

Global Understanding ***Graduating Senior Survey 2003-04***

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I. Global Understanding Requirement at Mason

Global Understanding is one of the core general education requirements of George Mason University. Global understanding courses intend to help students develop an understanding of global issues as well as an awareness of how these issues are perceived and dealt with in different cultural and historical traditions. These courses stress the interconnectedness, difference, and diversity that are central to understanding and operating in a global society. After completing a course from this category, students are expected to be able to analyze (that is, identify the causes and consequences of change in) significant global issues.

More than 70 courses have been approved as global understanding courses, ranging from the 100-level to the 400-level. This wide range of courses offers an opportunity for all students (including transfer students) to spread out their general education requirements over their time at Mason. While some courses may deal with a specific global problem, institution, or issue, others focus on a specific area or region outside the contemporary Western world by incorporating specific comparisons of several cultures. Therefore, these courses give students an opportunity to broaden their perspectives and perhaps move outside their majors to another discipline.

The 2003-2004 graduating seniors are among the first cohorts with this general education requirement and this study is one of the first attempts to assess the effectiveness of the global understanding requirement. This report compares the results obtained on the Graduating Senior Survey 2003-04 regarding global understanding and two national surveys.

II. Graduating Senior Survey and ACE Surveys

In 2000, the American Council on Education (ACE) undertook a national telephone survey concerning attitudes toward and experiences with international education among adults aged 18 and over. (A free electronic report¹ on this and related surveys is available at www.acenet.edu/bookstore/.) With the permission of ACE, we selected several questions in this survey for use in the 2003-04 Graduating Senior Survey. This report compares the responses to these common questions and also includes a few questions that ACE repeated in a survey conducted in spring 2002, just after the September 11 attack. A full report on the Graduating Senior Survey 2003-04 is available in print and on the website at <http://assessment.gmu.edu>.

Seniors who graduated in summer 2003, fall 2003 and spring 2004 completed the Graduating Senior Survey online as they completed their online graduation application. Among the 3,312 graduates, 2,924 completed the survey for a response rate of 88%. The global understanding section has a very high response rate of 99%, i.e. nearly all students completing the survey filled out this section.

¹ The American Council on Education (ACE) (2001). *Public Experience, Attitudes, and Knowledge: A Report on Two National Surveys about International Education*. Washington, D.C.: The American Council on Education.

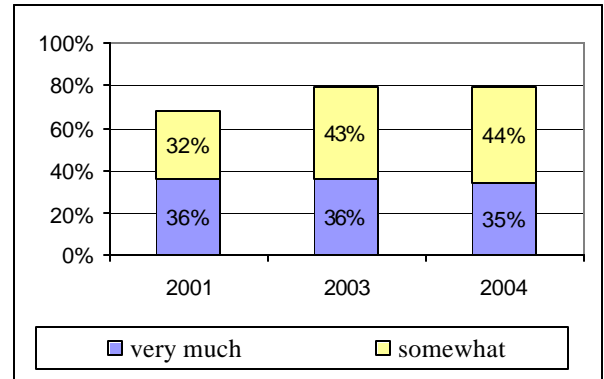
III. Mason's Contribution to Global Understanding

In recent years, between 35% and 36% of the graduating seniors think Mason has contributed “very much” to their development in global understanding. In 2004, approximately 44% of students think Mason has made “somewhat” of a contribution, an increase of 12 percentage points over 2001. (Response categories include “very much,” “somewhat,” “a little,” and “not at all.”)

“The greatest joy I received while attending George Mason University is learning about different cultures and ethnic groups in a disciplined setting as well as in a social setting. I appreciate the opportunities given to students to study abroad, learn different languages, and ultimately learn how to communicate effectively and successfully with people from diverse cultural, racial, & ethnic backgrounds.”

--- Comment from a graduating senior

Figure 1. Mason's Contribution to Global Understanding, 2001, 2003 and 2004



In the following section, Mason seniors were compared with the general U.S. public. The data on the public opinions and attitudes were collected by ACE in 2000 with select questions repeated in 2002, whereas the Mason senior data were collected from summer 2003 to spring 2004. The September 11 attack, the War against Terrorism and the Iraq War have had a great impact on all Americans. Public attitudes and opinions have, undoubtedly, changed as a consequence and are reflected in the survey results reported here.

