UWGB Select Mission:

The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay provides an interdisciplinary, problem-focused educational experience that prepares students to think critically and address complex issues in a multicultural and evolving world. The University enriches the quality of life for students and the community by embracing the educational value of diversity, promoting environmental sustainability, encouraging engaged citizenship, and serving as an intellectual, cultural and economic resource.



Understanding First Year Students' Perceptions of Learning at UWGB

Project Background

Many faculty members at the university today aspire to make their classes more "student-centered": to use evidence-based cognitive psychological research, for instance, to understand how students learn. Campus centers for teaching excellence, and sometimes specific programs focus on designing specific interventions for incoming new students. These programs often track all kinds of bird's eye student information—including surveys and grade data—about the assets these students bring to the table and the challenges they face.

A more in-depth understanding of how these students perceive the college experience, their university's mission, their own life experience, their existing emotional knowledge about the content of specific disciplines, and how they perceive their biggest challenges as learners is necessary to sufficiently assist incoming students and to facilitate a learning experience, to borrow from Paulo Freire, built around "student-teachers" and "teacher-students." (See Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1993) In short, we need to know more about our students at UWGB (and at similar regional comprehensive universities).

Research Design

This project uses the perspectives of my students from two classes I taught (my First Year Seminar and my History 206: US History since 1865 course in Fall 2017) to do a qualitative analysis of what perceptions UWGB students bring with them when they enter college.

Using surveys and one-on-one interviews, I investigated what incoming freshman expected to get out of college, and what they expected their experience to be like. I asked what challenges they thought they would face as incoming students. And, I investigated why they thought universities expected them to study liberal arts (at least as general education) fields such as history that typically did not equate to a very narrowly defined "job".

In short, I wanted to see how well students see what they are doing here in line with our mission (See above).

Q6	Which of the following do you think best describes what a student should get out of a degree at UWGB?
¢	O The classes I take should mostly train me to be able to do a specific job in the future
	O The classes I take should train me to do a specific job in the future, but I also think classes should teach me about a broad range of human experiences and social problems, past and present
	 The classes I take should teach me primarily about a broad range of human experiences and social problems, past and present
Q7	Please elaborate on your answer for question 6: explain why you chose the characterization of what a student should get out of a degree at UWGB.
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Findings (Surveys)

I surveyed two classes: one, my first year seminar, a Gateways for Phoenix Success program (so all first year students), and students in my History 206 course, which was a mix of first year and other undergraduates. 50 students overall took the survey...34 were first year students and 16 were not.

When I analyzed their answers, I noticed that those students whose parents had graduated from college were vastly more likely to view the purpose of education more expansively and in line with our mission. 32 out of 50 students had at least one parent who had graduated from either a four-year institution or a tech school, and 8 had had parents at least attend one of these institutions but not graduate (64% of students had a parent who graduated college, and 80% had at least one parent attend college). Only 10 students had had no parent attend college.

Of those who had at least one parent graduate from college 17 out of 28 (61%) whose answer could be coded (four were unclear), viewed the purpose of a college education expansively, or more or less in line with our mission.

The purpose of an education at UWGB, according to selected students who had at least one parent graduate from college:

- "Most importantly, I am here to earn my degree, but I think that UWGB is much more than that....[it] is also about experiencing new things, and preparing myself to succeed in the real world after college."
- An education at UWGB is "an opportunity to broaden your horizon in the degree you want to pursue."
- "...my goals in life are to come out of UWGB with a better understanding of what I want to do and who I want to be."
- "I think the purpose of education here is to help make someone" else's world a better place."
- "...find my passion and then find a job that fits that rather than finding a job and making it fit my life."

The purpose of an education, according to those who had not had a parent graduate from college (representative samples):

- "The purpose is to get your degree and further your education for what field you want to be in."
- "To earn a degree in something you want to do for the rest of your" life."
- "To make us career ready and help us focus on what we want to do with our lives and in the field. The purpose... is to be set on the right path for a better future."
- Purpose is "is to prepare students for their future job."

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Findings (Ethnographic interviews)

I ended up doing 13 one-on—one interviews with first year students.

THERE WERE TWO MAIN INSIGHTS FROM THESE INTERVIEWS:

1) **EDUCATION** represents a social wedge for our students...when I asked why they decided to go to college, many spoke of college as imperative for economic opportunity, but also how in high school, students (from both families in which parents attended college and those who did not) are made to feel and internalize the necessity of college. In other words, students have been told that they must go to college in order to get a good job, and if they couldn't do that, they would be a failure.

WHY DID YOU GO TO COLLEGE? (Select answers)

Participant #5: "I had very little choice in going to college. My dad said, if you want a good job you have to go to college. I would have felt like a huge failure if I didn't go."

Participant #6 (her father has a B.A. from UW-Madison, but her mother never attended college): "My parents didn't pressure me but told me if I want a good job I would need to go to college."

2) After several interviews about why students chose to go to college and what they believed might impede them from success, students kept bringing up how high school teachers and guidance counselors explained college. In short, tied with the economic and social imperative many students were feeling, their high school teachers were intentionally attempting to frighten them about the difficulty of college as a motivating tactic.

Participant #3: "My [high school] teachers told me I would be just a number in college. They said your professors wouldn't care about you."

Participant #7:

"Teachers told my professors aren't going to care about you. They will all be trying to fail you. They will not be understanding of students."

There are important implications regarding these insights that I don't have space to fully address here. But it is clear that we must communicate to high schools more effectively how college works, and we must work with incoming students to ensure they understand that college is meant to be about more than narrow job training!

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