

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES): Slavic Languages and Literatures

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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 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 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.

SLAVIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES RESULTS

The Slavic Languages and Literatures (SLAVIC) department was one of the UW ACES' 32 participating departments. Megan Styles, the SLAVIC program coordinator and academic adviser at the time, asked nine students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all of them agreed. This number represents about 90% of the seniors in SLAVIC who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.⁶

Students were asked which of the two major options in Slavic Languages and Literatures they were completing for their undergraduate degree. Five interviewees reported choosing the Russian Language, Literature, and Culture (RUSS) option; three students reported choosing the Eastern European Language, Literature, and Culture option (EELLCC); and one student reported choosing both options. Students' major options did not seem to affect their responses to the interview questions, as no clear patterns emerged by major area in our analysis of those responses.

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/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes_0/13-Dashboard#3)

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

In terms of how long students had before graduating, one student had only the quarter in which he was interviewed to complete before graduating; three students had two quarters left; and five students had three quarters to complete before graduation. Because more than half of the interviewees had a full year left at UW before completing their major, the courses they could discuss regarding academic challenge were limited to courses they had taken prior to their senior year in the major.

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, eight of the students listed a total of six classes, with some students mentioning more than one course. Four of those courses were Russian classes, and about half of the interviewees noted that Slavic 351 had presented significant challenges (two EELLC majors and two RUSS majors). The list of courses and the number who identified them (one if not noted) were:

Modern Eastern European Literature
RUSS 321
RUSS 451
RUSS 322 (2 students)
RUSS 230 (special topics, Russian Comedy, Dr. Henry)
SLAV 351 (4 students)

In addition, interviewees also mentioned the following as presenting them with their greatest challenges in the major:

- Study abroad in Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia (a Pitt course with a UW instructor)
- Honors thesis
- “All! A little bit from every single [class].”

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.”

Four themes emerged from students’ responses.

A paper/the writing required. Five of the nine SLAVIC interviewees said that one of the greatest challenges in the major was a paper or the writing required in a course. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *The research paper that I did for [RUSS] 451 sticks out because when I think of research I think of facts and historical and political factors. It was hard for me to make a connection between linguistic analysis and what I’m used to when I do research papers.*
- *I have to say it would probably be the literature courses where we had to write final papers. I’m more of a technical thinker, so when it comes to expressing opinions and what the author was trying to convey, that was difficult. So it was cool because I got to practice those skills, reading between the lines and making connections to historical events.*

- *I took the [RUSS 322] class without taking English composition, and so not learning all of the requirements in academic writing before taking a major Russian literature course was difficult.*
- *Research papers, the longer ones, 8+ page papers. And as a time crunch environment, essays on final exams where you had only so much time before the bell rang. So you had to write fast and come up with things on the fly.*

Linguistics. Five of the nine students interviewed also noted that linguistics or the linguistic-related aspects of their classes were challenging. Two of these students were EELLC majors and three were RUSS majors, and four of them mentioned the same class as the place where they experienced that challenge: SLAV 351. Some examples:

- *It was the first time I had done any work in historical linguistics and the articles were challenging just to read. At the end of the quarter we had to make a presentation on one Slavic language. So you had to apply what you learned to something that exists and is relevant. It was difficult, and I felt good about the presentation afterwards.*
- *Slavic 351. I did that without taking Linguistics 200, [which was a] big mistake. I'm pretty sure that it's a prerequisite now on registration. As long as they fixed that, no one will have that issue. Even now that I've taken LING 200, transcribing phonetics into Slavic phonetics is still difficult.*
- *Spring quarter [of my] freshman year, I took the history of Slavic languages course never having taken linguistics. That was really stressful having to teach myself linguistics, but they implemented that LING 200 prerequisite after that, which is probably the best decision they could have made. Just learning the Cyrillic alphabet was challenging, but I did it. And then I learned it in cursive.*

Specific class(es). A third of the interviewees mentioned one or more whole classes as being challenging. Two examples of this category of response are:

- *[A] class that comes to mind was Eastern European fiction. That was challenging because the professor really pushed us to think very thoroughly about the material and to read very thoroughly. And she didn't assign any homework other than reading. And there was an essay exam at the end. And that class... challenged me to really focus on what the materials mean. It was kind of depressing because it's modern Eastern Europe, but it was my favorite class at UW because reading those challenging texts just made me think about life.*
- *It was probably the History of Slavic class, Slav 351. I had it with Augerot years and years ago, and it was also coincidentally my favorite class. It forced me to think, and it was one of my first linguistics classes. So it opened my eyes and it forced me to realize that I was really into linguistics as well.*

Reading. Two students focused on the challenging nature of the readings required by courses in the major, both in terms of amount and complexity. For example:

Overall, the sheer amount of reading sometimes. [Also] contradictory things, where you had one article that says one thing about the same event and then one that says something completely different.

