Academic Challenge within General Education Courses:
The Effects of Academic Entitlement and Academic Self-Efficacy on Student Perception

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, a small, liberal arts college overhauled its course-based general education (gened) curriculum to an experienced-based curriculum. Initial focus groups identified student concerns in areas related to degree requirements, internal process, and course quality. A survey was developed to further investigate these issues and explore the issues of course difficulty, academic challenge, and academic entitlement within courses satisfying gened and preparatory major requirements.

BACKGROUND

Internal Study #1

Hypothetical academic plans were created to investigate the total credits required to complete the new general education (gened) curriculum. The findings suggest that, although, more gened credits were hypothetically completed within the students' majors, it was found that the new experience-based curriculum required students to complete more gened credits overall compared to its predecessor even when taking only multi-tagged courses. The study did not take into account student interest, prerequisites for courses, or course rotation, which all may have an effect on the time to degree.

Based on the findings from this research, it was recommended to examine the student perspective within the new gened curriculum by conducting focus groups with current students. The semi-structured focus groups will investigate issues relating to advising and registration, comprehension of the curriculum, and satisfaction with new gened.

Internal Study #2

Focus groups were held in early August with students entering the 2012 Fall Semester as either sophomores or juniors. Students provided their opinions about and experiences within the new gened. The following themes were observed based on student feedback from the focus group: (1) time to degree; (2) accuracy of information from advisors; (3) congruency between course content and the attached tags; (4) process for registering in gened courses, (5) level of academic challenge within courses satisfying both major and gened requirements. Results from this study guided the development of a survey to investigate these initial findings among the student population.

STUDY RATIONALE

Academic Challenge. The concept of academic challenge (AC) has been popularized by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and further debated in many areas of education. Payne, Kleine, Purcell, and Carter (2005) explored components of AC as perceived by faculty and students. Their findings suggest students appreciate academically challenging courses even though these courses tend to require additional effort and time beyond simply completing "busy work." Furthermore, they recommended that institutions develop an assessment instrument for AC that addresses student learning within each unique learning environment. Matsumura, Slater, and Crosson (2008) found that engaging in discussions which "assist students in interpreting or analyzing" (p. 299) course content as well as an atmosphere which promotes collaborative learning were related to the development of AC. Using this previous research on AC and theoretically related concepts, this study seeks to explore this concept further from the student perspective.

Academic Entitlement. In order for us to best understand AC from the student perspective, it is necessary that we include measures of individual student differences to help contextualize our findings. Researchers have discussed a shift in attitudes among the current college student population that resembles a sense of entitlement. This concept has been referred to as Academic Entitlement (AE) and has been defined as the tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without a sense of personal responsibility for achieving that success (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). This new construct has been increasingly gaining attention among researchers from various disciplines and has been described as a potentially serious threat to higher education. Studies have found that entitlement is associated with a number of maladaptive behaviors and socially unacceptable traits.

Academic Self-Efficacy. Academic Self-Efficacy (ASE) is a context specific form of self-efficacy and refers to students' confidence in their ability to carry out academic tasks such as preparing for exams and writing term papers. This construct is closely related to attributions, another form of cognitive appraisals that individuals make based on their self-efficacy beliefs when evaluating environmental demands as "threats" or "challenges." Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to perceive a situation as a challenge rather than a threat. Moreover, when situations are seen as a challenge, individuals tend to use more effective coping strategies and persist at the situation. A wealth of research has demonstrated the critical role ASE plays in predicting academic performance and retention.

Achievement Goal Orientation. It is also important to factor in students' goals for learning when considering their perceptions of AC. Learning goals affect students' motivation to learn, specifically in terms of their intrinsic motivation. Achievement Goal Orientation (AGO) is defined as an individual's set of beliefs that reflect the reasons why they approach and engage in academic tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Research has identified two primary academic goal orientations, including mastery orientation and performance orientation (Ames & Archer, 1988). Mastery orientation can be described as learning for the sake of learning and is thought to increase a student's intrinsic motivation. Conversely, performance orientation can be described as a student's focus on obtaining extrinsic rewards such as grades. Mastery oriented students pursue challenging tasks and endure when faced with difficult situations. On the other hand, performance oriented students avoid challenges and situations that would expose their incompetence, and prefer simple tasks where success is certain. When faced with challenges, performance oriented students exhibit withdrawal or avoidance behavior out of fear of failure.

