

Evaluation of the Upper Division Theme Courses

Final Report: Student In-Depth Essays

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General Education Assessment Coordinator, 2001-2002

Background

In 1999-2000, a group of faculty met with Virginia Hunter, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, to develop a series of goals and objectives, learning outcomes, and pilot tests of several measures to assess the University's General Education program. Part of this effort consisted of learning what other CSU campuses had done to assess General Education. San Francisco State University, which has a similar Upper Division GE requirement (three courses in "clusters") to Cal State LA's Upper Division "Themes," had carried out a questionnaire and essay in which students responded to several attitudinal questions about their "cluster" and also wrote a short essay about how the cluster courses related to each other. The ad hoc committee recommended that an "in-depth essay," an effort where students would write about how their theme courses relate to each other and to the theme topic, be implemented as part of the GE assessment effort, and the General Education Subcommittee of the Educational Policy Committee adopted this recommendation.

In defining what tasks the GE Assessment Coordinator would accomplish during 2001-2002, Anagnoson agreed to apply for an Innovative Instruction Award in order to carry out the in-depth essay assessment. The grant, for \$5,250, was awarded in Fall, 2001 and was used to compensate the five participating theme coordinators for their time involved in grading the essays and overseeing both this project and a similar project where we surveyed Upper Division Theme students on their attitudes toward the requirement and the courses they had taken to meet it.

For this project, the particular goals were:

- Ascertaining whether students think about the themes as an integrated series of courses on a single subject?
- Ascertaining whether students can write about the themes as an integrated series of courses.
- Ascertaining whether there is a difference on this ability between students who have taken one theme course and those who have taken all three theme courses?
- Ascertaining how varied is the extent to which instructors integrate the material from the themes.

Data and Methodology

The oversight group consisted of five theme coordinators:

- Prof. Shirley Better, Social Work, Coordinator, Theme H, "Race, Diversity and Justice"
- Prof. Marjorie Bray, Latin American Studies, Coordinator, Theme A, "Challenge of Change in the Developing World"
- Prof. William Darrough, Sociology, Coordinator, Theme B, "Perspectives on Violence"
- Prof. Ann Garry, Philosophy, Coordinator, Theme C, "Gender in the Diversity of Human Experience"

- Prof. Eleni Pitsiou-Darrough, Sociology, Coordinator, Theme F, “Human Maturity and Aging Processes and Problems”

The theme coordinators were paid \$1,000 each from the Innovative Instruction Award to act as the oversight group for both the in-depth essay exercise and the attitudinal survey that were conducted during 2001-2002. The coordinators also graded the in-depth essays in early June, 2002.

The schedule was as follows:

Early Winter quarter	Anagnoson drafted questionnaires and a prompt.
Mid Winter quarter	The oversight committee, Anagnoson, and Associate Dean Susan Cash reviewed the questionnaire/prompt and endorsed them for a pilot test.
Late Winter quarter	Two instructors agreed to try the questionnaires out in their classes, returning the results to Anagnoson by early Spring quarter.
Early to mid Spring quarter	The oversight committee, Anagnoson, and Associate Dean Susan Cash again reviewed the results, making a change in the prompt.
Mid Spring quarter	Anagnoson asked half the instructors teaching Upper Division Theme classes to implement the questionnaire in their theme classes.
Late Spring quarter	Results were returned from the instructors who participated.

Thirty instructors were asked to participate in the exercise, and 11 returned questionnaires. There were a variety of reasons for non-participation, including the fact that instructors were asked to participate during Spring quarter when course outlines and syllabi had already been finalized, lack of time or interest, etc. One of the eleven classes had such short responses that they were unusable; these are omitted from the results below.

The prompt, as revised after the pilot test, was as follows:

For the courses you have taken, how have they contributed to your understanding of the theme <insert theme name>?

The instructors who participated were given broad instructions. Appendix A reproduces the memo asking instructors to participate, and Appendix B does the same with the memo of instructions to instructors who were participating. Relevant excerpts:

Appendix A – Excerpts from the memo asking instructors to participate:

I am attaching the current version of our questionnaire. We would like to obtain a sample of UD GE classes that will try it out this Spring quarter. The idea is this:

- 1. You agree to participate.*
- 2. I will get you questionnaires that are attuned to your theme – in other words, the question at the beginning that asks the students what theme courses they have taken will be for the theme that you are teaching in, and the question will ask:*

For the courses you have taken, explain how they have contributed to your understanding of the theme “<your theme name inserted here>”?

