

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES): Foster School of Business

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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 they ascribe to 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 33 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, about 17% of the total 2012-13 graduating class. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method⁵, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories 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. Senior-level courses, particularly capstone or capstone-like classes, are those which students often say are their most challenging and satisfying. Although interviewing students as they applied for graduation 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.

BUSINESS RESULTS

The Foster School of Business was one of the UW ACES' 33 participating departments. Elaine Solomon, Adam Shinn, Aaron Robertson, and Michael Richter asked ten students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all agreed. These ten students represent about 2% of the 652 students who graduated with degrees in Business in 2012-13, which is too small a percentage to allow us to draw conclusions about challenge in the Business major. Therefore, this report simply provides the department with a brief summary of students' responses.

⁵ Merriam, 2001.

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

Six of the students reported having two quarters until graduation; two said that they had three quarters remaining; and two said that they were in their final quarter.

Overall, the 10 students listed nine courses in the Business major as presenting them with significant challenges. Students identified three courses in Business Economics, two in International Business, and one each in the following: Accounting, Finance, Information Systems, and Management.

The list of courses in the major and the number of students who identified them (only one if not otherwise noted) were as follows:

- ACCTG 225: Fundamentals of Managerial Accounting
- B ECON 300: Managerial Economics (3)
- B ECON 420: Financial Markets
- B ECON 426: Competing in the Global Economy
- FIN 350: Business Finance
- I BUS 470: Management of International Trade Operations
- I BUS 491: CISB Track Seminar
- IS 300: Introduction to Information Systems
- MGMT 300: Leadership and Organizational Behavior

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."*

One theme and several distinctive responses emerged from the data.

A course. One-half of students indicated that a course or courses had presented them with their most challenging work in the major. In the words of three students:

- *FIN 350. The professor was an MIT Ph.D. guy. We had to do a Harvard Business case. I'm not a finance background guy. We had to do a project that was valuing a project where a company was acquiring a lumber mill. We had group meetings every week that were hours and hours of trying to figure it out. I've never studied so hard for a class and been so happy to get a 3.3 before. That was the hardest quarter of my life.*
- *B ECON 300. Not necessarily because the class was hard, but I wasn't very good at computing numbers, so I had to try a lot harder. That's why I took the HR route.*
- *The material in general was hard for me, because I wasn't very good at accounting. There weren't any projects in the class, just lectures and quizzes and exams. The grade was dependent on the exam. The prof was great though, but I couldn't grasp the concepts.*

In addition, one or two students each mentioned the following as challenging features of the Business major:

- **Papers (2).** *The paper I had to write for B ECON 420. I spent a whole week doing research for it. He asked a question that had to relate to the banking industry with the Federal Reserve and how everything linked with the interest rate. He didn't really go over it in class. He mentioned it but never gives any answers, so you have to think outside of what you learned in class. You have to talk to people, do research and readings online, and come up with the best answer.*
- **Open-ended projects (2).** *The Certificate of International Studies in Business (CISB) requirements were the most challenging because of the independent learning aspect of the foreign market strategy project. It was group work, but we were given free rein to tackle the question at hand, and to present the project.*
- **Case studies**

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.

One theme and various individual responses emerged from the data.

Open-ended. Four interviewees explained that the activities were challenging because they did not receive specific direction. In the words of two students:

- *There was no strict rubric of what we needed to present. It was a challenge, but it made it more fun and exciting. We got to decide the scope, the research question, and how to streamline all research into that question.*
- *The ambiguity of the project was challenging. There weren't guidelines and it was kind of out of our league. We had to purchase the case, and we had never done this kind of thing before. There were so many variables to take into account. We had to interview people about stock values, etc. The lack of direction was very scary. There was one really smart person who took the lead and helped out.*

In addition, one or two students each mentioned the following as reasons why aspects of the Business major were challenging:

- **Applying theoretical concepts to real life (2).** I had to apply the concepts I learned from textbooks to real life problems.
- **Teaching style (2).** I felt like what she talked about in class was really hard to follow. There was no direct link of what she was lecturing about to homework or test material. You had to infer everything.
- **Preconceived notions**
- **Amount of information**
- **Working with others**
- **Difficult material**

3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?

Students were asked to explain how they met the challenges posed by the major. Three themes emerged in addition to two individual responses.

Students' responses yielded two major and one minor theme.

