

The General Education System Evaluated

Zach Beier

EVOKE

About the Ethnographer

Through my initial observations, interviews, and analyses I have become more aware of my own place in the university setting as well as my own biases. Having being raised around the ISU campus I already had notions of what the university was and offered. I have always seen the university as a place of education and a place of employment. Not surprising I find myself going to ISU as well as working on the campus in the advisement center. I am not only aware of the purpose of a university but also of the realities that occupy this cultural space. Through my own experience, and that of others, I have become aware of what students want from a university and the way many operate at ISU. Working at the academic advisement center has placed me in the position where I deal, on a regular basis, with the progress of students through the university system. This job not only deals with academics but also all the other issues that affect a student's life while at ISU. I feel it provides a true perspective into the population that a university caters to. My topic interest, General Education, is in large part affected by my position at the university. It gets at the heart of what a university is offering students as well as what students want. I know I am biased in the sense that I already have prior experiences and insight into the General Education system. I can only become aware of these preconceptions and work to reduce their effect when I am pursuing information. I plan on using my position as a peer advisor to my advantage though. I feel interviewing other student advisors and professional advisors provides me with beneficial information from sources that act as medians between the university and students. I just need to make sure these interviews are done in such a way that my role in our shared environment does not effect the information. Another issue I need to be aware of is the actual fieldwork in my study. I do not believe that observations will be as beneficial as interviews with students and employees at ISU. Thus, I need to construct a methodology that is more reliant on interviews while still taking into account the natural surrounding. We shall see.

I am a senior anthropology major at Illinois State University. I am interested in many topics within the field of anthropology but primarily am interested in archaeology with an emphasis on behavior studies. I have spent the last two field seasons in Ireland and Arizona and hope to further articulate my interests in the relationship between material culture and society. Also, I am employed by the ISU University College as an Academic Peer Advisor, and work directly with students in planning their course schedules. Working within the academic system at ISU has been a beneficial as well as an interesting experience. I am enthusiastic about the EOTU project and hope to develop a project that will add to the base of knowledge already gathered. I truly believe that university life is a unique community within any society and hope to find myself in close proximity to this subculture in the future. Other interests of mine include turntables, record collecting, hip hop, badminton and my cat Mr. Fish.

EXPLORE

Question

What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?

My project explores many aspects of the General Education system and includes a number of questions. Ultimately, through my research I have aimed to describe the relationship between university constituents (students, faculty, administrators) and a

broad base university curriculum, such as General Education. I narrowed my question down and focused on the recently cancelled course, Foundations of Inquiry (FOI), which was designed as the introduction for freshmen to the ISU General Education program. This concentration is intended to describe this curriculum revision through a number of different narratives as well as the significance of this cancellation to the General Education program. My base question is what happened to FOI and what can be said about the ISU General Education program?

After more thought, both my own and advice from others, my questions need to be more focused on the student perspective at ISU. Seeing as though this is the population that makes up the majority of the university community I feel this is a step in the right direction. Basically, my new questions revolve around the student perspective and include: "What are student's opinions of Gen. Ed.?" "What are students expecting out of the General Education Program?"

I also want to include the perspective of the University because this effects the experience of students directly. "What is the University expecting from General Education?"

Right now I think these questions ground my topic and allow me to work in the environment I am associated with at the University in hopes of getting some interesting information.

Some of my initial questions include the following, but I'm sure these will be revised as my research takes a more mature form. How does the reality of a university General Education compare to the reality of the modern workplace? What delusions may administrators have about the worth of General Education and how does this effect students perceptions about life after university? Is general education training for future position in the larger U.S. community? Why are we tested on topics that we may never use in the future? I hope these questions will bring me closer to realizing whether or not univeristy expectations are true to life.

Plan

How will you go about answering your inquiry?

Over the course of a week I have put some thought into my project and realize I need a stricter focus. My goal is still to analyze the role of General Education, but instead of attempting to study this large topic as a whole I am going to narrow in my sights on the now absent Foundations of Inquiry (FOI). This class was designed as the introduction to ISU's General Education and accompanied this large batch of required classes with the specific goal of providing a single shared experience for all students that emphasized the necessity for critical thinking at the university. I consider this course as what the university envisioned as a key to success in a general education curriculum. What happened to FOI? Last year it was decided, to the pleasure of students and professors alike, that FOI was being thrown out. No more students would be required to take it and no more professors would be required to teach it. With FOI gone alot of the grumbling about mandatory classes that don't provide much has dissipated. Did FOI fail its purpose? Seems like it. Why was FOI not accepted by students and teachers? Was it a conflict between an ideal philosophy of education and practicality? To answer these questions I will be interviewing a large amount of the peer advisors I work with as well as some professional advisors. I will also interview some of the individuals who were involved in the creation and organization of this component of Gen. ED., and also some juniors and seniors who took this class. This revision to my plan will not only narrow my specific focus, but also allow me to maintain my initial intent of analyzing General Education and the philosophical conflict between university and student intentions. Lets see how this works. BAM!

