November 22, 2002

Report to Educational Policy Committee
Results of survey and focus groups conducted by the subcommittee on Liberal Education,
Spring 2002

**Surveys**
During spring 2002, as part of the on-going assessment of UMD’s liberal education program, the subcommittee on Liberal Education conducted a survey of all students in upper division composition. We targeted this group of students for the following reasons: 1. They were likely to have finished (or nearly have finished) their liberal education program, 2. They represented a cross-section of the whole student population, and 3. They were a captive audience. A copy of the survey is attached, along with tabulated results. In all, 347 surveys were returned, however the number of responses for individual questions varies from this total. Results (questions 1-16, 27) show that in general:

a. Students feel Liberal Education (LE) courses are not as important as courses in their major.

b. Students learn better in smaller (< 20) and medium size (40-60) classes.

c. LE courses improve writing skills.

d. LE courses provide cultural diversity.

e. Overall both the course content and quality of teaching in LE classes are good.

f. Physical Education classes were not useful in meeting LE requirements.

However, when we look at the individual category mean scores (questions 17-26) the answers indicate that students think that most of the categories were not useful. The standard deviations on these answers are much higher than on the previous group, and probably reflect students’ aversion to some classes. If we look at the median score on these questions, with the exception of category 10, half the students agree that they are useful, and half do not.

Students were also asked to make comments if they chose. A summary of those comments (if made three or more times) is also attached. These comments are not representative of all students, and thus are not particularly useful when taken by themselves. However, when taken together with the focus group results (see below), they have more meaning.

**Focus Groups**
Because survey results tend only to tell part of a story, we initiated focus groups among the upper division writing students. We chose six different writing classes, each with students from a different discipline: Language & Literature, Business & Organization, Human Services, Social Sciences, Engineering, and Science. These groups were facilitated by Traci Laughlin and Barbara Titus. A copy of the focus group questions is attached.
When reading the summaries from the focus groups, there appeared to be some overall themes in ALL of the groups. They are listed in no particular order of priority:

1. Students prefer, and learn better, in smaller classes. Classes with large enrollments make genuine liberal education very difficult.
2. Consider the possibility of expanding the list of courses that can be used to fulfill the cultural diversity and international perspective requirements. Students felt that there were not enough choices to allow for flexibility.
3. Remove the word-processing part from freshman composition. Make it available for students as an optional remedial course.
4. Students asked that more grammar be taught in composition. This was addressed in all of the focus groups.
5. Improve advisement for liberal education classes, so that students understand the importance of liberal education. This needs to be done right at freshman advisement and continued through the first two years of college.
6. Have faculty make a better case for liberal education in their classes. It’s not surprising that many students question the usefulness of LE when most of the syllabi reviewed to date (also part of the on-going assessment), give at best a perfunctory LE rational for the course.
7. Students have a perception that LE slows down their graduation. (This actually might be true, see course enrollment data.)
8. Make sure that the content and grading be standardized from section to section of a particular liberal education class. (In the on-going category by category assessment, the committee members are monitoring the consistency among sections of the same class.)
9. Students would like enthusiastic engaging faculty teaching these classes. When a student is ‘forced’ to take a class from a category in which he/she has no interest, a dull boring professor only makes it worse. (I don’t think we can do much about this other than emphasize that our best faculty should be teaching LE classes.)
10. The general attitude of the students is that they are here simply to study their major field and they want a degree that will prepare them for their chosen profession. (Reducing the LE requirements to satisfy this point of view on the part of the students would radically change the concept and mission of UMD. If the administration wants to be customer driven, then a change is in order. But if the administration is committed to a well-rounded education, which some students decry and some applaud, then we need to make sure the system is in place to satisfy that mission.)

The following is a list of concerns raised by the individual focus groups:

**Comp 3100: Language and Literature:**

1. LE classes are often limited due to availability
2. Some faculty teach to majors. This is especially true of faculty in the science classes. This results in a threat (whether perceived or not) to their GPA.
3. Many classes are redundant with respect to speaking and writing. (This was the only group that focussed on this issue.)
4. They wanted some LE classes to be community-service related.
5. Take an integrated curricula/interdisciplinary approach to courses, for example, draw from the humanities in teaching science classes.
6. Tailor LE classes to their major.