Other. In addition to these themes, individual students identified the following challenges in the major:

- A presentation
- The level of thinking required
- Time management
- Nothing was challenging

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

Five themes emerged when students were asked what it was about those activities or classes that made them challenging. Three of those themes—the research required, the writing required, and coming up with one’s own topic—all related to writing in the major.

The subject was new to me. A third of the interviewees mentioned the challenge of taking on an unfamiliar subject, and in all three cases, that subject was linguistics. For example:

[The class] used all of the linguistics terminology, and I had no idea what those terms or their notations meant. I remember that my final paper was comparing Bulgarian, Polish, and Russian to determine how they originated in old Slavonic. I think I looked at a single term, like milk or something. And that was difficult because I didn't have a good grasp of Russian yet.

The research required to write a paper. A third of the interviewees also noted that the research they had conducted was what made the writing in the major particularly challenging. In the words of two of those students:

- *The amount of research that I tried to put into them and finding materials that supported my arguments. Sometimes I would have to go through 20 books to find a statistic or a quote.*
- *It was challenging because I'd never done that [kind of research project] before. I just figured out again how to break it down into tasks, a bunch of small chunks and then look at how much time I had to do them. This one will be twenty minutes, tomorrow I have two hours. When you break anything into small chunks, it magically gets done. I used the UW library JSTOR and I found several articles. I gave myself time to read them, to think about them, and then I just started typing for a certain amount of time. The requirements were to analyze linguistic discourse. In that particular topic it was difficult to find first-hand sources.*

The writing required. Echoing comments about their most challenging experience in the major and related to comments about the challenge of research, two students said that the writing was what had made the experience challenging. In the words of one of those students:

Just the whole process of writing a long thesis. That was my first time doing that and I was doing it in a second language. It was about the evolution of graphic design in the former Yugoslavia.

Coming up with my own topic. Also related to challenges inherent in writing assignments, the challenge in coming up with one’s own topic was mentioned by two students. As they said:

- *My own indecisiveness. There are so many themes that you're interested in and it's hard to zero in on a theme that you have enough background knowledge in and buckle down and start writing.*
- *When you take the class they leave it up to you which direction you want to go. Once you get the prompt, you're free to choose whatever story you want or which historical event. So I wrote on about Pugachev, the Russian rebel, and I was connecting it to one of the stories that we read in class. I had to tie it into the historical context and see which events were truly represented and which were not exactly true but were used to convey a certain meaning. The hardest part for me is being able to deal with all of the options and which direction do I take.*

The reading. Two students spoke of the challenges in the reading required. For example:

It's a lot of work [in RUSS 322]--the amount of readings and assignments. All of the readings that you have to do. I enjoy it. I love literature. But it became a priority, and my GPA went down in other courses. You have to love it in order to make it worthwhile.

3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?

All students but one identified two or more things that helped them meet the challenges they described.

The faculty. Two thirds of the students said that their professors and, in one case, a TA helped them meet the challenges they had described. In the words of three of these students:

- *It was the professors who were obviously very passionate about the subject and were knowledgeable and really pushed you to get to know the subject well. Without having such professors I think I would have gotten a lot less from the class than I did. I had to just be really ready for class all the time and get to the homework, do the homework well, do the readings, ask questions. They were very encouraging teachers.*
- *I learned to write and rewrite and move little paragraphs around. I learned to write and proofread really well. I met with the professor a few times and gave my thoughts about what I already had. That was helpful—to talk about those ideas.*
- *I had already had a class with the professor. She liked me, so it was easy to talk to her. I had three quarters with her, Professor X, in a row. After our midterm paper, Professor X actually came into class and was almost yelling at the entire class that none of us knew how to write. The fact that I knew her, made it so I wasn't scared of her, and it was also a huge wake-up call that I needed to learn fast what to do. I was in ENG 131 at the same time and I learned what I needed to know for the midterm after the midterm. And once I learned that stuff, I internalized it. Normally when I get English syntax, I kind of gloss over it. I know how to do that. But when I thought about what Professor X said, I knew that I needed to really internalize it.*

Their own efforts. Two thirds of the interviewees also noted that their own efforts had helped them meet the challenges they described. They identified a range of behaviors including outlining, faithfully going to class, starting work earlier than they might have, organizing their work and time, making flash cards, and revising. For example:

