

Liberal Education Requirements Focus Group Findings

Conducted for the University of Minnesota
Office of the Provost for Undergraduate Education
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We conducted four focus groups with University of Minnesota students to get their perceptions of the liberal education requirements (LER). A total of 30 Twin Cities campus students participated. All were juniors or seniors. Students came from CLA, CBS, IT, and the Carlson School. Margot Inverson, administrative fellow in the Office of the Assistant Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, managed the recruitment and logistics.

The focus group participants were bright. Many had taken honors courses. A number were completing double majors. Some had completed college courses while still in high school. Almost all were planning to complete their degree in four years.

This report summarizes what we heard in the focus groups. Student quotes are in italics.

What messages do students get about liberal education requirements?

Students said the main message they hear is to complete the liberal education requirements in their first two years or they will be behind for graduation. The emphasis is on getting these requirements done. (CBS students are an exception to this. They said they are encouraged to distribute the LER throughout their four years.)

The LER are seen as requirements, not opportunities. Students take these courses because they have to, not because they get to. The LER are not framed as valuable or beneficial to the students.

Most of these students had completed all their LE requirements.

A few people said they were “saving” a LER. They were anticipating a challenging semester in their senior year and were saving the LER to balance the workload and provide variety during a demanding semester.

My advisor told me to take the lib eds early. Take them your freshman and sophomore years so you can decide what you want to major in your junior and senior years.

As a freshman I remember signing up and it was like, ‘OK, you need to get all these done as soon as possible. If you are doing them in your senior year you are way behind.’ I remember it was like, ohmigod. I have all these requirements; I better do them all right away. They made it seem like if you didn’t do them right away you weren’t going to graduate on time.

How do students select courses to meet the LE requirements?

Students said they typically take basic introductory courses to fulfill the science and math requirements. Students take a variety of courses to fulfill the social science / humanities requirements, writing intensives, and designated themes.

Some students start looking for courses at One Stop. They use the search tool to look for courses that meet their criteria and they look at the lists of courses that meet the liberal education requirements. They select a course from that pool by weighing a combination of the factors described below. (Students don't always use One Stop to select courses. Some seem to select courses from a more limited pool based on word-of-mouth.)

Here are factors that students said they weigh when selecting classes. They are not listed in any order of importance. Different students gave different weights to these factors at different times in their college careers.

- Requirements. How many requirements does a course meet?
 - Many students looked for “double-” and “triple-dippers.” This seemed particularly true for students whose majors had little room for additional courses (e.g., IT students, students with double majors).
- Schedule. How does the course fit my schedule? Schedule is a major factor. One student said, “Schedule trumps everything else.”
 - Students schedule major courses first. Liberal education requirements must fit around their major classes.
 - Some students select classes to fit around a work schedule.
 - Some students select classes to fit a commuting schedule.
 - Some students select classes to fit personal time preferences (e.g., not wanting early morning classes, wanting time for lunch, wanting evening courses, wanting only Tuesday / Thursday classes, wanting an even schedule across the week).
 - Students in one focus group talked about a new online program called the Scheduler that, based on class numbers, will generate possible schedules.
- Reputation. What's the reputation of the course or instructor? Students said they use a variety of sources including:
 - Word-of-mouth. Students said they frequently ask for or get advice from friends and upper-class students.
 - Online sites.
 - www.ratemyprofessor.com. Students said there are a number of similar sites, but ratemyprofessor is the most popular. We were surprised by how many students said they used this site. They believe the site provides credible information.
 - One Stop. A few students said they use One Stop to search for instructors who have received teaching awards. (Some students don't know this option exists.)

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- Workload. How much work is required? What type of work is required?
 - Students said they are looking for a balanced workload.
 - If they have several courses that will require a lot of work, they will try to balance them with courses that require less work.
 - Students tend to look for “easy” LER courses to achieve balance.
 - They said they only take a LER course with a reputation of being hard if they are really interested in the topic or professor.
- Potential grade. What impact will this course have on my GPA?
 - Some students look for LER courses that can help boost their GPA.
 - One IT student said the LER hurt his GPA because he had to take biology even though he was not interested in biology. He got a C. He said it has been hard to recover from that.
- Interest. What course looks interesting or fun?
 - Students said they select LER courses based on their interests when possible, but sometimes interest is given less weight than other factors in this list.
- Variety. Does this course provide a break from the intensity of my other courses?
 - Some students (e.g., CBS and IT) said they purposefully look for courses that are different from their major courses.