IV. Interest in News

Nationally in 2000, 64% of the people surveyed followed international news events “very closely” or “somewhat closely,” substantially less than those interested in local and state (89%) and national (82%) news. In 2002, these figures were essentially the same, but the percentage who said they followed international news “very closely” increased from 20 to 27%, and those who said “somewhat closely” decreased from 44 to 39%. At Mason, 77% of the graduating seniors follow international news “very closely” or “somewhat closely,” 13 percentage points above the general population. Mason students also show a higher interest in national news (89%), followed by local and state news (85%). In the general population, more people are interested in local and state news than national news.

Table 1: Student Interest in News

	GMU Seniors, 2004		U.S. Public, 2000*	
	Very closely	Somewhat closely	Very closely	Somewhat closely
Local and State News	32%	53%	52%	37%
National News	39%	50%	35%	47%
International News	31%	46%	20%	44%

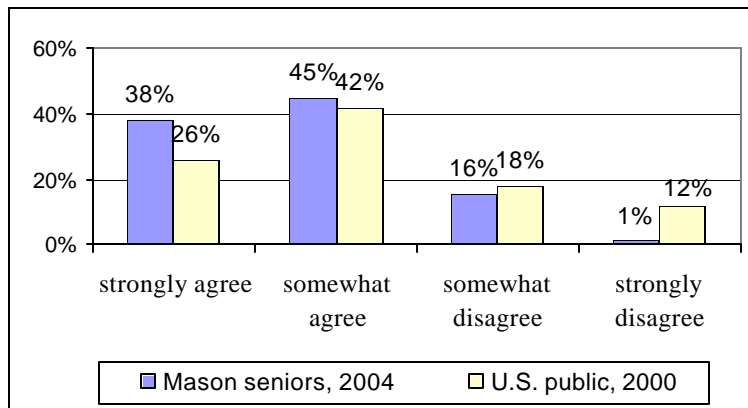
* Source: American Council on Education, 2001

V. Attitudes about the Impact of Globalization, International Knowledge and Skills

1. Impact of Globalization

To what extent do Mason seniors believe that international issues and events in other parts of the world are directly affecting them? Thirty-eight percent of them “strongly agree” and 45% “somewhat agree” that international issues and events have a direct impact on their daily life (see Figure 2). In 2000, among the general public only 26% “strongly agreed” and 42% “somewhat agreed” with this statement, much lower than the Mason seniors.

Figure 2. Impact of International Issues and Events on Daily Life: Comparison of Mason Seniors (2004) and U. S. Public (2000)



2. Perceptions of the Role of the U. S. in International Affairs

By the early 1990s, a majority of the U.S. population supported an active U.S. role in world affairs. National surveys have reported an increasing level of support, growing from 65% in the mid-1990s to 80% in 2000. ACE (2001) found that college graduates and post-graduates in 2000 showed the strongest support; approximately 90% of respondents in both these groups supported active U.S. involvement in world affairs. Among them, over 60% strongly supported it.

Four years later, we asked the same question of graduating seniors at Mason and found strikingly different responses than the 2000 national survey. Eighty-eight percent of Mason seniors support U.S. involvement in world affairs, but only 36% show strong support. The majority of Mason seniors (52%) “somewhat” support it. Anxieties about the Iraq War among potentially draft eligible young people likely have a strong influence on student opinion.

Figure 3. The United States should take an Active Part in World Affairs (Mason Seniors, 2004)

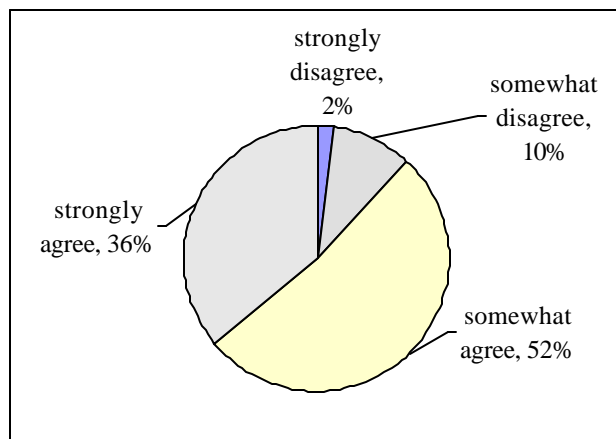
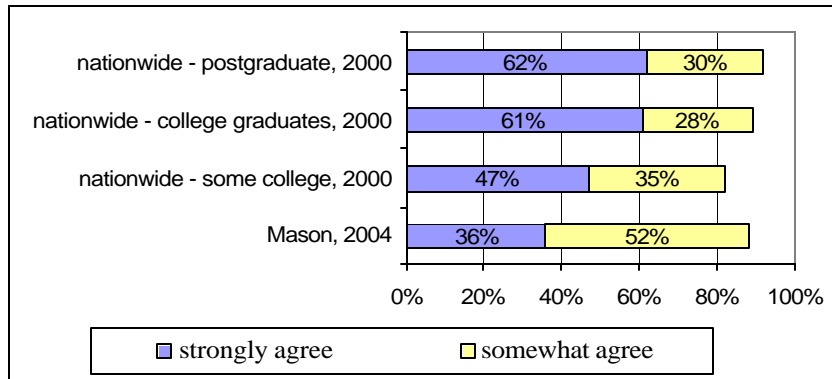