Comp 3121: Business and Organization

1. Many LE class times and space availability conflict with the courses required in their majors.
2. They would like to see a class on library/resource use added to the program.
3. Create a positive change and tailor the LE classes to better suit the students’ needs.
4. Most felt that LE requirements were essential opportunities for growth and personal development. They expand one's horizons.

Comp 3130: Engineering

1. Because many of the engineering students transfer to the TC to finish programs, they were concerned about the difficulty in transferring their LE credits. Because they cannot take all their LE classes in the first two years, they cannot use the MN transfer curriculum.
2. Bring technology into LE classes. Be interdisciplinary.
3. Combine LE categories and loosen the * and ** requirements.

Comp 3140: Human Services

1. This group was generally more satisfied with LE requirements than any other group. (This might be due to the fact that many of the majors in CHESP require 6 to 8 classes from the LE program. Thus, LE is part of their major.)
2. Instructors often fail to “bring course work down to their level” and “teach to the Majors of that discipline”. This served to bring down their GPA’s.
3. They felt that the writing classes lacked rigor.
4. Overall, these students felt that their focus group was valuable and hoped that they would be heard and changes would be made.

Comp 3150: Science

1. These students also complained that “LE courses served no purpose except to torture you and to bring down your GPA”. They were probably the least happy with LE classes.
2. They resented having to pay for classes not relevant to their major.
3. They wanted to have real-life experiences count for credit.
4. Combine technology with other classes, for example, create a music/computer class.

**Comp 3160: Social Sciences**

1. These students were also pretty satisfied with the LE program. They said that LE classes serve to create a balance in education and provide opportunity for undecided majors and minors. Many felt there was legitimate value in LE coursework, and that LE classes are important in their transition from university to career.
2. Reduce the number of categories and which would allow for greater choices and flexibility in their scheduling.
3. Build diversity into many LE classes.
4. Make opportunities for service work in the LE program.

**Preliminary Investigation**

Because so many students thought that LE delayed their graduation rates, Steve Hedman had enrollments in LE classes be tallied for the past three semesters. These tables have also been attached. There do appear to be some roadblocks in some of the categories.

Cat. II. Four classes account for 78% of the enrollment and these four classes average 100.9% capacity. There are no more spaces.

Cat. III. Six classes account for 76% of enrollment. These 6 classes average 96% capacity.

Cat IV. Five classes account for 79% of the enrollment and these average 97.5%.

Cat V. Three classes account for 75% of enrollment and these average 71% capacity.

Cat. VI. Five classes account for 76% of enrollment and these average 96.6% capacity.

Cat. VII. Nine classes account for 75% of enrollment and these average 97.3% capacity.

Cat. VII. Thirteen classes account for 75% of enrollment and these average 86% capacity.

Cat. IX. Eleven classes account for 75% of enrollment and these average 96% capacity.

Cat. X. Nine classes account for 75% of enrollment and these average 103% capacity.

Of these 65 classes, 11 offer CD and 12 offer IP. Categories 2, 4, and 5 do appear to have limitations in the number of classes offered.

In an effort to understand what LE classes students take, the LE classes required by each major were also compiled. It is obvious from this compilation (see attachment)
that science students take many classes from categories 2,3,4 and 5 in their majors, but not in any other category. Students from Fine Arts have no requirements for LE classes other than those in categories 9 and 10. However, students in majors from CEHSP have to take lots of liberal education classes across all categories. Perhaps this is why this group is most happy with liberal education.

Recommendations

At this stage in our on-going evaluation of the LE program, we would like to make these recommendations:

1. Separate out the word-processing component of Freshman Comp and make it optional.
2. Expand the CD/IP designation to study abroad programs, internships, and other formal participation programs, and to courses outside the Liberal Education Program. This would increase the CD/IP choices without increasing the number of courses on the Liberal Education list.
3. There is a need for improved advisement for Liberal Education. Faculty advisors should be trained and updated on our Liberal Education Program. Students need good, accurate advisement in their tenure as students at UMD.
4. Encourage science departments to increase their liberal education holdings.
5. If faculty teach LE classes, they should explain to the students how these classes meet the spirit of Liberal Education.
6. Share this information with your units so that a worthwhile discussion may ensue.