One Stop has been my friend throughout all this. I use it all the time.

I found the course search tool on One Stop to be really helpful. I would wonder what the heck fits this and it helped me find classes. I did a writing intensive through mortuary science. I would have never thought of that. So the search tool is great.

Most of it [my information] came from word-of-mouth. ‘So and so is really good.’ ‘This class is really easy.’ Especially when it came to the physical and biological sciences. I am not in that sort of major so I would typically go ask which class is easiest. Otherwise it is a lot of guesswork. I like to make sure it meets two requirements, a double-dipper. I can knock two birds out with one stone and go on with my own interests. That way you can save credits for something you actually find interesting.

I was looking at courses for astronomy for the physical science requirement. When I was choosing which professor I noticed one had an award for teaching so I picked him. I am in love with my astronomy class right now.

Most of us [dorm mates] were humanities, English, and psychology majors so we tried to get out of the heavy sciences. I think a lot of people take the most basic class you can to meet the requirements. I took Bio 1001. I took Math 1301. It is the most basic math. I just took them to get them done. Get them out of the way. I looked for the easiest. It felt like high school level. I learned it all

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before but it was fun to be in a college setting and learning it again. You get to school and you hear by word-of-mouth, 'Take Bio 1001.' 'Take math 1301.' I think for people who are undecided, they just fill the first year with lib ed requirements.

IT is really technical and a lot of work. So sadly, my first couple of years I looked for liberal education requirements that were easy and not time-consuming.... Now in the last couple years I have been choosing courses that would broaden my perspective on things.... I am not looking at it in terms of hard or easy, but more towards what I can get out of it. I had a shift in views over the four years.

Professors are really important to me. Spring semester of my freshman year I used ratemyprofessor.com to schedule my classes. I based my entire schedule off other people's comments—from the website and from my peers.... I would recommend it.

One reason I take lib eds is to give myself a break from other classes and to boost my GPA. But classes that you take because they fulfill a requirement but that you are not interested in, that is what lowers your GPA.

What role do advisors play?

Students said they listened to their advisors most when selecting classes for their first semester of freshman year. After a student's initial registration as a freshman, advisors seem to have less influence on students' selections of LER courses. Most students said they only go to their advisor for technical reasons (e.g., to change their APAS, to get a hold lifted, as a check that they haven't missed something needed to graduate). Many students said their advisor doesn't really know them or their interests, so they don't trust their advisor to suggest courses. Advisors seem to play a monitoring role.

Some students had two advisors: a faculty member in their major and an advisor who dealt with registration issues. While the faculty advisors help students select classes in their major, students said faculty provide less help selecting LER courses because they typically aren't familiar with courses outside their discipline.

Some students complained about the advising they received. One student said she met with a peer advisor during orientation who gave her inaccurate advice about the liberal education requirements, which caused her to take courses she did not need.

A few students said that early in their college career they thought they needed to take a separate course to directly address each LER designated theme. They did not realize that most of the theme requirements would be fulfilled by courses in their major. Students said they wished they hadn't taken courses in their first two years to specifically address the themes because they would have more time as juniors and seniors to take courses they truly want to take. (Students in CBS and IT said their major courses do not usually fulfill the LER designated themes, so they do need to pay attention to these requirements.)

They [advisors] never helped me with classes. They don't really help you. They print out your APAS and say, oh, looks like you need some credits in this or that, but they don't go in-depth with you. It's not coaching. It's more like a checklist of what you have met and what you haven't. It is not about where you intend to go or what you want to do.

I never ask my advisor for help with that kind of stuff. They have been helpful with other classes, but not with the lib ed.

I see the advisor as a check that I am not going completely wrong.

Professors don't know your schedule or what your interests are. They expect you to look it up yourself and find out what is interesting to you. They tell you that you still have this requirement to be fulfilled, but they don't help you pick classes.

Why does the University require liberal education courses?

We asked students to list the reasons they thought the University requires liberal education courses. Students consistently gave three reasons: to create well-rounded graduates, to help students appreciate diversity, and to give students who have not decided on a major a chance to explore. Many students said their LER did help them grow and explore, but some said their courses didn't do what they were meant to do (e.g., broaden their interests, make them better citizens).

