

**OFFICE OF ANALYSIS, ASSESSMENT & ACCREDITATION**

**GENERAL EDUCATION FOCUS GROUP REPORT 2005**

**JOAN KLEINKE**

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#### FOCUS GROUP OBJECTIVES

As part of Utah State University's undergraduate assessment program, several campus wide surveys have given attention to student opinion regarding General Education/University Studies. Because the questions have only solicited satisfaction ratings, much has been lacking regarding our understanding of just what students are experiencing in the General Education program. The focus groups were an attempt to sit down with a number of both Freshman/Sophomore students and graduating students and discuss their experiences, their likes and dislikes, and problems they may have encountered as they entered the program and as they finished the program.

#### FOCUS GROUP ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION

**Development of the Questions and Administration Procedures.** Brainstorming sessions were held to gather possible questions. Questions were then narrowed as they were compared to the types of written questions asked in the Freshman/Sophomore Student Survey and the Graduating Student Survey. It was thought that the focus groups could possibly clarify responses made to questions asked in each of the surveys. Possible issues with General Education were identified to further narrow the number of questions. It was decided that eight questions would be all that could adequately be discussed in a one hour focus group session. It was also decided that to start the group, students would be given a copy of their transcript with their General Education courses highlighted, and they would be asked to respond to a written question. This written question was meant to focus their thinking on their General Education courses in order to make the discussion flow more smoothly. The questions were pilot tested with a group of students and revised accordingly; the final questions both written and verbal appear in Appendix A.

**Sample Selection.** It was decided that four groups were needed to participate in the study; two groups of Freshman/Sophomore students and two groups of graduating seniors. Freshman/Sophomore participants were solicited out in the classrooms during the administration of the 2005 Freshman/Sophomore Student Survey. Students who were taking all of their General Education courses at USU were asked to volunteer for the study. They were told that they would be paid \$20 to participate in a one hour discussion on General Education. There were seven students that made confirmation to participate in the first group of Freshmen/Sophomores and seven showed up. There were eight in the second group that made confirmation and four showed up. Graduating seniors were selected from a computer list of students graduating Spring and Summer semesters of 2005. The list contained those students who had taken most or all of their General Education courses here at USU. Approximately 100 emails were sent out soliciting graduating seniors' participation in the study. There were only enough graduating students who responded to do one group of seniors. Five students made confirmation to participate and two showed up. All discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed. The report that follows is a summary of the transcriptions.

## **SUMMARY OF COMMENTS - FOCUS GROUPS 2005**

This report is categorized by each of the questions that were asked of the groups. There will be other issues that arise from the questions asked and will be noted as such. The texts that follow are either direct quotes from the students or their statements were summarized.

### **1. How did you learn about the General Education requirements at USU?**

- SOAR
- Parents
- High School
- USU Advisor
- USU General Catalog
- Sibling who attended USU
- Friend

Other feedback that came up with this question:

- Most felt that they did not get enough information about General Education from the sources except they found USU Advisors to be helpful.
- Students that went to the longer SOAR programs said they got more help than the students who went to the one day SOAR programs.
- One student had to go through a couple of USU advisors before getting a sufficient amount of information about General Education courses.
- Some complained that the students had to go after the information themselves; that advisors did not seek them out and help them.
- Some did not even know who their advisor was.
- Undeclared majors seemed to have the hardest time figuring out who their advisors were or where to go to get help.
- Those who had already chosen a major had an easier time with advising and selecting General Education courses than those who had not chosen a major.

### **2. What difficulties, if any, did you have registering for General Education classes?**

- A few freshmen did not have any trouble registering.
- The hardest part for students was trying to get into classes before they filled up.
- English 1010 and 2010 classes were difficult for most students to get into. Some were put on waiting lists for the classes.
- Some had difficulty getting into Humanities 1320. One of these students, however, was a multicultural student and had priority registration through the Multicultural Student Center.
- Creative Arts was difficult for many students to get into, and when they did get in they were overwhelmed by the size of the class, 300-400 students in the Kent Concert Hall.

