

## **UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES): Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies**

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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>1</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>2</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>3</sup>; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.<sup>4</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> 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>2</sup> Beyer, et al., 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>4</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>5</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.

## GENDER, WOMEN & SEXUALITY STUDIES RESULTS

Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies was one of the UW ACES' 33 participating departments. Jennifer Hoff asked three students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all agreed. This number represents 16% of the 19 seniors in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.<sup>6</sup> Given the small number of participants, this report presents the three students' responses verbatim, followed by a brief summary. Because of the small number, caution should be used in forming conclusions from the data.

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

All three participants reported that they had two quarters to complete before graduation.

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<sup>5</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> 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/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes\\_0/13-Dashboard#1](https://bitools.uw.edu/views/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes_0/13-Dashboard#1))

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, one student listed a 300-level course and two listed 400-level courses, as follows:

GWSS 310: Women and the Law

GWSS 435: Gender and Spirituality

GWSS 497: Fieldwork in Women Studies (Transgender)

### **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."* The three students responded as follows:

- GWSS 310: *I think the most challenging work was from the Women and Law course with Professor Novotny. The reason it was so challenging is that we had to write papers about a specific scenario and apply law to it. Within the law there were racial and gender dimensions. It wasn't black and white, sexist or not sexist.*
- GWSS 435: *The work was challenging because the topics in the major are touchy for people and they can have very different opinions. In addition, there is so much group work and you need to be able to talk things out with other students. In Gender and Spirituality class, religion came up so often and because it's such a touchy subject, it was hard. I remember a specific reading that we had a class discussion about. The reading was written by someone that was Christian and writing from her point of view and lots of people didn't agree with that.*
- GWSS 497: *It was a new idea and it stretched my thinking. We had a final paper, to pick one video or paper to do a report on. It was hard to build a thesis on something that was a totally new topic.*

### **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. In the words of all three students:

- *You had to come to a conclusion, or solution, but while doing that you realized how many different parts there were that had to come together. It was elements of the law and issues of equality. My topic was equal amendment and sexual harassment in the workplace. I looked at one specific scenario and decided what the proper outcome for a judge or jury to make was.*
- *I guess it was being more open to other peoples' opinions. I couldn't get too emotionally involved so that I could be open to their opinions too, which can be hard. That's why I love this major, it really does open my mind to think differently and look at other perspectives, whether I agree with them or not.*
- *Time in the quarter was short, so it was hard to narrow down the paper topic.*

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

Students were asked to explain how they met the challenges posed by the major. In their own words:

- *I had to study the law itself, and also take a look at previous cases. I went to talk to the professor several times and she helped me apply law to other examples to show me how to do it.*
- *I think part of it was having prior women's studies classes so I had experience. If it was my first quarter as a freshman I wouldn't have been able to do it. I knew the major was about developing critical thinking and broadening my perspective over the course of the years.*
- *We had discussion groups in class. It was mostly majors in the class and we worked with each other to build up ideas, to brainstorm. I ended up doing my project on Saudi Arabia, because it is one of the only places where the surgeries are legal. But it wasn't really very good in terms of following up because the people didn't get support and had to pick being a man or a woman.*

#### **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. See below for all verbatim responses:

- *I learned that as much as I want to believe in good versus evil, it's not as black and white as it seems. Each situation needs an in-depth look before making a decision.*
- *Being open minded, being a critical thinker are the things I've gotten the most out of the major. I've learned about history and gender which is good but the general thinking will help me more.*
- *I became more familiar with a topic I hadn't known much about and became aware of intersex communities.*

### **SUMMARY<sup>7</sup>**

When asked about their greatest challenges in the major, two of three participants mentioned writing and one commented on the challenge in working with others with varied perspectives, particularly when discussing controversial topics.

Two of the three students reported that the activities were challenging because they were required to take into account multiple perspectives on particular issues. As a result, students explained that they came to a greater appreciation regarding the inherent complexity of controversial issues. One student noted that paper was challenging because it was difficult to narrow down her/his topic given the length of the quarter.

When asked how they met the challenges in the major, students mentioned their own efforts including studying new subject matter as well as building on past courses that emphasized critical thinking skills. Moreover, one student noted that she/he met with the professor and another took part in class discussion groups to meet the challenges in the major.

Finally, two of the three participants explained that as a result of meeting the challenges in the major, they gained an appreciation for the complexity of issues and the importance of taking into account

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<sup>7</sup> Given the small number of participants, results should be interpreted with caution.

multiple perspectives before making definitive conclusions. One participant commented on gaining a greater understanding of specific subject matter.

## SOURCES

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