I have become interested in a lot more things. I took psychology and liked it a lot and was thinking of minoring in it. I have also taken Intimate Relationships through the Family Social Science department and I loved that and was thinking of minoring in that. I have taken classes in Fisheries and Wildlife and it made me think in a completely new way. It was really an interesting class and it changed me. It was about the impact of an individual on the environment and to think about your impact. I think I am a better citizen [because of that class]. I think I have a lot more interests because of the liberal education requirements.

I've had a lot of good courses. The best was a freshman honor seminar. What made it the best is that there were probably 20 people in there. The first day I am looking through the book and I see the picture of the author and suddenly he walks in the room and starts teaching the class. I was like, Oh cool. Wow! He wrote the book and he is teaching the class. It was like meeting a minor celebrity. And the reason it was good is that it shocked me into college. This is the type of thing that you can do at this major university. You can have a class with 20 students with a tenured professor who has written a book.... He knew so much. I wish everyone could have that experience sometime during their university career—to have a very good professor in a very small setting.

I think that is what they are designed for, for diversity and being well-rounded, but I don't know that it really does that. I feel I am plenty well-rounded taking the courses that I would have taken anyway. I think a lot of them were a waste of time. I can't think of any specific class that I was like, wow, this really opened my eyes to something.

A lot of the classes I took I just took to complete all the requirements. It is not like I read through the course descriptions and was really truly interested in taking these classes. I just wanted to get the requirements met. Maybe I learned a few new things, but I don't think it satisfied the purpose of the requirements.

A few students said liberal arts courses are required because they distinguish a four-year degree from a two-year technical degree. A few said the courses are required so the

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University can produce high quality graduates and compete with other higher education institutions.

A few students said they thought the courses were required as a way to generate additional revenue for the University or to keep consistent enrollment in certain courses.

We then asked students to rate how strongly they agree with the following statements related to the liberal education requirements. This is based on only 30 responses and is not meant to reflect the population of all students.

Statements (n=30)	Mean
My LE courses increased the breadth of my knowledge	3.9*
I understand why the University requires LE courses	3.9
My LE courses helped me understand how people think in other fields and disciplines	3.7
My LE courses increased my understanding of the environment, cultural diversity, international perspectives, or citizenship and ethics	3.7
My LE courses are a valuable part of my university education	3.5
My LE courses caused me to have new interests	3.4
My LE courses prepared me to be a better citizen	3.2
My LE courses improved the quality of my life	2.6

*5=Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2= Disagree, 1=Strongly disagree

Students said instructors do not explicitly describe how people in their discipline think or explore problems, nor do they compare how that is similar to or different from the ways people in other disciplines think and explore. Students must discern this for themselves. Students said faculty sometimes dismiss other disciplines and other ways of knowing.

Some students said the LER did cause them to have new interests. Some used the LER to find a major. Some changed majors or added a minor based on LER. Others said it did not cause them to have new interests. They said they already had broad interests.

Few students could cite examples of how the LER prepared them to be better citizens.

Students said the LER did not add to quality of life. They said the courses did not bring them more food or money. Instead courses added stress and took time from other things.

General versus specific courses.

We said to students:

Many courses will meet the liberal education requirements. You can meet the LE requirement by taking a general introductory course in a discipline or a specialized course within the field. Some have said that the specialized courses might be so narrow or diluted that the student doesn't get an understanding of the discipline. Others say that the specialized courses give the students more choices. What are your thoughts?

Some students said this isn't an issue because there are usually prerequisites to get into the higher level, more specialized courses. Students typically have to take an introductory course before they can register for a more specialized course.

Other students said they prefer to have both options. Students like choice. One student said she took the History of the Typewriter through Journalism to fulfill the historical perspectives requirement. (We did not see a course by this name listed.) She said she wasn't interested in history, but was interested in journalism. This course made the history requirement palatable. Another student said he wished the courses were even broader. As an IT student he said he would have been much happier taking an international perspectives course in his major, for example, on how the Chinese build bridges, but no such course is offered.

