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What Students Say about at Grand Valley State University

PERSPECTIVES

WHAT ARE THE ODDS of changing the culture of teaching and learning at a regional comprehensive university with twenty-three thousand students? Through the Claiming a Liberal Education (CLE) initiative, a group of faculty and administrators at Grand Valley State University sought to achieve this ambitious goal within the context of the university's founding commitment to the principles of liberal education. Significantly, the CLE was a campuswide initiative that enjoyed broad institutional support. The faculty senate passed a formal resolution of support for the initiative, for example, and the university's Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center provided sup-

port through its fund-

ing and programming priorities. In addition to funding research and structured discussion of liberal education, the provost modified the orientation for new faculty and students to include a stronger focus on liberal education and, later, strengthened the advising system, a key means of helping students understand the university's liberal education values. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, by far the university's largest college, included a statement about liberal education in its position descriptions. CLE leaders reached out to physical plant, public safety, and secretarial staff.

The CLE initiative also involved efforts to reach out directly to students, beginning with their earliest consideration of Grand Valley. After conducting focus groups with faculty and students, the Office of Institutional Marketing changed its messages to emphasize liberal

education, rather than affordability and convenience. Even the university's tagline was changed. The Division of Student Affairs responded by modifying welcome week activities to give them a stronger academic focus, by organizing themed academic learning communities, and, given the emphasis on diversity in the university's definition of liberal education, by developing a diversity action plan. Most significantly, all student affairs programming now has learning goals that intentionally connect activities to the freshman course, Introduction to Liberal Education, and the number of sections was doubled to enable one-third of all freshmen to enroll in the course.

Focus group findings

The CLE initiative began in 2004 with a program of research that included a qualitative study of student perceptions of the learning climate at Grand Valley. Then, during the winter of 2009, CLE researchers replicated the qualitative study in order to gauge the effectiveness of these coordinated efforts to emphasize the value of liberal education and to align faculty and student expectations with the goals of liberal education. A total of ninety-five student volunteers participated in one-hour focus groups led by professional facilitators. Participants in 2004 and 2009 responded to the same series of questions relating to their learning experience at Grand Valley. The data from the focus groups were analyzed to determine how well students were able to define liberal education, and the following broad themes were identified.

Campus climate. In 2009, a larger number of students responded positively when asked about Grand Valley as a place where they could learn. Several students felt that the university is "open to student input," and one said that the university "gives you the 'oomph' you need to keep going—makes you very competitive—especially in the sciences." Many commented favorably on the broad and clear focus on liberal education and on the importance

Overall, the results indicate the effectiveness of a comprehensive, coordinated, institution-wide initiative designed to help students understand the meaning of liberal education

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Liberal Education



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of knowing what the term means—although one student said that “[liberal education is just] problem posing/solution finding. It is overrated here.” Many students said that college learning is “deeper” than high school learning, that it is not “rote learning.” Students said they prefer smaller classes that allow for more group projects and student presentations, which helped their learning, and appreciate the large selection of classes from which they can choose. In addition, the students recognized and appreciated the many opportunities for learning outside the classroom. More specifically, several mentioned the value of study abroad in “[breaking] down comfort barriers.”

Student development. In the 2004 focus groups, several students said they had not changed since coming to Grand Valley; in the 2009 groups, no student reported a lack of personal change. In fact, many of the 2009 participants commented on their own personal development since coming to Grand Valley. For example, one student said that she had changed 100 percent since arriving on campus. Commenting on their personal habits, students reported that they had become better organized, more motivated, and better able to manage their time. Several also said that being at Grand Valley had opened them up to what they are capable of and enabled them to know themselves better. Moreover, several students not originally from western Michigan commented that their experience at Grand Valley had encouraged them to be more open-minded and to examine their values.

Students taking responsibility for their learning. Although this theme emerged from the 2004 focus groups, where students mentioned their development of better study habits and better time management skills, it was more pronounced in the 2009 discussions of what it means to be a good student. Many participants in the 2009 groups agreed that taking responsibility for one’s own learning means putting in the time and effort needed to do well, even though this may entail sacrifices in one’s social life or elsewhere. Taking responsibility means knowing when to ask for help from a professor or from other students, seeking tutoring assistance, or just being willing to ask “dumb” questions. One student said, “I used to think

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being a good student meant getting good grades. Now, I think it’s being able to reflect and say what you’ve learned”; several students agreed with this comment. A few students argued for making the effort to relate all their classes to one another, commenting that this

“pays off” in what they learn. Other students talked about the importance of applying what they learn—“even math”—to their real lives.

Faculty expectations of students. In the 2004 focus groups, some students said that professors should give students breaks, while others thought that professors were too lenient, and some were critical of students who disliked their classes or complained about professors. Participants in the 2009 groups did not express this type of negativity. Also, far fewer students identified themselves as consumers who are owed a degree by virtue of their payment of tuition. Further, several 2009 participants agreed that students should have a “willingness to learn, an open mind” and that faculty should hold students to high expectations. In the words of one student, “minimal expectations get minimal achievement.”

Student expectations of faculty. Students place a high value on “personal connection” with professors as a motivating factor. They are impressed when faculty members know their names and show an interest in them. They most like faculty members who create a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom, expect students to participate, and don’t have obvious favorites. One student summed up the expectations of faculty as “engage, relate, inspire.” In both 2004 and 2009, students commented that faculty members need to realize that students have more than one class. Several students in both groups tended to appreciate higher faculty expectations, but the 2009 students who were in professional colleges felt they would be overwhelmed by higher expectations.

