

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

Anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, culture, and values of the academic disciplines,¹ 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 experiences;³ 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 students 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 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 method, 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.

ANTHROPOLOGY RESULTS

The Anthropology Department was one of the UW ACES' participating departments. Diane Guerra, Director of Student Services in Anthropology, asked 21 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all 21 agreed. This number represents about 10% of the Anthropology seniors who graduated during the 2011-2012 school year.⁵

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

Fifteen of the 21 students interviewed were in their last quarter before graduation, and the other six had two quarters to complete before graduating. Their comments about challenge, therefore, represent a good deal of experience in the major.

⁵ The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the IPEDS report published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting: http://opb.washington.edu/sites/default/files/opb/Data/ExternalReports/Completions_Seattle_2011-12.pdf. Since newer data for 2012-2013 is not currently available, this 2011-2012 figure is only a proxy to approximate what percentage of graduating seniors we were able to interview.

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, students listed a total of 18 classes (some students mentioned two courses). Fifteen of the 21 students mentioned 400-level courses, and many students noted the faculty member teaching the courses they identified, as the following list indicates:

ANTH 322, Comparative History of Death, Jim Green
ANTH 330, Jessica Johnson
ANTH 337, Jessica Johnson
ANTH 375, David Citrin
ANTH 399, Junior Honors Seminar, Kahn
ANTH 414, Holly Barker (mentioned by 2 students)
ANTH 425, Post Soviet Studies, Laada Bilaniuk
ANTH 461, Ben Fitzhugh and Steve Harrell (2 students)
ANTH 469, Celia Lowe, Holly Barker, Rachel Chapman (3 students)
ANTH 475, Bettina Shell-Duncan
ANTH 479, Heather Clarke
ARCHY 481, Grayson
ARCHY 482, Ben Marwick
ARCHY 484, GIS Geographical Information Systems, Marcos Llobera
BIO A 101, Patricia Krammer
BIO A 201, Kusnick
BIO A 469, O'Connor
BIO A 482, Holman

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."*

Several themes emerged from students' responses.

Specific classes. Two-thirds of the students interviewed said that a class they took was the most challenging aspect of the major. Students noted a wide range of classes, as suggested by the list in the previous section of this report. The following quotations illustrate this group of responses:

- *BIO A 482: I think my most challenging class was BIO A working with genetics. It was difficult and a little intimidating because of graduate students [who were in the class] but I did well.*
- *ARCHY 481: The most challenging would be zoo archaeology. It was a 6 credit course. But it was also the most rewarding. It was my second quarter here, and it is an upper division class and graduate requirement class.*
- *ANTH 425: My Soviet studies class was the most challenging because I had no prior knowledge of the Soviet Union before the class.*

- ANTH 469: *I think Holly Barker's Discourse and Climate change. That course stretched my thinking the most and influenced me for the last several year after taking it.*
- ANTH 469: *I think the most challenging was in Rachel Chapman's class. It was very challenging the whole class.*
- ANTH 469: *I took a class with Celia Lowe on BIO Power and the final we had to do a presentation and come up with our own analysis and I loved it.*

A paper/the writing required. About a fourth of the students interviewed said that the greatest challenge they met in the major was a paper or the writing required in a course. Four examples:

- *Last quarter for Anthropology of Christianity, we did a mini-ethnography. I spend eight weeks every Sunday at a small Lutheran church and wrote a large ethnography. It was the most difficult piece of writing and also the most rewarding.*
- *Basically any courses that had extensive writing, but in a good way.*
- *The historical ecology paper that I did Autumn 2012.*
- *In Anth 322 our final project was to create an obituary that outlined how we lived our life and how we passed away. It was different but in a good way.*

The way of thinking required. Three students said that their biggest challenge in the Anthropology major had to do with the ways of thinking that the major required. Students who mentioned ways of thinking seemed to be talking about considering a range of differing perspectives on issues or events. Two examples illustrate this theme:

- *I am not sure if it was a physical assignment but the most challenging thing for me concerned ways of thinking. Most majors ask, "What do you think about this?" but Anthropology says, "Consider this." "Culture Bond Syndromes" is the example of paper I had to complete. I had to write about different perspectives.*
- *Historical Ecology with Ben Fitzhugh and Steve Harrell. It made you have to look at issues on multiple levels.*

