

Evaluation of the Upper Division Theme Courses

Final Report: Student Attitudinal Survey

By J. Theodore Anagnoson
Professor of Political Science
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 attitudinal survey of students taking the upper division themes 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 implement an attitudinal questionnaire similar to San Francisco State's but adapted to Cal State LA. It would meet several objectives. There are persistent stories that students dislike the Upper Division Themes, or that the courses do not relate to each other. An attitudinal questionnaire would enable the campus to ascertain whether these myths were true in the eyes of the students. Anagnoson applied for an Innovative Instruction Award for 2001-2002 in order to implement the in depth essay portion of what San Francisco State University had done; the same oversight group was to be used for feedback on the attitudinal questionnaire.

Questions

- What are students' attitudes toward the Upper Division Theme requirement?
- Do students' attitudes change as they take more courses in their theme?
- Do students feel that the courses relate to one another?

Data and Methodology

The oversight group consisted of the five theme coordinators who served as the oversight committee for the in depth essay study funded by the Innovative Instruction Award:

- Prof. Shirley Better, Social Work
- Prof. Marjorie Bray, Latin American Studies
- Prof. William Darrough, Sociology
- Prof. Ann Garry, Philosophy
- Prof. Eleni Pitsiou-Darrough, Sociology

The schedule was as follows:

Early Winter quarter	Anagnoson drafted questionnaires.
Mid Winter quarter	The oversight committee, Anagnoson, and Associate Dean Susan Cash reviewed the questionnaires 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, modifying several questions to focus on student motivations for taking the theme classes.
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.

Approximately 1,200 questionnaires were sent out. An exact return rate is impossible to calculate because neither the exact enrollment in each class at the end of the quarter nor the number of students in class on the day the questionnaire was administered was known. 635 questionnaires were returned, representing, at worst, a return rate of 53 percent and most likely a return rate between 55 and 65 percent. The questionnaires over-represent Theme F, Human Maturity and Aging, because one of the professors who fell into the sample was teaching four sections of a 40 person class in that theme. The sample should be considered broadly representative of the students taking Upper Division Theme courses in Spring, 2002, but the sample is not a simple or stratified random sample. 27 classes participated in the survey.

All of the themes are included in the sample. The distribution of questionnaires returned by theme is as follows:

Theme	Number Returned	Percent Returned
B	112	18%
C	136	21%
D	20	3%
E	50	8%
F	248	39%
G	7	1%
H	41	6%
I	23	4%

Findings and Results

A copy of the questions follows, along with the percentage of students choosing each alternative under the question:

1. Please answer the following attitudinal questions about your Upper Division Theme. We are not evaluating individual instructors or courses. This survey concerns the overall goals of the theme. Your responses will be reported as group means only; all responses will remain anonymous.

	Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
A. My upper division theme courses have expanded my awareness of issues of "The Challenge of Change in the Developing World."	6%	5%	19%	32%	38%					
B. My upper division theme courses have encouraged me to relate knowledge from different disciplines and subject areas.	6%	9%	23%	35%	27%					
C. The subject of this theme was explicit in every course in the theme.	4%	8%	27%	33%	28%					
D. Each course in the theme required or encouraged discussion.	5%	6%	22%	33%	33%					
E. Each course in the theme required a writing assignment.	6%	6%	14%	24%	50%					
F. The overall educational quality of my upper division theme courses was excellent.	4%	7%	23%	35%	32%					
G. I would recommend this theme to others.	5%	7%	17%	30%	41%					
H. I chose this theme because of my interest in the topic	9%	9%	18%	27%	38%					
I. I chose this theme because it fit into my schedule	19%	14%	23%	19%	24%					
J. I chose this theme because I needed diversity courses	22%	14%	21%	19%	23%					

Finally, we would appreciate some information about your personal background for statistical purposes only.