3. *You can grade them or use them as you wish. For example,*
 - A. *They could count as part of the final exam, or*
 - B. *They could count as part of the student’s grade on class participation, or*
 - C. *They could be extra credit for the course*

4. *You read the question and student responses and send the questionnaires to me, by Friday of final exam week, 6/14/02.*

Won’t you help us by participating in this project?

None of the information will be used to evaluate individual themes or courses (we have asked for the students’ names so that their performance on this questionnaire can be linked to their GPAs); we are trying to get a sense of problems that exist for all the themes and want to a broad spectrum of courses and instructors participating.

Appendix B – Excerpts from the memo for instructors who have agreed to participate:

In this questionnaire, we are trying to determine how the students understand the theme courses they have taken in relationship to the general topic of the theme. We are hoping to find that there is some integration of knowledge, or at least that students have a sense of how the courses they have taken illuminate the general topic of the theme.

- *You should administer this questionnaire during the 8th, 9th, or 10th week of the quarter.*
- *You should return the questionnaires to me by Friday of final exam week, which is June 14th.*
- *You may use the questionnaires as part of the students’ grades if you wish, but it is certainly not required.*
- *You may give the questionnaires to the students to take home and bring back or administer them in class. Probably it is best to give them in class, but that choice is up to you.*
- *You may talk with the students before giving the questionnaire about the different classes that they have taken in their themes – that choice is up to you. We will probably have somewhat better results if you do this.*

Since instructors had several options for how and when the questionnaires might be administered, this research study should be considered exploratory. The best results came from a class where the instructor had the students take the essay home and do it as part of a final class assignment.

The number of questionnaires returned from the participating classes varied considerably, as shown below:

Number of returned questionnaires (not course enrollments):

0-10:	0	41-50	0
11-20:	2	51-60	0
21-30	7	61-70	1
31-40	0	Total N =	265

Grading the essays. The five theme coordinators, the GE assessment coordinator and the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies graded the essays, using a holistic grading scale similar to that used in the campus Writing Proficiency Exam and previously adapted for the GE assessment of how students thought about diversity.

The grading scale was five points, from zero to four, with the question being the extent to which the student has integrated the three courses in the theme:

- 0 = Not at all, not on topic
- 1 = Weak integration of the theme topic ...
- 2 = Inadequate integration ... confused or inconsistent in its understanding
- 3 = Adequate integration, less thoughtful than a 4, but adequate ...
- 4 = Strong integration, use of relevant examples and details ...

0, 1, 2 = Fail. 3, 4 = Pass.

The same procedures as are used in the WPE were used to ensure reliability in the scoring system. There were two graders per essay. A third grader was used if one grader passed and the other failed, or if the two graders differed by two or more scale points. A norming procedure was used to try to bring all the graders to approximately the same scale, with 20 essays chosen for the norming period.

Findings and Results

Ten courses participated in the in depth questionnaire assessment:

**Courses, Themes, Areas, and Number of Students
Participating in the UD GE In-Depth Essay
Assessment**

Course taken Spring 2002	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Th I, Humani	11	4.15	4.15
Th C, NatSci	28	10.57	14.72
Th H, NatSci	25	9.43	24.15
Th D, SocSci	29	10.94	35.09
Th A, NatSci	25	9.43	44.53
Th A, SocSci	23	8.68	53.21
Th F, Humani	63	23.77	76.98
Th F, SocSci	11	4.15	81.13
Th D, SocSci	24	9.06	90.19
Th H, SocSci	26	9.81	100.00
Total	265	100.00	

Students taking GE Theme courses for non-theme reasons. A substantial number of the students participating were not taking the theme course for a theme-related reason. Most of these, to the extent to which we could identify the reason, were taking the course as part of the respective department's major. However, instructors varied in how compulsory doing the in-depth essay was for each course. Consequently, the percentages in the column headed by "2" should not be regarded as the absolute percentage of students in the course who took it for non-theme reasons. The percentages are more accurately regarded as indicators that in some courses, substantial numbers of students are taking the course for non-theme reasons:

**Percent of Students Taking UD GE Theme Courses
For Non-Theme Reasons**

	Took UD GE classes for non- theme reasons? Y=2 N=1		Total
	1	2	
Th I, Humani	11 100.00	0 0.00	11 100.00
Th C, NatSci	26 92.86	2 7.14	28 100.00
Th H, NatSci	23 92.00	2 8.00	25 100.00
Th D, SocSci	23 79.31	6 20.69	29 100.00
Th A, NatSci	15 60.00	10 40.00	25 100.00
Th A, SocSci	20 86.96	3 13.04	23 100.00
Th F, Humani	59 93.65	4 6.35	63 100.00
Th F, SocSci	10 90.91	1 9.09	11 100.00
Th D, SocSci	9 37.50	15 62.50	24 100.00
Th H, SocSci	19 73.08	7 26.92	26 100.00
Total	215 81.13	50 18.87	265 100.00

Of the ten courses, four had a percentage of non-theme students greater than ten percent, with the actual numbers ranging from 20.69% to 26.92%, 40%, and in one case, over half at 62.50%.