Research Question	Hypothesis
1) Is there a relationship between AE and perceived AC?	AE will be negatively correlated with perceived AC.
2) Are there differential effects of perceived AC dependent on students' level of AE?	There will be no differential effects on AC as it relates to AE.
3) Is there a relationship between AE and ASE?	AE will negatively correlate with ASE.
4) Does AGO mediate the relationship between ASE and AC?	AGO will mediate the relationship between ASE and AC. Specifically, students with high ASE and IGO will perceive a higher level of AC than high EGO students.
5) Is there a relationship between AE and AGO (IGO and EGO)?	AE will positively correlate with EGO, while AE will negatively correlate with IGO.
6) Is there a relationship between ASE and AGO (IGO and EGO)?	There will be no relationship between ASE and AGO (IGO and EGO).

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for Perception of Academic Challenge and Academic Entitlement
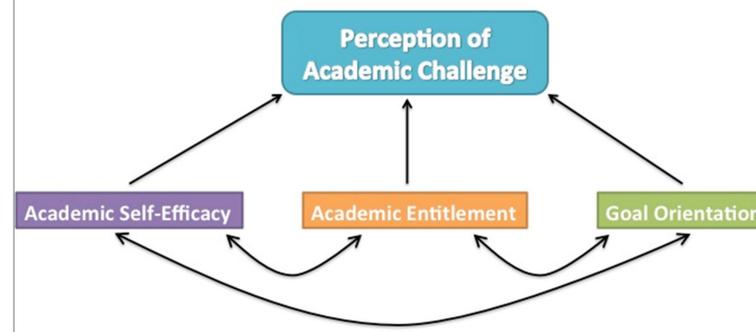
METHODS

This research will use a mixed-methods approach to investigate the student experience within the new gened curriculum. A survey instrument has been developed based on initial focus group findings Additional focus groups will be used to gain further insight from students directly, as well as to pilot the newly developed survey instrument.

Qualitative Approach. Focus groups will take place in freshmen courses with the cooperation of the faculty member instructing the course. Such courses include PHIL 101 (Critical Thinking) and COMMS 100 (Introduction to Communication). These courses are required for all students to complete which will allow for a diverse sample of students with different interests and intended majors. Focus groups will use a Grounded Theory approach for collecting qualitative data.

Quantitative Approach. The newly developed survey instrument will be distributed online via email to all students enrolled in at least one course with attached gened 'tags.' The online survey will be pre-populated with all of the courses students in the sample are currently enrolled in. If a student is enrolled in multiple courses that meet the inclusion criteria, one will be randomly selected by the survey software to use as a context for answering questions.

MEASURES

Academic Challenge. In recent focus groups, students indicated their expectations for academic challenge (AC) were not met in courses that satisfied their major requirements and offered gened experiences. Initial focus group feedback on AC were used in the creation of this new developed Academic Challenge Questionnaire (ACQ). First, students are asked to rate the level of importance of various aspects theoretically related to AC. Second, students are asked to rate the perceived level of AC in their current gened class using a scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 6 ("Far too much"). Additional measurements of effort and perceived course difficulty are also included in the newly developed survey instrument.

Academic Entitlement. The Academic Entitlement Questionnaire (AEQ; Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011) is an eight-item measure of academic entitlement. Participants will be asked to respond to the items using a scale of 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 ("Strongly Agree"). An example item includes "If I don't do well on a test, the professor should make tests easier or curve grades."

Academic Self-Efficacy. The Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES; Leach, Queriolo, DeVoe, & Chemers, 2003) is an eight-item measure of academic self-efficacy. The scale consists of eight statements about participants' confidence and perceived ability or competence in accomplishing academic tasks. Participants will be asked to respond to the items using a scale of 1 ("Definitely NOT true of me") to 7 ("Definitely true of me"). An example item includes "I am very capable of succeeding at the university."

Achievement Goal Orientation. The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991) was designed to measure students' motivational orientations and their use of different learning strategies. Two subscales of the MSLQ (*Intrinsic Goal Orientation* and *Extrinsic Goal* Orientation) are both four items long and are included in the newly developed survey instrument. Participants are asked to respond to the items using a scale of 1 ("Not at all true of me") to 7 ("Very true of me"). An example item from the *Intrinsic Goal Orientation* subscale includes "In a class like this, I prefer course material that really challenges me so I can learn new things" and an example item from the *Extrinsic Goal Orientation* subscale includes "the most important thing for me right now is improving my overall grade point average, so my main concern in this class is getting a good grade."

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