- A. Have you mostly attended Cal State LA during your undergraduate career or did you transfer in? _40%_ Mostly Cal State LA _60%_ Transferred in
- B. Are you proficient in more than one language? _72%_ Yes _28%_ No
- C. Gender: 60% Female 40% Male
- D. Race/ethnicity: 8% African-American 28% Asian/Pacific 15% Caucasian/White
 41% Latina/Latino/Hispanic/Latin American Native American 1% Foreign 6% Other
- E. Age: Under 18 18-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-54 55+
 1% 53% 20% 11% 6% 3% 4% 1%

Table 1, attached, summarizes the results for all students, as well as those who have taken either zero or one theme course contrasted with those who have taken all three theme courses. For all students: on Questions A, B, C, D, F, and G, the evaluative questions (excluding the writing question and the three questions on why students are taking the theme they are in), some 61% to 72% of the students chose a response in one of the top two categories. Some 10% to 16% chose the bottom two categories of the scale. Given the nature of the themes as a requirement for all upper division students except those in blended programs, we feel that this is a very positive response.

On the writing question, Q1E, only 12% of the students disagreed (lowest two categories) with the statement that “each course required a writing assignment.” 74% agreed with the statement, and 14% were neutral, choosing category 3 on the 5-point scale.

For the three questions that asked about the motivation for taking the particular theme:

- **Interest in the subject.** 65% said that they agreed with the statement that “I chose this theme because of my interest in the topic.” 17% disagreed, with 18% neutral. Slightly fewer agreed among transfer students, with 62% in the top two categories and 19% in the bottom two.
- **Scheduling considerations.** 45% said that they agreed with the statement that “I chose this theme because it fit into my schedule.” 34% disagreed, with 23% neutral. About the same proportion of transfer students agreed with this statement, with 46% in the top two categories and 31% in the bottom two.
- **Diversity courses.** 42% said that they agreed with the statement that “I chose this theme because I needed diversity courses.” 37% disagreed, with 21% neutral. Among transfer students, the percentage agreeing was slightly higher at 49%, with 30% disagreeing.

In general, then, most students take theme courses in which they feel they have an interest. A statistically significantly lower percentage takes theme courses because they need diversity courses, with a somewhat higher percentage of transfer students motivated in this direction.

We asked each student what particular theme courses they had taken and why they were taking the course:

- 11 students, or 2%, had taken no theme course (they were taking the theme course in which the questionnaire was administered for their major).
- 239, or 38%, were taking their first theme course.
- 170, or 27%, were taking their second theme course.
- 217, or 34%, were taking their third theme course.

The bottom half of table 1 presents average scores for each question for those students who were taking their first theme course (or hadn't taken any theme courses) compared with those who were in their third theme course. Those who had taken three theme courses were somewhat **more** likely to agree that:

- The subject of the theme was explicit in every course in the theme,
- The courses in the theme encouraged or required discussion,
- Each course in the theme had a writing assignment, and
- They would recommend the theme to others.

The differences, however, were modest, at approximately 10 percentage points.

The demographics of the survey are about what one would expect:

- **Transfer status.** 40% of the students say that they have done all or most of their work at Cal State LA; 60% are transfer students.
- **Bi or Multilingual.** Almost 3/4ths, or 72%, are proficient in more than one language.
- **Sex.** 60% are female and 40%, male. This is very close to the University average of 62% female.
- **Race/ethnicity.** 41% are of Latino or Hispanic origin; 28% are Asian/Pacific. 15% are Caucasian; 8% are African-American, with 1% choosing "foreign" and 6% choosing "other." It is not clear why the Upper Division theme audience for Spring, 2002 under represents Latino/Hispanic students compared with the university as a whole.
- **Age.** The age distribution shows that the UD GE audience is younger than the University as a whole, with over half between 18 and 24 and another 20% between 25 and 29.

Other than the differences with the reasons for taking theme courses and transfer status, very few differences were found based on transfer status, multilingual, or sex. Tabulations by race/ethnicity and age did not show significant differences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, most students who take the Upper Division Themes feel that the theme courses:

- have expanded their awareness of the theme topic,
- have encouraged them to relate knowledge from different disciplines and subjects,
- have found the courses relate directly to the theme topic,
- have found that the courses had discussion and writing, and
- in general, have found that the courses as a whole were "excellent" and would recommend the theme to others.