- *I learned to actually really try to read the reading, which definitely provided a deeper and better understanding of the authors and the literature.*
- *The big challenge is time management because I work. For me, I've been able to make lists of tasks for all my classes and just go through the list and make plans--a lot like Soviet government, except I was more successful! Honestly, I look at how many pages in the book I have to read and the number of hours that it will take me to read, and I divide my time hour by hour.*
- *I studied for the history of Slavic languages. I made flash cards. I worked online. I had all my notebooks and notes from other classes. So if we were referencing how Gogol influenced another author, I had all my notes about his style and his motifs. And I could say, "I think he really liked Gogol."*

The library/doing research. Five of the nine interviewees said that the UW library, doing some research, or learning to do research helped them meet the challenges they discussed. Two of them put it this way:

- *I did some research. I went to the library and looked up some books that toed in with the author and his story. Being able to read those references well and not just the actual story. It was learning how to get what was useful out of those references.*
- *Know what to look for. Do online preliminary research. Look up Wikipedia and see what's there on that subject matter before diving head first into the library. Research something that you kind of know something about, but not too much. If you do something that you're really good with, it won't be interesting and you'll end up sounding like it's a known fact even though it's not. And if you choose something that you don't know anything about, the paper will suffer as a result because you'll have to learn so much and information changes.*

The class itself/other classes in the major. Three students said that the course, itself, or other courses in the major had helped them learn what they needed to know in order to complete the challenging work they had described. As two of them said:

- *Going to class because the material was really unique and you really would find that, compared to other classes, if you didn't go to class, it would be really hard to understand.*
- *By my junior year, I had accumulated all this knowledge and it got easier. I remember being totally lost in 322, [wondering about other students]—how do you all know this? And now I know.*

Peers. Three of the nine students also said that peers had helped them meet their academic challenges. In the words of two of those interviewees:

- *I learned to test myself a lot and study with others when it came to the history of Slavic languages.*
- *I probably bugged the people in my class too much, the Linguistics majors who were taking it as an elective. I remember asking really simple dumb questions of them, and they were like, "You don't know what that is?" No. There you go.*

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

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenge they had described, and all but one student mentioned multiple lessons learned. Several themes emerged from their responses.

Better time management and planning skills. Five students said that they had learned to be better at time management and planning. In the words of two of those students:

- *There's obviously the sort of technical things that I learned about Slavic languages, but outside of what I was supposed to learn, I developed study skills, such as time management and reading skills and really trying to understand things you don't understand.*
- *I learned that it definitely feels good to start early, and even if you don't finish it, write anyway. There's something about starting it early and then letting your mind work on it for awhile. With math, they use the example that if you take some time, your brain is still working on it, and when you come back to a problem, you can solve it.*

Research skills/the importance of research. Four of the interviewees said that they had learned to do research and the importance of that work by meeting the challenges they had discussed. As two of them said:

- *I learned how important research is too. It's one thing to take at face value what you learn in a book, but it's another to come in at different angles and tie in all of the things that you've learned in other classes and other sources. All of those things can make it so much richer than just a one-dimensional story.*
- *Just further expanding on my research skills....*

Language skill and language understanding. Three interviewees spoke about increased language skill or understanding. For example:

First and foremost, it gave me a much better handle on the language.

I learned so much about Slavic linguistics. I had to put in so much personal time that it kind of stuck with me, and I still see that today in my classes. Or when I was in Russia, and different students spoke a different Slavic language, you could see where words had the same roots from old church Slavonic but it took different forms now.

Improved writing skill. Two students noted that in meeting the challenges they had described, they improved their writing ability. As one of them said:

I feel like I have the chops now to write long form papers.

Other. Finally, individual students said that they had learned the following by meeting the challenges they had described:

- To understand things more deeply
- “That I had a passion for this”
- How to work independently
- The importance of the relationship of history and culture to literature
- How to “read” a film cinematically

SUMMARY

The most significant challenges that students in the Slavic Languages and Literatures major noted focused on linguistics and the writing required in the major. For many students, linguistics represented a completely unfamiliar approach to language study, and many spoke of the challenge in learning that approach, including the student whose full responses to the interview questions follow this summary. Two noted that a prerequisite (Linguistics 200) had been added to the major that made the inclusion of linguistics easier for students to understand, although one student noted: *“Even now that I've taken LING 200, transcribing phonetics into Slavic phonetics is still difficult.”*

Writing was also a challenge noted by several students. The challenges in writing papers in the majors appeared to center on students' needing to create their own topics, the research required to complete writing—which included research on history and culture as well as on the work of literature in question—and organizing the writing of a longer paper. Students also mentioned the challenges in the reading required in the major, speaking both about the amount of reading and the level of difficulty in the reading required.