I think it is great to give students options. If someone wants to take the History of the Typewriter, let them. If they want to take a broad class, that is fine too. I think students should be able to make those decisions for themselves. They are legal adults. As long as you say they have to take a history class, at least let them pick which history it will be. They will probably enjoy the class more and get more out of it.

I think we should have the option for both [general and specific courses]. I don't see the problem. I took the History of Rock Music and a general history and they both fill the same requirement.

Comments on writing intensives.

Students didn't question the need for the writing intensive requirement. Students agreed that they, and other U of M students, need good writing skills.

Students wondered how courses are selected to satisfy the writing intensive requirement. They said some courses that meet the writing intensive requirement require little writing, while other courses that require much more writing don't meet the requirement. Some said courses they took that filled the writing intensive requirement weren't intense.

Students complained that feedback they received in the courses they took to address the writing intensive requirement didn't help them become better writers. Some said the feedback was minimal and at a low level, like minor editing. It did not challenge them or help them move to a higher level. (These students may have been good writers already, but they wanted to be challenged to improve their writing.)

Some students speculated that overworked TAs grade these papers and that they really don't put much effort into providing feedback.

Several students said they did learn how to write better but it was because they took the initiative to meet with their instructor to discuss what was wrong with their writing and how to improve it. They said students are not required to get face-to-face feedback or help.

While discussing writing, several students said the information on One Stop that describes the liberal education requirements is not well written. It should be rewritten to be more direct and less confusing.

I am a TA for a marketing class. I have graded a few papers and despite being sophomores and juniors and Carlson majors, people still can't write. It is pretty bad.

The writing intensive requirement is complete bull. My writing intensive courses have not been writing intensive at all and my other courses that have been more writing intensive are not counted as that. I don't mind, but why are they requiring this when it doesn't mean anything? I think Intro to Theater was my writing intensive and we wrote one paper in the whole class, but we got it back and then we turned it in again. It was just ridiculous. Then my history class, the whole grade was based on three papers that were each about 10 pages, so we wrote about 30 pages. The papers were really intense. We had to do research. [But the history course didn't count as a writing intensive course.]

I think the writing intensive courses are missing the mark. The ones who don't need them are stuck in classes that don't make sense and the students who truly need help aren't getting it.

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What I turn in [initially] is basically what I turn in later. They might point out a grammatical error or they might say this needs to be stronger, but there are no major revisions. When I hear writing intensive, I assume intense writing. It should be called the 'we look at your paper once before you turn it in' course.

Ninety percent of the writing [courses] are done by TAs. A bunch of my friends are TAs and I have watched them correct papers and [they aren't putting much effort into it].

It is minor editing.

It is not teaching writing.

Complaints about the liberal education requirements.

The students' biggest complaint about the LER is that some felt forced to take courses they weren't interested in and didn't want to take. They said this meant:

- They couldn't take other courses that they were really interested in but that didn't fulfill the requirements.
- They wasted time and money.
- They didn't learn much.
- The courses didn't have the desired impact (students didn't become more well-rounded, etc., and in some cases actually disliked the subject more after taking the course).

I had to take care of a Citizenship and Public Ethics course... and I couldn't find one that I liked at all. So I took one and I knew going into it that I wouldn't like it. I just hated it. So it made me dislike the subject even more.

If you are not interested, you are going to have a crappy attitude.

A lot of it is your attitude. If you go into it wanting to gain more knowledge for yourself, then you will. But if you go in, 'Oh, I hate this class' then you are not going to end up better.

Sometimes it is hard to find a class that fulfills what you need. Sometimes you have to find one that fulfills the two requirements you have left and you end up in a class you don't care about and have no interest in.

In IT they really want to push you out in four years. That means you have to find classes that double-dip and fulfill a couple requirements. So that was what I looked for first, courses that fulfilled two requirements and then I went with the ones that sounded better. Freshman year I ended up in a class that I really did not like and did not enjoy and wish I hadn't taken. I found out since that I had plenty of time to take all the classes I wanted and I could have spread them out. I still take lib eds for fun. I don't need the requirements but it is a break from all the other work.

Instead of taking a class to become more diverse or well-rounded, they take it to fulfill the requirements. They push people to get through everything quickly... I think that puts them down a path of, oh, I want to take this class because it fills a requirement, not because they actually want to learn stuff.... I think it is a good idea that they require some liberal education...but I can't agree with the way they do it. I think they could improve it if they said, find something you want, then see if it fills a requirement. Instead of fill these requirements whether you like it or not.

