

Faculty Opinions on How to Improve Undergraduate Education in America.

Concerns about undergraduate education in US have a long history. They have taken one form or another throughout the history of higher education in America. For example, perennialist principles advocated by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler in the 1930s were for the use of the great books in undergraduate education. In recent years however, the focus on improving undergraduate education has shifted to research-based instructional strategies for enhancing student learning. Numerous reports and articles were produced in 1990s on teaching practices that improve student learning. Among them were Chickering and Gamon's (1991, 1999) "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education", Angelo's (1993) "fourteen general research-based principles for improving higher learning" and Engelkemeyer & Brown's (1998) "ten principles of learning". One of the most important reports, The Boyer Commission report, "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A blueprint for America's Research Universities" made ten major recommendations for addressing the problems of undergraduate Education. In addition, it provided four academic bills of rights for students in colleges and universities and additional three academic bills of rights for students in research universities. The report stimulated intense discussions and reform in many universities. Prior to The Boyer Commission Report in 1998, the Carnegie Foundation conducted a national survey of faculty in higher education in 1975. Among the survey questions of the

research instrument were six items designed specifically to elicit faculty opinions on changes that would improve undergraduate education in America. The stem of the specific items were: Undergraduate education in America would be improved if:

All courses were elective.

Grades were abolished

Students were required to spend a year in community service at home or abroad.

Course work were more relevant to contemporary life and problems.

More attention were paid to the emotional growth of students.

There were less emphasis on specialized training and more on broad liberal education.

The reported frequency distributions of faculty responses to the above items showed that majority of faculty agreed that if more attention were paid to the emotional growth of students (67.8%), course work were more relevant to contemporary life and problems (60.9%), and students were required to spend a year in community service at home or abroad (53.7%), undergraduate education in America would be improved. Interesting as the above results may be, they do not help us to understand the patterns of faculty opinions i.e., whether qualitatively distinct clusters of faculty members could be identified based on their responses to the six questionnaire items.

The purpose of this study was to reanalyze the six questionnaire items on faculty opinions on how to improve undergraduate education in America. Specifically the study sought to identify distinctive groups of faculty members

with qualitatively different opinions on how to improve undergraduate education in America.

Source of Data. The data for this study were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), www.TheARDA.com, and were collected in 1975 by Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, Survey Research Center, University of California, Berkeley.

It was a national survey with a sample of 25,262 faculty members.

Data Analysis

To develop a typology of faculty opinions on how to improve undergraduate education in America, Latent Class Analysis (LCA) was performed on the six questionnaire items on faculty opinions to find distinctive subgroups or latent classes from the categorical responses.

LCA is a statistical method suitable for finding latent classes from multivariate categorical data.

Five different models for the data were estimated. The Bayesian information criterion (BIC) was used to select Model number 4 (a four class model) as the best fitting model for the data.

Results

The four class model identified four distinctive groups of faculty members with respect to their opinions on how to improve undergraduate education in America. The Item-Response probabilities from the data analysis were used to assign labels to the four distinctive groups of faculty members. Two of the four groups (group 2 & 3) had completely different opinions on how to improve

undergraduate education in America. Group 2 was labeled “pro-change” group. It consisted of 23% of the faculty members who participated in the study. The group agreed to all the suggested changes in the survey for improving undergraduate education i.e., that undergraduate education would improve if,

Students were required to spend a year in community service at home or abroad.

Course work were more relevant to contemporary life and problems.

More attention were paid to the emotional growth of students.

There were less emphasis on specialized training and more on broad liberal education.

Group 3 on the other hand, was labeled Anti-change. It consisted of 23% of the faculty that disagreed with all the suggested changes above for improving undergraduate education. Groups 1 and 4 had mixed opinions on how to improve undergraduate education in America. In particular, Group 1(34%) had more reservations on how to improve undergraduate education. It agreed that undergraduate education would be improved if course work were more relevant to contemporary life and problems

and more attention were paid to the emotional growth of students. However, the group disagreed that undergraduate education would be improved if students were required to spend a year in community service at home or abroad and there were less emphasis on specialized training and more on broad liberal education.

Group 4 (19%) was pro-change in orientation. It agreed to all the suggested changes for improvement in

undergraduate education with the exception of making course work more relevant to contemporary life and problems.

Summary

Latent class analysis employed in this study successfully identified four classes of faculty members in terms of their opinions on how to improve undergraduate education in America.