

THE CASE FOR LINKAGES BETWEEN THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR & OTHER FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS

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* Linking the FYS with *New-Student Orientation*

New-orientation programs that take place prior to the start of classes have multiple advantages, such as: (a) providing a special welcome for new students—at a time when all the institution’s attention and resources are directed exclusively to first-year students, (b) capitalizing on new students’ initial excitement and enthusiasm about starting college and capitalize on it to create a favorable first impression of the institution and positive anticipation for the upcoming college experience, and (c) providing a time and place for new students to get the opportunity to informally bond with each other and with other members of the college community—for example, faculty, student development professionals, student leaders, or peer mentors). Research indicates that involvement in orientation programs increases student retention by increasing their level of social integration (Tinto, 1993).

Unfortunately, however, many new college students do not experience the benefits of new-student orientation, because attendance at such pre-semester programs is not mandatory and failure to attend has no consequences. However, if the FYS is extended to include new-student orientation as its initial component, it becomes an integral part of a credit-earning course. This serves to stimulate students’ attendance and level of involvement in the orientation program, or any summer-preparatory experiences associated with it (e.g., summer reading), particularly if the FYS is a required course for all new students.

Linking the FYS and new-student programs may create a “win-win” partnership, whereby the new-student orientation program profits from greater student participation through its connection to a credit-bearing course, and the FYS profits by freeing-up class time to cover topics other than those addressed in new-student orientation. Moreover, such a linkage would be a natural marriage, because the objectives of most new-student orientation programs dovetail with those of the FYS, such as social integration and strategic use of campus resources. It is no accident that the FYS has been referred to as an “extended orientation” course; it logically follows that the seminar could or should be “extended” to include new-student orientation as a linked component.

* Linking the FYS with *Co-Curricular Programming*

Research in higher education has revealed that the connection between co-curricular experiences and classroom learning is very weak (Heller, 1988). Faculty, in particular, have been found to underestimate the power of student learning experiences outside the classroom and do not actively encourage student involvement with co-curricular programs (Boyer, 1987; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). This is a particularly disturbing finding when viewed in light of the wealth of research indicating that student involvement in campus life has a powerful impact on student retention and the development of students’ interpersonal skills and leadership qualities (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The potential of the FYS to address this problem has been noted by Barefoot and Fidler (1992): “Many freshman seminars exist to bridge the gap between the curriculum and co-curriculum and to facilitate student involvement in all aspects of campus life” (p. 8).

Meaningful connections can be made between the FYS and co-curricular experiences through course assignments that provide students with incentives for becoming actively involved in student life outside the classroom. For instance, when John Gardner taught the FYS at the University of

South Carolina (USC), his syllabus included a co-curricular course assignment that required students to “join a group—some type of USC sponsored organization, club, society. Membership in this group must be verifiable and you must provide proof of membership to us in writing” (Gardner & Davies, 1996, p. 5).

At Marymount College (CA), all FYS instructors include a course assignment in their syllabi, which requires students to attend *two out-of-class activities or campus events per month* during the fall semester. During the first week of class, students receive a “menu” of scheduled co-curricular experiences for the fall semester from which they choose particular events to attend. (Students are encouraged to participate in events that relate to leadership development, service learning, and personal academic or career plans.) After attending the event, students turn in a short “reflection” paper to their seminar instructor in which they respond to a series of short questions designed to assess their personal reaction to and assessment of the co-curricular experience. Extra-credit is sometimes awarded for attending more than two co-curricular events per month, and *special (bonus) credit* may be awarded for involvement in extended *leadership* and *service-learning (volunteer)* experiences (Cuseo, 2004b).

An innovative illustration of how connections can be made between co-curricular experiences, the FYE, and new-student orientation on a totally commuter campus is the “CLUE program,” offered by the College of Staten Island (NY). At this college, all students are expected to attend a two-hour pre-semester program that is offered at a wide variety of times to accommodate the diverse schedules of their non-traditional commuting students. Following participation the pre-semester program, new students’ must fulfill the remainder of an “introduction to college” requirement during their first term by either completing a one-credit FYS (“Issues in College Life”), or by participating in the College Life Unit Experience (CLUE) program. Students selecting the CLUE option are required to attend a total of four certified co-curricular programs during their first semester, at least two of which must involve cultural or intellectual experiences (e.g., guest lecture or theatrical event), and at least two that are oriented more toward personal adjustment or growth (e.g., time management or career development workshops). The Dean of Students publishes a weekly calendar that lists all certified events that is widely distributed on campus; attendance is taken at all CLUE-certified events and cumulative records of student cumulative attendance are maintained in a computer database (Black, 1994).