- Freshmen felt that it was a little easier to register when they were at SOAR. But subsequent semesters when they had to use the QUAD they couldn't get online. A majority of students indicated that they couldn't get into QUAD. When they hit the refresh button it then kicked them off. When they finally got to the place where they typed in their number they got a message saying "We're sorry, the system is overloaded". Many stated that the first two weeks of each semester were the hardest to get on Quad. Some spent over three hours trying to get on. So they finally had to go into the registrar's office and stand in line to try to get classes.
- A student indicated that he/she could never get all of his/her classes over the computer. He/she could usually get about three classes and then had to go to an advisor and "beg" to be let into classes.
- Some felt the priority registration system was unfair; especially for freshmen who already had a lot of their credits accepted. One student tried to get an introductory business class and found out it was closed to freshmen.

### **3. What is your perception of what General Education is supposed to do for you?**

- "General Education courses help you enhance your thinking capabilities which are important for other courses you take after Gen Ed." "These courses help you think critically and analytically."
- "Give you general well-rounded knowledge."
- "Give you a taste of what the university has to offer and help you ultimately choose a major."
- "They just help you fulfill requirements... That is unfortunate because it doesn't motivate you to learn."
- "To help students learn how to study a little bit harder and learn how to write papers."
- "It gives you a broad understanding of other fields outside your major so that you are not so one dimensional."

### **4. What were your experiences like with your General Education professors?**

- "Courses are highly dependent on the professor, whether they're motivated, or whether they have mannerisms that annoy everyone."
- "Some professors make things that are so simple hard to grasp, their vocabulary, they could put it in so much simpler terms."
- "The professors sometimes, want to make themselves look even smarter than they really are; but it is difficult for us because we're just trying to get the layman terms, the basic terms that we can understand."
- "Some professors really try to help us learn."
- "I like the way one guy teaches because it forces us to read the material and to know the material. He will tell you straight up that anything that comes out of his mouth, anything in the textbook, anything in the supplemental book, is testable; so it really forces you to know all of that. And, he actually talks with the students and asks for feedback, and I think that helps a lot to understand the concepts."
- "I think it is very important to include the student and to have interaction in the class, even in big

classes.”

- This question prompted an additional question: “What percentage of your General Education courses have allowed you to interact?” Some said: a quarter, some less than half, and others half.
- Supplemental Instruction helped a lot of these students, some comments about this follow:
  - “My teacher would get up there and talk about I don’t even know what, and I just couldn’t understand it. Our SI instructor would get up later or at test reviews and all of a sudden, everything made sense. It wouldn’t have been a successful class without the SI instructor.”
  - “My wife goes to an SI for one of her classes instead of the class, because she learns from the SI and not the class. That’s funny! Why hire a professor if students don’t learn from that professor?”
  - “SI’s help me out a lot. There’s interaction, plus there’s not thousands of students. Maybe 30 people come, and they you can really feel like you can dig in deep in the information and ask questions that you normally wouldn’t do in front of 400 students.”
  - “With the SI I feel the interaction level is so much higher than the classroom.”
  - “Most SI instructors are students, so they speak in our terms. They help us understand it. They kind of convert the definitions.”
- “I think there’s a couple of different ways the professors react to General Education classes. They either get there and say, “Okay 90 percent of the students in this class do not even want to be here, so I’m just going to dump down the material and just get through it.” Or you have an instructor who comes in and says, “I am going to do what I can to change the way these students think.” I’ve had better experiences with Gen Ed classes that try to teach me concepts.”
- “All the professors in generals are more than willing to help, at least for me.”
- “Many professors went out of their way to help, even after office hours, they would find another time. And most of them were very good at the actual teaching part, really well prepared, and taught so that you could understand.”
- One freshman graduated from high school with 17 people and was really nervous about big classes. “It really helped having English classes that were smaller with teachers who were willing to help me. And a lot of them will help outside of the classroom, even if you can’t make their office hours.”
- “These General Education classes cover so much in such a short amount of time that I think they could just be a little bit more organized about how they pick and choose maybe a bit more. They were trying to cover so much that if they were just trying to cover the really important things and focus more on the important things and not even worry about the little things.” If the professor in “ancient civilizations would just focus on the main things.”
- “In Biology 1010 he was talking about things that the SI instructor didn’t even know. He just talked about things that a lot of us didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. He used a lot of examples that were just way beyond what we knew.”
- Because some of the classes were so big students were reluctant to ask questions in class.