With more thought plans change. That's the usual way of things. Right now, I am going to leave out some of my previous research methods in order to focus my project more on the student perspective. Seeing as I am a peer advisor I am going to place most of my attention on contacting my fellow advisors and see if I can observe some of their interactions with students, especially when dealing with Gen. Ed., and also interview some select individuals. From this source I hope to get impressions of Gen. Ed from new students as well as those who are near completing their education.

I am also enrolled in two Gen. Ed classes right now and am a UTA in another. I have already begun observing the class dynamic in these courses and will continue doing so. I am hoping the mood and behaviors in these classes will differ from other classes that are directly related to ones major.

I am planning on collecting more research on ISU's Gen. ED. program. I want to analyze these documents in order to reveal the expectations of Gen Ed. from the institution that organizes these necessary courses. I also may find some inconsistencies or loopholes within these statements. Going to the Career Center at ISU would also not be a bad idea, seeing as though this is an ISU based service that connects University students with jobs after school. I want to question these individuals on the perceived benefits of a General Education.

As of now, my plan is pretty much the same as I described it last. I thought I would be able to go to the Career Fair on campus to get some info from prospective employers about their expectations of applicants, but I missed the boat on that one. Instead, I am planning on going to the Career Center on campus and inquire with them and I may also go to some area businesses, such as State Farm, and get some info straight from the source. Other than that my plan is a go.

My tentative plan thus far is to use the experience I have gained working as a Peer Advisor and also as a university student to my advantage. I plan on interviewing students that are experiencing ISU general education. To avoid a biased and possibly unethical collection of individuals I will stray away from interviewing student that I directly advise in the advisement center. My main purpose in these interviews is to get a sense of individual feelings to General Education and determine if any pattern exists. Other interviews that I am currently contemplating involve discussions with seniors and graduates already experiencing the pressure between university and professional life and hopefully some ISU curriculum coordinators and faculty members.

I also would like to observe a few Gen. Ed classes, besides my own, in action and to document the dynamics of the classroom. Hopefully, this will bring out the interest or disinterest within these Gen. Ed classes. Apart from these forms of observation and interviews I will continue researching the system of general education and its place in a university curriculum. Lets see how this works.

OBSERVE

What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?

In all, my project consisted of nine interviews conducted in a semi-formal style. I recorded some of these but am not including these transcribed interviews for the sake of anonymity. For the most part, I relied on these interviews in combination with personal experience and information gathered through research. All of this information can be found in my final report attached in the Discuss section.

Today was busy with interviews and tomorrow will be much the same. I am in the process of transcribing all of them but wanted to hammer out a few thoughts. My first

interview of the day was a student from the new freshman course LinC. As a peer advisor I participated in the co-teaching of one section for an 8 week duration, and this student was one of around 20 in this class. I sent out a mass email to all the students and interviews were arranged based on response. LinC is voluntary course designed to introduce freshmen to the ISU campus and, as my interviewee put it, "Get plugged in." The course material deals with many topics such as time management, course catalog training, community service, and health issues. The interviewee described the course not in the sense of the course work, but its social opportunities. She indicated that she is in Gen. Ed. classes with many of her LinC classmates and she can rely on these individuals to answer questions concerning class assignments and other school related issues. This type of relationship is very beneficial in keeping up with the pace and often chaos of freshmen year. When asked the benefit of the course she said, "I have friends." Positive review. I hope to interview a few more former LinC students. My next interview was with the Director of Gen. Ed. He answered my questions and was helpful in describing the manner in which FOI related to the rest of the Gen. Ed. program, but also how it became irrelevant. Both financial and organizing issues were cited as the causes for the cancellation. He also explained how the course became too abstract and not ideal for incoming freshman. This description was very much like what I had heard from others as well as our university newspaper. This interview was also helpful in comparing the fundamental differences between a European education and an American. This is essentially a conflict between the practical arts and liberal arts education programs distinct in each areas. What do ISU students want? My last interview was with a former professor of FOI. This perspective was helpful in illustrating the inherent difficulties of FOI from the teaching point of view. He stated that he thought the general idea behind FOI was well intended but the realities of the course amounted to numerous issues. He revealed the conflict of the way to run the course, whether it should be standardized or open to teacher preference, and financial issues with arranging faculty direction. Overall, busy day, and I now have a range of perspectives to work with.