Many students take the upper division theme they chose because of their interest in the topic. Some state that they took the particular theme because of scheduling needs or the need for a diversity course. Transfer students are somewhat more likely to take a particular theme because of the GE requirement for two diversity courses to graduate.

Table 1 – Upper Division Theme Attitudinal Survey Results – All Students

Questions	All Students	
	Lowest 2 Categories	Highest 2 Categories
All questions had a five point scale ranging from 1, "Strongly Disagree" to 5 "Strongly Agree."		
	Percent	
A. My upper division theme courses have expanded my awareness of issues of <"Theme Name Inserted Here">.	10.7%	70.3%
B. My upper division theme courses have encouraged me to relate knowledge from different disciplines and subject areas.	14.6%	62.8%
C. The subject of this theme was explicit in every course in the theme.	11.9%	61.0%
D. Each course in the theme required or encouraged discussion.	11.6%	66.1%
E. Each course in the theme required a writing assignment.	11.6%	74.1%
F. The overall educational quality of my upper division theme courses was excellent.	10.7%	66.7%
G. I would recommend this theme to others.	12.2%	71.2%
H. I chose this theme because of my interest in the topic	17.2%	64.9%
I. I chose this theme because it fit into my schedule	33.8%	42.9%
J. I chose this theme because I needed diversity courses	36.6%	42.2%
Number of respondents:	N range 598-618	

Questions	Taken 0-1 Theme Courses		Taken All Three Theme Courses	
	Lowest 2 Categories	Highest 2 Categories	Lowest 2 Categories	Highest 2 Categories
All questions had a five point scale ranging from 1, "Strongly Disagree" to 5, "Strongly Agree."				
	Percent		Percent	
Question summaries:				
A. Expand awareness of theme issues....	11.2%	70.4%	8.3%	71.8%
B. Encourage me to relate knowledge....	14.1%	62.0%	11.6%	66.2%
C. Subject of theme explicit in every course....	11.5%	54.4%	10.8%	66.4%
D. Courses required/encouraged discussion....	14.0%	62.7%	8.8%	71.6%
E. Courses required writing assignments....	14.8%	67.0%	7.9%	80.9%
F. Overall educational quality of theme is excellent....	9.9%	64.6%	8.4%	67.3%
G. Recommend theme to others....	14.5%	68.3%	8.3%	74.5%
H. Chose theme because of interest in topic....	17.0%	63.2%	17.6%	64.4%
I. Chose theme because it fit into schedule....	30.9%	45.3%	32.1%	46.5%
J. Chose theme because of diversity courses....	33.8%	43.7%	34.6%	47.7%
	N range 222-234		N range 214-216	

Memorandum asking instructors to participate:

You are teaching an Upper Division Theme Course – these are courses that are numbered between 300 and 397 and are part of the Upper Division General Education requirement here on campus. The requirement is that all students take three courses in Upper Division GE – one in the humanities, one in the social sciences, and one in the natural sciences/mathematics – and all on a single “theme,” such as “The Challenge of Change in the Developing World,” or “Perspectives on Violence,” or “Race, Diversity and Justice.”

This quarter, a committee of five theme coordinators, the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies – GE and Articulation, and I are embarking on two large projects in looking at the Upper Division Themes. One of these is the attached attitudinal survey.

Basically, it is a 10-minute survey that asks students:

- What theme courses they have taken (each survey is for a specific theme)
- What they think about the themes and the courses as a whole
- Why they took the specific theme they are enrolled in

We would appreciate it very much if you could administer the questionnaire to your Upper Division Theme class before the end of the quarter. It would probably work best if you did it before the last day of class, but the specific day and time is up to you.

When the students have completed the questionnaires, you collect them and return them to me through campus mail:

Ted Anagnoson
Political Science
E&T A529 – Mail Code 8226-05

If you have questions about the survey, please call me at x3-2245 (323-343-2245) or email me at tanagno@calstatela.edu.