Some did not want to appear ignorant with their questions, and some thought other students got tangential with their questions and seemed to waste class time.

- Some students were reluctant to go and talk to professors because the classes were so big that they figured that they would never get in to see the professor.
- Other students in large classes did go and talk to professors and pointed out that “not too many students seemed to go meet with the professor, so you could get a one on one personal conversation, and I found that to be a major advantage even though some of the classes were bigger. I took advantage of it so I was really satisfied with most of my classes where I met with my professors.”
- There was a significant problem with students having trouble understanding foreign student instructors. “Their English skills were below average...and it was very difficult to follow exactly what was going on. You seem to lose your train of thought.” “Math is hard enough with someone who speaks fluent English, let alone the language barrier.”
- Some who had foreign student instructors felt cheated because they didn’t get better instruction because of their poor English skills. Some felt that an instructor should watch over the foreign student instructor and give them feedback and also make themselves (instructor) available to help the students if the foreign student instructor could not be understood.

#### **5. What were your experiences like with your advisor while taking General Education classes?**

- Many students felt that their advisors were available, and extremely helpful.
- Some students said their advisor “fed me with garbage”. This student was Pre-Med and went to several different people to find out who his advisor was. He kept being referred to the wrong advisors. Each advisor giving him wrong advice. So some of the General Education classes he took he didn’t need and it put him behind a semester.
- Two students had very good experiences with advisors in Elementary Education and Deaf Education.
- Some advisors helped students get into the Graduate Guarantee Program and gave them exceptional advice.
- A student did not feel the need for a lot of help and had not used an advisor very much.
- A student said his/her advisor was too nice and did not guide the students’ choices. Instead the advisor said “Well, whatever you want”. This student wanted an advisor who would tell him/her if the choices were appropriate or not. He/she felt confused after advising appointments.
- Several students had a hard time finding out who their advisor was and some did not even know they were assigned an advisor.
- A student said: “The advisor made all the difference for me in getting me through and helping me.”

#### **6. How have you used any of the things learned in your General Education courses in other areas of your life or academic experience?**

- A student had just used the “Labeling Theory” taught in her Sociology class in a family discussion. She stated: “I just think in conversation, a lot of the times a lot of the things you learn in Gen Ed come up in different conversations.”

- Several students mentioned that their English 1010 and 2010 classes help them learn how to write college caliber papers, and improved their writing skills overall.
- An Economics class helped a student learn how money worked. He learned about loans, and banks, credit, etc.
- A USU 1340 Social Systems and Issues class taught a student about relationships both business and personal.
- A Geography class helped a student become aware of his/her surroundings on a biking trip in Moab. He/she saw the limestone that the professor was talking about.
- An English 2010 student learned how to write a resume and used that information to help get a summer job.
- An FCHD 1500 student better understood his/her siblings and their interactions because of the class.
- General Education classes taught another student how to study better for classes.
- Another student learned about WebCT and can now get around the internet much better.
- In a Technical Writing class a student learned how to communicate more clearly in reports, emails, and even in budget sheets.
- A Family Finance class taught him/her a life skill he/she had not been exposed to. He/she now knows how you use money better.
- An Anthropology class helped a student understand world cultures better and he/she could thus understand or at least appreciate other countries and their cultures.

**7. What one thing have you learned from your General Education that you would not have learned without this experience?** *(The students did not seem to perceive that this question was much different than the previous question. So many of the comments are similar but expressed by different students.)*

- “We were kind of forced in a way to take a lot of these classes, so without them I wouldn’t learn anything about politics or history or rocks. I’m in the outdoors all the time now and I’m like, “Oh, look at that, that’s a circ!” Just looking at all these land forms, and it’s cool that I know them.”
- “General Education courses can help you transition form high school to college.”
- It helped several students become more “self-motivated to learn.” “It teaches you how to learn for yourself, how to read a textbook...if you need to get something done taking responsibility for it.”
- Some students felt it helped them transition into upper-level classes.
- It allowed some to improve their reading and writing skills.
- Many students, once again, expressed that it helped them find a major. One student said: “without General Education I probably would have just picked something and just gone straight for it, not knowing.”

