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Assessment of General Education of Doctoral Students Matriculating in an Educational Leadership Program in a Southern New England University

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Statement of the Problem

Higher education usually reserves talk of “general education” to the undergraduate experience. When entering graduate schools, graduate students have dissimilar and diverse undergraduate experiences in general education. Some graduate students have benefit of a solidly constructed undergraduate curriculum, while others have experienced broad distribution or no requirements whatsoever. Demography, language, and their disciplinary curriculum serve to divide them. Interdisciplinary programs have students usually study within the confines of two or more disciplines, and still they would be studying and researching within their disciplinary structures. Even bi-lingual and multi-lingual students still act within their linguistic structures. Stimpson (2002) created a term “General Education for Graduate Education” recommending that some form of general education be provided (course work in her case) in graduate education. At the highest level of education, the doctorate, we wanted to know the influence of the doctoral program’s cohort structure (as a Professional Learning Community) and its related environment on the enhancement of a student’s general education. We hypothesized that the students’ cohort structure and peer-to-peer (conversations) interactions in various settings increased the presence of general education indicators.

Related Literature

Based on the European model of classical education, the original mission of American higher education was to provide a “liberal education.” In the liberal education model, college students became well versed in classic literary works, philosophy, foreign languages, rhetoric, and logic. This

model stressed the importance of a broad base of education that encouraged an appreciation of knowledge, an ability to think and solve problems, and a desire to improve society. The core values displayed by American liberal arts colleges and universities most closely resemble this traditional model of liberal education.

Boyer and Levine (1981) provide an insightful tracking of the historic development and nearly continuous revision efforts of general education in parallel to the societal changes and needs. Clearly, we continue to seek a commonly acceptable and employable definition to meet our expectations for the role of general education. The authors conclude, however, that as in 1977, when the Carnegie Foundation concluded that general education in American institutions of higher education was a disaster area, “ that conclusion remains valid today” (p.33).

By the turn of the twentieth century, many work-oriented fields such as teaching (normal schools), business, engineering, and nursing had made their way into the four-year college and university curriculum. Vocational and practical education was now a major component of American higher education. Also, the “testing” movement had started. The Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales initiated the modern field of intelligence testing. In 1916, the Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman released the "Stanford Revision of the Binet-Simon Scale", the "Stanford-Binet", for short. Soon, the test was so popular that Robert Yerkes, the president of the American Psychological Association, decided to use it in developing the Army Alpha and the Army Beta tests to classify recruits (Wikipedia, 2009).

The President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) called for the development of a balance between "specialized training on the one hand, aiming at a thousand different careers" and a general curriculum that fosters "the transmission of a common cultural heritage toward common citizenship on the other" (p. 49). Recognizing the importance of vocational training but still valuing the significance of classical education, many colleges and universities began to develop a series or set of courses

that all students attending their institution would take prior to graduation. This set of courses became known as general education, sometimes referred to as a core curriculum. This model of curriculum has come to exist as a fundamental component of American higher education. According to Stark and Lattuca (1997) the American Council on Education found that in 1990 over 85% of American colleges and universities required all students to complete some sort of general education requirements. Stark and Lattuca noted that typical students at four-year institutions spend approximately 1/3rd of their studies meeting general education requirements. And, although debate continues regarding which courses should be considered critical in the development of educated graduates prepared for life beyond college, general education itself is firmly grounded in the modern American collegiate experience. Some colleges maintain a broad array of choices that satisfy general education requirements, whereas others are very specific with their curriculum. Many institutions have also been very successful at creating interdisciplinary courses that incorporate material and perspectives from a wide variety of disciplines; some of these courses have become quite popular and successful at institutions across the United States.

What Are the Goals of General Education?

The primary goal of general education is to provide a broad, yet focused, survey of courses that will promote critical thinking and increase students' awareness of the world around them. Many faculty members and administrators on college and university campuses hope that requiring a set of specific courses will encourage students to make connections across disciplines and between formal course instruction and informal learning experiences outside the classroom.

More important than specific requirements for general education is the time given by institutions to intentional thought, discussion, and development of general education curriculum. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) affirmed this notion when they discovered that the greatest gains in

students' ability to think critically were found at institutions with courses specifically designed to meet general education requirements. Even knowing this, however, extensive disagreement continues to exist among members of college and university communities regarding the identification of fundamental components and requirements of a general education curriculum. This continuing disagreement can lead to a tedious and lengthy debate, resulting in slow and difficult change on most campuses. The importance of general education was affirmed in a national study conducted by Boyer (1987) for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Boyer and his colleagues found that approximately 75% of undergraduates in American colleges and universities felt that general education courses "added to the enrichment of other courses" and "helped prepare them for lifelong learning" (p. 85).

