

Introduction to the Problem

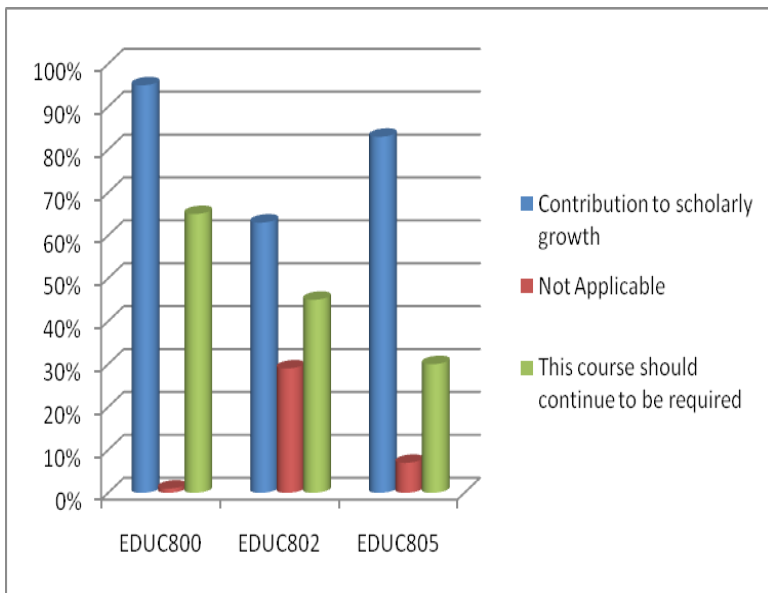
George Mason (GMU) is a large and rapidly growing public university in Northern Virginia. Located in the middle of the metropolitan Washington D.C. area, GMU serves an enormous and diverse undergraduate population as well as thousands of working adults pursuing continuing education in one of the most highly educated regions of the United States. The analysis presented in this paper examines data collected to better understand student satisfaction in one of GMU's graduate programs in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). In particular, this survey was designed to inform the new director of CEHD's Ph.D. in Education. The new director, in collaboration with a class of students enrolled (or sitting in on) a course in survey method design, designed the questions and responses in this survey to examine several aspects of the program, including required courses, training in educational methods, faculty and peer relationships, and the process leading towards dissertation defense.

Foundation Courses and Goals

The CEHD Ph.D. program contains several features that distinguish it from other similar programs, and the perceived relevance and significance of these features to the current students were interrogated in the current survey. Among these features are the program's "general culture" courses. These are courses intended to provide all students with a common core of knowledge. Beyond this, the courses are intended to support opportunities for students to collaborate and interact with students they might otherwise interact with if they were to be immediately segregated into -primary and secondary specializations. These general courses are: Education 800, "Ways of knowing", (an epistemology course); Education 802, the leadership seminar; and Education 805, the doctoral seminar. A second set of courses, the educational research methods courses, comprise another 9 credits of

courses common to all students in the program. This paper examines students' satisfaction with these general culture and educational methods courses.

Before we examine the data, it is important to note a significant weakness of the study. The respondents were over-represented those students who are relatively early in the program. This was