- One student started college at the age of 22 after working construction; he said he was really intrigued by what he was learning. He found that he might want to go on and get a master's in marketing.
- "I think it just helps you step back and say, "somebody else really finds these things important, else we wouldn't be learning about them. So I think that it definitely helps just to make me realize the importance of learning and learning different things and becoming more aware of what's going on around us in all areas, not just one specific, "this is my major, I'm going with it"."
- A senior said: "I kept plugging along because I knew I was going to need it until I figured out what I wanted."

**8. What are some of the frustrations, if any; you are feeling about the General Education program at USU?**

- One student felt that General Education was "pointless". "It has nothing to do with what you're going into. If you think for a while it kind of does, but not really."
- As a follow up to the above statement another student expressed a lack of understanding about the purpose of General Education courses. Her comment was that the "people that run the university know exactly why they're doing it, but I don't think the connection is there (referring to students not understanding why they have to have Gen. Ed.). The suggestion was made that students be informed of the purpose of General Education.
- One student was attending Bridgerland Applied Technology College to get an Associate's degree in Information Technology. He realized he needed a Bachelors degree and wished USU had this program because it would save him two years worth of school if we did.
- Students were upset about having to use their Social security number as an ID number, *thank goodness this will soon be a thing of the past.*
- The big classes; they were specifically referring to class sizes of 200 or more. As a result of these large class sizes many students expressed:
  - "I don't want to be another person to make him have to stay late and keep him from his family and stuff."
  - "It is frustration being in a class that's really big and not feeling the teacher-student connection."
  - "You know he or she is there for you but you really don't want to bug them because there are so many people who do."
  - "I think if the classes are smaller you can have more of a discussion instead of just a lecture; I think people learn more that way too!"
  - "It's so big that if you really didn't understand anything you're not really going to raise your hand and be like "I don't get this" because 75 percent of the class would. And you'd be like, "Oh, I'm wasting their time"
  - "He throws the notes on an overhead and he kind of goes over it....so we're just burning pencil lead trying to take notes."
  - "You are trying to get what's on the overhead on paper before he moves it....What I think

would be good is if we could just listen to him talk...have him email the notes.”

- “Some of the best classes I’ve had have had guided notes or had their notes posted somewhere.”
- “Non-English speaking teachers.”
- “One of my concerns is I wish I could know who to choose from (instructors) in the math courses.” (This student did not know of the availability of course evaluations).
- Some students did not know where to find a list of courses that would tell them what classes fit what requirements.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

These focus groups allowed us to find out what was on the students’ minds. It gave us a closer look into their successes and frustrations. It also allowed us to see issues that might need to be improved or addressed. Issues that need attention are:

1. Students felt they did not get enough information about General Education from most sources.
2. There needs to be a better way of notifying students about who their advisor is (undeclared majors had the most trouble determining who their advisor was).
3. English 1010 and 2010 classes were the most difficult for students to get into.
4. Most students could not get on line for QUAD and when they did they got a message that the system was overloaded.
5. Most of these students had a significant problem understanding non-English speaking student instructors.
6. For the very large classes, students wanted to have overhead notes provided online so that they could concentrate on listening to the professors’ lecture.
7. Students did not know where to find a list of courses that would tell them what classes fit what General Education requirements.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Appendix B contains the students’ responses to the written question. The transcripts for the groups will be released upon request. Because there is often identifying information about professors or classes of a negative nature, they are not included in this report. If you have a need for the transcript please call the office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation. This report can also be found on the USU Facts and Figures website at <http://aaa.usu.edu/FactsFigures/surveys.asp>.

## APPENDIX A



### **General Education Focus Groups 2004-2005**

1. How did you learn about the General Education requirements at USU?
2. What difficulties, if any, did you have registering for General Education classes?
3. What is your perception of what General Education is supposed to do for you?
4. What were your experiences like with your General Education professors?
5. What were your experiences like with your advisor while taking General Education classes?
6. How have you used any of the things learned in your General Education courses in other areas of your life or academic experience?
7. What one thing have you learned from your General Education that you would not have learned without this experience?
8. What are some of the frustrations, if any, you are feeling about the General Education program at USU?

