

Assessing GMU's Fall 1996 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.

I. Background and Introduction

Link courses pair an English 101 course with a non-English subject matter course to encourage student writing in a discipline area and support learning in the non-English course. Specifically, during fall semester 1996 at GMU, English 101 was linked with class sections in anthropology, biology, communication, government, history and psychology. Further, Psychology 100 and Biology 103 were combined with English 101 in a three way link as were Sociology 101, University 100 and English 101; and Government 103, Communication 100 and English 101. Students enrolled in these courses were surveyed at the beginning (n=372 respondents, 99.2% of 375 students enrolled) and end of the semester (n=278 respondents).

II. Students' Experiences in the Linked Courses

On the post-course questionnaire, students were asked to indicate their agreement ("strongly agree" or "agree") and disagreement ("strongly disagree" or "disagree") with statements about social and academic community in the linked program and about the curricular connections made between English 101 and the non-English, subject matter course. A summary of the results of these questionnaires follows.

IIA. Formation of Community

Students agreed that social community (79%) and academic community (56%) developed in the linked courses. (See Table 1.) Further, four-fifths (81%) agreed that community was easier to develop in the English course. (Past focus groups suggest that the smaller size of English 101 relative to the subject matter course, contributes to English being the easiest place to form community.) Over two-thirds of students said that they experienced a closer relationship with faculty in the link program when compared with faculty teaching other courses (68%). For most of them (60%), the linked courses program eased the transition to college. One student wrote, "Through linked courses, I was able to learn more about myself as a person and as a student. It definitely helped my transition to college greatly." Further, in addition to saying that an academic community was formed (56%), they also felt that the links helped them to be more comfortable in the larger, non-English course (55%). On the survey, one student wrote, "I liked the sense of having the same classmates in my English class as my large psych class. It helped me get over my anxiety in a large lecture class."

Table 1.
Proportion "Agreeing" With Each of the Following Items on Academic and Social Community in Linked Courses

<i>% Agreeing*</i>	Academic and Social Community
81.1	It was easier to achieve community in my English class.
79.4	A social community developed in my linked courses.

68.4	Experienced closed relationship with linked faculty than with faculty teaching other courses.
60.0	Linked courses helped ease transition to college.
57.3	A sense of community carried over to my non-English class.
56.3	Academic community formed between students.
55.0	As a result of the link, I was more comfortable in my larger, non-English course(s).

**Percent of students responding "strongly agree" or "agree"*

IIB. Curricular Connections in Linked Courses

Students agreed that they began the semester with high expectations for substantial curricular connections (85%) in the linked courses program. And indeed, most of them report positive curricular links. For example, links appear to support an understanding of disciplinary perspectives - 79% of students say that faculty opinions and views may differ depending on their discipline. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the linked students felt that the number of curricular connections were appropriate and that the curricular connections made in the linked courses helped students see subject matter relationships (70%).

Table 2.
Curricular Connections in Linked Courses

% Agreeing*	Curricular Connections in Linked Courses
84.5	When enrolling, I expected many curricular connections.
79.0	Faculty views/opinions may differ depending on their academic discipline.
72.8	The number of curricular connections were appropriate.
71.2	My linked courses did make curricular connections.
70.0	Curricular connections helped me see subject matter relationships.
48.7	Because of the links, I began to make curricular connections in other, non-linked courses.
55.0	As a result of the link, I was more comfortable in my larger, non-English course(s).

**Percent of students responding "strongly agree" or "agree"*

III. Meeting Students' Expectations?

On the post-course questionnaire, students were asked to describe the most appealing aspects of the linked courses "I liked being able to talk about my Sociology class in English because it gave me a better understanding of both. It also gave me interesting papers to write about.". Most often, students described the linked assignments that connected or related subject matter (17%). Other aspects that students liked included a strong social or academic community (16%), the " good experience" (11%) of the links, the small class size that made learning easier (11%), and the perception that the links supported learning (11%). Regarding connected or related subject matter, one student wrote, "I liked being able to talk about my Sociology class in English because it gave me a better understanding of both. It also gave me interesting papers to write about." Another said, "The most appealing aspect to me was being in the same groups. It helped in studying and learning." For a complete listing of all students' responses, request a copy of the report, **Meeting Students' Expectations?, Linked Courses, Fall 1996** from the Office of Institutional Assessment.

IV. Enrolling in Linked Courses

Reasons for Enrolling in the Linked Courses Program

The top four reasons students gave for enrolling in the linked courses were to learn more or learn better with the linked approach (35%,

n=128), they were the only courses open or available at registration time (18%, n=68), the smaller class size might allow the students to get to know one another better (13%, n=47), and the links were recommended to the student by someone (12%, n=46).

The most frequently given reason for selecting the subject matter course (opposite the English component in the linked combination) was interest in the subject matter (62%, n=229), followed by the subject being a major requirement (30%, n=111).



How Did Students Hear About The Linked Courses?

Over two-thirds (69%, n=257) reported that they first heard about the linked courses at a GMU orientation session, while 21% (n=81) indicated that an advisor or faculty member was their first source of information about the program. Nearly one-fifth (19%, n=69) said that they first learned of the program through a course information pamphlet sent in the mail.

