

## **UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES): Evening Degree**

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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 disciplines<sup>2</sup>, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 experiences<sup>4</sup>; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.<sup>5</sup> 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:

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to conducting interviews, Connie assisted in the early stages of analysis, and we are grateful for her help.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Beyer, et al., 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> 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 method<sup>6</sup>, 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.

## EVENING DEGREE PROGRAM RESULTS

The Evening Degree Program was one of the UW ACES' 33 participating departments and programs. Connie, Suki, and Emily asked 23 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all agreed. This number represents about 16% of the 144 students who graduated with evening degrees in 2012-13<sup>7</sup>.

### *Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge*

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

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<sup>6</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Evening Degree included the following majors: Communications, English, Humanities, Psychology, Social Sciences

Overall, the 23 students listed 18 courses as presenting them with significant challenges.

The list of courses and the number of students who identified them (only one if not otherwise noted) were as follows<sup>8</sup>:

ANTH 215: Introduction to Medical Anthropology and Global Health  
ANTH 456: Contemporary Ethnography  
ARCHY 465: Public Archaeology  
BIO A 348: Evolutionary Biology and Human Diversity  
COM 334: Essentials of Argument  
COM 373: Small Group Communication (2)  
COM 426: International Media Images  
COM 440: Mass Media Law (2)  
COM 475: Organizational Communication  
ENGL 440: Special Topics- Toni Morrison  
GEN ST 391: Exploring Research in Communication and Social Science  
GEOG 343: Comparative Geographies of Youth  
GWSS 456: Feminism, Racism, and Anti-Racism  
HIST 371: History of Consumerism in America  
LSJ 360: Drugs and Society (2)  
PHIL 345: Moral Issues of Life & Death  
POL S 405: Advanced Seminar in American Politics (2)  
SOC 344: Cognitive Social Psychology

### **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 major and one minor theme emerged from the data.

**A course.** Eighteen interviewees indicated that a course or courses had presented them with their most challenging work in the major. Given that students were a part of the Evening Degree Program and had several different majors, the course topics varied widely. In the words of five students:

- *The race and the law class. I really struggled with that one. Reconciling coming from a disadvantaged background, recognizing that I am still privileged because I am white.*
- *The moral issues of life and death course stretched my thinking the most in regards to cultivating a sense of moral appropriateness for a better way to explain that and how I have to look at my actions and what those mean. The teacher never gave one answer. She gave subjects and articles that had view points for as well as against it.*
- *I know that the course I just took, Philosophy 345, which was really interesting, took a lot of thought and deep thinking. I had a hard time putting that much time into it.*

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<sup>8</sup> Two participants said the following: "I can't remember the course number. It was Anthropology" and "Women's Studies I forgot the name, but it had to do with Womens' International Rights."

- *I think probably the most challenging would be COM 334. I know some of the concepts really stretched my thinking about argument and how argumentation is used on an everyday basis. It's pretty intense.*
- *Drugs and Society. I just finished the class. I think just the ethical dilemmas about what is right or wrong changed how I see the world. Everything isn't black and white.*

**Writing.** Five (22%) interviewees explained that writing was the mostly challenging work that they were required to complete as part of the Evening Degree Program. In their own words:

- *Doing longer papers where you have to express your thinking was most challenging.*
- *Writing a scientific paper for the biology class was challenging.*
- *My Women's Studies class, was one of the first classes I took. It was a law class. There were a lot of the readings and discussion was new to me. The final paper was the most challenging.*

In addition, one or two students each mentioned the following as presenting them with the greatest challenge in the Evening Degree Program:

- **Group discussion (2).** *Probably small group communication when we had to do the fish bowl assignment in Gerry Phillipson's class.*
- **Ethnography (2).** *In ethnographic studies, I learned how to do field research and the process involved field and then research analysis, fake publishing it, and doing case studies where you site your own work.*
- **Projects.** *In Feminism Racism and Anti-Racism, we did a project where we had to pick a source of media such as films. We worked in a group, which is challenging as no one has the same schedule. We were learning different theories and had to tie the theories into the films and readings. It was an interesting class.*
- Exams

## **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 major theme and several minor themes emerged from the data.

**Critical thinking.** Nine (39%) interviewees said that the activities/classes were challenging because they required students to use a new way of thinking, namely looking at things from multiple perspectives. In the words of five of those students:

- *It was challenging because I had to shift my perspective and shift the way I see myself and the world.*
- *It was a challenge because I had never taken Anthropology before and had to look at things from a different perspective.*
- *I had to change the way I was thinking, the way it's always been. It's hard to break out of the mold and look at it in a different perspective.*

