Summary of Global Higher Education Master’s Program Survey Evaluation and Changes Initiated for Program Improvement

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Introduction

We strongly value student feedback in the Global Higher Education Master’s Degree Program to inform our continuous efforts to strengthen the program. Accordingly, we developed an assessment survey instrument to systematically collect student feedback data at the end of each academic year. This instrument contains 31 items addressing various aspects of student experiences in the program, such as course taking, advising, and extracurricular activities. The survey was administered through the Qualtrics, the web-based survey service offered at UW-Madison. Students are notified of the survey via email and may complete it either on their computer or another mobile device. It takes students between 15-20 minutes to complete the survey. The survey was set up in such a way that student responses are not linked to their email addresses, thus ensuring anonymity of student responses and protecting their identity. Upon the completion of each survey administration, we compile a comprehensive report detailing all the findings. Over the past two years, these survey reports have been crucial as we consider changes to the program and course structure, and make improvements to the ways in which we provide advising and support services to our students.

We began conducting the GHE survey during the 2014-2015 academic year. Each year, we revisit survey items to determine their relevance to the program. We make adjustments to reflect the ongoing changes to the GHE program, and accordingly, although the main components of the survey remain stable, there have been minor alterations to the survey from year to year. The following summary reflects the most recent assessment, which was completed at the end of Summer 2016.

Survey Items

Survey Section 1: Background Information and Career Plans (5 questions)

The needs and goals of our students vary greatly given that they are a mix of domestic and international students, a factor which we kept in mind when creating the survey questions. The first set of questions is demographic in nature. The survey does not ask for any identifying information; however, it is important to learn whether certain responses came from a domestic or an international student. The survey also asks whether or not they completed their undergraduate education in the United States, what stage they were at when they decided to apply for the program (i.e., an undergraduate student or in the workforce), and to rank their career goals from a list of five options ranging from working in the field to pursuing a PhD. The survey also measures whether students hope to continue working in the United States after graduation.

Survey Section 2: Course Evaluation (12 questions)

Following the section on background information and career plans, the survey proceeds with items addressing students’ feedback on the GHE courses, including how each semester prepared them for the following one, the relevance of the course content to their field of study, and an open-ended text box to allow students to offer additional comments and/or suggestions for the course structure of the program.
Survey Section 3: Advising and Programming (5 questions)
This section includes items that help provide an understanding of how our students experienced other aspects of the GHE program beyond the classroom, including their advising experiences and skill development (e.g., critical thinking, global competence, communication, and academic writing and research skills). In addition, this section asks students to provide three words to describe their experience being part of a cohort.

Survey Section 4: Student Effort and Engagement (2 questions)
In order to assess the level at which our students are engaged within the program and department, this section includes questions that measures the frequency at which students were engaged in activities such as studying with their peers, reading additional materials, attending advising sessions, and participating in program events that were not mandatory.

Survey Section 5: Personal Experience in the Program (7 questions)
Our survey concludes with a set of open-ended questions that allow students to express their thoughts about their experiences within the program in great depth. These questions provide a great understanding of our students’ experiences to inform our work as we strive to provide strong, on-going support for our students. The questions we asked in this section include the following:

- What comments and/or suggestions do you have about the cohort model of the GHE program?
- Briefly describe 2-3 positive aspects of your fall semester in the GHE program.
- Briefly describe 2-4 positive aspects of you spring semester in the GHE program.
- What barriers did you experience during the fall semester?
- What barriers did you experience during the spring semester?
- If you had the opportunity to repeat the GHE program, what would you do differently?
- What suggestions do you have for improving the GHE program?

Survey Results and Changes Initiated for Continuous Improvement
Although it is difficult to meet every student’s expectations in all cases, we fully engage with this assessment and its results as an opportunity to identify key issues that shape our students’ experiences and determine whether or not something needs to be re-considered and changed in future semesters. It also gives our students an opportunity to comment on the program anonymously and thus in an open, honest fashion. We understand that each student experiences the program differently and believe that all comments should be taken seriously. Broadly, the feedback we have received through these surveys in past semesters has been very helpful in determining the collective satisfaction (or lack thereof) of our cohort-based program.

A majority of our survey items are based on a 5-point Likert scale, or short-answer questions. From these questions, we are able to see quantitative summaries of their responses to identify big-picture patterns. For example, 63% of our students felt that the GHE fall semester courses prepared them “a lot” (4 on a 5-point scale) for their spring courses, while 18% either believed...
fall courses prepared them “somewhat” (3 on a 5-point scale) or “a great deal” (5 on a 5-point scale). Similarly, the highest rated skills students felt that the program most prepared them for were global competence, communication, and collaboration. A final example demonstrating the range of response types indicate that 54% of students believed that individual advising meetings were “very” helpful (4 on a 5-point scale) and 45% found them to be “extremely” helpful (5 on a 5-point scale). These findings were useful for us to judge the collective opinion about program satisfaction in a number of key areas. Responses generally showed higher percentages of positive responses. These general positive patterns reinforced that the program course structure and advising practices are maintaining a generally positive direction. However, we are also mindful that there remains room for improvement, and accordingly, we use other complementary survey findings to determine areas of potential change, along with areas of strength that we want to maintain.