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People end up taking classes they don't care about and don't get anything out of.

I still have to take my other humanities course and none of them really interest me. [Moderator] But aren't there hundreds of courses to choose from? [Student] There might be hundreds to choose from but it is all social science and humanities and you don't have an interest in it. It doesn't matter how many hundreds of classes you have to choose from, they are all getting at the same thing.

We don't want to give the wrong impression. Not everyone was complaining about taking liberal education courses. Almost everyone said they would take liberal education courses even if they were not required.

What advice would you give to the people who make decisions about the liberal education requirements?

Advice on the LER.

- Continue to require liberal education courses. Most of the students in the focus groups believe that they should be required to take liberal education courses. They believe the courses can help them be well-rounded.

Advice on the LER structure.

- Students argued for and against the specific requirements (e.g., so many credits in various fields and themes). Some students want maximum flexibility (just require so many credits outside the major). Other students say that without some structure students might limit their selections, like only eating dessert at a buffet.

I don't mind having to take classes outside my major. I think it is good. But I don't like having such a strict emphasis. If we could just take 20 credits outside our major that would be beneficial because we could choose what we want.

I don't think students despise these requirements. It is just inconvenient for us to take them because they are so structured and we are limited to certain types of classes. I think better advising could help and I think if they were less structured it would be easier and students would be more accepting of the classes. Students will take classes they are interested in. I think less structure would be a good thing.

I like the structure. It forces you to take classes that you wouldn't think you are interested in and it forces you to explore other areas. I think they should keep the structure. I would change the advising. Tell students they can spread the lib eds out and a lot may just get taken care of with their normal classes.

I think we need to do a better job of advising and less pushing right away for students to get things out of the way. I think they should tell students to relax a little more and find something they are interested in. As far as the structure goes, I think maybe they should just say 15 credits of social science and humanities rather than a specific number in history, etc. So they have a little flexibility. If you just say take some liberal eds they may take them all in the same area.... Someone might just take guitar every semester to fulfill their requirements. That defeats the purpose. I think you need some guidance but loosen it up a little bit so students have more options.

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When I was a freshman it was really beneficial to me to be able to check things off my list and know exactly what I had done. So have a stricter first year.

Advice to increase choice.

- Offer more courses that meet LE requirements, so students have more choice.
- Offer more courses within majors that meet the LE themes.

Advice on writing intensives.

- Improve the quality of the writing intensive courses.
- Require students to meet face-to-face with writing instructors to get feedback.
- Improve the quality of the feedback in writing intensives so all students are challenged to improve their writing.

Advice on advising.

- Tell freshman that they can spread their liberal education requirements out over their four-year career.
- Tell freshman not to concentrate on the designated themes. The themes will probably be fulfilled by courses in their major.
- Challenge students to take courses they will learn from, not just easy courses.

Advice on ways of knowing.

- If you want students to understand different “ways of knowing” then develop a course that explicitly focuses on this. Tell why it is important to know about the different ways of knowing.

Our Observations and Suggestions

Students, in general, support liberal education requirements. They believe liberal education courses are part of a university education. They believe it is important to be well-rounded.

Many students view the LER as a burden, not an opportunity.

Change the image of the LER. Many students said they were taking additional liberal education classes (beyond those required) for fun, or balance, or just because they are interested—almost as a treat. But that is not the way they talked about the courses they took to fulfill the LER. Students see value in liberal education classes. Therefore, be explicit about the value of the LER to students. Emphasize the benefits or value of the LER to the student in ways that are credible, clear, and enticing. Place less emphasis on abstract benefits.

Provide more explicit help to students in selecting classes. Let them know the protocol used by other students. Help students find courses that are highly rated (not because they are easy, but because the professor teaches well or the students are challenged, etc.). Make One Stop easier to navigate.

Rewrite the description of the LER on One Stop so it presents a clear rationale to students, not just institutional rhetoric.

Spot-check LER courses to ensure that they actually do continue to meet requirements.

Considering being more explicit about the purpose of the LER. How are students supposed to be different because of these courses? Then determine to what extent the current structure achieves that purpose.