

Survey of Students' Fall 1995 Experiences in Linked Courses

"In Focus" is a vehicle for sharing information about learning and assessment in the George Mason community. "In Focus" is prepared by the Office of Institutional Assessment and is intended to make assessment-related information widely available. Comments and suggestions are welcome.

Introduction

GMU's linked courses join introductory courses in different disciplines (i.e., sociology, psychology, etc.) and English composition. The linked courses promote a sense of community among students and support student achievement in thinking, reading, and writing. In fall 1995, English 101 was linked with freshmen courses in anthropology, history, psychology, sociology, and biology. In addition, for the first time, three-way linkages were made between English, sociology and University 100, and between English, government and philosophy. Enrollment in the linked courses was slightly over 300. To gather information on the effectiveness of the program in meeting its stated goals, including the development of academic and social community, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire at the end of the semester. This report summarizes the results of 217 students who responded to the survey.

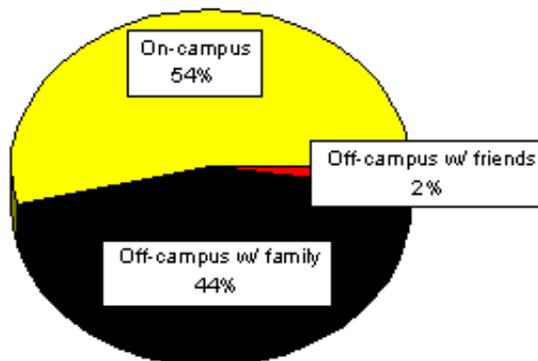
Students Characteristics/Background

Places of Residence.

The majority (54%) of freshmen participating in the linked courses lived on-campus, 44% lived off-campus with family or relatives and 2 percent lived off-campus with other students or friends. (Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Places of Residence

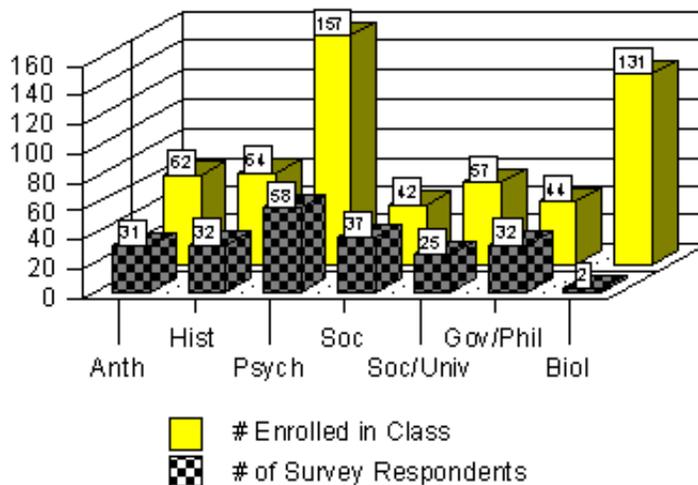
Linked Students, Fall 1995



Enrollment vs. Survey Respondents by Class.

Of the 217 linked students who responded, 27% were enrolled in the psychology link, 17% sociology, 15% history, 15% government and philosophy, 14% anthropology, 12% sociology and university 100, and only 1% came from the biology 213, 103, or 104 linkage. (Figure 2.)

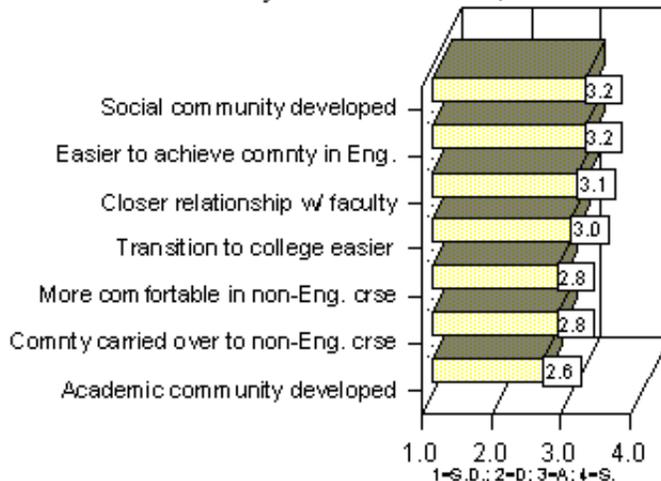
Figure 2: Number of Enrollees & Respondents by Linked Courses Class Section, Fall 1995