*You go along living your life and experiencing everyday things, and then when you have to look at it academically it opens your eyes in certain ways.*

- *It was a new way of thinking. Instead of names, dates and places, it was: why did this happen? How did this happen? If this hadn't happened, what would have happened instead? It expanded my thinking.*

In addition, two or three students each mentioned the following as reasons why aspects of their coursework in the Evening Degree Program were challenging:

- **Research skills (3).** *It was very thorough. The research part was the difficult part; the writing was easier. The research was hard and it helped me with other classes once I could organize my thoughts.*
- **New subject matter (3).** *It was a new field of learning. It was evolutionary biology so reading scientific journals and writing reviews of those journals required attaining new scientific knowledge.*
- **Rigorous writing standards (2).** *We had multiple revisions and we had writing conferences one-on-one with the teacher. We could improve our writing and expand on our previous undergraduate experience.*
- **Working with others (2).** *The hardest thing was the group presentation. Everyone had different ideas about what they wanted to present and how to present, and then there was the challenge of getting the schedules together to throw something like this together.*

One student each mentioned the following as reasons why aspects of their courses were a challenge:

- Lack of guidance
- Application of theory to real-life

### **3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?**

Students were asked to explain what helped them meet the challenges posed by the Evening Degree Program. Their responses yielded three major themes and several distinctive responses.

**Own efforts.** Ten interviewees explained that they met the challenges in the major by putting in extra time and effort in order to understand the material more thoroughly and complete the requirements of the course and/or project. In the words of five students:

- *I pulled up my boot straps and went for it. I did lots of independent study and making good choices on the weekends (studying instead of hanging out with friends).*
- *I did a lot of reading and spending time at the UW library and online library.*
- *I just went for it and did the readings.*
- *The research that was involved in it and the writing was a lot. I was just applying myself just to see if I could understand it, to fully understand it rather than just reading through things or writing, just getting into it.*
- *I learned not to procrastinate. I used this method of working on it and taking a break from it and then going back to it which seemed to help.*

**Working with others.** Eight interviewees (35%) commented that the opportunity to work together with peers was extremely beneficial as they met the challenges in the Evening Degree Program. As four students stated:

- *The class was only eight people. It was really nice because everyone had respectful opinions and so we were able to look at each person's perspective respectfully. I call it engagement and it challenged me to look at things through their eyes.*
- *As far as talking about it, having discussion with my classmates made it more easy to discuss the topic. It was practice to be able to talk about race, slavery, and even other topics that can be considered taboo. Probably I spent a lot of time working with other students in class, working through the concepts. We talked it out, like talking about syllogisms. I had no idea what that was until we talked it out with others in the class.*
- *I had a lot of class discussions and conversations with my peers and an adjustment in my philosophical approach to learning.*

**Worked to improve writing skills.** Seven (30%) of the interviewees explained that they worked hard to improve their writing skills in meeting the challenges in the Evening Degree Program. In their own words:

- *I learned how to approach reading differently. I learned that writing has so much to do with what you read and how you read it and how you interpret it depending on where you are in your academic path.*
- *I got really into the paper, and I worked really hard on the research. Writing the paper was this big accomplishment that I have never had. It was a relieving feeling to create something that was well written.*
- *Definitely writing an outline and a draft, which was something the professor required. Also being able to pick a topic that was relevant to the class and interesting to me.*
- *I got better at organizing longer papers and structuring the arguments.*

In addition, one or two students each mentioned the following as ways in which they met the challenges in the Evening Degree Program:

- **Learned more about the research process (2).** *First of all I learned enough about research and research methodologies so that I could appreciate what someone was doing and what they were trying to accomplish with their work.*
- **Learned how to think critically (2).** *I had an epiphany moment—"Oh my gosh, I don't know it all!"—when I looked at something through someone else's eyes. I liked the way he framed it. He's a good teacher!*
- **New study skills.** *I'm usually not a flash card person, but I made flash cards and did some different study techniques.*
- *Learned how to speak up in class.*

#### **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 Evening Degree Program.

**How to think critically.** Seven (30%) interviewees commented that they learned how to think critically, as a result of meeting the challenges in the Evening Degree Program. More specifically, students spoke of the importance of being more open-minded and critically examining multiple perspectives. In the words of three students:

