Reunion Survey Prepared by Jeff Epstein -- Our Freshman Year

Coming from a small public high school which was certainly not a feeder for Amherst College, I found freshman year (1958) to be both challenging and life changing. I identified twenty aspects (I am sure there were many others but these were the ones I most clearly recalled) of freshman life and asked participants to a survey I prepared with the help of Survey Monkey to reexamine them fifty years later. What was Amherst trying to accomplish. Clearly, the school had a vision of what a liberal arts college should be and how eighteen year old boys should be molded into men. Whatever that vision was, by the time we graduated it was beginning to radically change so that by the 1970’s the Amherst of 1958 had pretty much disappeared.

I was able to distribute the survey via email to 154 classmates (unfortunately neither the college nor my own research was able to find email addresses for about 40 classmates). Approximately 55% responded which I am told is very good for a survey which does not promise a reward for completing. Participants were just asked to respond favorably or unfavorably but could add comments. I have set forth the results below and for some questions many of the comments in the hope of eliciting a lively discussion during our reunion.
1. Freshman Beanies

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Favorable  
65.0%  52

Unfavorable  
35.0%  28

Selected Comments:

Worked out very well. Still some of my best friends from then.
5/9/11 8:08PM

Very hectic but well organized and a satisfactory outcome for me.
5/9/11 7:29PM

A anxiety-producing hassle, which nonetheless worked out very well for me.
5/7/11 5:39PM

I thought the process was conducted with dignity and intentional, rigorous organization.
5/4/11 8:48PM

An awful, but fascinating process. Glad it's gone.
5/4/11 12:32AM

It was exciting. I like the shopping aspect. Although I was played at a couple of places, the whole thing was fascinating and a real learning experience for an only child coming from a small private school.
5/3/11 2:22PM

Like the deferred timing, the short time frame, and the over-the-quota system, all contributed to its acceptability. Of course, you need to have actual fraternities to make it work.
5/3/11 1:34PM
Enjoyed this experience and attention - I liked the fraternity experience- it worked for me.  
4/26/11 8:26AM

I hated it; it was one of the many reasons I was happy to see the fraternities disappear.  
4/25/11 9:53PM

However, full rush failed for the first time in '61.  
4/25/11 7:17PM

Only later did I find out that this was an introduction to the way much of our social and professional lives are conducted.  
4/21/11 5:37PM

Being selected for (or against) can be stressful, but it's a preview of life  
4/19/11 4:45PM

It is no fun being near the end of the line.  
4/16/11 5:30PM

The worst part of Amherst. Spending most of junior year looking over the freshman class (as assistant rush chairman) to decide who was cool  
4/16/11 9:36AM

So irrelevant today it bears no comment.  
4/15/11 8:37PM

Fraternity life was an important part of the overall Amherst experience.  
4/15/11 12:56AM

Is there a better way to chose folks? Didn't get my first choice and this was a good life lesson. There have been many instances in which I have not gotten my first choice. I have learned to move on and appreciate what I do have without regrets.  
4/15/11 10:29AM

It was all kind of embarrassing then, and seems quite embarrassing now.  
4/14/11 11:22PM
Too rushed, too shallow
4/14/11 5:15PM

It was handled in such a way that there was no stigmatization. Fraternities served a core social function.
4/14/11 4:33PM

Can't say favorable or unfavorable. Unpleasant, traumatic experience for me, although it worked out OK in the end.
4/14/11 4:12PM

great memories of this time
4/14/11 3:11PM

Took a room at the Lord Jeffrey Inn and eluded the bigger brothers that night.
4/14/11 2:21PM

This was a good chance for me to meet a lot of people who were in other classes. Otherwise our social life was one-dimensional.
4/14/11 1:09PM
### 7. Compulsory Chapel

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### 8. Policy on Visitors in Dorm Rooms

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9. Core Curriculum

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Selected Comments:

Excellent. I would never have known Plato, Aristotle, and Mozart without it. 5/9/11 8:08PM

I benefited from courses that I would probably not have selected voluntarily. 5/9/11 7:29PM

Without core requirements, I might well not have had as well-rounded educational experience. 5/7/11 5:39PM

scary but necessary for me; thanks Arnie! 5/5/11 8:26AM

I still feel the CC created a sense of community among our class that was very important. We all came from different backgrounds but we immediately were given something to talk about together. 5/4/11 8:48PM

Forced me to do things that were very hard for me, and opened windows in my life. 5/4/11 10:46AM

That's why I chose a liberal arts education. 5/3/11 6:07PM

I believe sharing a curriculum brought us more together as a class. 5/3/11 2:55PM