General education requirements vary significantly from one institution to another. Different institutions attempt to answer the same guiding questions such as: ideally, what knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and exit abilities should graduates of the institution possess upon completion of their degree? And, how should the curriculum be designed to meet these goals? General education requirements vary because of the broad array of institutional missions and goals. Consequently, institutional researchers and administrators attempt to answer these broad questions in a variety of ways at the hundreds of American colleges and universities. One specific requirement that tends to remain constant across most institutions is a proficiency in English. Most colleges and universities agree that a fundamental component of being well educated is the ability to read and write. Thus, regardless of students' chosen fields, almost every college and university requires coursework in English literature and composition.

Another example of another a final or sometimes "capstone experience" requirement of general education, is that all students should have a common experience, demonstrate, or be exposed to a particular set of knowledge. Some colleges and universities that provide required reading lists to all incoming students. These readings are often incorporated in

the general education curriculum and provide a common foundation and experience for that cohort of students. Some graduate departments and specific disciplines might require all students to read and review a common body of knowledge as part of the overall curriculum. These common learning experiences often emerge in discussions throughout students' experiences at that institution and continue into their lives beyond the collegiate experience. This approach to general education relates to the primary goal of general education stated earlier: to make connections between formal course instruction and informal learning experiences outside the classroom. The American Psychological Association (APA) (2001) states: “committees or departments may require evidence that students are familiar with a broader spectrum of literature than immediately relevant to their research...” (p. 324).

Over forty-five years ago, Alan Simpson (1961) advised framers of curriculum that they ought to invoke the ancient doctrine, which holds that an educated man “ought to know a little about everything and a lot about something.” “A little about everything” might be interpreted as some sort of general education that an informed individual ought to possess. The late Joseph Katz (AAC, 1988, p3.) defined general education as “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all of us use and live by during most of lives-whether parents, citizens, lovers, travelers, participants in the arts, leaders, or Good Samaritans.” Several contemporary definitions of general education are part of every student’s course of study regardless of their degree; the imparting of common knowledge; the intellectual concepts and attitudes every educated person should possess; and lastly, not directly related to a student’s professional preparation (University of Wisconsin, Stout, 2005). Bowen (2004) states in a survey conducted by Rob Mauldin of colleges and universities (N = 200), general education titles used: 67% “general education”, 20% “core”, 8% “university”, and 7% “liberal.” He goes on to say that some institutions use titles that more precisely signify their purpose, e.g., “Common Learning Agenda.” Further, General Education intellectual skills are universal across diverse

institution types, and in higher education, there is a growing consensus on their content and form (AAC&U, 2006). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2004) states that students should acquire the following attributes: Breadth of knowledge and capacity for lifelong learning; abilities to analyze, communicate, and integrate ideas; and effectiveness in dealing with values, relating to diverse individuals, and developing as individuals.

The attention that has been paid to the continuous improvement of general education in undergraduate education has been nearly matched by criticism from inside higher education, as well as from the public, expecting “better results” demonstrated by graduates of colleges and universities. One of the strongest critics, Gardiner (1998) stated that:

For tens of thousands of students in a large national study, specific curriculum design has little effect on most of the 22 general education outcomes examined. The types of breadth of courses, specific course availability, or relative flexibility to choose among these courses had little impact on these outcomes, but most of the 4000 course goals they submitted related to teaching concepts in their disciplines, rather than developing the intellectual skill they say were important (p. 75).

Our considerable efforts over the years to produce undergraduates with consistent competencies in the core knowledge and skill we expect remains a challenge and raises concerns for graduate educators.

Lastly, at the graduate level in education a professional learning community emerges from the cohort structure where an entire group of professionals comes together. They are inquiry-based, focused on student learning, goal and results oriented; collaborative, reflective, based on shared values and beliefs; and committed to continuous improvement (Fullan, 1993; Murphy & Lick, 2001; Eaker, DuFour; & Burnette, 2002; King & Newman 2000; Glickman, 2002; Brandt, 2003).

Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to ascertain the General Education level of cohorts (1st year students and 3rd year students) of doctoral students enrolled in an educational leadership program in Southern New England. The secondary objective was to assess the possible indirect affect of the program as a stimulus for growth in general education. And finally were there significant differences between 1st and 3rd year students in General Education.

Method

The total sample (N = 30) was comprised of first year doctoral students (n = 15) and third year doctoral students (n= 15) enrolled in an educational leadership program in Southern New England. An instrument was devised using the literature on general education (Gaff, 2004; Trainor, 2004; Stimpson, 2002) and University of Wisconsin's Assessment Report (U.W., 2006). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the twenty-five item instrument is .89, which allows us to infer that 89% of the total variance in the scale scores is true (Gable & Wolf, 1993). Data was collected from first year doctoral students after the completion of one full semester of course work in January 2007. Third year students assessment occurred in December of 2006. Descriptive statistics, t-tests for independent samples, and a one-sample t-test were employed.

Results

Twenty-one general education categories were above the category "some" for the combined groups (N = 30). Using a one-sample t-test with a test value of 2 ("some"), six out of the 25 categories were significant at the .05 level using a two-tailed test. The highest mean values were: analyze information (M = 3.3, SD = .59); synthesize information (M = 3.2, SD = .78); value lifelong learning (M = 3.1, SD = .91); appreciate literature (M =

2.9, SD = .80); and creativity (M = 2.8, SD = 1.04). Appendix A, Table 1s & 2 contain in depth results.

An independent samples t-test was used to test for differences between first and 3rd year students over the twenty-five items. Levine's Test for Equality of Variances was performed on all twenty-five items. Technology and Life (1st year SD = .74 and 3rd year SD = .45) and History and Problems (1st year SD = 1.12 and 3rd year SD = .70) required unequal variance t-test, whereas all other items used an equal variance t-test (failing to reject the null hypothesis of equal variances). Using Huck's (2004) recommendation to avoid the risk of an inflated Type I error when using multiple dependent variables, a Pseudo-Bonferroni adjustment procedure was used, alpha ($\alpha = .02$). Only three of the twenty-five categories were significant at the .05 level: technology and life (1st year M = 2.5, SD = .74 and 3rd year M = 1.9, SD = .45), $t(28) = 2.66$, $p = .014$ (two-tailed); technology and environment (1st year M = 2.6, SD = .73 and 3rd year M = 1.4, SD = .83), $t(28) = 3.94$, $p = .000$ (two-tailed); and social forces et al. (1st year M = 3.1, SD = .99 and 3rd year M = 2.1, SD = 1.18), $t(28) = 2.50$, $p = .018$ (two-tailed).

Mean scores were computed over the twenty-five items for each student. The first year students (M = 2.47 and SD = .52) and the third year students (M = 2.28 and SD = .41). Levene's test failed to reject equality of variances, and the t-test results: $t(28) = 1.07$, $p = .292$ (two-tailed) were non-significant.

Discussion

Matriculation in an Educational Leadership Program seems to have a positive indirect influence on the general education of a student. Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Education Objectives' upper levels (analysis, M = 3.3) and synthesis, M = 3.2) are highly supported and were the highest for both groups of students. These are positive career outcomes in a knowledge-based economy where many people work on solving unscripted problems (Carnevale & Strohl, 2001). In some regards, sound general education

knowledge, skills, and abilities might be the most useful in career preparation. Moreover, educated people need to understand similarities and differences among all types of people to develop capacities to bring diverse groups together to solve problems in a variety of environments. Wikipedia (2007) defines “lifelong learning” to include postgraduate programs for those who want to improve their qualification, bring their skills up to date or retrain for a new line of work. Internal corporate training has similar goals, with the concept of lifelong learning used by organizations to promote a more dynamic employee base, better able to react in an agile manner to a rapidly changing climate. A well established community of learners seems to emanate from the experience (value life long learning, $M = 3.1$). In addition, the students' program experience also seems to foster reviewing and appreciating the literature ($M = 2.9$) and gives them the opportunity to exercise their creativity ($M = 2.8$). The independent samples t-test seems to imply that 1st year students were more influenced in technology and current social forces than 3rd year counterparts. At the local university level, the institution's graduate school outcomes of “research and analysis” also seem to be supported. Also, over the a two-year period of time it appears that (if general education is in fact influenced by program matriculation) its growth over time is stagnant, since the mean scores for the first and third year students were non-significant ($p = .292$).