The last week or so has been filled with interview planning. Currently, I have scheduled 3 interviews for this week and intend on adding a few more to this list. This week I will be interviewing the former coordinator of General Education, who was also in charge of FOI when it was operating. I will also interview the current Director of General Education as well as the coordinator of the new freshmen core course LinC (Learning in Communities). All these interviews will be brief and semi-formal. I am trying to cover all my bases so to speak and I am trying to create questions that will emphasize the role each interviewee plays in the General Education process. After I have interviewed these administrators I am hoping to interview a few professors of the old FOI course as well as upper class students who experienced the class. Based on my last interview experience people have a lot to say about General Education but often express contradictory messages. It seems General Education exists in a balance of pros and cons and I hope to analyse this balancing act to understand the role of ISU's Gen. Ed program and where it is headed in the future.

"Visual Data"--I compiled a number of visual materials that are representative of my topic. The first one is an ISU course catalog and can be considered as an academic artifact. This visual material should be possessed by all students on campus and an understanding of its format is a necessary skill. I use this catalog everyday at the Academic Advisement Center, and run into students everyday that are often overwhelmed by its contained material. The catalog represents a guide that assists students on their path to a successful graduation, but is also a symbol of the education provided at ISU. The 05/06 catalog is the first catalog in around 7 years that no longer contains the description for FOI since this course has been erased from the curriculum. My other forms of visual evidence are pictures. The pictures were taken on my phone and

are not the best quality, but I have found that using a phone to capture images is a lot less conspicuous, enabling me to take pictures freely. All of the pictures provide a visual setting for my topic. The first, rather blurred picture, is shot from the back of a lecture hall in a typical general education course. At first glance the picture is not very interesting, but in terms of my topic, it reveals the classroom environment found in most Gen. Ed. courses. The next picture was taken the same day, in the same classroom, but from a different angle. The picture reveals two people taking a snooze in the back of the lecture hall and other students seemingly paying attention. This image represents the common divide in most Gen. Ed. classrooms of those who pay attention and those who take advantage of the class to get some rest in. When analyzed even more the picture represents the conflict of educational philosophies held by students. There are those students who do not understand or desire the motive of learning topics outside the major field of interest, and other students who actively participate and enjoy the opportunity to discover new topics that may have nothing to do with their major. I believe that FOI (foundations of Inquiry) ran into this same problem, just on a grander scale. Students and teachers alike were confused and annoyed by the broad and often irrelevant subject matter and problems arose when attempting to teach and learn from the class.

Files:

[10-27-05_1201.jpg](#) (Sun 10/30/2005 18:27)

[10-27-05_1132.jpg](#) (Sun 10/30/2005 18:27)

What is the ISU community? Is this community of one or many? Whose is it? What campus places is this community brought to life? When answered, these questions define the direction my EOTU study. First of all, the ISU community is first and foremost built on a foundation of education. The university is a house of education, or more appropriately, a store selling education. Students come to ISU to learn. Professors come to teach. Administrators come to organize and standardize. This generalized picture brings out the main communities that exist within the ISU structure, and how they are related. It is true that ISU students come to Normal, Illinois to learn. This is the intention on the surface, but other student intentions cannot be overlooked. More importantly, students come to ISU to get a diploma with the hopes of getting a job and for the most part, finding a place in the middle class. ISU caters to this student intention by educating a thriving mass of Education and Business majors. Where does General Education fit into this apparent truth? University motives for General Education are to create well-rounded students. All students go through this process, whether or not they have occupational intents or more liberal aims. The conflict between the majority of students' intentions and those of the university's is never out right in the open. Extending past the personal trials individuals face with general education this conflict can be tracked to more personally accessible places on campus. It exists in the close conversations of professors, students, and administrators. I feel that upon closer examination this conflict is apparent in classrooms and in the advisement center. Based on observations and interviews in both spaces I hope to get a better understanding of the general education experience as well as the possible disconnect between the university and its primary constituents; the students.