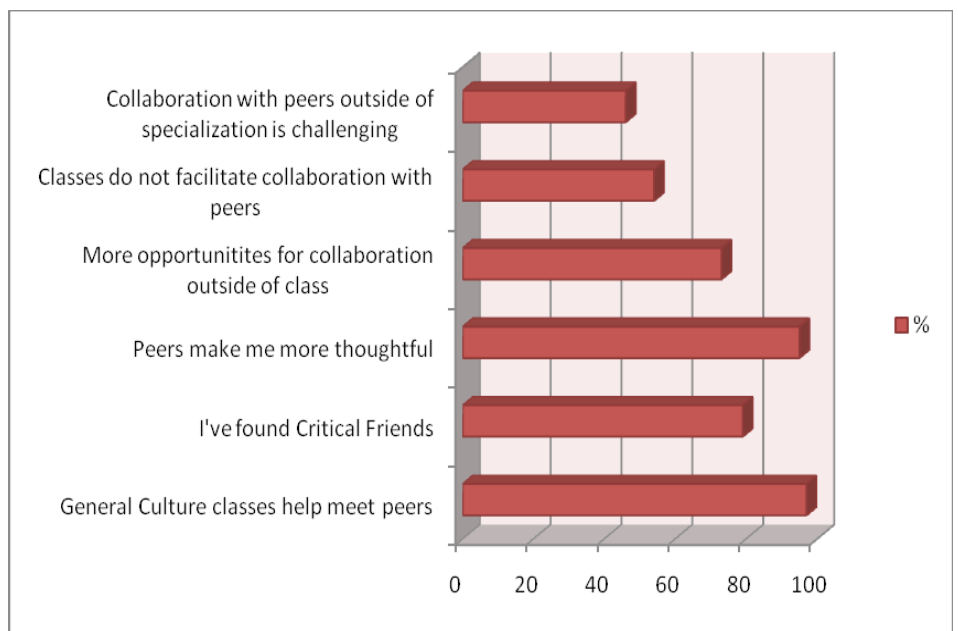


apparent by looking at the courses the respondents have not yet taken. Responding students (from here on referred to as "respondents") were, on the whole, very pleased with the general culture courses, and reported that the courses were contributing to their professional development.

Overall, respondents felt very positively

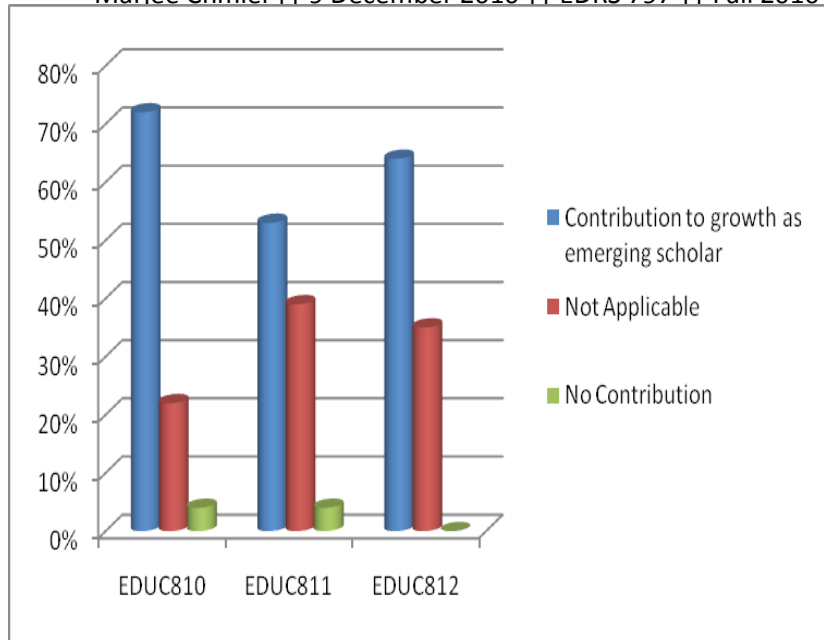
towards the Education 800 "Ways of knowing" class with 95% reporting that it had contributed positively to their scholarly growth and 65% of students saying that the course should continue to be required. Most students reported having had taken Education 800. This is contrasted to Education 802, where 29% of respondents reported the course was not applicable to them. However, those who could

comment on the Educ 802 course reported that it provided a useful contribution to their scholarly development at 63%, with 45% of respondents reporting that the program should continue to require the course. Education



805, which only excluded 7% of respondents, was viewed as contributing to the scholarly development by 83% of respondents, but only 30% of respondents said the course should be required.

The PhD program



director and his advising students were also interested in perceived benefits of the courses that lie outside of the syllabus and course assignments. 97% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the general culture courses are a good way to meet peers. 79% said that these classmates serve to establish their circle of critical friends. 73% of students would like more opportunities to interact with students outside of class, and 95% report that their classmates made them more thoughtful.

A weakness of the courses may be their role in fostering productive collaborations: 54% of respondents said that they do not collaborate with their class peers on research. In fact, 46% of respondents agree or strongly agree that working with peers outside of their own specializations proves to be challenging. These results may in part be explained by the fact that most of the respondents are quite new to the program.

