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## **Students' Perceptions of Liberal Arts and General Education Courses at the American University of Sharjah, UAE**

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### **Abstract**

With the rise in liberal arts universities around the world it is apparent that the value of a liberal arts education is becoming increasingly important in today's knowledge economy. What is less known are the attitudes towards liberal arts and general education studies that are held by students in countries without a strong liberal arts tradition. By knowing students' perceptions of liberal arts and general education courses; as well as, understanding their previous educational background, I believe we can then begin to create an academic environment that may help more students persist and succeed in their undergraduate studies. In this mixed-methods study, I surveyed students at the American University of Sharjah in order to (1) gain an understanding of their secondary education experience, and (2) their initial understanding and perception of a liberal arts education and general education courses. As a result of this research I will offer suggestions for courses, seminars and faculty development courses in order to both reduce the numbers of students entering into academic probation and to increase the retention rate of our students

**Keywords:** liberal arts, general education, student retention, personal epistemology

### **Students' Perceptions of Liberal Arts and General Education Courses at The American University of Sharjah, UAE**

The American Association for Colleges & Universities defines liberal education as a way to “empower learners with a mind and skill set that enables them to be critical members of society prepared to address complexity, diversity, and change (as cited in, Godwin, 2015, p.226). Godwin(2013, 2015) further elaborates that liberal education is dependent on three components. She states that it is multidisciplinary, contains a general education component, and strives to teach basic skills, such as: critical thinking, analysis, communication, and a sense of social responsibility. According to the AUS General Education Program Mission Statement, the university proposes that, “Liberal studies form the core component of an AUS education.” The mission statement cites similar goals to many ‘American Style’ higher education programs in the Middle East, and are also similar to the aims of a liberal education mentioned above. In the UAE and around the world, liberal arts programs and institutions are on the rise. There is an apparent intrinsic value placed on a liberal arts education and much has been written about the reasons why this proliferation has taken place in countries without a deep-rooted tradition in the liberal arts. What is less known is the attitudes towards liberal arts and general education studies that are held by students in countries without a strong liberal arts tradition. Many of our students at AUS come from secondary education systems that rely heavily on teacher centered classrooms, rote memorization, and a focus solely on STEM related subjects. When they enter AUS, where faculty members may use student-centered teaching approaches, active and collaborative learning and a focus on critical thinking skills; some students may be unable to adapt quickly enough to these new methods in order to succeed. I believe this difference in teaching and learning is one of the main reasons for both the high number of students who enter into academic probation in their first year at AUS and the difficulty in student retention. Research into student retention (Thomas, 2011; Seidman, 2012, Coates, 2006)

all point to the importance of academics and the quality of teaching in student retention. By knowing the perceptions of our students to liberal arts and general education courses; as well as, understanding their educational background, I believe we can then begin to create an academic environment that may help more students persist and succeed in their undergraduate studies.

**Emergence of the Liberal Arts**

Much research has been focused on the descriptions and development of liberal arts universities and their programs around the world. Mulcahy (2008), Rothblatt (1997), Thelin (2004) offer comprehensive scholarly works focusing on the history and the purpose of a liberal arts education in a democratic society. Further, Goodwin (2013) offers a comprehensive overview of the where, when, how and why of the emergence of liberal arts education globally (See Figures 1, 2 and 3).