Maybe the best thing about freshman year. It helped me to dramatically switch the entire focus of my later studies by allowing me a glimpse into areas I probably never would have explored if I had had more schedule discretion. Bravo, I hope they still do that. Arnie Aarons and Bill Pritchard changed my life. 5/3/11 2:22PM
Painful but a strong part of our liberal arts experience.
5/3/11 1:34PM

Consider it to have been one of my best experiences in life
5/2/11 11:13AM

forced us to consider other career paths.
4/28/11 1:47AM

I figured "they" knew what was better for me than I did. I still feel that way (about undergrads).
4/26/11 12:06AM

No problem. I believe it was a "positive" as it broadens one, otherwise students might just get too specialized and there was plenty of time for that at Amherst
4/26/11 8:26AM

That was one of Amherst's great strengths. I suffered through English 1-2 and ultimately learned what thinking and expression are all about.
4/26/11 7:42AM

Although it scared me to death, Physics-Calculus taught me how to separate "meaningless hen tracks" from real thought.
4/25/11 9:53PM

We were so lucky to be there in that creative moment in the history of college education. Really.
4/25/11 7:40PM

Provided a broad view of subjects I'd never have chosen to study.
4/25/11 5:02PM

4/25/11 4:51PM

We are a liberal arts school. I saw what happened to my son who went to a liberal arts college (not Amherst) but didn't take diversified courses because he didn't have to.
4/25/11 4:41PM

... but then it damn near killed me
4/25/11 3:18PM

Great learning experience and unified the class
4/25/11 2:02PM

Beyond praise. Arnold Arons told me years later that it had to be abandoned because more and more narrowly trained graduate students could no longer teach it. I modeled some of my introductory philosophy courses and my metaphysics class on English 1-2; the evaluations those
courses received tell the rest of the story.
4/21/11 5:37PM

18 year old males need structure and the Amherst core curriculum made certain that its graduates were, as they said, "whole men!"
4/19/11 4:45PM

Intent was reasonable--to create a shared intellectual foundation and perhaps train us to approach thinking and studying in similar ways. Some of the faculty, and probably some of us, needed more guidance in dealing with the challenges.
4/17/11 4:45PM

I regret that it faded away.
4/17/11 2:14PM

Helped us be able to talk--have discourse--with one another. The modern offerings are comparatively mush.
4/16/11 9:36AM

Was responsible for my interests in total learning throughout my post Amherst life.
4/15/11 1:14PM

The core curriculum was an essential part in instilling in each of us what it meant to be a well-rounded and educated individual.
4/15/11 12:56AM

Strong proponent of core curriculum. Purpose of college is good experience, the more the better. Took courses I would not normally have and got a very good broad liberal education (liberal in the classic, not political, sense). I did not really know what I needed to be educated. Mature, experienced adults decided for me and gave me solid education that prepared me well for my life. The public speaking course has been especially helpful. Ability to communicate is a must for success.
4/15/11 10:29AM

Really too big a subject for a yes or no, but since you put it this way ...there were many good and unforgettable things about the curriculum. Had I not been so defensively contemptuous of physics I might have learned more about learning things that are hard, which would have served me well.
4/14/11 11:22PM

I hate to see how Amherst has moved away from the core concept. The challenges it presented to me and the broadened interest and intellectual growth it engendered were invaluable.
4/14/11 8:55PM
An important foundation for a liberal arts education.
4/14/11 8:53PM

But this doesn't mean I think that in today's world I think it is feasible for the College
4/14/11 6:43PM

Despite claims that Amherst was the best in the whole wide world, I was not disappointed that it
was just plain excellent even though I failed Calculus 1.
4/14/11 6:29PM

Everyone ought to be exposed to a variety of disciplines even if they'll have no direct application
in later life.
4/14/11 5:15PM

This was the strongest part of the Amherst freshman experience. Its absence is one of my
strongest objections to changes after we left. I realize the times change, but this common
experience among the class and the interdisciplinary intellectual effort was critical to developing
young minds and perspectives.
4/14/11 4:33PM

Excellent idea to require everybody to get some grounding in science, math, classics, creative
writing (or whatever English I was about), world history, etc.
4/14/11 4:12PM

too much to handle (workload) when on scholarship and playing a sport
4/14/11 3:11PM

The requirement for exposure to many different ways of thinking helped me to choose a career
and to have interests outside my profession.
4/14/11 2:21PM

The most distinctive attribute of our epoch at Amherst. Ours was truly a liberal education.
4/14/11 12:54AM

Thought that this was one of the best parts of school
4/14/11 12:54AM
10. Physics 1-2

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Selected Comments:

