



Executive Summary of General Education Focus Group Research 2010

Purpose

The purpose of the General Education Focus Group Study of 2010 was to understand participant perceptions of Viterbo University's current general education program and of the proposal for a new general education program. Research into student understanding and values related to general education was conducted by means of three focus groups held July – September 2010. Focus group interviews were chosen as a method for research in order to gauge the range of student understanding and experience of the current general education program, to gain insight into student perception of the proposed model, to hear ideas generated by the student groups regarding implementation of the proposed model, and to uncover the language used by students when they speak about their liberal arts education.

Methods and Procedures

A single-category design was chosen: three focus groups involving eighteen students were held between July and September 2010. The groups consisted of current junior and senior students at Viterbo University who belong to the cohort groups of first-time, first-year students. The aim of this purposeful sampling was to allow for homogeneity. A parallel aim was to have some meaningful variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions and a range of perspectives. It was especially important to the project that both liberal arts and professional programs be represented in the group composition.

Each focus group session was recorded (video and audio) and transcribed for analysis. The first part of the discussion focused on the current general education program. Then students were introduced to the proposed general education program with time for responses to questions. The ensuing discussion was about their perceptions of the proposed program. Conversation was prompted by a series of discussion questions, and students also gave written responses to two questions. The sessions concluded with an brief summary of the conversation by the moderator.

The research project was granted exempt status from the Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Gender: Nine males and nine females.

Year: Six juniors and twelve seniors

Majors: Biopsychology (3), Chemistry (2), Philosophy, Psychology, Nursing (4), Biology (4), Social Work, English, Business Education, Technology Education, Computer Information Systems, Marketing.

Minors: Chemistry, Psychology, Spanish, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Servant Leadership, Management.

State or country of residence: Seventeen from Wisconsin, one international student.

Traditional / Non-traditional: 1 25+, 17 20-23 year-olds

Co-curricular involvements at Viterbo: Major clubs, Tri-Beta, Pep band, gardening at Villa St. Joseph, Residence Life activities, Philosophy for Children, Student Government Association, Academic Integrity committee, Resident Assistant, Residence Hall Council, Sustainability committee, Student Activities Board, Taking New Tactics, Intramurals, orientation leader, Nursing Deans' Roundtable, Rugby, SAAC, Campus Ministry, Viterbo Theatre, Lumen, SIFE, Army ROTC, Boys & Girls Club, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, tutor, ATOD, Viterbo voyager, Service trips.

Undergraduate research: 9/18

Honors Program: 7/18

Study Abroad: 6/18

Athlete: 4/18

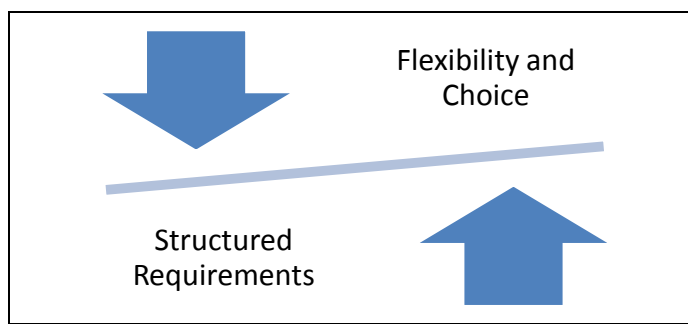
Findings

The following themes were common to all three focus groups, and these ideas were expressed by more than one person. Quotations are given when the particular expression of a motif captures notions that were either reiterated or affirmed within or across groups.

Participants said the **purpose of general education** is to introduce them to college, to increase knowledge, to complement the major, to help students decide on a major, to provide a foundation for the specialization of the major.

While many participants emphasized the value they have gained from **Viterbo's current general education program**—discovering new areas of interest, becoming a more open-minded person, increasing knowledge, building a foundation for life—a common comment was that general education requirements are something to “get out of the way.”

In several of the conversations, students noted the desirability of flexibility and choice in a general education program while acknowledging the benefits of structured requirements in general education.



Responses to the Proposed General Education Model:

Foundations works to bring “everyone up to speed and then allows them to branch out.”

Mission Seminars: participants liked the seminar format and the emphasis on missional values

- “One thing about the mission seminars I really like is how cohesive it makes the university. With faculty from all disciplines putting themselves into the mission seminars, it seems like the university is a cohesive unit.”

Ways of Thinking: Many students made positive comments about the emphasis on critical thinking through different lenses. Several students noted the emphasis on thinking like a historian or a theologian will help students make connections between areas of knowledge.

Response to the model as a whole was affirming, with the following themes emerging:

- The proposed GE anticipates the future and will prepare students for challenges.
- It is a cohesive model with emphasis on learning rather than a checklist of requirements.
- It provides opportunities for integrative learning, with students learning to learn and ready to apply types of thinking to new experiences.
- Students will be pushed out of their comfort zones in good ways to learn in new areas.
- Highlighting the contributions of the co-curricular to learning is positive.
- It will generate interest, and students will be more engaged in GE courses.

Advice to Faculty:

Advising will play a critical role in helping “students to stay on track” and understand their general education program;

Respond Set up guidelines so that students do not elect to “specialize even in general education.”

“I would just like to say if it is implemented it will better prepare graduates for like moving on in life and people overall for well roundedness. They [faculty] are not only affecting this university but they are affecting the community and the world.”

One of the most passionate segments of the conversation was when the group spontaneously began generating ideas about implementing the proposed program. Students saw advising and learning outside the classroom as key elements in the success of general education.

Students noted that everyone on campus—from current students who are in the old GE to all faculty, from admissions to advisors, from campus life to student affairs—should know about the new general education design and be prepared to talk to prospective and new students about it. Students suggested that they be involved in “selling” the new general education design.

Envisioning future Viterbo graduates:

- “I think that this model’s impact on graduates would be substantial. The strong emphasis placed on our university’s mission as a Franciscan institution” will be helpful to graduates.
- “I think Viterbo graduates will benefit from this experience. For those going to graduate school, it will show an aspect of diversity in the students’ learning. For those going straight into the real world and working, having the mission seminars will enforce good values and morals in people. I like the mission at Viterbo and implementing that into courses will really show more people what it means to be a good and honest person in life outside of college.”
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The full report is available from the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research. Please contact:

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