Thank you very much in advance. I realize that we all get a lot of requests for extra tasks at this time of the quarter and year, and I appreciate your helping us to gather this student information. It will be of assistance to the GE Subcommittee, to the University, and to our committee. Thank you again.

Sample Questionnaire:

California State University, Los Angeles Survey of Students in Upper Division Themes – Theme A – Spring, 2002

Directions: This information will be used to improve the upper division GE theme courses and requirement. The upper division theme requirement at Cal State LA requires students to take three upper division courses on a single theme. You are enrolled in a course in the “Challenge of Change in the Developing World” upper division theme, the subject of which is:

This theme explores the dilemmas faced by the peoples of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America as they struggle to overcome legacies of colonialism and economic dependence. The developing countries are characterized by severe social and cultural tensions, physical complexities and challenges to themselves and the rest of the world. Their current integration into the global economy marks a crucial stage in world history. The natural science courses assess their physical settings, constraints and possibilities; the social science courses analyze social, political and economic processes of change; the humanities component examines the dynamic interplay among the arts, religion and cultural values.

1. **Check off what courses you have taken in this theme, Circle one for each course you took or are taking: Including the one you are taking now. Are you taking this course for the theme OR something else (your major, minor, or certificate)?**

Natural Sciences and Mathematics

<input type="checkbox"/> BIOL 326N Agroecology in the Developing World (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> GEOG 333 Environment and Development in the Third World (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> GEOL 351 Environmental Geology of Developing Nations (4)	Theme	Other

Social Sciences

<input type="checkbox"/> ECON 360 Developing Countries and the New Global Economy (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> HIST 360 Revolution and Society in Developing Countries (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> LAS/PAS/POLS 360 Dynamics of Change in the Developing World (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> EDFN/LAS/PAS 380 Education and Development in the Third World (4)	Theme	Other

Humanities

<input type="checkbox"/> BCST 324 Third Cinema/Video (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> (d) ENGL/PAS 386 Literature and the Third World (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> (d) LAS/PAS 342 Cultural Impact of Development (4)	Theme	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> PHIL 334 Post-Colonial Values and Modernization in the Developing World (4)	Theme	Other

2. **Please answer the following attitudinal questions about your Upper Division Theme. We are not evaluating individual instructors or courses. This survey concerns the overall goals of the theme. Your responses will be reported as group means only; all responses will remain anonymous.**

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
K. My upper division theme courses have expanded my awareness of issues of “The Challenge of Change in the Developing World.”	1	2	3	4	5
L. My upper division theme courses have encouraged me to relate knowledge from different disciplines and subject areas.	1	2	3	4	5
M. The subject of this theme was explicit in every course in the theme.	1	2	3	4	5
N. Each course in the theme required or encouraged discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
O. Each course in the theme required a writing assignment.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
P. The overall educational quality of my upper division theme courses was excellent.	1	2	3	4	5
Q. I would recommend this theme to others.	1	2	3	4	5
R. I chose this theme because of my interest in the topic	1	2	3	4	5
S. I chose this theme because it fit into my schedule	1	2	3	4	5
T. I chose this theme because I needed diversity courses	1	2	3	4	5

Finally, we would appreciate some information about your personal background for statistical purposes only.

B. Have you mostly attended Cal State LA during your undergraduate career or did you transfer in?

Transferred in _____ Mostly Cal State LA _____

B. Are you proficient in more than one language? _____ Yes _____ No

D. Gender: Female Male

D. Race/ethnicity: African-American Asian/Pacific Caucasian/White
 Latina/Latino/Hispanic/Latin American Native American Foreign Other

E. Age: Under 18 18-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-54 55+

3. Do you have any comments on the upper division theme courses that you have taken? We'd like to hear them, and your comments are anonymous.

Thank you for your help. If you have questions about the survey or would like a copy of the results, email Prof. Ted Anagnoson at tanagno@calstatela.edu.