The non-theme students did much worse on the in-depth essays, as one might expect, and have been excluded in the analyses below. The average score on the four point scale for the 50 non-theme students was 1.43, in contrast to a mean of 2.52 for the 215 theme students.

Results of the assessment for UD GE theme students. What follows are the scores for the 215 theme students. Decimals have been rounded to the nearest integer.

**Distribution of Scores for 215 UD GE Theme Students
Who Participated in the In-Depth Essay
Assessment and Were Taking the Course for GE
Purposes**

score1	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0	16	7%	7%
1	30	14%	21%
2	41	19%	40%
FAIL (Sub-Total)	87	40%	
3	54	25%	66%
4	74	34%	100%
PASS (Sub-Total)	128	59%	
Total	215	99%*	

* Total does not add to 100% because of rounding.

Sixteen of the students, or 7%, did not write in such a way that their essays could be construed as being on the theme topic (several praised their instructors and the individual course but did not mention the theme topics). About a third, or 33%, received a 1 or a 2, meaning that the essay lacked sufficient depth to be considered a passing score on an essay about the theme topic and how the courses related to it. About 60% of the essays received a three or a four, meaning that there was sufficient information there for the two graders to consider the essay to have passed.

Number of theme courses taken. There are substantial differences between students who have taken just one theme course and those who have taken all three, as one might expect. About a quarter of the sample had taken one theme course (27%); about the same number had taken two theme courses (29.3%), and almost 44% had taken three theme courses at the time the students were surveyed (late Spring quarter, 2002).

Number of UD GE Theme Courses Taken (N = 215)

	Summary of Score 0-4; 0=off topic; 1-2=fail; 3-4=pass		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1	1.96	1.26	58
2	2.58	1.23	63
3	2.82	1.08	94
Total	2.52	1.22	215

As can be seen, the average score increases as the number of theme courses taken increases. Here is the distribution of the same data with the score variable recoded into passes and failures only:

UD GE Theme Assessment Scores, by Number of Theme Courses Taken

Essay score, 2 categories	Number of theme courses taken			Total
	1	2	3	
0=Fail	35 60.34	25 39.68	27 28.72	87 40.47
1=Pass	23 39.66	38 60.32	67 71.28	128 59.53
Total	58 100.00	63 100.00	94 100.00	215 100.00

As can be seen, 71.28% of those who took three theme courses passed the exercise, while only 39.66% of those who had taken only one theme course passed. A similar pattern is seen for those who failed.

Results by class. The following table shows the percent passing and the number of students participating (again, only those who took the course for UD GE reasons are included).

UD GE Theme In-Depth Essay Assessment Scores, by Class

Percent passing w/ 3-4 score	N	
Theme A, NatSci	40%	15
Theme A, SocSci	75%	20
Theme C, NatSci	69%	26
Theme D, SocSci	11%	9
Theme D, SocSci	4%	23
Theme F, Humani	95%	59
Theme F, SocSci	80%	10
Theme H, NatSci	43%	23
Theme H, SocSci	47%	19
Theme I, Humani	36%	11

The results are very class-specific. One class, with 59 students participating, had a 95% passing rate. Two classes had passing rates below 15%. The median class had a passing rate of 45%. There was considerable variance in part because of the exploratory nature of the study – instructors were allowed the leeway of emphasizing the interrelationships among the courses in the theme or not. The author's class participated in the study and had a high passing rate; we spent small parts of several class sessions talking about what the students had covered and learned in the other courses in the theme, and the instructor of the large class with the 95% passing rate did the same.

Here is the percent passing in each class arranged in categories:

UD GE Theme In-Depth Essay Assessment Scores, Categorized

Percent passing in each class	N
0%-25% passing	2
26%-50% passing	4
51%-75% passing	2
76%-100% passing	2

Demographics. The demographics of the 265 students who participated in the assessment are shown below. Students were asked whether they were native or transfer students. The difference in the scores of the two groups was small – 2.67 for the native students and 2.55 for the transfers, a difference that was not statistically significant in a standard two sample t-test:

Demographics: Transfer vs. Native Students

Transfer student=2; native=1	Summary of Score 0-4; 0=off topic; 1-2=fail; 3-4=pass		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1=Native	2.67	1.18	66
2=transfe	2.55	1.20	139
Total	2.59	1.19	205

Students were also asked if they were proficient in two or more languages. Again the results were similar – 2.61 for those who were proficient in more than two languages compared with 2.45 for those proficient in only one language. The difference was not statistically significant.