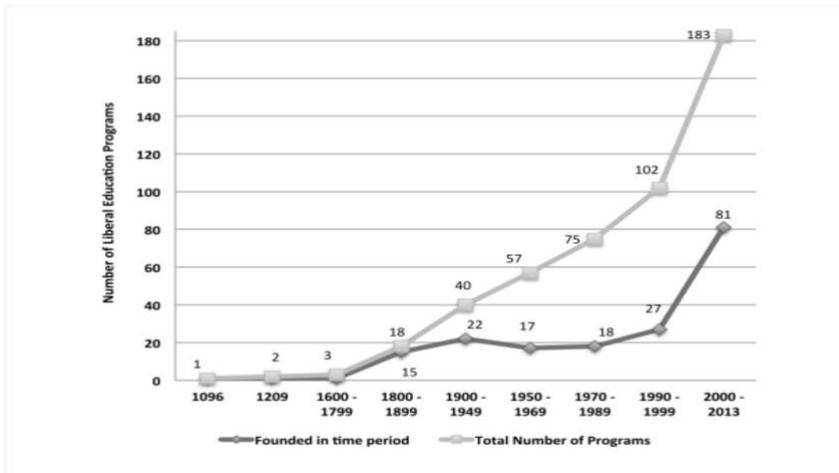


Figure 1. The number of liberal education programs founded and cumulative number per time period. Based on Analysis and date from the Godwin Global Liberal Education Inventory (2013).

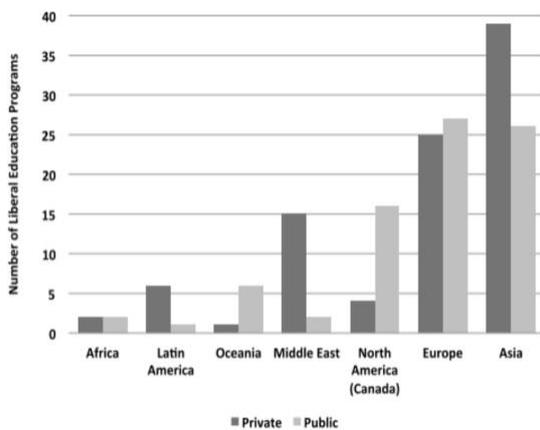


Figure 2. The number of liberal education programs by region. Based on Analysis and date from the Godwin Global Liberal Education Inventory (2013)

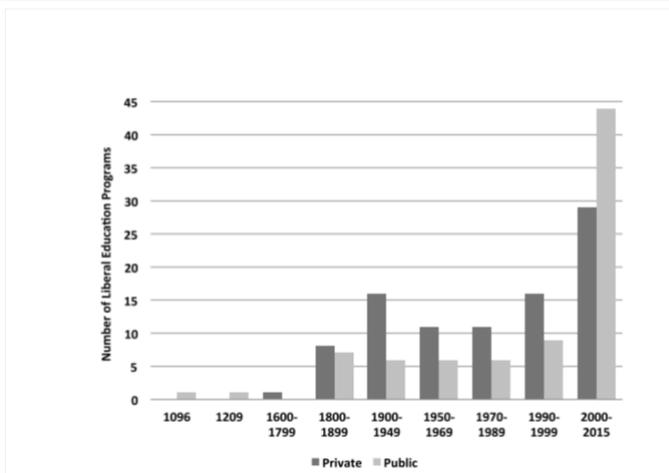


Figure 3. Number of public and private liberal education programs by founding date. Date provided by the Godwin Global Liberal Education Inventory (2013).

Although, in her 2013 work, *The Global Emergence of Liberal Education: A Comparative and Exploratory Study*, she mentions the lack of empirical research that “addresses the phenomenon of global interest in education” (p.20). Van Der Wende (2011) and Peterson (2012) however, offer an exception as each focuses on trying to understand the current and future state of liberal arts education in different contexts. Van der Wende (2011) for example focuses on the question of why liberal arts programs are on the rise in Europe. He mentions “...the need to differentiate the massified European systems, which are characterized by insufficient diversity and flexibility in terms of the types of institutions and programmes offered to an increasingly large and diversified student body” (p. 24). In Europe, liberal arts institutes are seen as ways to offer more choice and flexibility for students who typically must choose their course of studies at a young age. Peterson (2012) focuses on a more global perspective, but who also concludes that liberal arts education is growing around the world mainly due to the changing nature of society as both human movement and technology affect our knowledge economy. Both researchers also provide reasons why a liberal arts education can help to solve problems and how the re-emergence or emergence is filling gaps left from previous and more traditional forms of higher education.