Sense of Social and Academic Community

Students indicated the extent to which they agreed (4=strongly agreed and 3=agree) or disagreed (2=disagree and 1=strongly disagree) with various questions related to the academic and social community in their linked courses. Students were most likely to say that a social community formed between students (3.2)*, that it was easier to achieve community (social and academic) in their English class (3.2), and that they experienced a closer relationship with linked faculty than with faculty teaching other courses in which they were enrolled (3.1). [*Unless otherwise indicated, these numbers are means based on a scale of 1-4 as indicated above.]

Figure 3: Linked Students' Opinions on the Academic Social Community in Linked Courses, Fall 1995



Asked to comment on the community in their linked classes, students most often mentioned that they experienced positive social

and/or academic community (45%). See figure 3 below. One student said "Both academic and social communities were developed in my linked courses and through them it was easier to comprehend materials." Another commenting specifically on the academic community wrote, "I have learned so much about myself and my writings by exposing my ideas to my professor/teacher and other students. I received praises and constructive criticisms on my work." Second most often mentioned was the impact of class size on community (13%). Most students felt that the smaller size of English 101 facilitated the development of community. These students often indicated that the course linked with English was too large, but some were able to feel comfortable in this larger class because of the community that carried over from their English class. One student commented, "Between the two linked classes you always saw familiar faces especially going from a small English class to a large psychology class." Others, however, thought that size of some of the non-English courses were a hindrance to the development of community. For example, one student commented, "It was hard for me to learn in my Psychology class--extremely hard to deal with 400 other students and one professor." Some students indicated that study groups formed outside of class (9.5%). For example, one student noted, "My link course helped me form study groups that I would have never formed if I were not part of the linked courses." All comments received on academic or social community in the linked courses are summarized in Table 1 below. The comments are rank ordered by the number received and their percentage of the total comments received.

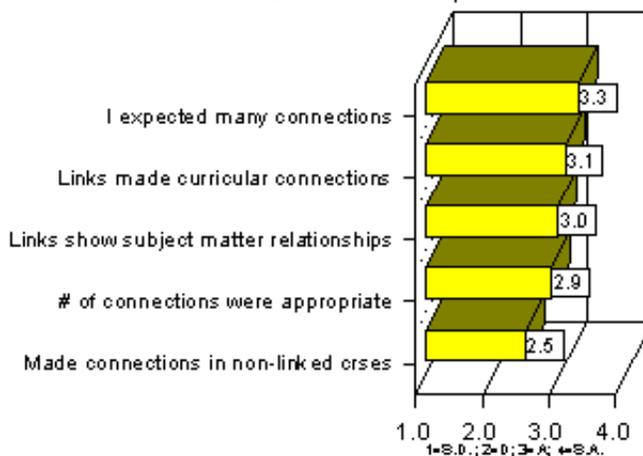
Table 1: Ranking Comments on Community

Rank	Comments on Community	number	% of total comments
1	Social/academic community	75	45%
2	Impact of class size	22	13%
3	Study groups formed	16	10%
4	Good experience	16	10%
5	Supported learning	11	7%
6	No different than other classes	8	5%
7	Miscellaneous comments	7	4%
8	Easier transition to college	6	4%
9	Negative community experiences	5	3%

Curricular Connections in Linked Courses

Asked their opinions (4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree) about the linked courses curricular connections, students had fairly high expectations for "many curricular connections" between the courses (3.3) and agreed, to a lesser extent, that connections were made (3.1) although they agreed that the number of connections (such as assignments, readings, etc.) were appropriate (2.9). Students also agreed that the links showed subject matter or educational relationships between courses (3.0). Although appearing lowest on figure 5 (at right), 52% of the students said they began to make curricular connections in other non-linked courses because of the links. One student said, "Everything connected; it was neat to see how some parts of my classes interacted with my non-linked classes." Not shown in the graph, students agreed (3.1) that faculty opinions and views may differ depending on their academic discipline.