- *I learned to be mindful of my own actions rather than my conclusions, to analyze others' moral stances and how they arrive at their conclusions.*
- *I learned, that there's more to the story than right and wrong and to put aside my biases and stay objective. I also learned to be a better person and a better member of society.*
- *I learned that there is not always one answer, even if someone tells you that it is not necessarily true.*
- *I learned how to relate theories with cases that actually happened and apply it all together and come up with some sort of meaning from it.*

**Specific subject matter.** Five (22%) participants noted that they gained knowledge about specific subject matter including such topics as race, class, gender, morality, and evolutionary biology. For example:

- *I learned about evolutionary biology and that almost any subject is accessible. With research and study you can do almost anything*
- *I became an expert on the US vs Sioux case.*
- *I became very knowledgeable about the subject, sex and gender, and what it portrays in the media and our way of thinking in the media through different cultures. It also gave me a broader idea of different cultures and their viewpoints of sex and gender as well as other social aspects of their culture.*

**To write more effectively.** Another five (22%) interviewees explained that they learned to write more effectively as a result of meeting the challenges in the Evening Degree Program. In their own words:

- *I have been able to write some nice papers. I've been able to use the library and to use it for my ultimate challenge to write a ten page essay this quarter.*
- *I learned how to write better. I learned that if properly motivated I could write well.*
- *I learned about who I was as a student and how to write differently and think more and give academic papers a more personal voice and express stronger ideas.*

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

- **Study strategies (2).** *I have to make practice tests to help with my nerves and help me memorize as much as possible.*

- **How to work with others (2).** *How to be a team member and how to work in a group and not as an individual. Usually I tend to think on my own, this helped me to bring other people into my thinking process.*
- **Gained confidence (2).** *I learned that I could do it.*
- **Time management skills.** *I learned how to structure my time in writing and in life better.*
- **How to make a budget**
- **Networking skills**

## SUMMARY

Although interviewees in the Evening Degree Program spoke of challenges presented to them in courses from a wide range of disciplines, there was quite a bit of agreement about what made their activities challenging and what they had learned from addressing those challenges. For most of the students, challenges appeared to center on critical thinking (and the writing and research that requires it) and the challenge of taking multiple perspectives into account in that thinking. Furthermore, as the student's comments in the box that follows this summary suggests, students also mentioned having their personal views changed by this process.

When asked about their greatest challenges in the major, the majority of interviewees mentioned a specific course that they had taken as part of the Evening Degree Program. Moreover, several students commented that writing papers had been their greatest challenge and two students each noted that group discussion and ethnographies were particularly challenging aspects of their Evening Degree Program coursework.

Students were most likely to cite a new way of thinking as the aspect of the activity or class that made it particularly challenging. More specifically, students talked about the importance of examining multiple perspectives and reevaluating one's relationship with the world. In the words of one student:

- *It was a new way of thinking. Instead of names, dates and places, it was: why did this happen? How did this happen? If this hadn't happened, what would have happened instead? It expanded my thinking.*

In addition, students cited new subject matter, research skills, and rigorous writing standards as aspects of the class or activity that were especially challenging.

Students most commonly mentioned that they met the challenges posed by the Evening Degree Program by putting in additional time and effort, including completing necessary readings, spending time studying, and going above and beyond their typical efforts.

Students also noted that working with others (e.g., class discussion) and improving their writing skills through hard work served to help them meet the challenges they faced.

When asked what they had learned as a result of meeting the challenges in the major, students explained that they had learned to think critically and how to write more effectively, in addition to learning about specific subject matter. Students also mentioned that they had gained study strategies and learned how to work more successfully with their peers as a result of their work in the Evening Degree Program.

Finally, students' responses to the UW ACES interview questions suggest that students in the Evening Degree Program, regardless of what they were studying, felt that the challenges they described were rewarding. This positive response to challenge 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 engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than they do when coursework is easy.

***One Student's Responses to All Four Questions***

**Course where greatest challenges occurred:** Geography 343: Comparative Geographies of Youth

**Q1. What was the most challenging work you did?** *The class on comparative geography of youth.*

**Q2. Why was it challenging?** *It's like you have to think outside of the box. You can't just go in and see things through one eye. It was challenging because it made all of us think outside of the box.*

**Q3. What helped you meet that challenge?** *The class was only eight people. It was really nice because everyone had respectful opinions and so we were able to look at each person's perspective respectfully. I call it engagement and it challenged me to look at things through their eyes.*

**Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge?** *I learned not to judge people. I come from a minority multicultural background. Some of the stigma against minorities was exposed and it helped you feel like you are more together through shared experiences. It allowed us to really express our feelings, which I really liked.*

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