I have much more experienced knowledge because I know about our country relating to other countries.*
- *How to communicate. That's outside what you were supposed to learn in the class but I did [learn that]. There are people all over the world with those similar challenges, and we all share those same problems and discrepancies.*
- *I definitely learned how to research. It's something I learned for my other classes. If I can't find something now, it's likely that it does not exist. There are so many research methods that I have learned about, that if you're not finding it through the libraries'*

databases, you are probably not going to find it. When you have those challenges, when you have a background in research, what you find is more valid even if it is limited.

- *How to better write papers, what not to do. Make sure you've done significant research. Don't wait till the last minute. Have several sources.*
- *I learned that I have different study habits than other people I know, I learned how to manage my time for projects like that one. I learned to work a lot and then take a break—don't tire yourself out right away. I learned how important outlining is. That still helps me.*
- *I learned time management, first of all. I also learned that to know a subject you have to know all parts of it—things from the past, things from the future. I learned not to focus on one thing too much, because then you won't see the whole picture.*
- *I learned about the Pacific NW prior to urbanization, how to bring back food sovereignty, and the relations these people had to the land—the spirituality of all living things and how they coexist for the betterment of the people. I learned how to write a 20-page paper and make it flow. It was more of analysis and research, and it was expository, about how food is today, reacting to urbanization, the way land is now.*

SUMMARY

In speaking of their most challenging work in the major, all eight seniors in American Indian Studies focused on writing challenges, as well as on the research required by those assignments. Students felt that what made those writing assignments challenging was the research required and creating their own topics to investigate, and they attributed much of the help they received in meeting those challenges to what they learned in the courses that required them. Students felt that in completing those writing challenges, they had learned content—information on unfamiliar topics—along with writing, research, and time management skills. Finally, students' responses suggested that they felt the challenges they described were rewarding, as the student's comment in the box below indicates. This is consistent with research on student learning, which shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when instructors help students meet those challenges, students are more engaged in the course.

One Student's Responses to All Four Questions

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? *I think the most challenging was [AIS 451] on the UN declaration on indigenous women's rights. It was about indigenous peoples worldwide, [something] that you don't even think about. That 12-page paper really stretched my thinking and it really frustrated me quite a bit to have to keep rewriting the same paper over and over again!*

Q2. Why was it challenging? *Having to choose the topic myself was the most challenging and not being told what to do. It brought me to the realization that I actually learned a lot while I was here. It was a good challenge.*

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? *I studied a lot with groups. I discussed a lot with my classmates and with [the professor]. There was a lot of communication between my peers and [the professor]—open discussion in that class especially.*

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? *How to communicate—that's outside what you were supposed to learn in the class but I did [learn that]. There are people all over the world with those similar challenges, and we all share those same problems and discrepancies.*

SOURCES

- Beecher, T. & Trowler, P.R. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*. Suffolk, UK: St. Edmundsbury Press.
- Beyer, C. H., Gillmore, G. M., and Fisher, A. T. (2007). *Inside the undergraduate experience: The University of Washington's Study of Undergraduate Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Biglan, A. (1973). The characteristics of subject matter in different academic areas. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57(3), 195-203.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.) For the National Research Council. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press.
- Donald, J. G. (2002). *Learning to think: Disciplinary perspectives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Neumann, R., Parry S., & Becher, T. (2002). Teaching and learning in their disciplinary contexts: A conceptual analysis. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27, 405-417.
- Pace, D. & Middendorf, J. (Eds.) (2004). *Decoding the disciplines: Helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shulman, Lee S. (1988). A union of insufficiencies: strategies for teacher assessment in a period of educational reform. *Educational Leadership*, 46(3), 36-42.
- Wineburg, S. (2001). Interview with Randy Bass. *Visible Knowledge Project*, Georgetown University, from <http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/conversations/participants/html>. Accessed 10/12/06.
- Wineburg, S. (1991). On the reading of historical texts: Notes on the breach between school and academy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 28(3), 495-519.