

What is the optimal *class size* for the First-Year Seminar?

To be true to its name, “seminar,” which denotes an intimate group or community of active learners, class size for the FYS should be kept as small as possible. Naturally, smaller class sizes may require more course sections, more course instructors, and more money expended. However, this trade-off may be worth making because research on the effects of class size demonstrates that there are multiple advantages associated with small classes, which include: (a) heightened levels of student participation, (b) improved instructor-student rapport, (c) more frequent writing assignments, and (d) more specific, personalized feedback to students (Cuseo, 2004a). As Leamson (1995) advises, “The Freshman Seminar must be small enough to allow the teacher to know each student by name, to talk to and listen to each student, and to coach each in speaking and writing” (p. 6).

Campus-specific research on first-years seminars also suggests that students in smaller seminar classes, especially those with less than 20 students, perceive the course to be more effective (North Dakota State University, cited in Barefoot, 1993a) and achieve higher first-semester GPAs relative to students enrolled in larger sections of the course (Hopkins & Hahn, cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Based on research reviewed by Cuseo (2004a), it is recommended that the optimal or ideal class size for a FYS would be 15 or fewer students. National survey data reveals that only 18.3% of institutions offer first-year seminars with class sizes of 15 or fewer students; approximately 36% offer their seminar in class sizes ranging between 16-20 students, and roughly 34% have class sizes ranging between 21-25 students (Tobolowski, 2005).

References

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