Conclusion

Although the assessment of general education is usual reserved for undergraduate education, graduate students in an educational leadership program at the doctoral level seem to have their general education influenced by enrolling in such a program. However, after a four month period, this growth appears to remain the same throughout the remainder of course work. However, the cohort structure for working professionals seems to increase the capacity for creating new combinations of people and ideas a.k.a. the Professional Learning Community (ERS, 2003).

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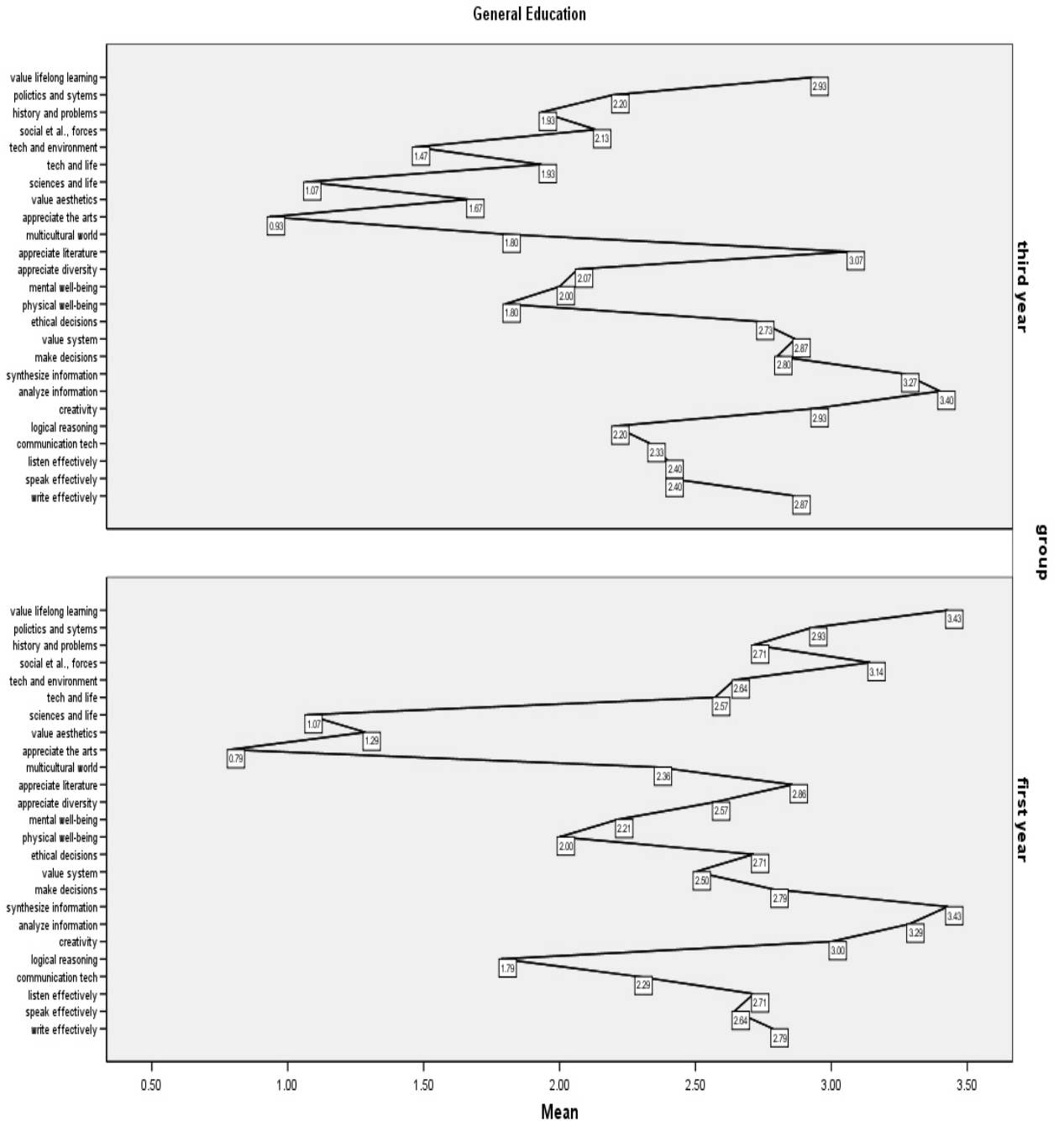
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First and Third Year Educational Leadership Doctoral Students



0 = None 1 = Very Little 2 = Some 3 = Very Much 4 = Extensively