To illustrate, some of the survey findings through the open-ended questions revealed that, generally, students felt that their first semester prepared them for the rest of their coursework. It is particularly helpful for international students with little background in American higher education. Regarding courses, while students expressed that they were satisfied overall, many also expressed a desire to have more flexibility in selecting classes and desired a course that contained more practical applications. Changes initiated accordingly: Acting upon this feedback, while we have consistently offered the same courses each fall semester given the overall satisfaction, we have added a new course entitled International Higher Education Programs and Services in the spring semester, which is more practically-oriented and emphasizes practical applications of theory and literature in global higher education. Given that the program operates as a cohort, more flexibility to choose courses is an infeasible change per university policy. Lastly, students expressed their satisfaction with their advising experience, both one-on-one and group advising. We have therefore continued to offer more of these opportunities, while also adding new group career advising during the spring semester. These meetings are meant to help our students begin their job searches, preparing their application materials, and discussing how to relate their course content to real-world applications.

As mentioned earlier, our survey ends with a set of 7 final open-ended questions, which is how we obtain significant insight into the GHE program from the perspectives of our students. We first learned that our students put high value on the cohort model, finding it to be a very beneficial experience to progress through the program with their cohort peers and become close to students from American and international backgrounds. By the second semester, they felt more acclimated to the environment of graduate school and were able to more directly relate their coursework to their international and career interests. Some of the barriers students mentioned included adapting to the reading load of their courses, overcoming confidence in their academic abilities, adjusting to English as an academic language, isolation, and time management. Changes initiated accordingly: With this information at hand, we have been able to make some changes over the last couple of years. For example, we have expanded our orientation program by inviting GHE alumni to serve as mentors to new students. Through their panel presentations and Q&A sessions, they are able to explain graduate level expectations, strategies, and advice. This has been a useful strategy because their experiences are more relatable than those of program faculty and staff. It also provides an immediate network for new GHE students. Finally, we have added regular, optional social dinners into the program calendar.
These have been effective in offering students more opportunities to connect with and help one another, which has become a crucial strategy in helping our students feel a sense of belonging within the cohort. While optional, all GHE students have been consistently attending these social dinners and expressed strongly positive feedback about the impact of such events on their integration and sense of belonging within the GHE program and the department.

Overall, we have found the GHE program survey to be a very useful starting point when assessing the needs and experiences of the students and the general direction of the program. Providing students are answering honestly and to the best of their abilities, we are able to gain insight they might otherwise not be willing to share with us. Although we cannot guarantee that all needs will be met to match all expectations, we are better equipped with this assessment process and associated findings to learn the overall experiences of each cohort. We have been able to use the feedback and suggestions provided by this assessment to continuously strengthen and enrich our program offerings in order to support current and future GHE cohorts, thus making the GHE a robust, innovative program that appeals to students around the world.

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Sent Electronically

Dear Professor Li,

At its January 13, 2017, meeting, the Graduate Faculty Executive Committee (GFEC) had a substantive discussion of the GHE’s progress at the three-year mark. Committee members were impressed by the efforts taken to schedule faculty to teach program courses without impact on the department’s traditional programs, and the success of the program financially with a planned enrollment of just 15 students. The GFEC agreed with program’s concern for future international enrollments, and was pleased to see new recruiting efforts planned. The committee was also intrigued by the program’s assessment activities, and requests that you provide a summary of your survey evaluation, with any changes initiated as a result of this work, to the GFEC for further consideration by March 1, 2017.

In conclusion, I want to remind you that the GFEC will join the Provost in expecting the program to undergo a full review, including a self-study, at the five-year mark from the first term of student enrollment. Given the enrollment challenges facing the program now, adequate enrollment and resources will be a concern of the GFEC at that time.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of graduate education,

Sincerely,

William J. Karpus
Dean of the Graduate School
Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine

Cc: Diana Hess, School of Education
    Carolyn Kelley, School of Education
    Jeffrey Hamm, School of Education
    Beth Janetski, School of Education
Cc: Eric Camburn, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
   Jocelyn Milner, Office of the Provost
   Sarah Kuba, Office of the Provost
   Marty Gustafson, Graduate School
   Emily Reynolds, Graduate School