I conducted my first batch of interviews this week. In all, I interviewed two individuals that work in the Academic Advisement Center. These interviews were basic in nature but still provided an adequate amount of information. I specifically chose to interview these two people because I believe they have a unique perspective into university life. Both are peer advisors while also filling the role as students on campus. I conducted my interviews using a semi-structured format. I previously had prepared a round of questions that I wanted to use as my foundation, but did not limit dialog based on this structure. Conversation was more free flowing, allowing both interviewee and myself to feel

comfortable with one another. I believe this will be the interviewing technique I will use in the future as it creates an environment accessible to all opinions. The first interviewee was a sophomore Elementary Education major, age 20. This person stated that they had known what they wanted to be since high school and applied to a number of schools catering to this education track. Choosing ISU this individual entered university with the idea of pursuing degree right away. This individual stated that at first they didn't know why they had to take so many Gen. Ed classes. They stated that they were "overwhelmed" by the structure of Gen. Ed requirements and thought they would never get to major classes. When asked if Gen. Ed sidetracked students this individual did not think so. Upon further investigation this individual thought Gen. Ed provided more insight into their education major and they used these required courses as exploratory courses. When asked about the opinions of the students this individual advises they said that most freshmen ask, "Why do I have to take so many Gen. Ed. classes?" The interviewee expressed the opinion of many students that if it weren't for Gen. Ed. they could be out of college in 2 years, thus entering the work place. I thought this was an interesting point. It seems that this individual now supports the University motive of creating well-rounded students even though they did provide insight into other opposing viewpoints. The next interviewee had a similar perspective as the first person interviewed. This individual was in their early twenties and entered ISU in order to pursue Theater and Art, which they are about to graduate with a double major in both. The interviewee made it clear that being at ISU was their plan B after being rejected at U of I. This interviewee is slightly different than the first in terms of their goals at ISU. While interviewee 1 had a set plan of what they wanted after college, interviewee 2 stated that their goal in attending ISU was to pursue an interest in Art but also to satisfy their interest in learning from a broad range of topics. Here we see the difference between an occupational major such as Education versus a more liberal focus such as Art/Theater. I thought it was interesting that interviewee 2 stated that if they wanted to study nothing but Art they would have went to a conservatory but instead they entered ISU to get a more general education. This individual stated that they love Gen. Ed as it provides students with a sampling of knowledge. They went on to say that Gen Ed. helps in creating a foundation that can be useful in the present job market where individuals change jobs around 3 or more times during their life. This interviewee was aware though of the downsides of the Gen. Ed system. They said that this education doesn't always work with students who don't see the worth of it and who often do not know how to achieve in a topic that is not related to their major and that they subsequently aren't interested in. They went on to say that the Gen. Ed system has noble goals that are not always seen by students. I feel that both of these individuals expressed the upsides and downsides of General Education in a way that highlights the educational dilemma of the university. Do we provide students with a well-rounded education or give the majority what they want; specific courses geared towards completion of their major?

Thus far I have been able to do some initial observations in a number of contexts. Although not in any completed form I have observed General Education related exchanges in the Academic Advisement Center as well as in a number of classrooms. Most of my information is coming from the Academic Advisement Center, but observing students in a Gen. Ed. classroom has revealed different attitudes towards this mandatory system. Spending considerable time during the week at the Advisement Center is a definite benefit for my project. Without making my intentions known to students I have observed a number of appointments and have collected some basic info. I have notified my coworkers of my interest in observing appointments in order to reveal student opinions of General Education, but for the most part these individuals are unaware when I am observing. Most of the appointments I have observed have been with freshman and sophomores. During these appointments advisors help students formulate their schedule for next semester, as well as answer any questions. Advisors have a way of promoting the

university's intentions with General Education. General Education is presented to students as a "well rounded education," and a necessary step in order to graduate from ISU. I did not observe any blatant criticisms of Gen. Ed by students in this context, which is probably due to the fact that they are in the advisement center and not engaged in casual conversation with peers, but I did observe a lot of student misunderstanding about General Education. Most of this confusion had to do with Gen. Ed. requirements and scheduling. Students expressed some frustration about the content of some Gen. Ed. courses, and this may have to do with lack of personal interest to course material. I am hoping to observe some more in the Advisement Center as well as begin some personal interviews with students and university officials.

DISCUSS

Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data

I have provided my report in entry form as well as attached in Word format. Use it for your benefit and if you have any questions feel free to email me @ zjbeier@ilstu.edu.

I. Intro

For my contribution to the University of Illinois at Urbana project, The Ethnography of the University (EOTU), I addressed a topic that I am personally connected to, but that is also central to understanding a major role of universities—offering a general education. Academically speaking, the purpose of a university is to educate as well as to train students for their future. In terms of my own connection to this topic, both of my parents are professors and I have lived near college campuses for all my life. More importantly, for the last two years, I have been employed as an Academic Peer Advisor in the Illinois State University's Academic Advisement Center. Through this job, I have not only worked alongside students, by assisting them in their choices of classes and majors, but I have also supported them in a classroom setting as a Peer Leader in the new freshmen introductory course, LinC (learning in communities). This experience has made me aware of many diverse narratives about the education universities should provide and what students want from their college experience. University narratives and students' opinions seem to conflict; my project considers this situation.