Students credited faculty, their own efforts, the research process, the courses they had taken and were taking, and their peers for helping them meet the challenges they described. They noted that challenges in their major had improved their skills in time management and planning, research, and writing. In addition, they noted that they had a deeper understanding of languages as a result of the challenges they had met.

Finally, students' responses to the UW ACES interview questions suggests that Slavic Languages and Literatures majors felt the challenges they described were rewarding. They often described their most challenging courses as their favorites or the ones that had the most lasting impact on their learning. 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 engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than when coursework is easy. In addition, at least one student said that the UW ACES interview process, itself, had been rewarding. He noted:

This is actually really useful because it's making me think about what I learned from the class. Sometimes when you finish a class, you just think, “I'm done!” and you don't think about what you actually learned. I actually learned something really useful!

This response is consistent with research on reflection, which shows that when students are asked to reflect on their learning, such reflection has the power to amplify learning.

One Student's Responses to All Four Questions

Course where greatest challenges occurred: *History of Slavic languages class and Russian 322 and 230, a special topics course with Dr. Henry -- Russian comedy.*

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? *Spring quarter, freshman year, I took the history of Slavic languages course, never having taken linguistics. That was really stressful having to teach myself linguistics, but they implemented that LING 200 prerequisite after that, which is probably the best decision they could have made.*

For the Russian courses, just learning the Cyrillic alphabet was challenging, but I did it. And then I learned it in cursive. I can't say that it's really been challenging; it's been more fun. I guess the teaching styles [were challenging]. For instance, Dr. Henry would have you bring in other Russian authors when you were reading

someone. In the different literature courses, looking at how different Russian authors influenced their peers was challenging—being able to recognize that this guy is making fun of this guy, being able to recognize that.

Q2. Why was it challenging? *The history of Slavic languages course was challenging because it used all of the linguistics terminology, and I had no idea what those terms and the notations meant. I remember that my final paper was comparing Bulgarian, Polish, and Russian to determine how they originated in old Slavonic. I think I looked at a single term, like milk or something. And that was difficult because I didn't have a good grasp of Russian yet.*

[In the Russian courses,] just being able to recognize the writing style of a particular author and how other authors would try to mimic that and incorporate it into their own style [was also challenging].

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? *I studied for the history of Slavic languages. I made flash cards. I worked online. I probably bugged the people in my class too much, the linguistics majors who were taking it as an elective. I remember asking really simple dumb questions of them and they were like, "You don't know what that is?" No, there you go.*

[For the Russian courses,] I'm a packrat, so I had all my notebooks and notes from other classes. So if we were referencing how Gogol influenced another author, I had all my notes about his style and his motifs. And I could say, "I think he really liked Gogol." When I enrolled in RUSS 101, I had no language, and I had skipped European history with running start. So the first year or two was learning that this is when this revolution was and this was when this happened. So by my junior year, I had accumulated all this knowledge and it got easier. I remember being totally lost in 322 and wondering "how do you all know this? And now I know. By the third year, you're reading The Master and Margarita, and you know what's going on. I remember not even being able to pronounce some of the characters' names reading Crime and Punishment.

I'm entirely a product of the UW Slavic department. Everything I know about this stuff I picked up here.

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? *I learned so much about Slavic linguistics. I had to put in so much personal time, that it kind of stuck with me, and I still see that today in my classes. Or when I was in Russia, and different students spoke a different Slavic language, and you could see where words had the same roots from old church Slavonic but it took different forms now. I was having a conversation with a girl about the word milk in Polish and you could see the liquid metathesis that had happened.*

In terms of the Russian courses, they allowed me to analyze texts and set them in place them in a cultural context and see what was happening at that time, what had preceded it. Basically looking at history and seeing how it influences where we're at today, but using literature. I did take the film course with Alaniz, which was really cool. It was films of Andre Tarkovsky. It was great, but I had zero understanding of cinematography. And when you had to write your paper you had to be able to analyze the cinematic elements - why this long shot was so moving and what the director was going for. I didn't know how to watch the film—like I didn't notice that [in one scene] they hadn't changed the camera angle and it was all one long scene. I had to learn how to be an active reader of film. There were people in there that were film majors, and they could get all that, but they didn't know anything about the culture. So I learned to be an active film watcher I guess. That was one of my favorite classes, but I sucked at getting a good grade in it. It was lowest grade [I got] in the department, but I loved it. When I was in Russia, I was in a film class, and I had seen all these stupid weird random Tarkovsky movies!

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