* Linking the FYS with *Academic Support Services*

As one of the 12 activities required during orientation week, students complete a computerized self-assessment of learning habits and study strategies (E-LASSI) administered in the Learning Center. In the seminar, a follow-up assignment is given that requires students to *meet individually with a professional in the Learning Center* to discuss their personal profile of learning styles/habits and identify strategies for capitalizing on strengths and improving weaker areas.

The seminar also introduces new students to the College Library via a classroom visit from the Director of Library Services—who makes a presentation on academic integrity (what constitutes plagiarism and cheating) and/or disciplinary differences in the nature of research (e.g., how currency of research is a criterion more strongly valued by the natural sciences than the humanities).

* Linking the FYS with *Academic Advisement* and *Career Counseling*

Course assignments in the FYS can be crafted to connect students with academic advisement and career counseling for purposes of engaging them in long-term *educational and career* planning,

enabling new students to begin making *connections* between their *present* college experience and their *future* goals or aspirations. For instance, the following types of assignments could be included in the FYS to connect new students with academic advisors and career counselors and promote long-term planning: (a) an *undergraduate* plan that includes courses in general education and the student's intended academic specialization (major field of study), (b) a tentative *post-baccalaureate educational* plan for graduate or professional school, and (c) a tentative *career* plan that encourages first-year students to identify potential positions, design a skeletal or model resumé that would prepare them for entry into such positions, and initiate a professional *portfolio*—a collection of materials that illustrates student competencies or achievements, and demonstrates educational or personal development (for example: best written work, art work, research projects, letters of recommendation, co-curricular accomplishments, personal awards, and certificates of achievement).

Norwich University (Vermont) uses its first-year seminar in this fashion to engage new students in long-range educational planning and promote student dialogue with their academic advisors about their future plans. The FYS syllabus at Norwich calls for students to meet with their advisor on three occasions during the first term—in addition to their initial meeting for course scheduling. One of these meetings occurs at about the midpoint in the semester, at which time students bring a self-assessment report that they have completed as a FYS course assignment. Advisors use this report to prompt a focused discussion with students about their present academic progress and future educational plans (Catone, 1996). Similarly, at Marymount College (CA), a 2-year institution devoted exclusively to preparing students for successful transfer to baccalaureate degree-granting colleges and universities, first-year seminar students are given an assignment carrying significant point value that requires them to meet with their academic advisor during the first 4-6 weeks of their first term to develop an educational plan, which includes general education requirements for the associate degree (A.A. or A.S.) and pre-major requirements for their intended field of specialization (Cuseo, 2003).

* Linking the FYS with *Service-Learning* Experiences

Research suggests that when service experiences are well integrated into a course, they can enhance cognitive development (Pascarella, 2005). National survey data indicate that approximately 23% of all colleges and universities offering first-year seminars link their seminar with service-learning experiences (Tobolowski, 2005). An ambitious example of how service experience can be integrated with the FYS takes place at the University of Rhode Island, which uses approximately 100 sections of its FYS to involve more than 2400 new students in service learning, by requiring their participation as a component of the course (Richmond, 2002).

A major advantage of linking the FYS with service learning serves is that it creates opportunities for experiential learning *early* in the undergraduate experience, when they are very limited, especially for first-year students. Since internship and practicum experiences are typically reserved for upper-division students, service-learning experience is an alternative way to expose lower-division students to the “real world” and provide them with a very meaningful form of experiential learning. As Zlotkowski (2002) argues, “Given what we now know about the role of unstructured, ‘real-world’ experiences in the development of lifelong learners, it is hard to see how first-year programs can prepare new students to maximize their learning potential unless those programs abandon the often unexamined assumption that learning takes place only on campus” (p. xiii).

An additional advantage of increasing student involvement in off-campus service learning is that it serves to heighten the visibility of the college in the local community, which may strengthen

“town-gown” relationships and serve as a stimulus for expanding the number and variety of off-campus experiential learning opportunities for students.