From the beginning of this project, my goal was to analyze the role of General Education, which comprises a large portion of university courses taught. Illinois State's current General Education program was formed in 1998 and replaced the older University Studies program. University Studies consisted of a large assortment of courses that were divided into eight categories from which students were free to choose. These classes existed in loose association to one another, creating a type of open menu. The creation of ISU's General Education program responded to a national trend in favor of a more integrated academic experience with definable goals (Healy 1999, Latzer 2004, Brint, Riddle, Turk-Biicakci, Levy 2005). Coming at a time when universities nationwide were reconfiguring their general liberal-arts programs, ISU's General Education program reflects a pattern in which course topics are narrowed down in order to allow students a sampling of unfamiliar disciplines. According to ISU university documents, the purpose of General Education is to encourage students to pursue other courses of study besides their major (IBHE) and to prepare students for "the expectations that the world will place on you once you finish school" (ISU General Education Program).

This study focuses on a single course, Foundations of Inquiry (FOI). This class was designed as the introduction to ISU's General Education program and was considered to be the "cornerstone" of this program. The specific goal of FOI was to provide a single shared experience for all freshmen students that emphasized the necessity for critical thinking at the university. The university envisioned this course as a key to success in a general education curriculum. However, FOI failed and was cancelled last year, making

this semester a good moment to capture this experience. Also, going on right now is the implementation of a new pilot project called LinC (learning in communities). This course replaces FOI as the primary model for introducing freshmen to the university and academic life, but is done so on a volunteer basis. Without FOI, a casual observer might ask what state is the General Education program left in?

What exactly happened with FOI and what does this have to say about the General Education program? I examine General Education's setbacks as well as successes from a variety of perspectives. In particular, I examine the creation and subsequent deletion of the FOI program and recent alternative efforts to introduce freshmen to college life.

II. Methods

In order to conduct this study I utilized a variety of ethnographic methods. Personal experience was one of my most useful tools because from the outset I understood where I should look to gather more information on my topic. Other methods used included participant-observation, documentary research, and interviews. For the most part, I used observation only in the initial steps of my study. During my daily schedule I recorded notes concerning student and instructor behavior in a General Education course I was enrolled in and one for which I was an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant. These observations, along with ones made in the advisement office I work in, supported my previous impressions that students often do not enjoy General Education classes and do not understand the function of these courses in a university education.

I reviewed university documents concerning General Education and FOI as well as campus publications, such as the ISU newspaper, *The Daily Vidette*. I compared this information to national trends in university education from the early 20th Century to the present. I also used Rebecca Nathan's ethnography, *My Freshmen Year* (2005), to compare and contrast the educational setting at ISU to another university.

Most of the data I used in this study comes from semi-structured interviews with nine people who were involved with General Education and FOI in different ways. I interviewed the current General Education coordinator, the coordinator of the new freshmen introductory class LinC, two professors who were involved in the planning and teaching of FOI, a freshman enrolled in LinC, and four Peer Advisors. Peer Advisors are a group of employed student workers who are generally academically successful and assist other students in forming their academic schedules as well as choosing a major. They have interesting insights from both a student and administrative point of view. I recorded most of these interviews.

III. Data

Foundations of Inquiry: A cornerstone?

FOI was conceived in 1992 and became active in 1998. This course was described as the cornerstone to the General Education program because faculty was to introduce critical thinking skills and university expectations. This was hailed as the appropriate step to prepare students for the work that lay ahead of them. During my interviews I asked a number of informants what was FOI and I received varying responses. When I asked the current coordinator of General Education this question his response was drawn out, as if he were mulling over the many possibilities in his head. He responded by saying, "FOI...was many things...um, and what it was will depend on who you talk to and when you talk to them." He indicated that the course was similar to the freshmen seminar model that is apparent on other US campuses (Nathan 2005). He continued by describing the purpose of teaching freshmen inquiry at the university level, what he referred to as "epistemology to freshmen." He finished this question by stating, "developmentally, this was a risky proposition." From the student perspective, FOI was a little different. One Peer Advisor I interviewed thought FOI was similar to a "high school setting" in which conversation was encouraged and argumentation was the main topic accompanied by the teacher's input. Teacher input was a common theme in a conversation I had with a former