Demographics: Proficient in Two or more Languages?

Proficient in 2+ languages? 1=Y 2=N	Summary of Score 0-4; 0=off topic; 1-2=fail; 3-4=pass		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1=Yes	2.61	1.19	143
2=No	2.45	1.26	62
Total	2.56	1.21	205

There were statistically significant differences between the men and women who participated in the study. Approximately equal numbers of men and women completed the in-depth essays, but the women did much better than the men, 2.80 on the average compared with 2.35. The difference was statistically significant, with a t-value of 2.72 and a probability of arising by chance less than 0.001:

Demographics: Sex

Sex 1=Female 2=Male	Summary of Score 0-4; 0=off topic; 1-2=fail; 3-4=pass		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1	2.80	1.17	100
2	2.35	1.21	107
Total	2.57	1.21	207

Students were also asked their race and/or ethnicity. The scores varied from 2.13 for the 74 students who checked “Latino” to a high of 3.02 for 63 Asian and Asian-American students. Here the results were statistically significant in an analysis of variance, where the score was the dependent variable and race/ethnicity was the independent variable. The F value was 4.40, with a probability of arising by chance less than 0.001.

Demographics: Race

Race/Ethnicity	Summary of Score 0-4; 0=off topic; 1-2=fail; 3-4=pass		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1=Af-Am	2.45	1.38	19
2=Asian	3.02	0.92	63
3=Cauc	2.85	1.09	26
4=Latino	2.13	1.30	74
6=Foreign	2.50	1.41	2
7=Other	2.38	1.14	17
Total	2.56	1.21	201

The same procedure was used for the age variable, where we had asked students to classify their ages in one of seven categories. The scores here ranged from 2.39 for the 31 students between 30 and 34 years of age to 3.0 for one student under 18 and 2.90 for 10 students between 35 and 39. Here, however, an analysis of variance resulted in a non-significant F value of 0.39, with a probability of arising by chance of 0.88.

Demographics: Age

Age in categories	Summary of Score 0-4; 0=off topic; 1-2=fail; 3-4=pass		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1=<18	3.00	0.00	1
2=18-24	2.65	1.17	77
3=25-29	2.54	1.25	54
4=30-34	2.39	1.26	31
5=35-39	2.90	1.15	10
6=40-44	2.75	1.04	21
7=45-54	2.63	1.03	8
Total	2.60	1.18	202

Conclusions. Any exploratory analysis must be viewed somewhat tentatively, but a few conclusions seem justified based on the data collected in this analysis:

- (1) Students who have taken three UD GE Theme courses do better in the analysis than those who have taken just one or two theme courses.
- (2) Approximately 60% of the students who participated in the exercise and were taking their theme course as part of the UD theme requirement were able to integrate material from the three courses to the satisfaction of the evaluators. A substantial proportion (40%) of the students, however, could not. This finding should be viewed in the light of the fact that instructors volunteered their courses for this assessment. Presumably these instructors are more interested in the theme concept and in integrating the material than other instructors. Another factor could be the method the instructor used to administer the assessment instrument, and if it was meaningfully embedded in the course assignments.
- (3) There is marked variation in the results that appears to be class-specific. There may be several explanations. The first may be a function of the degree to which the instructor emphasizes the integration of the course material into the theme concept and comparing the course being taught with the other courses in the theme. Since the results vary so much, we think there is a role here for a coordinator to interact with instructors in theme courses and remind them of the goals and objectives for the course and the expected outcomes in a

general education program. The second may be the role the assessment measure played in the course. When the assessment measure was embedded as a graded assignment the results were more complete and offered greater ability to assess student understanding of the theme topic. In other cases, the assessment measure was a short in-class activity that yielded little information. In applying this measurement in the future, consideration should be given to working with instructors well before the course is offered so that the assessment can be embedded meaningfully in the course.