Unutterable pain in finding out I wasn't as smart as I thought.
5/9/11 8:08PM

Challenging and scary with Arnie Arons, but a worthwhile mind expanding experience.
5/9/11 7:29PM

I may not now use, or even remember, much of the content of the course, but I will never forget Prof. Arons, his style, and the awful feeling that came with the closing of the lecture room door.
5/7/11 5:39PM

We all had the same experience of Arnie Arons and I don't think any of us has forgotten it.
5/4/11 8:48PM

Arnie was hard to love and our section head spoke a language that appeared to be English. But in the long run getting through that requirement was something to be proud of.
5/4/11 10:46AM

Only because I managed to get through it with relatively decent grades. Still don't know how to use any but the C and CI scales on my slide rule, though.
5/4/11 12:32AM

Because of the math component, I almost became a Math Major. But the enthusiasm did not sustain, and that was not my major.
5/3/11 8:36PM
One of the most exciting experiences of my (less than stellar) academic life. To be in the presence of such a incandescent being was life changing. He taught me how to think, how to present ideas and how to communicate them with style and impact.
5/3/11 2:22PM

a bear that could have been better organized
5/3/11 1:44PM

Great course but Arnie's approach actually turned me off of what should have been my favorite subject
5/3/11 1:34PM

Forced me to study matters about which I had no previous experience, and came to love the experience
5/2/11 11:13AM

intimidation was unnecessary.
4/28/11 1:47AM

While Arnie might have been a great teacher, I only experienced that greatness once or twice. The rest was fear.
4/26/11 12:06AM

Showed me how to think and analyze, even if I had no real knowledge on the subject.
4/25/11 9:53PM

Scared the piss out of me but he was obviously a master and I really like Jocl Gordon, my section prof, who was very patient.
4/25/11 7:40PM

The first day, Galileo New Science, failed to get it, continue to try! A function is a set of ordered pairs of numbers, no two of which have the same first element
4/25/11 4:51PM
I was unprepared for the math/science curriculum and damn near flunked out of the college because of it
4/25/11 3:18PM

Didn't do particularly well, didn't matter. I have spent much of my research career working out some of the implications of Physics 1-2, and along the way wrote a popular introduction to Newton's physics. Strange that although Towne, not Arons, taught it my year, Arons' approach to the teaching of physics and even his personality informed everything about the course.
4/21/11 5:37PM

I appreciate the concept (demonstrating that every principle in physics can be proven by calculus), but, having a poor math aptitude, I found the experience to be devestating
4/19/11 4:45PM

HIGHLY unfavorable. Arons is directly responsible for many of us never wanting to give one cent back to the College.
4/19/11 1:53PM

Professor A was a bit too impressed with himself.
4/17/11 4:45PM

I thought I'd be an astrophysicist. I still enjoy the subject as a lay person. So, the course was good.
4/17/11 2:14PM

But it could have been better with a different instructor.
4/16/11 5:30PM

Help us bridge CP Snow's two cultures
4/16/11 9:36AM

Mind-shaping in a good way.
4/15/11 8:37PM

This was a wake up call!
4/15/11 12:56AM

Hard course, demanded the best from me, and I did not do well but knew the subject when I finished. Not the last time that I was confronted with a tough situation whose solution did not come easily. Taught me to structure my life and focus.
4/15/11 10:29AM
Even in retrospect I can think of nothing I gained from the course except a distaste for physical science and the teaching methods of A.A.
4/14/11 8:53PM

Professor Arons taught us all the importance of analytical and careful thought.
4/14/11 6:29PM

Something I'd otherwise never have been exposed to.
4/14/11 5:15PM

AA's reputation notwithstanding, it was a vital part of the core curriculum. And AA was only making the same point as others (e.g., Roger Sale) in his own way and in his own discipline.
4/14/11 4:33PM

Actually I'm undecided. Arons's truculent bulldog personality made the material seem more complicated than it was. We would have learned more with a less aggressive teacher who focused on the beauty of physics rather than intimidation of students.
4/14/11 2:21PM

This was one of my best preparations for graduate school and my future career, believe it or not.
4/14/11 1:09PM
11. English 1-2

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Selected Comments:

As much as I often cursed the assignments we were given, I will be forever grateful for the experience as it greatly improved my ability to express myself in writing and speech.

5/9/11 7:29PM

The course I remember most fondly. I don't think I ever worked harder than in producing thrice-weekly essays on topics which didn't seem to lend themselves to thrice-weekly analysis. Highly frustrating, but it made me a better writer, for which I am most grateful.

5/7/11 5:39PM

wow! Ben Demott!