professor of FOI. FOI organized faculty from a variety of fields within ISU who were supposed to be teaching similar goals. The professor I interviewed indicated that during the progression of FOI two opposing mindsets were formed. One side urged the teaching of a “common experience” in FOI while the other side wanted to teach critical thinking with faculty freedom. This opposition often was expressed during summer workshops, which the professor referred to as a type of “FOI boot camp.” This division between faculty-administrators contributed to a blurring of course objectives, which was felt by students. Two Peer Advisors echoed the same sentiment that there was little connection between FOI to other General Education courses. As the supposed cornerstone to the general education curriculum FOI continued for 7 years and at its highpoint, in 2002, had 115 sections (Vidette 2002). During FOI’s operation, ISU’s General Education program was one of 12 universities nationwide involved in a project aimed at designing a model for freshmen education (Vidette 2003). This occurred two years before its cancellation. Was FOI a cornerstone? As a former professor explained, in the beginning FOI was “a metaphor of we are building a building here.” What happened?

What the hell went wrong with FOI?

The FOI project failed after only 7 years for a variety of reasons. This multi-causal conclusion was voiced in a number of written sources as well as by interviewees. The financial impracticality of FOI was a main reason (Vidette). FOI cost the university millions in staffing and organizing. All 3 individuals interviewed who were involved in the planning and teaching of FOI repeated this same line of reasoning. One interviewee stated that the money needed to continue FOI was equivalent to the hiring of 50 new faculty.

Another reason for the cancellation of FOI was the course’s inherent design flaw. The course began as serving the transition function from high school to college, but then in its later stages evolved into instruction on critical thinking. It appears that the specific purpose of this course was written in sand and was often left to the discretion of the specific instructor. One interviewee described summer planning sessions for this course as not only expensive for the university but also a situation similar to a “horse being designed by a committee; you get a giraffe that’s not good at one thing.”

I believe there exists a fundamental reason why this course was erased from the General Education core curriculum, and this was the lack of understanding by both instructors and students, which resulted in an overall dissatisfaction with the program. Teachers didn’t want to teach the class and students didn’t like the idea of a mandated course without much practical benefit. This confusion turned both parties off the idea of this type of introduction. One interviewee concluded that, “FOI was a great idea as an idea,” but described the reality of the situation as “the blind leading the blind.” Very abstract course goals left teachers wondering how to teach inquiry at the university level to incoming freshmen, and students questioning the use of such an introductory course in their college development. It seems that in terms of practice FOI was not the ideal introduction to ISU’s General Education program and apparently not a cornerstone providing much in the way of support.

So how about the good news?

Can we talk about successes in what appears to be a rather grim academic situation? This depends on which perspective the observer is looking from. With FOI gone and along with it the metaphor of a cornerstone to the General Education program, is this structure still standing? Yes. From the perspective of the coordinator of General Education this has a lot to do with the program revisions that began with the switch from University Studies and continue even after the cancellation of FOI. As indicated by the General Education Coordinator, “no one course is responsible for any one program objective.” The recent transition from FOI has resulted in the dispersal of the useful portions of the course, such as critical thinking, to more practical course applications, like in introductory English and

Communication classes.

This reliance on practicality to transmit university objectives is the key to connecting students to ISU's General Education program. The abstract nature of FOI did not appeal to the students currently entering ISU. From the student perspective, all of the five ISU students I interviewed knew the major they wanted to when they entered college, or were quick to find one. While this is not to say that all students entering ISU know what "they want to be when they grow up," the general feeling I received from my research indicates a more project-minded student. What I mean when I refer to the project-minded student is an individual who is aware of their educational goals and wants to shape this education in accordance with the development of career skills necessary after college. This characteristic was expressed in a rather surprising way that made me rethink some of the conceptions I had before investigating this topic. Previously, my opinion was that, for the most part, the General Education program was not appreciated and understood by the student population. My observations of students sleeping in large auditoriums and complaints during academic planning appointments in the Peer Advisor office formed my conception of the General Education program. But this notion of resistance was challenged after completing two interviews with Peer Advisors. Both of these individuals indicated that they and other students stood to benefit from a general education. This was not because they were becoming well-rounded individuals, a common benefit expressed by many liberal-arts programs, but because as one interviewee stated, "Gen Ed. helps in creating a foundation that can be useful in the present job market where individuals change jobs around 3 or more times during their life." It appears that students desire a pragmatic link to their learning in order for them to achieve their educational and career goals, and encouraging the development of this broad source of knowledge can be considered a success for ISU's General Education program.

What appears to be another potential success to the General Education program is the formulation of a new introductory course targeted at freshmen. LinC caters to incoming students that desire instruction in transitioning from high school to college. This is a step offered by ISU to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in their undergraduate studies. Some of these tools include time-management skills, participation in campus organizations, academic planning, and interaction with their fellow peers and individuals familiar with the university.