Service. Three students said that the service learning or community component of a class was especially challenging. Two examples:

- *Service learning component of my Anthropology class (414) that made me put for the effort to actually go and apply myself instead of just testing or reading the material.*
- *The upper level Anthropology classes with Holly Barker were the most challenging. Her projects require students to go outside the classroom [and] engage their skills. I worked with the UW diabetes clinic and it was difficult because of the obstacles involved in doing tangible work.*

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

Next, students were asked to note what it was about those courses or activities that made them especially challenging, and several themes emerged from their responses.

Learning about a new topic. About a third of the interviewees said that learning about a topic that was entirely new to them was what made the course or the activity they noted challenging. In the words of two students:

- *It was new concepts as well as statistics, and that was my first introduction to statistics.*
- *It was a topic I had never thought about and it brought up and made feel really ignorant about people with disabilities and the way I perceive them.*

Understanding things from a new perspective. About a fourth of the seniors interviewed said that the class or the assignment that they had identified was challenging because it asked them to understand issues, events, or other realities from unfamiliar perspectives. For example:

- *It engaged me and changed my framework about how I think about human and environmental issues.*
- *She asks her students to think from a different perspective, and she challenges them to go outside their comfort zones.*
- *We were supposed to see both sides of the picture about female cutting and HPV vaccinations. It was a topic I did not know a lot about and just to trying to understand something I would be on the other side of was hard.*

Related to this theme, one student noted that the class or activity she described was challenging because it asked her to think critically. In her words:

In class our teacher explained to us that "culture bound syndromes" have no biological basis, that they were just a form of discrimination. It made it challenging because you had to look at it through a critical eye. You could not just take what the teacher said; you had to apply your own thinking.

Also related, another student noted that the class or activity *"stretched my imagination."*

Investing the necessary time. About a fifth of the students said that the investment of time required made the class or the activity especially challenging. For example:

- *It took 30 hours outside class to study a week. I wanted to do well for one of the best archeologists in the world. Having to juggle outside work with service learning on top of the rest of the course work, and I [was also dealing with family issues] at the time.*
- *Making time in your schedule to be at your site consistently and to just do your best job and fully give yourself to your site so that you are there mentally and physically. You are not just there for the credit but to help out.*

Other. In addition to these major themes, the following three challenges were each mentioned by two of the interviewees:

- The required writing and research
- Doing the analysis required

3. What Enabled Students to Meet Those Challenges?

Students' responses to the question of what had enabled them to meet the challenges they had described are organized around several themes.

The course and/or the professor. About a fourth of the students said that it was the course that enabled them to meet the challenges they had described and/or the faculty member teaching the course. For example:

- *We learned different kinds of culture bound syndromes and how they are understood. I learned different perspectives and applied them to my own perspective and how it overlaps.*
- *I learned new concepts and accepted new forms of teaching.*

Self-awareness and changes in self. The same number of students pointed to self-awareness as the thing that enabled them to meet the challenges they faced. This group's responses varied quite a bit, as the following three examples show:

- *I learned a lot of patience with myself in the learning process.*
- *I had to concede to the idea that I might not do as well in this course as others.*
- *It requires you to learn from your mistakes and adapting to the situation to successfully accomplish the goal.*

Studying with or talking with peers. Several students said that working with peers helped them meet the challenges they faced. The following two quotations illustrate this category:

- *I think I learned how to study for the class, I utilized the professor, and I worked with my classmates to study for the final exam.*
- *We talked a lot about different practices and how we wanted to think about death. It allowed me to be more open to thinking about death, because it is not something you are real comfortable talking about.*

Reading. Several students also noted that extensive reading helped them handle the challenges they were meeting. As two students said:

- *I had to read a lot and make sure I understood the background and their history before I could learn what [I needed to] about their culture.*
- *I had to read a lot. There is no common rule for anything you had to go through the literature.*

Learned to apply theory/perspective to cases. A few students said that what helped them meet the challenges they had described was applying theory or others' perspectives to cases or events. In the words of two of those students:

- *I learned how to use an ecological perspective to view both current and historical events and data.*
- *We learned different kinds of culture-bound syndromes and how they are understood. I learned different perspectives and applied them to my own perspective and how it*

overlaps. You have to look at history as well to understand perspective. There is more to the surface.