5/5/11 8:26AM

Never understood what it was all about, but to watch Roger Sale perform for 50 minutes made it all worth it.

5/4/11 8:48PM

When writing I still sometimes pose to myself the question "How are we to understand this sentence?"

5/4/11 10:46AM

Wow! I was in Mr. Todd's section with Roger Sale. It was like being in the dugout for the World Series during your first year in baseball.
5/4/11 12:32AM

I learned to think. Or, at least, I thought so! So many papers came back with the notation: "Huh?"

5/3/11 8:36PM

This was the single most important Amherst experience for me. I came in thinking I was going to major in mathematics and by the end of freshman year Bill Pritchard had made me into a writer. To say that he changed my life would be understating the facts. Not a day goes by that I don't utilize what I learned in English 1-2.

5/3/11 1:44PM

Painful but highly educational--formative for me and developed all our writing skills for short, to the point papers

5/3/11 1:34PM

But am not certain I "got it." According to Pritchard, I wasn't able to properly write a sentence.

5/2/11 11:13AM

taught me that I could be other than a scientist.

4/28/11 1:47AM

It got me over the writing block.

4/26/11 12:06AM

Needed it, but it puzzled me often to say the least.

4/26/11 7:42AM

I only figured this out about fifteen years ago. The lesson -- writing is hard, buddy, and you're nowhere near as smart as you think you are.

4/25/11 9:53PM

One of the great learning experiences of my life. RS became my hero, and we are still friends.
4/25/11 7:40PM
What a shock to learn what little one knew about writing.

4/25/11 5:02PM
Thank you, shades of John Butler and Doug Wilson

4/21/11 5:37PM
The subsequent reunion revelations from our instructors have made it pretty clear that they had no more idea what they were doing than we did!

4/19/11 4:45PM
I found Pritchard arrogant and rigid. I ended up minoring in French literature. Never took another English course at Amherst. (I have gone on to write in English, both books and articles.)

4/17/11 4:45PM
favorable but frustrating. I guess the favorable rating is as much looking backward as remembering how I felt. Certainly I was frustrated-- the assignments were difficult and sometimes seemed to make no sense. I did have the sense that I was learning something about myself and about writing.

4/17/11 2:14PM
But I never knew what the hell they were trying to do.

4/16/11 5:30PM
But I could have used more low level advice e.g. on sentence length. Was taught at too high a plane for most of us.
4/15/11 8:37PM

I did not understand where this was going when I was a student and do not understand it now.

4/15/11 1:14PM

Writing essay after essay on what it meant "to pay attention" was an essential part of the development to think critically and express oneself clearly.

4/15/11 12:56AM

I still have no idea what they wanted but made me think and clarify thoughts and write reasonably well.

4/14/11 8:55PM

Roger Sale made it one of the most mind-expanding, challenging courses in the curriculum.

4/14/11 8:53PM

Necessary but taught with an ivory tower bias.

4/14/11 5:15PM

As with Physics 1-2, it was a vital part of the core curriculum. In the non-hard-sciences, it served its part of stimulating original thought and shedding preconceptions. Plus, a lifetime of benefit from learning to express oneself.
4/14/11 3:11PM

The dynamic of the course forced discipline on my unruly writing. Also, I learned a lot about my classmates from their writing and criticisms.

4/14/11 2:21PM

I never really caught on to the point of what the instructors were looking for. Too many young instructors trying to get tenure,

4/14/11 1:09PM

Prof Pritchard was a failure for me. I never got the course and didn't learn how to write a coherent sentence until long after Amherst.

4/14/11 12:54AM


4/14/11 12:51AM
12. Policy on Cars

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### Favorable
- Favorable: 65.4% (51)
- Unfavorable: 34.6% (27)
- Comment: 38

13. Attendance Monitors

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### Favorable
- Favorable: 46.8% (29)
- Unfavorable: 53.2% (33)
- Comment: 37

14. Scholarship-Work Program

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### Favorable
- Favorable: 95.2% (40)
- Unfavorable: 4.8% (2)
- Comment: 32
### 15. Valentine

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### 16. Saturday Classes

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### 17. Living Arrangements

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18. Freshman Intercollegiate Athletics

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19. Mixers — Smith — Holyoke

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20. Underachiever

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>52.8% 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>47.2% 34</td>
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Selected Comments:

One of my greatest accomplishments was being included in this revolutionary program! Gave me an excuse for not living up to my potential! And that lasted well into my 30's. HMMMMM - maybe NOT so good looking back.

5/9/11 8:08PM

I waited until after Freshman Year to release my inner underachiever, although I'm sure I could have done more had I been a better organizer of my time.

