How are Kalamazoo College Students Catching their “Breadth”: A Qualitative Study

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Presentation Plan

• Background

• Findings

• Recommendations
Introduction

Dr. Nordmoe’s 2011 Quantitative Study

Percent of Students Meeting Former Area of Study Requirements (abridged table):

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Focus Group Questions

What does “breadth” mean to students?

Do students think they are achieving breadth? How?

Do students think Kalamazoo College values breadth?

What do students think about the new curriculum?
Method

Trained 7 student focus group leaders
Conducted 9 focus groups
80 participants (representative sample)
Two note-takers recorded themes
Moderator wrote report
Analyzed all reports for major themes
Views on Open Curriculum

First-years/sophomores:

Many chose K because of “lack of gen ed requirements”

“People here are more adventurous.”

“In the open curriculum you can find your passion.”

“Requirements are not as fun as what you want to take.”

“My favorite part of being here is being able to take what I want.”
Views on Open Curriculum

Seniors

“Too open... it’s important for advisors to encourage more courses outside of your comfort zone.”

“I like not worrying about requirements, but I wonder what I might have missed out on.”

“It feels like a load off my shoulders, but I know I didn’t push myself.”

“We shouldn’t go back [to the old curriculum]; just find ways to help people explore.”
Breadth Definition

First and second year students are less familiar with “breadth” terminology

Student definitions

“Well-rounded, spreading out”
“Variety, more like a horizon”
“Jack of all trades”
“Taking classes from other departments”
“Making the way you think well-rounded”
“Getting a surface knowledge”
Does ‘K’ Value Breadth?

Students expressed uncertainty

“With the old curriculum, yes. I’m not sure now.”
What Does ‘K’ Value?

Social justice
Diversity
Foreign languages
Service-learning
Study abroad
Taking courses you find interesting
Attaining Breadth

Ways of getting breadth according to students:

A range of courses
Concentrations
Within the major
Through LACs
Experiential education (e.g., service-learning, study abroad, student organizations)
Benefits of Attaining Breadth

“For me, classes are very interdependent – history, religion, art – completely unrelated fields, but it all gets put together.”

“The new curriculum allowed me to enjoy multiple minors...a more profound kind of breadth.”

“Professors help me get breadth; they’ve opened up possibilities for me.”
Benefits of Attaining Breadth

A science student talked about how a philosophy class changed the way she thought about scientific paradigms.

Another science student: “Strong writing skills and a variety of knowledge means you can share your ideas better.”

One student said that through breadth, he noticed gaps in his knowledge and wanted to fill those gaps.
“I’m open to breadth, but…”

“I’m intimidated.”

“The only time I stepped out [of my major], I wasn’t too great at it. It pushed me to stay within my requirements more.”

“They [majors] were all into it, and you’re just interested in the topic. It’s kind of like a clash or competition.”
“I’m open to breadth, but...”

“Dow”/Non- “Dow” divide

“There's a stigma against non-science majors taking science classes...it's scary and there's labs.”

Several science students said they found writing intimidating and felt “relieved not to have to take an English class.”
“I’m open to breadth, but...”

“...I have competing priorities.”

Scheduling conflicts
- Classes are offered at the same time
- Is the class offered every year? Every other year?
- Science labs conflict with T/R classes

Space availability in courses
- Some first and second year students reported serious difficulty getting into any of their first choice courses.
“I’m open to breadth, but...”

More competing priorities...

Major and minor requirements

"First I take the stuff I have to take... then I take what I want for fun."

Workload
Advising

Students’ advising experiences varied

“My advisor tried to get me to balance my classes that use different parts of my mind.”

Some students felt that advisors put unnecessary pressure on students to take varied classes, but most appreciated the suggestions.

“My advisor was pretty hands off; it was frustrating.”
Advising

Advisors have influence with regard to breadth; small comments can make a difference

“My advisor asked me ‘What else besides computer science?’ and I was like ‘Ohhh, I should look at other stuff.’”
Advising

Students are more likely to follow their advisors’ advice when they believe their advisor cares about them personally.

“Don’t just do the job, but actually be interested in it.”

“Know more about my life.”