## APPEXDIX B

**GENERAL EDUCATION FOCUS GROUPS 2005  
RESPONSES TO WRITTEN QUESTION**

**“What do you think of when you think of General Education here at USU? If you can choose one class from your General Education experience that has changed your life and tell us how it has changed you.”**

- This being my first semester, I have a lot of general education classes, so I have really been bombarded with new ideas, and new ways of thinking and analyzing things. Probably my class that I would pick out would have to be my English 1010 class that I have at 7:30 in the morning. It is early, especially this being my first semester, but the way they introduced me to the “cultural eye” way of thinking has really broadened my way of thinking. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- The class that I think has had the biggest impact on me and my education would be all of my English courses. The set up of the class is very non-restrictive and it’s easy to feel comfortable in the small setting. I enjoyed being able to have large discussions and seeing many different ideas and opinions. I liked that we covered out loud thinking strategies as well as written papers. Because of my experiences with the set up of Utah States English classes, I have felt more comfortable speaking up in class and feeling more confident in my opinions. It was a good thing that I took English the first two years because I was able to use what I learned in those classes to help my transition into college life. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- I have only had the opportunity to take a few classes of General Education courses here at USU but thus far I have thoroughly enjoyed them. One of the classes that I particularly enjoyed was my English 1010 course which I took my first semester here at school. It is always nice to go into a class and know right off the bat what is expected of you and also what you can do to get a good grade. I really enjoyed going to this class, although it was at 7:30 in the morning, and being taught how to write. I was never a poor student in English but I was never stellar at it. The class, over the course of a few months taught me more about writing and how to structure and cite within an essay than all of my high school classes. I also feel that the course writers did a great job at picking things to write a paper on. The course was taught by Jason Catey, a graduate student, and I definitely appreciated all that he taught me in our class. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- General Education gives a broad overview of each different area of studies – that’s what I think of G.E. When I first came here I didn’t know what I wanted my major to be and going through the Gen Eds has really allowed me to get a taste of what the subject would be like. I think the one class that really left an impression on me was my USU 1340 class. Wow – it was amazing. My Prof. was excellent and I learned about things that I could really understand, grab, and use in my life. It was one of my harder classes, studying wise, but I was so interested in it that it was worth it. All of my Gen Ed classes have been really quite good. The only one that I really never clicked with was Biology. But, at the same time I did learn from it, it just wasn’t my favorite. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- For the most part, I really like the General Education Program here at USU. I think that it is very well-rounded in the types of classes that you choose from. However, I think that it would make more sense if each college would pick the generals. That way, the classes that you would take would more reflect what you want to do with the rest of your career. I think though, that the program does work very well, but it could be even better. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- General Education is mostly a pain as far as having to take classes I have no interest in. However, I can see the goal of gen. ed in broadening students’ educations and making sure we aren’t knowledgeable in only one area. I enjoyed most of my gen ed classes in the humanities, but suffered through my science classes. One of those, my honor 1360 class was very helpful and fun because it was a small class. Our instructor was able to tailor the curriculum to meet our needs and interests. My USU 1350 life science class, however was a huge auditorium class with

little opportunity to ask questions. The class was just a requirement – filler for most students in the class, making discussion strained. I did enjoy my cultural anthropology class quite a bit. It taught general principles of culture and human life – ways that I have found very useful in my major. It introduced important vocabulary that I have used in many other humanities-based courses. (Freshman/Sophomore)