While a mandatory introductory class like FOI did not work for a variety of reasons, it is argued that a class such as LinC has a better chance based on an awareness of the failings of FOI. When I interviewed the coordinator of this new course, I asked whether LinC was created in response to the cancellation of FOI. She responded by a yes and a no answer. It is true that LinC is a similar model to FOI, with its concentration on freshmen experience, but the course objectives and the volunteer nature of the class are very different. Unlike FOI, LinC is not designed similar to a freshmen seminar and has objectives that can be measured. Introducing the practical social applications on a campus is the main focus of LinC. Students get to know one another in a classroom setting, and these students are present in their other General Education classes as well. According to the LinC student I interviewed this was the most beneficial feature of the class, and she indicated that the primary benefit to her was that she now has friends. She stated that her fellow LinC classmates are individuals she is able to call upon when in academic need. This type of relationship, though not intimately personal, appears to be very useful during a freshmen's first year experience. The practical minded student is able to create functional relationships that ease transition into the college workload. I believe this is a very proactive step by ISU to provide an introductory course that assists students in the completion of their intended objectives.

IV. Relevance: Why should we care?

I believe this project reveals a number of issues that deal with academics at a university. Specifically, this study describes the rise and fall of a course intended to introduce the

university's objectives of prescribing a general education. In the process of explaining why a course, such as FOI, fails this study outlines the developmental steps ISU has taken to relate to the ever-changing student body. More importantly, I believe it describes the trend of modern public universities catering to students as consumers. With the decrease in government support, college institutions rely increasingly on their paying population, and must cater to student demands. Universities will continue relying on programs such as General Education to provide a foundation of knowledge beneficial throughout undergraduate studies and beyond. But developmentally, public universities are formulating strategies that are in line with the larger societal forces that are influencing incoming students, such as the high price for education and the competitive job market. This is the type of general education students are after and FOI was unable to relate to the practicality of students. Responding to this issue the university removed it.

V. Implications: What does it all mean?

My project results reveal the changing educational setting of one university, but I believe as a whole my analyses are relevant to other campuses across the United States. Unlike the specialized European model of higher education, which restricts many individuals from pursuing higher education, in the US, the goal is to afford the opportunity for as many people as possible to get a college education. This means college classrooms are filled with students of many different abilities and intended goals. Introductory classes, such as FOI and LinC are intended to greet incoming students and pass along the goals of the university. Unfortunately, a class such as FOI blurred objectives making these goals immeasurable. The reaction to this abstraction was a large amount of dissatisfaction by students and teachers. Rebecca Nathan recorded a similar situation during her freshmen experience (2005). She found that the freshmen seminar model is out of sync with the current focus of students, which in turn shapes the objectives of universities. The cancellation of FOI was more than a widespread disapproval rating. The significance of its removal is a national trend toward making practicality an issue shaping course development. It seems ISU, as well as other universities nationwide, are developing educational programs that have concrete measurable objectives, which is in line with the practical demands of students. These changes are all wrapped into the main goal of both universities and students, to prepare and be prepared for the realities after college. I believe this is evidence of a combining of educational narratives.

Work in Progress...

In order to provide more helpful insights for university curriculum planning this project requires even more research. If interviews were expanded and more observations of other first year courses, such as LinC, were undertaken a better picture could be provided. The best method to coordinate university development is a difficult topic to investigate due to the number of variables involved, such as time and funding. If this study were to be expanded to other campuses the ability to pinpoint appropriate programs to assist the success of students and completion of university objectives would be greatly increased.

My up-to-date Project Report is the Revised version.

Files:

[EOTU Project Report.doc](#) (Sun 11/27/2005 22:41)

[EOTU Project ReportREVISED.doc](#) (Thu 12/01/2005 11:55)

REFLECT

Link

Connect with other resources and materials.