Further, Chanin (2005) and Ghabra & Arnold (2007) offer a look at American style universities in the Middle East, and offer reasons why liberal arts institutes are either remaining strong or emerging in many countries in the Middle East, from the Gulf states to Lebanon. Specifically, the researchers mention the fact that the United States still signifies quality in terms of higher education, therefore a university that is branded as 'The American University of...' will be seen as a higher quality product than other universities. Finally, more recently, much research has focused on the emergence of liberal arts programs in Asia, most notably Hong Kong and mainland China. Kirby & Van Der Wende (2016) and Postiglione (2016) both offer a glimpse into the future of higher education in Asia and issues surrounding the rise of liberal arts programs. Most of the research mentioned in this section has focused on the reasons why liberal arts programs and liberal arts universities are emerging around the world. A common theme is the changing nature of the knowledge economy and governments and institutes of higher education trying to adapt in order to remain competitive or relevant in the future. In most cases the massification of higher education has created more of a demand than traditional forms of higher education can handle, and therefore new approaches are emerging.

Students' personal epistemological beliefs are an important area of research because it is thought that they may influence a variety of behaviors related to learning (Tittle, 2001). For instance, epistemological stance has been shown to be related to students' overall academic performance as measured by grades (Hofer, 2000; Kardash & Howell, 2000), with students holding more complex epistemological beliefs having higher academic achievement. While the idea of researching epistemology is not new, recently research has started to focus on how knowledge domain (i.e., academic discipline) influences personal epistemology are still developing (Marra & Palmer, 2008). Palmer and Marra (2004) in a prior study noted that "individual students exhibited different epistemological perspectives in humanities versus scientific knowledge domains" (p.102). Other studies, (Biglan,1973) support the idea that epistemological beliefs are subject oriented. Students tend to have more nuanced beliefs about humanities courses, meaning more likely to allow for multiple sources of knowledge than for science based courses where students have more dualistic beliefs about the sources of knowledge.

### **Research Question**

What are Students' Perceptions of the Liberal Arts and General Education Courses at the American University of Sharjah? Do students' negative perceptions of about Liberal Arts have a correspondingly negative affect on their grades?

### **Methods**

This was a mixed-methods study using both qualitative and quantitative data collected from an online survey distributed to AUS students via faculty in the English Department. The survey consisted of 17 questions and a total of 84 complete responses were received. A total of 58 female and 26 male students completed the survey and the majority (74%) were in their second year at AUS. The questions varied from 12 closed ended questions to 5 open ended questions, asking for students to elaborate on their previous responses. After the qualitative data was coded, it was then analyzed with the goal of providing thick description and subjected to thematic content analysis. The methodology for analyzing the qualitative data can best be described as a generic or basic qualitative method, since no particular major qualitative methodology would exactly fit for this particular project. While there may be characteristics of phenomenology and grounded theory present in this study, my goal for this research was to simply explore the experiences and perspectives of students as a way to understand their learning environment better. Generic qualitative methods as Merriam (2002) has suggested seek to understand how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their world and their experiences. Furthermore, she writes that "generic studies are epistemologically social constructivist, theoretically interpretive studies that focus on "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Based on the Greene, Caracelli, & Graham (1989) conceptual framework for mixed methods design, the purpose of complementarity in a mixed method study serves to understand more deeply and in a better way the different aspects of the same complex phenomenon. In this study, the quantitative data collected from the surveys will be used to provide background information on the participants including, among other data, country of origin, secondary educational experiences and ranking in order of importance reasons for choosing to study at AUS. Some of this data can also be used in correlation with the qualitative data in order to gain insights into the line of questioning of this study.