Figure 3. Agree that the U.S. Should Take an Active Role in World Affairs, by Educational Level



* Source: American Council on Education, 2001

3. Professional Relevance and Benefits of International Education

Mason seniors perceive that international affairs play an important role in their careers and their children’s careers (see Table 2). When asked how important knowledge about international issues will be for their career in the next 10 years, 91% think this is important. This is dramatically higher than the general public attitude about this topic – 52% in 2000 and virtually the same in 2002. Virtually all Mason students and nearly all of the general public believe that this knowledge is even more critical for their children and the younger people in high school today – 98% of Mason students and more than 90% of those in the two national surveys.

Ninety-eight percent of Mason seniors, more than the general public, said it is important both to understand other cultures/customs and to know about international issues to compete successfully in a global economy. When asked how important it is to speak a foreign language, 93% said it is “very important” or “somewhat important,” 8 percentage points higher than the general public.

Table 2. Professional Relevance and Benefits of International Education

<i>How important will...</i>	GMU Seniors, 2004		U.S. Public, 2000*	
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important
...knowledge about international issues be <u>for your career in the next 10 years?</u>	56%	35%	25%	27%
...knowledge about international issues be <u>for your children’s career or for young people in high school today?</u>	72%	26%	63%	30%
...it be for people in the workforce to <u>speak a foreign language</u> to compete successfully in a global economy?	55%	38%	41%	44%
...it be for people in the workforce to <u>understand other cultures and customs</u> to compete successfully in a global economy?	80%	18%	53%	40%
...it be for people in the workforce to <u>know about international issues</u> to compete successfully in a global economy?	73%	25%	46%	43%

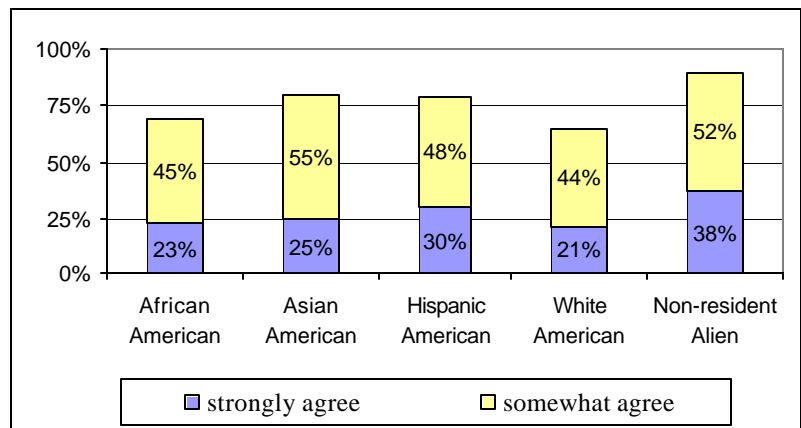
*Source: American Council on Education

VI. Learning International Skills and Knowledge in High School and College

1. Selecting a College or University

The ACE 2000 survey showed that almost 80% of the public believed international education opportunities were an important consideration when selecting a college or university. Among the Mason seniors, 70% support this statement: 24% “strongly agree” and 46% “somewhat agree.” The support is higher among international students, Asian and Hispanic American students with 90%, 80% and 78% of them supporting this statement respectively (See Figure 4). White American students are the least likely to agree.

Figure 4. International Education Opportunities should be an Important Consideration when Selecting a College (Mason, 2004)



2. Learning International Skills and Knowledge in College

Like the general public, Mason seniors (79%) agree that college students should have a study abroad experience. This view is shared by the general public (75% in 2000), even more so after the September 11 attack (79%). Mason students also agree that college students should take courses on international topics and should have a work or internship experience abroad at some time during their studies. International students and Hispanic American students are more likely to support all three of these statements than others.