“My advisor was really helpful. Academics was only one side of it. She really cares about my struggles being here.”
Summary of Findings

• First-years and sophomores are attracted by the open curriculum (used “passion” language)
• Seniors are more ambivalent about the open curriculum
• Students are unsure about whether the college values breadth
• Students are more likely to value breadth if they perceive that advisors value it
• Students are more likely to follow advisors’ advice when they believe their advisor cares about them as individuals
• Consensus among students: Keep open curriculum and find ways to provide structure
• Students see advising as key to providing structure
Students are seeking an “intense intellectual relationship” where faculty are “attuned precisely to students’ thinking and development.” – Belenky and Stanton (2000)
Recommendations: Advising

Balance freedom and structure

“My advising meeting really struck me. I didn’t realize I didn’t have to take anything. It was almost overwhelming.” – First-Year Student

Explain why attaining breadth is important

Be able to recommend appropriate “breadth” (and non-major courses) in various departments
Recommendations: Advising

Ask about how students are doing generally, not just academically

Ask about out-of-class activities (some may provide breadth and complement coursework)

Prepare students for registration challenges by helping them think about many possible courses
Recommendations: College

Keep open curriculum but find ways to make it work

Raise awareness

Have a breadth PR campaign
Recommendations

Departments

Provide information to advisors and students about which courses are friendly to non-majors

College

Bring back LACs
How are Kalamazoo College Students Catching their “Breadth”?  

Anne Daveyke, Kamille La Iresa, Paul Soterland;  
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Project funded by a mini-grant from The Teagle Foundation

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Kalamazoo College revised its curriculum and degree requirements.  
• The old curriculum required students to fulfill many course requirements, ensuring breadth.  
• The new curriculum does not require students to take general education classes.  

Without requirements, will students still obtain “breadth”?  

Dr. Nordmoe’s (2011) Quantitative Study  
percent of students meeting former Area of Study Requirements (abridged table):

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This table shows the percentage of students who met the former requirements for two areas of study under the old curriculum (2004) versus the new curriculum (2007).

MAIN QUESTIONS

• What does “breadth” mean to students?  
• Do students think they are achieving “breadth”?  
• How?  
• Do students think “K” values “breadth”?  
• What do students think about the new curriculum?

METHODS

• Trained Student Focus Group Leaders  
• Conducted 9 focus groups with 80 participants  
• Two note-takers recorded themes; Moderator wrote report  
• Analyzed all reports for major themes

VIEWS ON THE OPEN CURRICULUM

“WE’RE MORE SERIOUS ABOUT ACADEMICS - WE HOLD OURSELVES RESPONSIBLE.”  

“ARE WE DOING THIS FOR OUR STUDENTS OR JUST BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE LIKE BROWN?”

RESULTS

Breadth Definition

• Underclassmen are not familiar with “breadth” terminology  
• We altered the question to ask about taking a variety of classes

Does ‘K’ Value Breadth?

Some students said yes, because K is a liberal arts college; others were unsure because it is not required and does not seem to be emphasized.  

Attaining Breadth

It seemed that if students experienced breadth earlier, they were more likely to seek breadth later. Some students feel intimidated about taking courses in other disciplines. Students commented fairly often about privileging depth over breadth.

“My advisor asked me ‘What else besides computer science? And I was like, ‘Ohhh, I should look at other stuff.’”

Advising

• Some advisors stress breadth, while others do not.  
• Advisors have influence: small comments can make a difference.  
• Students are more likely to follow their advisors’ advice when they believe their advisor cares about them personally.

RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Factors Affecting Course Selection

• Scheduling and space availability  
• Major and minor requirements  
• Advice from upperclassmen  
• Workload  
• Interest  

“A PROFESSOR CAN MAKE OR BREAK A CLASS.”

Breadth

Students think they can achieve breadth through:

• A range of courses  
• Concentrations  
• Experiential education  
• Within their major  
• Through LACs (seniors)

“ON LACS: “NOW THERE ARE LOTS OF SPEAKERS, BUT NO ONE SHOWS UP.””

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS

Advising

• Ask about how students are doing generally  
• Ask about out-of-class activities (some may provide breadth and complement coursework)  
• Explain why attaining breadth is important

KEEP OPEN CURRICULUM BUT FIND WAYS TO BALANCE FREEDOM AND STRUCTURE

• Bring back LACs  
• Breadth PR Campaign  
• Identify existing classes that are friendly to non-majors or advocate breadth in coursework  
• Post-registration survey (“Did you get the classes what you wanted?”)

To Our Participants: THANK YOU!

References:

How can we as advisors help students balance curricular freedom with structure?

How might each of us use these findings to improve our own advising?