Other. In addition to these themes, two students mentioned each of the following as important in enabling them to meet the challenges they described:

- Time management
- “Putting in the extra hours”

4. What Did Students Learn by Completing This Project/Class/Activity?

Four themes emerged from students’ responses to the question of what they had learned by completing the project, course, or activity they had described as their most challenging.

Learned about themselves. The most frequently-given response, given by about two-fifths of the students interviewed, was that they had learned something about themselves. As might be imagined and as the following examples demonstrate, what they learned about themselves varied widely:

- *I learned to appreciate people with disabilities more and I became more comfortable around the subject and I stopped looking at people as being less able but differently able.*
- *First of all I learned I could do it. It was one of the experiences that every student needs to have, like every medical student needs to see a cadaver. It was really rewarding.*
- *I learned that it is my work that I have to look at and not somebody else. I cannot compare my knowledge to someone else’s. And, that the amount of work I put in, no matter how difficult, produces a good outcome.*
- *I feel confident that I can use the equipment myself, that I know as much as anyone else through this vast amount of literature.*
- *I learned that I wanted to be remembered [for] something I have done good in my life. And that I am going to grow old with a big family. That is my goal.*
- *I learned a lot about my skill set....*

Learned new information. About a fourth of the students mentioned an area of content that they had learned. Most of these students were speaking of challenges presented in Biological Anthropology courses. For example:

- *That basically, humans are still improving being able to walk on two feet. A lot of people have back problems, and that does not apply to those animals who walk on all fours. That we are still improving.*
- *I learned that genetics can play a factor within your health. We learned how DNA works and how the body composition is due to genetics--for example, how some diseases like malaria, if you are heterozygous for sickle cell, it can combat malaria. This information was new to me.*
- *I learned a lot about evolution and biology. Probably a lot more than [in] other classes.*

Learned about research in the field. Students spoke about research as “data” and as “participatory.” Two quotations illustrate this category, mentioned by a few of the interviewees:

I learned that you have to look at the whole picture. Without viewing complete data you will never have a true understanding of the issues you face.

I learned everything. I learned about applied anthropology and participatory research and community resilience studies and environmental issues are social issues and critical discourse analysis.

Learned the importance of applying academic knowledge to the outside world. A few students said they learned to link academic learning to the world outside academia, as these quotations demonstrate:

- *The importance of taking our academic knowledge and applying it to the outside community. Applying what you learned in college to the outside world.*
- *I learned a lot about my skill set and different ways to synthesize classroom work with the real world.*

Other. In addition, two students said that they learned that it is important to be open-minded in developing a deep understanding of people and issues.

SUMMARY

The students majoring in Anthropology who were part of the UW ACES project said that learning about topics and perspectives that were unfamiliar to them made specific classes, writing, and thinking in the discipline particularly challenging to them in the major. In addition, students mentioned the time commitment required by their courses as presenting challenges.

In identifying what helped them meet those challenges, students noted two aspects of their challenging experience that helped them equally: the course, itself and its instructor, and their own self-awareness and changes in themselves. Several students also noted that they were helped by talking/studying with peers, by the reading assigned in the course, and by applying perspectives learned in class to the world outside of class. These responses suggest that in 400-level courses, the course structure, student self-reflection, opportunities for interaction with peers, and application of theory to cases help students meet the challenges that advanced courses present them with.

As we might predict by their earlier responses, in terms of what students said they learned by taking on the challenges presented to them in the major, students most often said that they learned something about themselves. In addition, they mentioned learning specific content, learning about the importance of research, and the importance of applying academic learning to the world beyond academia as the important lessons they learned by meeting the challenges that were presented to them.

Results from the UW ACES suggest that when Anthropology courses present students with information, theories, and skills that are unfamiliar to them; ask them to apply that learning to real-world places and issues; and inspire them to relate what they are learning to themselves and their own lives, students are challenged.

SOURCES

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