Qualities of a good professor. The participants in both sets of focus groups agreed that good professors do not just lecture, expressed a preference for a more interactive classroom, and wanted professors to be accessible outside of class. Students in the 2004 groups wanted more handholding than those in the 2009 groups. In particular, they said that professors should cover in class anything that is important in



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the textbook and go slowly so everyone can understand; none of the 2009 participants expressed this view. The 2004 groups emphasized concrete behaviors of professors, such as returning tests and papers in a timely fashion, being on time for classes, and being well organized. Both groups said that good professors adapt their teaching to the specific needs of the students in their classes and make sure everyone is “on the same page.” Several of the 2009 students talked about the value of relating course content to real life, a theme less evident in the 2004 groups.

Diversity and exposure to different views and attitudes. Student comments about diversity at Grand Valley were mixed. Some regarded the university as highly diverse; these students claimed to have learned new views and become more tolerant. Others, particularly students of color and students from outside western

Michigan, believed that the campus needs to become more diverse. Students in both 2004 and 2009 expressed the view that their experience at Grand Valley had increased their appreciation of different cultures. The 2004 students reported having learned about diversity through their experiences and relationships on campus and, more generally, in western Michigan, whereas many of the 2009 students reported having learned about diversity through study abroad and other travel experiences.

The importance of being well educated. Students in both years indicated that it was important to be well educated, although there was more depth in the responses of the participants in the 2009 focus groups. Several equated being well educated with having a broad scope of knowledge: “It helps one to see the big picture and not have tunnel vision on just one thing.” They also said it means having a sense of how

things are interrelated and recognizing the value of different approaches to solving problems. Being well educated means being able to talk to anyone about anything. It means getting outside of oneself, recognizing, as one student said, “there’s more to the world besides the US.” Students implied that social intelligence is as important as formal education.

The value of an education. All students in both years believed that education is very important, although in 2009 they explained why in two different ways. The first is pragmatic: education is a necessity today if one wants to be successful. One student, who commented on how his father’s prospects were limited due to his own lack of education, said that he expects education “will open doors” for him.

Many students agreed that a liberal education means more than comprehensive learning

The second way relates to ethical relationships with others: education is not just about getting a job. “You have to be able to make good decisions,” one student said. “Otherwise, you’ll end up hurting people.” Another student said it would make a difference for children: “If I know more, I can give them more.” Finally, students appreciate the opportunity of getting an education: “It’s a privilege to come here to learn.”

Defining liberal education. At the end of both the 2004 and the 2009 focus groups, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that included the following questions: “How would you define liberal education? What does it mean to you?” Some of the 2009 respondents defined liberal education in concrete ways, as a “broad selection of classes and requirements



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for a student.” A few went further, commenting on the integration in such an education: “If you imagine a knitted scarf and how each line connects—that is what liberal education is.” Many students agreed that a liberal education means more than comprehensive learning, however: “It involves being able to work in any environment under any situation.” Other students associated liberal education with being more open-minded, “not biased.” One student summarized, “a liberal education requires students to think critically and draw on information from not just the professor of a particular class, but all classes and life experiences.” None of the 2004 students completed this part of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire also presented a list of statements about liberal education, and participants were asked to choose the one that best described their own views. In selecting a statement, 46 percent of the 2009 respondents chose the response, “I think that liberal education should be a primary goal for all Grand Valley undergraduate students.” Forty-three percent chose the response, “I believe that liberal education is valuable, but not necessarily important for all undergraduate students.” The remainder said that liberal education was “somewhat important.” No student selected the two other possible responses—one indicating uncertainty about what liberal education is, and the other stating that it should not be a goal for Grand Valley.

Conclusion

Students absorb information about the purposes of education cumulatively from all their experiences at an institution. Marketing materials and student orientations typically make the first impressions, but on-campus residential living, participation in student activities, the structure of general education programs, graduation requirements, and course syllabi all convey important institutional messages. Overall, the results of the CLE replication study indicate the effectiveness of a comprehensive, coordinated, institution-wide initiative designed to help students understand the meaning of liberal education. By infusing a common definition of liberal education into all aspects of university life, institutions can ensure that students understand the meaning of liberal education. The study also demonstrates the value of institution-wide discussion

Liberal Education as Defined at Grand Valley State University

Grand Valley State University is committed to providing each student a broad educational experience that integrates liberal learning with preparation for career or profession. Liberal education begins with encountering the great ideas of diverse traditions in the humanities, the creative and performing arts, the natural and social sciences, and mathematics, and is an essential part of all of our professional programs. We value the liberal ideals of critical thinking and preparing students for lifelong learning. The practice of liberal learning develops the skills of inquiry and reflection, which guide students to think for themselves, gain self-knowledge, and make ethical judgments. Such learning can inform individual and collective actions and prepare students for the responsibility of local, national, and global citizenship.

of research findings. Too often faculty members are unaware of student characteristics, and students are unaware of faculty expectations. Sharing focus group results through various institutional venues can help develop a shared institutional vision and create support for institutional change. Finally, the study results point to the need for greater collaboration between the faculty and the student affairs division, which may otherwise convey very different messages to students. And by involving other offices—such as admissions and marketing—an institution can further strengthen its messaging.

Through campuswide initiatives that address students’ understanding of liberal education as well as faculty and student expectations, an institution can create a learning environment where students are more likely to take responsibility for their own education and their own achievement of essential learning outcomes. □

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