Own efforts. Six interviewees explained that they met the challenges in the major by putting in extra time and effort reading course materials, studying for quizzes and exams, and seeking out additional help when needed. In the words of two students:

- *I had to work really hard, and I probably spent four hours extra for every single two hour class rereading information in the course pack. And then try to link all the materials he provided in class together. Because it's like a puzzle, and you just put it together yourself.*
- *I probably have never practiced more or been more attentive in class. I just really gave an interest to it. I poured over the textbook, read between the lines, and did a lot of extra work. I was very motivated to follow the textbook with the lectures.*

Working with others. Another six interviewees commented that the opportunity to work together with peers was extremely beneficial as they met the challenges in the major. As three students stated:

- *We had a good community in the class. It really forced us to go out of our way to get a better grade and work harder.*
- *Along with study sessions, I formed individual groups to study from. It started me on a trend to continue with my other Business classes. It was really, really helpful. I should have done that earlier.*

Time-management. Three interviewees mentioned that developing better time-management skills helped them to meet the challenges posed by the major. In the words of one student:

Very good time management—,that was probably the biggest thing. I learned not to procrastinate.

In addition, one student each mentioned the following when asked how they met the challenges in the major:

- **Attended office hours**
- **Didn't feel successful in the major**

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

Finally, students were given the opportunity to discuss what they learned in the process of completing the project/class/activity in the Business major.

How to work with others/importance of working with others. Three interviewees explained that they learned how to work with others effectively in pursuit of shared objectives (e.g., group project) and/or the inherent value of working with others. In the words of two students:

- *I also learned about how to sit back and take orders, and about how I myself can be a good group member, and how to contribute.*

- *One thing is you definitely make a lot more friends when you study with them. In the Business school, you see a lot of people, but you don't necessarily interact with them. But by forming these groups you see them a lot more, become friends, and you also get better grades!*

In addition, one or two students each mentioned the following as things they had learned by completing the project/class/activity in the major.

- **How business principles can be applied to everyday life (2).** How the federal reserve controlled the interest rates, and how it linked with the banking industry, and how that all linked to your everyday life. And how that relates to your personal life, and personal investments when it comes to management.
- **Did not enjoy the subject matter (2).** I don't like B ECON. I actually knew that before taking the class, but it made it even more clear that I don't want anything to do with Economics.
- **Time-management skills**
- **Presentation skills**
- **How to be attentive in class**
- **How to complete a project from start to finish**
- **Perseverance**
- **There are multiple ways to solve a problem**

SUMMARY

When asked about their greatest challenges in the major, one-half of the interviewees mentioned a specific course with three of those five noting that the course was particularly difficult because the subject matter was not among their strengths. The remaining responses were largely distinctive and included papers, open-ended projects and case studies.

Four of the ten students explained that the activities were challenging because they weren't given many guidelines, requiring them to make key decisions on their own, as the student example in the box that follows this section illustrates. One student described the open-ended nature of a presentation as follows:

There was no strict rubric of what we needed to present. It was a challenge, but it made it more fun and exciting. We got to decide the scope, the research question, and how to streamline all research into that question.

Other aspects of the activities that were challenging included the complexity of the subject matter, the amount of material covered, as well as applying theoretical concepts to everyday life.

When asked how they met the challenges in the major, students reported that they put in additional time and effort, reading course materials carefully, studying for quizzes and exams, as well as seeking out additional help when needed. Moreover, students also underscored the importance of working with others, both in-class and out, as they met the challenges of the major. In the words of one student:

Along with study sessions, I formed individual groups to study from. It started me on a trend to continue with my other Business classes. It was really, really helpful. I should have done that earlier.

One student mentioned that she/he attended office hours and another never felt successful in the major.

Finally, when asked what they learned as a result of meeting the challenges in the major, three students commented that they learned how to work more effectively with others as well as the benefits of working together to tackle difficult challenges. Moreover, two students mentioned that they learned how business principles can be applied to everyday life, and one participant each noted that they learned time-management and presentation skills, as well as perseverance.

One Student's Responses to All Four Questions

Course where the greatest challenges occurred. B ECON 420

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? *The paper I had to write for B ECON 420. I spent a whole week doing research for it. He asked a question that had to relate to banking industry with the Federal Reserve, and how everything linked with the interest rate. He didn't really go over it in class. He mentioned it, but never gives any answers, so you have to think outside of what you learned in class. You have to talk to people, do research and readings online, and come up with the best answer.*

Q2. Why was it challenging? *What drove me crazy was that I didn't know if I was getting the right answer or not. You only knew it if you came to talk to him at office hours or outside of class. It took a really long time because information online conflicts with each other, so you have to try to pick out the best pieces of information to put in your paper.*

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? *I had to work really hard, and I probably spent four hours extra for every single two hour class rereading information in the course pack and then trying to link all the materials he provided in class together. Because it's like a puzzle, and you just put it together yourself.*

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? *How the federal reserve controlled the interest rates, and how it linked with the banking industry, and how that all linked to your everyday life. And how that relates to your personal life, and personal investments when it comes to management*

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