If peer collaboration emerged as a weakness of the program, building traditional scholarly skills can be said to be the program’s strength. According to respondents, the program is meeting their needs in building a variety of scholarly strengths. For instance, only 4% of respondents felt that the courses did not help in this matter and 11% of respondents reported they have had the opportunity. Only 2% of respondents felt courses were not helpful in ascertaining the quality of educational research studies,

with a mere 6% reporting that they have not had the opportunity to do so yet. An overwhelming 92% of respondents felt that the program has helped refine their writing skills. 80% of respondents felt that the program has provided them with opportunities to be better practitioner (with 12% reporting no opportunity yet), and 91% of respondents reported that the program has been helpful in increasing knowledge in their primary area. Only 2% of respondents who have had the opportunity to work in their secondary area have reported that it ~~wh~~as not been helpful in developing content knowledge.

Courses in Educational Research Methods

In addition to the general culture courses, all ~~GMUPh.D. in Education-graduate~~ students take three required core research courses: An introduction to educational research (810), an introduction to quantitative research methods and analysis (811) and an introduction to qualitative research methods and analysis (811). These three courses ~~generally~~ serve as precursors to upper division courses of the students choosing. These include advanced quantitative and qualitative courses, courses in mixed-methods research, evaluation, single-subject methods, and others that are offered intermittently. In this section of the study, the over-sampling of students early in the program becomes more apparent, as respondents reporting that the question was not applicable to them ranged from 25% to nearly 100%.

Overall, respondents felt the methods courses were contributing to their scholarly growth, with Educ 811 having the greatest quantity of “Not applicable” responses. It is likely that the relatively lower population of respondents who took Educ 811 artificially deflates the percentage of respondents reporting that the course did contribute to their growth as a scholar. In the case of all three courses, it’s worth noting that in absolute terms, few to no students report that the courses overtly *do not* contribute to their growth as a scholar. By breaking the responses down further, the Educ 812 course emerges as having a high number of respondents reporting that they “strongly agree” that the course contributed to their scholarly growth. In fact, when it comes to Educ 812, 42% of respondents selected

the “strongly” option as opposed to Educ 810 (29%) and Educ 811 (19%). Because so few respondents were able to assess any of the upper division methodology courses (such as mixed methods, evaluation, self-study methods, structural equation modeling, and the advanced qualitative and quantitative method courses) due to their timing within the program, we are unable to provide any sort of meaningful analysis regarding the more advanced courses.

Final Thoughts

There are several compelling questions that have been opened by this study. For instance, why do so many respondents find Educ 805 to be such an important contribution to their scholarly growth, yet relatively few think it should be maintained as a required course? Why do so many respondents feel so strongly about the contribution of EDRS 812 to their scholarly growth compared to the other introductory methods courses? Are there projects, efforts, or course structures in EDRS 812 that could be implemented in EDRS 810 and EDRS 811 that could increase the degree of student satisfaction with those courses as well? It is also curious and worrisome that relatively few students who are towards the middle and end of their program responded to the survey. These more seasoned students appear to be more difficult to reach via email survey. Perhaps the best course of action would be to construct some focus groups to get a more in-depth understand of those students’ concerns and motivation and use this data to inform the new director about the program from the point of view of these seasoned students. During our group analysis of the survey results, several seasoned students of the program voiced concerns that data from students earlier on in the program might not accurately represents the attitude and satisfaction of the student body as whole.

Based on the data presented in this survey, however, students do seem to be satisfied with GMU’s general-culture-cohort approach to scaffolding new PhD students. The academic content and

opportunities to meet peers from a variety of sub-disciplines is clearly being received as strengths of the program by the new students.

Marjee, I will accept this paper as is. I used more to provide feedback to help you with your writing up a study. APA formatting is of particular note: headings and labels for figures and tables. Also, note that I made comments on how to “clean” data, even the limited and pre-digested data I shared with you. We can easily remove those respondents who obscure real findings and then recalculate the percentages (in this case).

I notice that I did not make any comments on your writing. There is a good logical flow to your writing, so you seem to have that mastered. You don't stray from the data or make unwarranted judgments about what they mean.

A