V. Students' Characteristics

Ethnicity.

Institutional Assessment has begun adding the category of "multiple ethnicity" to many survey projects. In fall 1996, 5.4% of the linked students said this applied to their ethnic origin. The ethnicity of linked students is compared to all fall 1996 first time freshmen in Table 1 below. The linked program enrolls more African American and Hispanic American students than their proportions among the first time freshmen population, but a smaller proportion of Asian American students. This latter difference may be accounted for, in part, by the use of the "multiple ethnicity" category.

Table 3.

Ethnicity	Linked Students	'96 GMU First Time Freshmen
African American	11.1	10.6
Asian American	11.9	16.0
Hispanic American	9.5	6.9
Native American	.8	.7
Nonresident Alien	1.6	3.0
White American	59.6	62.8
Multiple Ethnicity	5.4	NA*

*NA - Not available from the institutional database

First Language.

Fourteen percent of linked students said that they first learned to speak a language other than English, while 12% first learned to speak both English and another language. In 1994, a slightly greater proportion of freshmen (28%) said they learned another language or English and another language simultaneously.

Rating English Composition Skills and Skills in the Non-English Subject Matter Course.

Comparing themselves to other GMU freshmen, 59% of linked students rated their writing skills as "average" and nearly one-third (32%) rated their writing skills as "above average." In the subject matter course, 53% rated themselves "average" and 37% rated themselves "above average."

Places of Residence.

A majority (54%) of linked students said that they planned to reside in university housing during fall semester 1996. This is slightly more than the proportion of all 1996 GMU freshmen (51%) who reside in university housing. Forty-four percent of linked students said they planned to live off campus with family or relatives and 2% said they would live off campus with other students. Among freshmen nationally at four year public institutions, 74% planned to live in campus housing and only 2% with parents or relatives.

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Declared Majors of Linked Students.

Nearly two-thirds (63%, n=232) of survey respondents entered GMU with a declared major. The most popular majors were psychology (18%, n=42), computer science (9%, n=21) and business administration majors (9% n=20).



VI. Linking English 101 with Large Lecture Sections

VIA. Introduction

In the linked courses program, English 101 is sometimes linked with a subject matter course that might enroll a few hundred students. In these large subject matter courses, only a handful of students are enrolled in the linked English section. This arrangement poses challenges for students and faculty. During fall, 1996, focus groups were conducted with students linked in English 101 and Psychology (n=12) and English 101 and Sociology 101 (n=16) to consider how faculty met the special challenges of linking relatively small English sections (22 students) to such large subject matter courses.

VIB. How Were Links Created?

Overall, whether in Sociology or Psychology, students said that the English faculty were instrumental in making or creating the linkages to their subject matter course. Specifically, students mentioned writing papers related to their subject matter courses, reporting that the English professor visited the subject matter class to hear both content and class logistical issues (e.g. dates of exams), and that English class projects and discussions were centered on Sociological or Psychological issues.

VIC. E-mail Mentoring in the Psychology Link

Students enrolled in the English and psychology link corresponded with e-mail mentors throughout the fall semester. These mentors were GMU seniors majoring in the field of Psychology. Most often, freshmen sought help from the e-mail mentors with the questions over terms, concepts or definitions, study tips and career information. Some students sought out personal advice from the mentors, but the mentors often referred students to various campus offices for help with these issues.

VID. Mentoring Supports Learning

After the focus groups, students were asked to write their responses to three questions. (A copy of students' comments may be obtained from Institutional Assessment.) Would they recommend an e-mail mentoring course and what were the most and least valuable aspects of the course? Students comment often on the speed of response of mentors when asking a question (compared with waiting until the class meets again) and the fact that mentors were readily available over e-mail. It appears that the success of the mentoring was tied not only to the fact that there were mentors, but that these mentors were readily available by e-mail.

Greater Access to Information

Students said they would recommend a linked course with an e-mail mentoring component because it was easy to get help when needed and that it was easier to reach a mentor than the professor. Some students said that the most valuable aspect of the mentoring program was knowing that someone was going to be available when they needed help. Specifically, when asked whether he/she would

recommend the e-mail mentoring linked course, one student said, "Yes! Absolutely! It helped me through the transition of being a freshmen and living on campus. I met new, interesting, and nice people and with the mentors there, I always felt that I had someone nearby if I needed help. It opened up the lines of communication between the professors, students and the mentors. I think this is a very valuable aspect to the college experience."

Learner Centered Approach

Many students mentioned that having the mentors available via email allowed them to learn when they were ready. For example, one student wrote, "Confusions can be cleared up at our convenience - when we have the chance to e-mail." Similarly, another student said, "If you have questions it is easier to just ask your mentor and have them answer you than to wait until your next class or until your professor has the time to answer your question." Another student also suggested that the e-mail technology provides a last minute boost to learning. Specifically, he/she said, "The mentoring aspect helped with general information on concepts and study skills, they were also helpful before tests on clearing up last minute questions."

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