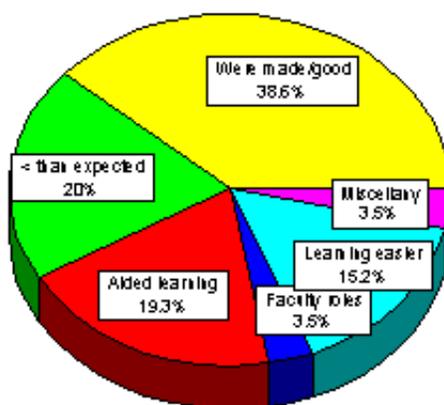
Figure 4: Linked Students' Opinions on the Curricular Connections in Linked Courses, Fall 1995



Students' Comments on Curricular Connections

When asked to comment on the curricular connections in their linked courses, 40% said that connections were made and some added that the connections were very good. Specifically, one student said, "Philosophy and Government ideas linked together well. English helped to put those ideas and thoughts onto paper." Another remarked, "Being able to take what I learned in one class and apply it to something in another class made me feel like I actually learned something." One-fifth of students said that connections aided learning or led to a deeper understanding of the subject matter. For example, one student wrote, "The assignments and discussions in the English class helped me to understand the history readings and lectures better." Nineteen percent of students' comments mentioned that there were fewer curricular connections than they had expected in the linked courses. One student wrote, "There were only two linked assignments in the linked courses. I felt there should have been more linked assignments." Another indicated, "Too few of them. The only connections came just before an assignment was given."

Figure 6: Students' Comments on Curricular Connections Linked Courses, Fall 1995



A substantial proportion of students' comments (15%) said that the links made learning easier, more enjoyable or interesting. For example, some of the students' comments included: "English prepped us for sociology , so understanding sociology was a lot easier" and "I enjoyed writing about subjects in English that related to history." Faculty were seen by some (3.5%) as the key in developing connections and aiding learning. One student said, "My English teacher really connected the two [courses] to help me understand."

Most Appealing Aspects of the Linked Courses

Students were asked about the most appealing aspects of the linked program and whether they got what they thought they would out of the program. The highest proportion of comments (17%) received said that the linked courses supported learning. Students commented that they gained more knowledge, had a better understanding of class material, or were better able to apply information. One student commented, "... the scientific reading such as the zipper, cells that wouldn't die, etc. The reading helped me understand certain things about cells and how they worked. If I didn't know from Biology class, I learned it in this English class." [These readings were given by the English instructor to support the curricular linkage with biology.] Another student wrote, "I was able to get a lot out of these classes and apply the skills that I learned in these linked courses and apply it to my other classes." Other appealing aspects of the program included strong social and academic community (15%), good experiences (12%), and the connections between subject matter (10%). A full listing of the most appealing aspects of the linked courses are rank ordered in the table below indicating both the number and proportion of comments in each area. Each comment is discrete, i.e., it is counted only once.

Linked Course Summary, Fall 1995

Students enrolled in the linked course program continue to find positive social and academic rewards from their participation. Many students report making connections across disciplines. The performance of these students over time, as evidenced by retention and GPA will be followed.

Table 2: Most Appealing Aspects of the Linked Program

Rank	Most Appealing Aspects of the Linked Program (Did you get what you expected?)	number	% of total comments
1	Support learning (knowledge, understanding, application)	34	17%
2	Strong social/academic community	31	15%
3	Good experience/got what I expected	24	12%
4	Connected/related subject matter	21	10%
5	Faculty to student support/communication	17	8%
6	Linked assignments	16	8%
7	Expectations not met	16	8%
8	Smaller Class Size	15	7%
9	Dissatisfaction with aspects of linked courses	13	6%
10	Multiple perspectives/feedback on assignment supported learning	4	2%
11	Supported transition to college	4	2%
12	Miscellaneous	4	2%
13	Ease of registration	3	2%

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