- General Education courses at USU have taught me and are currently teaching me broad perspectives on various topics related to things of the world. I am impressed with the professors for the Gen. Ed. Courses, I feel that I'm gaining valuable information from these professors that will help me to become a better citizen. The Gen. Ed. Courses have also helped me to build efficient study habits. However, sometimes I think that some Gen. Ed. Classes are so easy that students learn a very small amount of information and do not gain studying skills from those easy classes. Those studying skills that students need to gain in Gen. Ed. Courses are vital for the student to succeed in higher level courses. Overall, though, I think Gen. Ed. Courses taught at USU are very effective with helping me and other students become better citizens to build and maintain the current structure of our country, along with other countries. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- The first thing that I think about is...you have to do it, but I do like how there is different things that you can choose depending on your major. One of the classes that I enjoyed was FCHD 1500 because it was something that helped me decide whether or not I wanted to be an elementary teacher. Another one that I like a lot is USU 1320 because the professor makes it fun, not only that, but you are able to learn not only of your culture but also of those around you or even the ones that you weren't aware of. Overall I think that it depends on the professors if you will like it or not. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- When I was here two years ago, I didn't think much about the purpose of General Education. After returning from a two year mission in Europe, I was able to compare the two different educational systems. I can now see both the pros and cons of our system. First, our system does just what it says, general education; good because we all need to know general information; bad because we could be spending our time with learning the specialized skills the society is in demand for. Europe lets the students go around their Gen. Eds. And they custom make their degree. That's what I would like to see in the future. I can't say that there has been one class that has changed my life. It's exposed me to more general information but not the vitals, like the everyday knowledge, for example, "How money works", "How taxes work", etc. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- When I think of General Education classes I have taken, I think of learning the basics. General Education classes give you a basic understanding of what you would be learning and focusing on if you were to choose that area for a major. That helps me because I am undecided. I'm trying to take different general education classes to get an idea of what I would like to go into. They also give you a simple background of different subjects so you learn a variety of things while in college. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- For the most part I believe that the General Education courses I have taken at USU have been quality courses that have been beneficial to me. Most haven't been too hard and provided me with information and knowledge that is useful in other classes. I took Creative Arts with Michael Ballam last semester. This was my favorite class I have taken at USU. The information he taught us was very interesting to me. I definitely will use it in my life. Michael Ballam has shaped some of my views about a variety of things like the importance of music and creative thought, parenting, and governmental issues. He was interesting to listen to because he was very interested in what he was teaching. Some classes he would sing a song or even have us sing with him. I never missed a class. To me Creative Arts was definitely a worth-while general education class. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- Econ 1500 has changed me in a number of ways. First, it has helped me gain an understanding about the supply and demand of the world. It has also changed the way I study. Also I will be

able to more fully understand some of the presidential arguments. The class deals with a lot of issues that are important for my future. Another important aspect of the class is taking articles written by economists and other members of society and breaking them down to their basic arguments. After this has been done you can analyze the truth of the article and its flaws. Overall the class teaches important subjects that will make people better members of society. (Freshman/Sophomore)

- In general I believe I think of crowded conference rooms full of people who for the most part don't care about what is being taught. I've found that if you can break thru the distractions long enough to maintain focus on the professor – the material is actually quite useful and interesting. I also feel the professor has a great deal to do with class participation and comprehension; some got it, some don't –we won't mention any names... I particularly enjoyed the U.S. Institutions course taught by Peterson, which I took Fall Semester 2004. History/Politics have never been a point of interest for me and I entered that course quite pessimistic. More than just dates and wars Dr. Petersen applied the past to our day and enabled me to see the importance of history and also understand political matters. He peeled back a lot of my ignorance. I wouldn't say that I'm able to debate or even have the opinions necessary to do so, but I can understand what is being discussed politics wise. (Freshman/Sophomore)
- For the most part I thoroughly enjoyed my general education classes at USU. There was one major exception that I wish could be improved. I was very satisfied and impressed with my MATH 1010 instructor Rob Hogan. He was a very good communicator and had a very thorough understanding of the math concepts that were to be presented in class. I was frustrated with my remaining math courses and especially with my MATH 1100 course. I completed all my homework, frequently went to the tutoring lab in the TSC and even visited with my instructor John Merkley. I felt I was on my own in the class and was not provided with adequate advice on how to at least pass his class, let alone ear a high grade. My experiences with my Business Statistics class was on par with the math class. Our lab instructor was a foreign student with very limited English language capabilities. I loved my history general education courses, especially French Revolution and Modern Western Civilization. I broadened my horizons greatly and learned more with all the reading I did then in probably all my classes. There were many excellent courses. (Senior)
- When I think of General Education I think of required classes that I have to take with everyone else. I know there are many choices and options regarding these classes, but it seems like the classes are a bit overloaded and impersonal. My favorite general education class was perspectives in writing. I was never English inclined so this class really had a great effect on me. I learned a lot of helpful techniques that I still use in my job and in school. I liked it so much because it was useful. (Senior)