### **Results**

## Secondary Education Experience and Transition to University

One of the assumptions made at the outset of the study was that students at AUS come to the university from secondary schools that rely on teacher centered learning techniques. This assumption comes from observations and conversations with students over the years as well as historical and cultural ideas of education that remain in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The idea that students who are predominately used to a teacher centered learning style, may find it more challenging to enter AUS, since there may be more of an exposure to student centered learning techniques, including a greater emphasis on critical thinking, communication and written and oral argumentation skills. The data shows that, in fact, 70.24% of students answered that their secondary class was a teacher centered learning environment. The survey explained that teacher centered referred to a teaching style that relied on a lecture style or focusing on preparing for a test while student centered teaching focused more on group work and project-based assessments. Further, the students were asked about the teaching style in their General Education courses at AUS, the results showed that 57% of students believed that these courses were also taught in a teacher centered manner, but that 42% were taught in a Student-Centered manner. This difference (13%) in ways of teaching may contribute to the difficulty in transitioning from secondary school to university for some students.

**Table1**

*Teaching Style of Respondents' Secondary Education Experiences*

Answer	%	Count
Student Centered	29.76%	25
TeacherCentered	70.24%	59
Total	100%	84

**Table2**

*Teaching Style of Respondents' AUSEducation Experiences*

Answer	%	Count
Student Centered	42.86%	36
TeacherCentered	57.14%	48
Total	100%	84

## Students' Perceptions of Liberal Arts

To understand the background knowledge that students at AUS possess about Liberal Arts, they were asked about their level of familiarity with the term and to provide a definition, if they could. Table 3 shows that the vast majority of students surveyed (88%) had either a moderate, slight or no familiarity with the term Liberal Arts.

**Table3**

*Students' Familiarity with the term Liberal Arts*

Answer	%	Count
Extremely familiar	1.19%	1
Veryfamiliar	10.71%	9
Moderately familiar	27.38%	23
Slightlyfamiliar	36.90%	31
Notfamiliaratall	23.81%	20
Total	100%	84

When students were asked to provide a definition of the term Liberal Arts – 29 (34.5%) students responded, ‘Don’t know’ and 14 (16.7%) responded with an incorrect answer. The most common responses among the incorrect answers were related to the ‘Arts’ generally or to courses that are unrelated to one’s major. One student responded, for example that Liberal Arts is “Arts education that involves learned skills”, another student answered, “Liberal arts is about paintings”. Other common misconceptions can be highlighted by the common responses of some students when they mentioned that the liberal arts, “Offers courses not related to a persons major” or “Social sciences or other non-STEM subjects”. Further, students were asked to comment on how important AUS’s liberal arts focus was to their decision to enroll at the university. Students were asked the following question: How important was AUS being a Liberal Arts college in your decision to apply and to attend this university? Only 18 students (21%) responded either ‘Extremely Important’ or ‘Moderately Important’, with the vast majority responding either ‘Neutral’ ‘Moderately Important’ or ‘Extremely Unimportant’ (see table 4).

**Table4**

*TheImportanceofLiberalArtsinChoosingAUS*

Answer	%	Count
Extremely Important	8.33%	7
Moderately Important	13.10%	11
Neutral	40.48%	34
Moderately unimportant	19.05%	16
Extremely unimportant	19.05%	16
Total	100%	84

When asked to elaborate on their answers some of the most common themes from students were deemed liberal arts to be important in their decision were the fact that they wanted to be exposed to courses in all areas of academic inquiry, not just their chosen major. One student mentioned that, “It was important for me to be well educated in various topics and not just my major” Another mentioned that “it’s very important because it gives students an opportunity to expand their knowledge either in our majors or general courses and it is giving us a general knowledge”. For students who did not deem the Liberal Arts as important in their decision some of the main themes were that it was not related to their major or future career goals and that other aspects of AUS were more important in their decision to attend, mostly reputation, ranking, and location. One student mentioned that, “Liberal Arts is not directly related to my major so it wasn’t important in that sense.” Similarly, another student answered, “Mainly because I am an engineering student and hence my courses are not as related to any liberal arts.” In fact, when asked to rank order their main reasons for choosing to attend

AUS, the results show that the fact that AUS is a liberal arts school ranks the lowest for the majority of respondents (62%), only 1 student ranked it as their first choice (see Table 5).