* Linking the FYS with *Institutional Assessment*

Since the first-year seminar has a student-centered focus that emphasizes self-examination and self-assessment (for example, self-assessment of learning styles, academic and career interests), it can provide a comfortable venue within which to administer instruments designed for institutional assessment of students’ college-entry characteristics, such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), or instruments designed to assess new students’ readiness for college or risk for attrition. Assessments conducted in the first-year seminar for the purpose of collecting college-entry data are likely to be perceived by new students as consistent with the seminar’s objectives and as a natural extension of other self-assessments that are part and parcel of this graded, credit-bearing course. Thus, a common concern about how to enlist students’ full cooperation and motivation for engaging in the assessment process is alleviated when that process is conducted as a meaningful class activity or course assignment. Also, such course-embedded assessment is less likely to be perceived as an irrelevant interruption or intrusion that “sacrifices” class time and course progress, which can diminish both students’ and instructors’ enthusiasm for participating in the assessment process.

Furthermore, required (or heavily enrolled) first-year seminars can provide a sizable sample of first-year students, plus the time and place needed to conduct reflective, comprehensive college-entry assessment. Students enrolled in seminars represent a captive audience, so the need to solicit and reward volunteers for participating in assessment is eliminated, and the potentially confounding effects of sampling bias (a.k.a., the “volunteer effect”) are minimized.

Another source of useful assessment data that may be obtained through the FYS are new students’ reflective writings. Reaction papers, minute paper, and journals are commonly employed in FYS courses and may be viewed as a source of course-embedded assessment. These individually written products may be anonymously aggregated and content analyzed to get a clearer picture of entering students’ initial values, early expectations, and first-term experiences.

Lastly, student grades in the FYS may be a useful as an assessment tool for diagnosing student progress, serving as a possible early-warning (early-alert) mechanism for proactive identification of students who are “at risk” for academic failure and attrition. Empirical support for the diagnostic-assessment potential of FYS grades is provided by institutional research conducted on four consecutive cohorts of first-year students at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, which revealed that first-year seminar grade can predict students’ overall first-year academic performance better than high school grades or college-entry SAT/ACT scores (Hyers & Joslin, 1998). Similarly, at Floyd College—a public community college in Georgia, institutional research indicates that a significant correlation exists between first-year seminar grade and subsequent GPA (Green, 1996). Other campus-specific studies have shown that the specific *grade* earned by students in its first-year seminar correlates significantly with student *retention* (Raymond & Napoli, 1998; Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001). These findings suggest that the course can serve as an accurate diagnostic tool for identifying first-term students who may be academically at-risk and in need of academic assistance or psychosocial intervention.

Such findings suggest that students’ academic performance in the FYS may be predictive of their general academic performance and persistence in their first year of college. If this is the case, then institutions could target intervention procedures that are tailored specifically for beginning students who perform poorly in the FYS, allowing the course to function as a prognostic and diagnostic

assessment tool for early identification and interception of academic problems (and potential attrition) during the first year of college. The FYS could perform this diagnostic function in a particularly *proactive* manner if the course concluded before the end of the term, allowing students' grades to be formally recorded and made accessible to advisors and other student-support or intervention agents while students are still enrolled in other classes. This strategy is used at The Ohio State University, Wooster Campus, where the seminar is offered during the first five-weeks of the semester. Institutional research on this campus demonstrates that student grades in the course are better predictors of their success at the college than high school rank or ACT score; and since these grades are known after the fifth week of the term, early identification and intervention is possible (Zimmerman, 2000).

For seminars that do not conclude before the end of the term, FYS instructors could generate *midterm grades or midterm progress reports* to students experiencing these problems, which could be circulated to academic advisors or academic-support professionals. First-term students receiving grades below a certain threshold or cutoff point in the seminar may then be contacted for consultation and possible intervention. To determine this cutoff point, assessment could be conducted on grade distributions in the FYS to identify the grade below which a relationship begins to emerge between poor performance in the course and poor first-year academic performance or attrition. For instance, at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, it was found that students who earned a grade of C+ or lower in the seminar had a significantly higher rate of first-year attrition ($p < .001$) than students who earned a grade of B- or higher in the course (Hyers & Joslin, 1998).

Use of midterm grades as an "early alert" or "early warning" system is nothing new to higher education. However, a perennial problem with successful implementation of this procedure is lack of compliance—faculty teaching traditional introductory courses may have neither the time for, nor the interest in, calculating and reporting midterm grades for all their students. However, if the FYS grade proves to be an accurate proxy for first-year academic performance in general, then the midterm grade in this single course may serve as an effective and efficient early-warning signal. Moreover, given that FYS instructors often self-select into the program because of their interest in, and concern for promoting the success of first-year students, they should display a high rate of compliance or reliability with respect to submitting students' midterm grades in an accurate and timely manner.