Figure 4. Colleges should Require Students to Take Courses Covering International Topics (Mason, 2004)

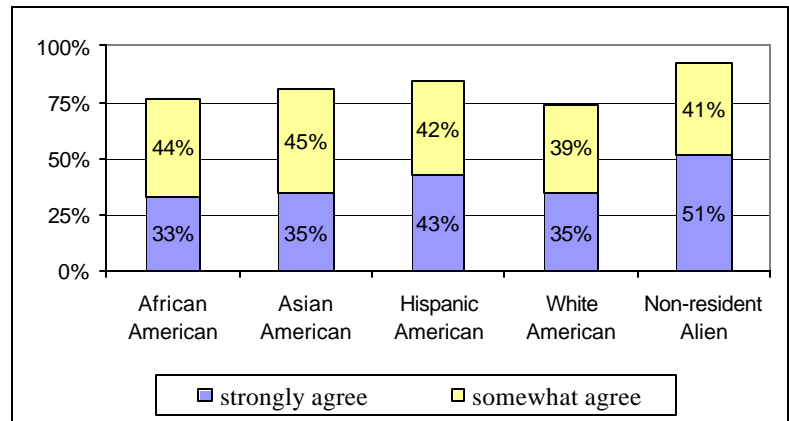


Table 3. Curricular Requirements

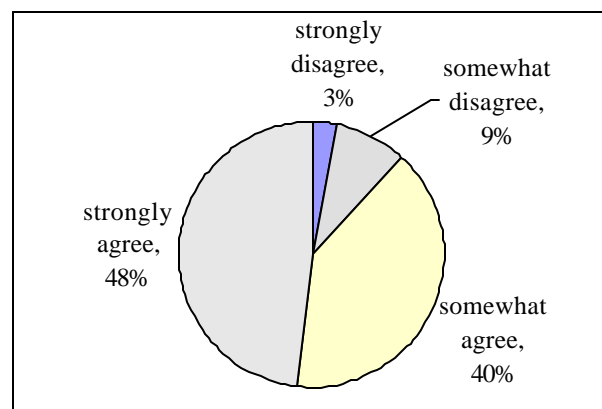
Level of agreement with the following statements:	GMU Seniors, 2004		U.S. Public, 2000*	
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree
Students should have a study abroad experience some time during college or university.	34%	45%	34%	41%
Colleges and universities should require students to take course covering international topics.	37%	40%	38%	39%
Students should have a work or internship experience abroad at some time during their studies.	30%	42%	75% combined	

3. Interaction with Foreign Students

Eighty-eight percent of Mason seniors think that “The presence of international students on U.S. campuses enriches the learning experience for American students.” This figure is very close to the national survey in 2000, which was 86% and above the 2002 survey in which 80% agreed.

One Mason senior wrote down the following comment: “*The international diversity provided at Mason has been the most defining point in my education and has assisted me in learning new information and skills about the world.*” International students have also benefited from diversity at Mason: “*To my delight GMU has one of the most diverse learning communities. This is certainly a great opportunity for all the students to learn of the other people’s background and culture; and international people, such as myself, were able to learn of American culture.*”

Figure 5. Agreement with the Statement that the Presence of International Students on U.S. Campuses Enriches the Learning Experience for American Students



On the other hand, a few students observed the lack of sufficient interaction between American students and international students outside of class. “*Mason hasn’t built an atmosphere that encourages students to interact with each other outside the classroom. Therefore, the international students usually stick to their own groups while the Americans stick to theirs.*”

4. Foreign Language Requirement at School

In the 2000 ACE survey, 77% of the public thought foreign language training should be required in high school and 70% supported the idea that college students should be required to study a foreign language if they did not already know one. Support for a foreign language requirement in both high school and college was strongest among African Americans and Hispanics, as well as among those who have traveled overseas or already speak another language.

Among Mason seniors, 87% support a foreign language requirement in high school; in contrast, only 63% support the requirement of a foreign language in college for the students who do not already know one. Strong support was found among Hispanic American students at Mason: 74% of them strongly support a foreign language requirement in high school and 42% strongly support such a requirement in college.