5/7/11 5:39PM

I still recall the cleverness of Rolfe Humphries' parody on Miniver Cheever.

5/4/11 8:48PM

Two memories: Tim Colvin, I believe; "Underachiever child of scorn". Anon: But Dean, there are five home games next year!"

5/3/11 2:55PM

The "Favorable" is for being one not for the program. I was close to being invited to leave in junior year, so I guess the program was an effective early warning system. I managed to pull
myself together enough to graduate with the class and end up with a decent GPA. But being an academic "underachiever" meant being an over-achiever in other areas.

5/3/11 2:22PM

Why come to Amherst to be an underachiever?

5/3/11 1:44PM

Put the fear into you that passing might not be enough--was there ever another after Tex Hudspeth?

5/3/11 1:34PM

Never understood what the consequences were if a person was so characterized.

5/2/11 11:13AM

should have it today.

4/28/11 1:47AM

In theory, it was great. It upset me when friends were tagged. One of my most enjoyable ventures was in replying to a University of Wisconsin writer, who took us to task for the underachiever policy. It was one of my smuggest, effete, arrogant intellectual actions.

4/26/11 12:06AM

The opportunity to be at Amherst was too valuable to be taken lightly or squandered. The program was necessary to send the very strong message -perform to the best of your ability or leave Amherst and open up the placement for someone who will honor it and benefit

4/26/11 8:26AM

I think it was a good idea to try to prod along those who chose to coast.

4/26/11 7:42AM

I was one. I begged and pleaded and they let me come back for sophomore year.

4/25/11 9:53PM

Of all the silly elitist ideas that Amherst keeps generating over the decades, this was one of the worst, most arrogant.

4/25/11 3:18PM

But needed more counseling for those of us who were in between

4/25/11 2:02PM

The only thing to be said in its favor is that I get to tell Tom West stories.

4/21/11 5:37PM

Thank god for Rolphe Humphries' "Underacheeva!" The program was the ultimate statement of academic arrogance by the Amherst faculty. One wonders how this mind set would have dealt with mandatory teacher appraisals, I-phones, text messaging, internet research, etc.

4/17/11 4:45PM

I've mixed feelings about this. On its face, it seems like a good idea, but it has lots of administrative issues. I recall that I didn't understand why some were designated as "underachievers" but as a parent I now see how hard it can be to motivate a person to work to his/her potential. In a competitive environment, it is a shame to give a space to one who will perform below potential as that space could have gone to another.
4/15/11 8:37PM

The underachieve policy was a subtle but effective incentive to work to one's capacity, and to maximize an opportunity not afforded to many.

4/15/11 12:56AM

"Underachiever, child of scorn, assailed the seasons". Poor emotionally charged term. Some were slackers, some were a poor fit, some were depressed. Amherst was a realistic, sink or swim environment. The world is like this. However, a more supportive infrastructure for strugglers would have been helpful.

4/15/11 10:29AM

They were pretty romantic figures, the under-a's. It was good for them, I think, and entertaining for the rest of us, though not really cautionary, if that was the point. I remember Tom West's heroic return to campus, driving a 1937 Ford Phaeton.

4/14/11 8:53PM

Notwithstanding this comment I know of a couple of contemporaries who said it was beneficial for them. Just too difficult to administer fairly.

4/14/11 6:43PM

As an "overachiever" I really hated this policy. Ugly and unnecessary.

4/14/11 6:29PM

Who determines, and how, what "underachievement" is?

4/14/11 5:15PM

Never understood the concept. I recognize it was intended to get us to reach our supposed potential. That is not a very good means, in my view. And I don't think anyone paid any attention to it.

4/14/11 3:11PM

As a guy who's still teaching undergrads for his 44th year, I can attest that the underachiever problems are still with us. At least 10% of students in University of Washington Freshman and Sophomore classes exhibit virtually no engagement with their course material, and another 10% have such serious academic deficiencies that they can't perform at a reasonable level no matter what their motivation. The latter was seldom a problem at Amherst; but the wake-up calls to Amherst underachievers served a useful purpose. Given the stiff competition for admission, why should students who weren't yet, and who might never be, invested in an Amherst education usurp space that could be used by fully motivated students? This isn't to denigrate the characters of the Amherst underachievers, or to pretend that all of us don't harbor our personal underachiever behaviors. These folks and their current underachiever compatriots are simply following their own educational trajectories. Some of them even broadened the outlooks of the rest of us, and some became far more successful than those of us who dutifully plodded through Physics 1-2. Nevertheless, the underachievers were still taking up seats that might have been filled by a Stephen Hawking; and just imagine what Arnold Boris Arons and the rest of us would have learned from him.