CHANGES IN STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL ATTITUDES: A Study of an Experimental Living-Learning Program

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This study highlights the longitudinal changes in educational attitudes of students during the freshman year of college, with the prime focus on comparisons between students in a living-learning program (N = 95) and students in the regular curriculum (N = 89) at the University of California, Davis. The Student Orientations Survey was used in a pre-post design, and major results were (1) students who selected the experimental program held somewhat different attitudes from their peers in the regular curriculum prior to the start of the academic year and (2) compared to changes in attitudes of their peers, the experimental-program students, by the end of the academic year, had significantly decreased their desire for lectures and formalized education, expressed greater interest in self-directed independent study, desired a more significant role in educational decision-making, and viewed education more as a way of exploring various academic areas rather than solely preparing for a vocational future. Coupled with findings from student interviews, various implications of the results were discussed.

Over the last decade, researchers in education have been highlighting the diversity in characteristics of students enrolling in our various colleges and universities. This increasing heterogeneity of students encompasses wide differences in family background, academic ability, personality characteristics, and educational attitudes, as Feldman and Newcomb (1969) have indicated in their recent review of research on college students.

With the added recognition that different kinds of students desire different kinds of educational experiences, many institutions of higher learning have been moving to develop innovative programs in the undergraduate domain. One approach that has been gaining in popularity is based on the "living-learning" concept — an attempt to blend, rather than fragment, a student’s in- and out-of-class experiences. Although the content, philosophy, and format of these programs vary greatly, the goal of providing a mechanism for continued student-student...
and student-faculty interaction is thought to be desirable.

Two premises usually underlying the development of an experimental living-learning program are (1) the program's educational assumptions and operating policies are sufficiently different from those students encounter in the regular curriculum and (2) the program will have some "impact" on the participants, especially the students.

Before we can assess the effectiveness of an experimental program for undergraduates, however, it is necessary to know something about the students who both do and do not desire to participate. In this way, we may not only compare experimental-program students with their peers in the regular curriculum, but also have a base for analyzing any changes in student attitudes, abilities, and characteristics (Heist and Bilorusky, 1971).

This last concern was the focus of a longitudinal study of student development in a living-learning experiment at the University of California, Davis. The Experimental Freshman Year Program (EFP) was housed in a co-ed dormitory and centered on the theme "Self in Society" (Morstain, 1972). Under the direction of two faculty members in the Sociology Department, all students who chose to participate in the program took one common "course" together for four units each quarter, and added regular university courses to round out their academic schedule.

Throughout the year, the experimental course touched on many topics: identity, awareness, norms and expectations, social issues and problems, and so on. Students met once a week for a lecture or multi-media presentations, and were expected to undertake personalized independent study projects or work cooperatively with others on a joint project in various interest groups headed by upper division students.

**METHODOLOGY**

One aspect of the research dealt with empirically determining the attitudes students had regarding their college education, and how these attitudes changed during the freshman year. Seven scales of Form B of the Student Orientations Survey (SOS), developed by Gray and Morstain (1971), were used to assess attitudes toward independent study, formal education, student-faculty roles, grading policies, participatory decision-making in academic affairs, and so on. SOS scales were originally developed through principal components analyses, and estimates of internal consistency (coefficient alpha) ranged from 0.72 to 0.84. There are eight items for each of the SOS scales, and each item is on a four-point scale with options ranging from "closely reflects my attitude" to "not at all like my attitude."*

*A copy of the current version of the SOS and a preliminary manual outlining the development of the research inventory is available from the author, Office of Academic Planning and Evaluation, University of Delaware, Newark, Del. 19711.