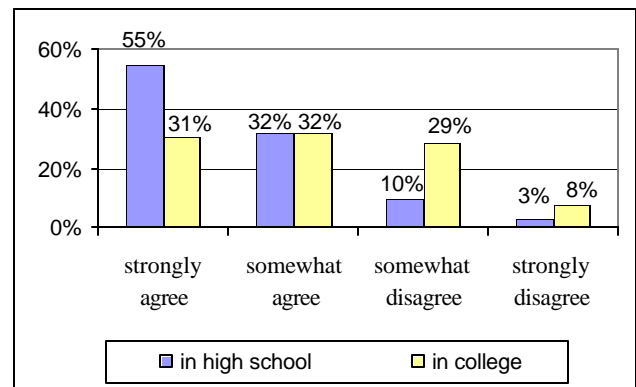
Some students expressed their satisfaction with the opportunities to learn foreign languages at Mason: “Mason’s diversity of culture made it a very enjoyable and interesting experience. I highly recommend incorporating foreign languages in all disciplines from Arts and Sciences to Engineering.” Some Mason seniors are against the foreign language requirement in high school or college; instead, they think that foreign languages should be introduced at an early age because “*the younger you are, the more successful you will be at learning a foreign language.*”

5. Student Comments on the Foreign Language Requirement at Mason

Although the majority of Mason seniors support the statement that “Students in colleges and universities should be required to study a foreign language if they do not already know one,” some of them have reservations about the foreign language requirement of their colleges. Currently, all students enrolled in Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree programs in the College of Arts and Sciences and some students enrolled in B.A. degree programs in the College of Visual and Performing Arts are required to demonstrate intermediate-level proficiency in one foreign language. College/program requirements on foreign language may vary, but some students have to complete as many as 12 credits to fulfill this requirement. Calls for reforming the foreign language requirement were found in student comments in the Graduating Senior Survey. Here are some verbatim comments:

- Some students *are confused about the foreign language requirement of their college/program*. Some programs allow students to test out of the requirement, but the comments suggest that not all students know this or at least do not see this as a realistic option.
 - “Although I believe that people should have a good understanding of other cultures and languages, I think that the foreign language requirement is too much. To fulfill the requirement without testing out, you are forced to take 12 credits—that’s about the same as some minors! There is no other general education course that forces you to take so many credits.”
- Some students call for *lowering the foreign language requirement*.
 - “The foreign language requirement is too strict and time consuming. Instead of wasting my time learning a language that I will not use, I wish I could have used the 12 credits to pursue a minor in another department.”
 - “I think that 4 semesters of a foreign language was a waste of my time personally and from what I heard and discussed with my classmates, they felt the same way.”
 - “I do not feel that a language should be a required class for any major. It’s nice that it is available for other students, but I am almost 32 years old and do not plan on using Spanish in any capacity after I graduate. My high school did not require a language; therefore, I am at an extreme disadvantage right now.”

Figure 6. Agreement with Foreign Language Requirement in High School and College (Mason, 2004)



- “Being forced to take a foreign language at a university, and having to pay for it in order to get a degree is an incredible waste of time, money, and resources. It is a major irritant and a distraction from other classes.”
- “I don't believe the college should require students to take foreign language classes, it should be up to them. It all depends on what their interest is and what they want to do in their future.”
- Some students suggest *emphasizing foreign studies rather than foreign languages* at Mason.
 - “I think it's necessary for students to learn language by reading literature, history and experiencing art... The curriculum in foreign language could be adjusted to reflect emersion by lessening the ‘mechanics’ (which are about 12 hours worth) and focus some of these 12 hours on literature, history or art. Maybe the student could experience ‘emersion’ instead of ‘aversion’ to foreign language.”
- Some *non-traditional students do not have enough academic preparation*.
 - “As an older student I struggled a great deal with the foreign language requirement. The book that is used for Spanish is not for beginners. I had no languages in high school, and therefore had no background in Spanish to build upon. The Spanish book is geared more for students with Spanish already in their past.”
 - “There are countless non-traditional students who are returning to college and did not have foreign language as a requirement for graduating from high school years ago. Many are self taught.”
 - I am 30 years old and when I started taking Spanish at George Mason it was and remained to be extremely difficult. These classes were for students who already had some prior knowledge of the subject; it was more of a review than teaching. Four semesters was way too much time and money to require of me to take this course. It was a waste.”
- Some students call for *more selections of foreign languages*.
 - “Valuable Foreign languages such as Chinese, Spanish, Japanese need to be supported and expanded, with academic languages French, German, Russian receiving less focus.”
 - “I also hope to see [Mason] create a Korean language course, too... I think that this language is also very important as much as other oriental foreign languages.”

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George Mason University