- (4) In some UD GE Theme courses, there are substantial numbers of students taking the course for non-theme reasons. Most often, they are taking the course for elective credit in the major. It may be appropriate to revisit the GE policy that excludes students from taking courses offered by their major departments in the UD GE Themes. The original purpose of the restriction was to create a course environment that would be a “general education” environment, not a UD “major” environment, as well as to broaden the educational experience beyond the major. At this point, the rule is very confusing, since it does not hold in Lower Division GE.
- (5) There is a role for Department chairs and the Office of Undergraduate Studies to play in coordinating UD theme courses. Given that many departments employ lecturers for some of their theme courses, chairs should be reminded every quarter or two that they should discuss with both experienced and new faculty the place the course has in an upper division theme, the obligation the instructor has to ask the students about their theme knowledge from other courses and to relate the present course to those courses, the name and role of the theme coordinator, and the writing requirements present for all GE courses. Other factors may also be important. The GE Subcommittee should consider having the Office of Undergraduate Studies carry out these coordination and any related responsibilities.

Appendix A – Memo Inviting Instructors to Participate in the Project

California State University, Los Angeles Department of Political Science

Memorandum

5/13/02

To: Selected Instructors Teaching Upper Division Theme Courses, Spring, 2002

From: Ted Anagnoson, GE Assessment Coordinator, Department of Political Science

Subject: **Your Participation in the UD Theme Assessment Project**

As GE Assessment Coordinator this year, I have been working on several projects relating to the Upper Division Themes. One of these is an evaluation of student understanding of the Upper Division Themes, in which a committee of theme coordinators and I have been working on a question that will enable us to assess the extent to which students have integrated the material from the theme courses that they have taken.

The committee of theme coordinators and the themes they coordinate is:

- Shirley Better (Social Work, Theme H, Race, Diversity and Justice)
- Marjorie Bray (Latin American Studies; Theme A, Change in the Developing World)
- William Darrough (Sociology; Theme B, Violence)
- Ann Garry (Philosophy; Theme C, Gender)
- Eleni Pitsiou-Darrough (Sociology; Theme F, Aging)

I am attaching the current version of our questionnaire. We would like to obtain a sample of UD GE classes that will try it out this Spring quarter. The idea is this:

5. You agree to participate.
6. I will get you questionnaires that are attuned to your theme – in other words, the question at the beginning that asks the students what theme courses they have taken will be for the theme that you are teaching in, and the question will ask:

For the courses you have taken, explain how they have contributed to your understanding of the theme “<your theme name inserted here>”?

7. You can grade them or use them as you wish. For example,
 - A. They could count as part of the final exam, or
 - B. They could count as part of the student’s grade on class participation, or
 - C. They could be extra credit for the course
8. You read the question and student responses and send the questionnaires to me, by Friday of final exam week, 6/14/02.

Won't you help us by participating in this project?

None of the information will be used to evaluate individual themes or courses (we have asked for the students' names so that their performance on this questionnaire can be linked to their GPAs); we are trying to get a sense of problems that exist for all the themes and want to a broad spectrum of courses and instructors participating.

Email your response to Ted Anagnoson at tanagno@calstatela.edu, or call x3-2245 and I will have enough questionnaires for your class delivered within a couple of days.

Thank you for your consideration.

Attachment B – Memo With Instructions to Those Willing to Participate in the Project**California State University, Los Angeles
Department of Political Science****Memorandum**

12/7/2005

To: UD Theme Instructors Willing to Participate in Our Assessment of Student Understanding of the Upper Division Themes

From: Ted Anagnoson, GE Assessment Coordinator

Subject: **Administering the Questionnaires**

First of all, a big, big thank you! I appreciate your being willing to administer the questionnaires.

In this questionnaire, we are trying to determine how the students understand the theme courses they have taken in relationship to the general topic of the theme. We are hoping to find that there is some integration of knowledge, or at least that students have a sense of how the courses they have taken illuminate the general topic of the theme.

- You should administer this questionnaire during the 8th, 9th, or 10th week of the quarter.
- You should return the questionnaires to me by Friday of final exam week, which is June 14th.
- You may use the questionnaires as part of the students' grades if you wish, but it is certainly not required.
- You may give the questionnaires to the students to take home and bring back or administer them in class. Probably it is best to give them in class, but that choice is up to you.
- You may talk with the students before giving the questionnaire about the different classes that they have taken in their themes – that choice is up to you. We will probably have somewhat better results if you do this.

Let me know if you have questions or problems. You can reach me at x3-2245, or by email at tanagno@calstatela.edu, or at home at (805) 681-9994. I am usually in Monday through Thursday most of every day.

You should return the questionnaires to me at the following address (campus mail is OK):

Ted Anagnoson
E&T A529

Department of Political Science
Mail Code 8226-05