"Linking Up"--Various ISU sources provide material pertinent to FOI and Gen. Ed. The information I gathered is a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data that establishes the setting in which my topic resides in. Describing the university's academic setting is a necessary step in determining the relation of my topic to the institution that directly controls it. My first batch of source material is derived from the ISU newspaper "The Vidette." After a quick archive search I located a number of relateable links. I accumulated a number of interviews from administrators, faculty and students that furthered my knowledge of opinions to FOI, and in some cases General Education. Many of these articles dealt with the erasure of FOI from the Gen. Ed program, but some date to periods of its operation. FOI ran for 7 years and in 2002 had 115 sections. Described as the "cornerstone of the general education program" that was "created to encourage critical thinking and help with the transformation from high school into college." This backbone of general education came to an end in the beginning of 2005, but why? One 2001 article states "the quality of incoming students at ISU has gone up in the last seven years... The university has raised its academic standards, the average ACT scores have increased and more students are choosing to come to ISU...The increase in retention rates has been attributed to the new general education program, the good work of the faculty and the help from advisors, among other things." At a time for improvement why change things? These articles illuminated the university's reasons for the canceling of FOI. Financial reasons seem to be the main motive. Cited as costing ISU millions, a period of university cut backs coincided with the progression of FOI. The necessity of FOI was also questioned quite often in these articles. Many students recounted negative experiences of the course, but there were also positive accounts. The FOI debate obviously carried on for a number of years until its bid farewell. Information about general education was also made apparent through the focus of FOI. ISU requires 45 gen ed hours while most colleges require 39 to 41, thus making it "very difficult for a number of programs and majors to get the major done and satisfy the [General education] classes in 124 hours." In a 2004 article General Education is described by the director as overall being successful. It seems ISU's general education system is one of 12 universities involved in a project aimed at designing a model for freshmen education (2003). There is much information highlighting the ups and downs of ISU general education and its "cornerstones," and also the opinions of the university population. The quantitative data that I found came from the ISU "FactBook" available on the homepage. I was able to find a number of forms of useful information that dates back to the middle 1970's. The headcount between 1976 and 2005 is represented by the range 19,039 (1977) to 22,241(1989). A bit of information I found interesting was the breakdown of diplomas granted by respective majors. Using 2005 as an example the College of Arts and Sciences graduated 1437 undergraduates, College of Business-878, College of Education-625, College of Applied Science and Technology-974, Fine Arts-204, Nursing-116, Other-40. Out of these colleges my numbers indicate that there are 17 majors offered by CAS, 4-COB, 2-COE, 7-CAST, 4-FA, and 1 for Nursing. I've got some numbers to crunch but I believe these figures demonstrate the high percentage of the graduating class coming from COB, COE, and Nursing, which occupy less than half of the majors offered. This information figures prominently into my investigation of the desired educational philosophy of students. What do you want to be when you grow up?

Files:

[Degrees by Major.xls](#) (Wed 10/26/2005 0:04)

[HistoricalEnrollDegree.xls](#) (Wed 10/26/2005 0:05)

Literature Review:

"From the Liberal to the Practical Arts in American Colleges and Universities: Organizational Analysis and Curricular Change." --- This is an article I found on the ISU Milner Library website under the education search engine. It deals with University curriculum changes, and specifically focuses on the shift from an Arts and Science education to a predominately practical or occupational education. The type of information in this article is important to my topic because it explains the large scale change in the education provided by Universities and provides an explanation to why many institutions are preparing students for careers after college rather learning "for its own sake." The article provides a wealth of information including statistics and will be helpful resource. The article also forms pertinent questions in my mind such as what type of university is ISU, "liberal arts" or "practical arts? What do students believe is the best mode of study? How do each method of thought effect the perception of students toward the university?

"Postion Paper On General Education Approved February 27, 2004, By The Faculty Advisory Council" <http://www.ibhe.state.il.us/Search/query.asp> ---This document is an official statement released by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and is available on their website. Although short, there is one particular statement that stands out as being a representative example of the opinion higher level administrators have of General Education. The statement describes the purpose of general education as encouraging students to pursue other courses of study besides their majors. Major courses do not count towards general education, thus students experience a diverse undergraduate education where different levels of thinking are necessary. I wonder if students feel that the promoted benefit is worth it?

These two sources help me articulate my understanding of ISU. It seems that ISU considers General Education to be a necessary component of undergraduate education. This school of thought, often considered to be a superior pursuit of knowledge, is meant to significantly add to the educational experience of undergraduate students. But is this emphasis on a diverse academic background what students enter univeristy for? Are students entering university in the pursuit of a career or knowledge? Stats of gradual trends in university curriculum suggest that universities are acknowledging this motive, and reducing emphasis on arts and science majors in exchange for practical majors. How does ISU fit into this picture?

Implications

Could your findings have broader implications beyond this inquiry?

This topic is interesting from an administrative point of view as well as a student. It sheds light on recent curriculum developments that enable a better understanding of the educational environment of a university, but also shows where ISU fits into the United States culture of education. With more work, projects similar to mine could reveal even more information about the relationship between students and a university general education and increase the pool of knowledge necessary when developing courses. ISU failed in their attempt to design a course that introduced their own General Education program. The significance of this failing reveals what strategies work, as well as the combining of narratives between the practical-minded student and the university. With more research, developmental agendas can be accurately streamlined with the goals of students in order to satisfy both parties involved, the university and its paying constituents.