Table5

*The Importance of Liberal Arts in Choosing AUS*

Question	Most Important 1					Least Important 6
		2	3	4	5	
AUS'S ranking	28.79%	31.82%	16.67%	9.09%	12.12%	1.52%
AUS'S reputation	25.76%	34.85%	27.27%	6.06%	1.52%	4.55%
The faculty	0.00%	6.06%	21.21%	27.27%	37.88%	7.58%
The campus	1.52%	4.55%	13.64%	37.88%	28.79%	13.64%
The fact that AUS is a Liberal Arts College	1.52%	7.58%	3.03%	10.61%	15.15%	62.12%
Your specific major was available at AUS	42.42%	15.15%	18.18%	9.09%	4.55%	10.61%

## The Importance of Liberal Arts in Choosing AUS

**Students' Perceptions of General Education Courses**

In contrast to students' perceptions of liberal arts, the overall impression of General Education courses at AUS was positive. 47 (71.2%) students stated that general education courses were either extremely valuable (25.76%) or moderately valuable (45.45%) (see Table 6). When asked to elaborate on reasons for their value a common theme was gaining a broad education or background information that will help in their future lives and careers. One student mentioned that, "General Education courses allow us to develop valuable skills like critical thinking and communication. They also allow us to gain a more well-rounded education, which I prefer to a strict, narrow one." Another student wrote that, "I find them valuable as they expand our knowledge to more than just our field of interest, although I'm a business student the best course I have taken in AUS is BIO 103 with Professor Amin. If general education courses were not a requirement I would have never had the opportunity to learn so much more about my human body."

Table6

*Students' Impressions General Education courses at AUS?*

Answer	%	Count
Extremely valuable	25.76%	17
Moderately valuable	45.45%	30
Neutral	19.70%	13
Moderatelynotvaluable	4.55%	3
Extremelynot valuable	4.55%	3
Total	100%	66

Students' Impressions General Education courses at AUS?

### Students' Familiarity with Liberal Arts and Effect on Grades

I was also curious to see if there was a correlation between students' perceptions of Liberal Arts and their overall GPA. As table 7 shows, the median GPA remains basically static if the students responded at least a slight familiarity with the term liberal arts, but falls to a median GPA of 2.9 when students responded that they were not familiar at all with the term. The fact that they found liberal arts important or unimportant seemed to have to correlation to GPA, which is understandable since as seen in Table 6 above, there are many other criteria that are more important when choosing a college in the UAE rather than liberal arts.

Table7

#### *Students' Familiarity with Liberal Arts and Median GPA*

FamiliaritywithLiberalArts	#of Responses	MedianGPA
ExtremelyFamiliar	10	3.2
ModeratelyFamiliar	23	3.1
SlightlyFamiliar	31	3.3
NotFamiliaratAll	20	2.9

Students' Familiarity with Liberal Arts and Median GPA

### Discussion

To begin, it seems clear that students' perceptions of Liberal Arts, at the American University of Sharjah, is neither well defined nor a determining factor in choosing to study at AUS. Even after a full academic year, students still have not yet been asked to define what it means to be at a liberal arts university. The most important factors in choosing to study at AUS were the majors on offer, the ranking of the university and its reputation. The question of how this knowledge affects students' personal epistemological journey and academic development is one that this study attempted to uncover. Based on student responses, I think it is clear that having both a student-centered secondary education with a general familiarity and interest in the liberal arts will lead to increased success for students at AUS.

Additionally, knowing that a vast majority of students entering AUS come from a secondary education that relied heavily on teacher-centered pedagogical practices and a widespread misunderstanding of lack of knowledge about the liberal arts on what a liberal arts degree entails, it is clear that some course of action is required. Freshman courses or seminars in the fundamentals of a liberal arts education, or even marketing material focusing on educating potential students would be a step in the right direction. Engaging students in

conversation about their epistemological values and beliefs as a standard counselling practice, may also help to encourage deliberate and thoughtful reflection on students' beliefs about education and may encourage them to become more independent and successful overall.

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