First Year Experience Courses

Recommendations for UAB’s Core Curriculum

University of Alabama at Birmingham: First Year Experience Workgroup

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# Executive Summary

In this report, the First Year Experience (FYE) Workgroup provides the context and research used to respond to its main charge: *To make recommendations for the consideration of FYE courses becoming a part of UAB’s Core Curriculum*.

To inform recommendations, internal UAB data sources include Core Curriculum Committee expectations, a review of the current state of FYE courses at UAB, and a campus-wide listening tour. External data sources include a review of national research on FYE courses and an exploration of how UAB’s peer institutions approach FYE courses.

For **the charge to consider the number of recommended credit hours** for an FYE course within the Core, we recommend standardization at two credit hours, with flexibility given to schools and colleges to add one more credit hour to cover area/discipline-specific content as desired (for an optional total of 3 credit hours). The Workgroup recommends that any FYE course should be transferrable to satisfy the FYE requirement for any undergraduate degree program at UAB.

For **the charges to consider shared learning outcomes** **or concepts**, we recommend that all FYE courses design student learning outcomes around three central aims:

1) Help students connect with the institution and community.

2) Help students articulate their educational goals and plans.

3) Equip students with strategies for academic success and personal well-being.

For **the charges to consider resources and instructor training** needed to support excellence in FYE course delivery and consistency in the Core, we recommend that the schools and colleges retain their autonomy for developing and providing FYE courses, while also recommending that UAB designate a UAB Core Curriculum Director with responsibility for:

Provision of a clear course creation and approval process within Core standards

Monitoring FYE course compliance within Core standards

Provision of campus-wide FYE instructor training and support

Details for carrying out the above recommendations are provided in the report. Since FYE courses will remain decentralized across the University, the FYE Workgroup recommends that the first response to our research and data collection is the above recommended designation of an individual at UAB to initially oversee the addition of FYE courses to the Core, then to provide campus-wide training and support for maintaining consistency and excellence for all FYE courses.

First Year Experience Courses: Recommendations for UAB’s Core Curriculum

# Introduction

## The Workgroup’s Charge

In October 2019, UAB’s Signature Core Curriculum Committee recommended that a First Year Experience (FYE) working group be established to explore the possibility of bringing the FYE courses into the core curriculum via the following charge:

The charge for this committee will be to make a recommendation [by December 2020] on incorporating the FYE into the core by considering:  1) the number of credit hours; 2) shared learning outcomes; 3) shared concepts/units; 4) resources needed for teaching this course (e.g., sample assignments and activities); and 5) instructors/instructor training.

## The Workgroup’s Members

The below personnel were appointed by UAB’s Provost, Dr. Pamela Benoit.

Workgroup Co-Chairs

Samiksha Raut Associate Professor Department of Biology

Victoria Smith Associate Director; Instructor Office of First Year Experience

Workgroup Members

Amber Genau Associate Professor; Program Director School of Engineering

Nicole Gravitt Program Manager; Instructor School of Public Health

Deborah Littleton Director of Academic Advising; Instructor College of Arts and Sciences

Daniel Siegel Associate Professor; Program Director Department of English

Amy Snow Director of English Language Programs INTO UAB

Peter Tofani Assistant Dean; Instructor School of Nursing

Mary Wallace Assistant VP for Student Experience Student Affairs

# Context and Research

## Internal Data

### Expectations from the Core Curriculum Committee

In the spring of 2018, Provost Benoit established a committee to undertake a significant revision of UAB’s undergraduate core curriculum, which had been essentially stagnant since 1998.  The committee considered all aspects of the core experience, endeavoring to create a modern and engaging core that was also unique to UAB.  As part of this endeavor, the Signature Core Curriculum Committee determined that First Year Experience (FYE) courses at UAB should be incorporated into the new core curriculum.  The committee believed this would help to provide consistency for students, with a standardized number of credits for FYEs and some percentage of shared competencies (such as learning outcomes or career exploration modules).

The Core Curriculum Committee also wished to see all FYEs include some experiential component to connect students to the community around them (e.g. with a campus or community service project, field trip, survey of local career options, etc.) and for FYE seminar options (like those currently offered through the Honors College) to be more widely available.  At the same time, the committee recognized the need for flexibility so that schools are still able to tailor the FYEs they offer to the needs of their students.

Because of the widely varied and decentralized nature of current FYE offerings, the Core Curriculum Committee realized that providing more specific recommendations regarding FYE courses was outside the scope of their ability and timeline.  The committee co-chairs therefore asked Provost Benoit to create a separate FYE working group to collect data, talk to all the stakeholders (deans, advisors, faculty, etc.), research best practices, and make recommendations for change.  The plans for the new Signature Core Curriculum were therefore approved by the faculty senate in spring of 2020 with only provisional details about FYE courses, with the understanding that the new FYE working group would provide more specific and detailed recommendations as a result of their work by the end of 2020.

### The Current State of First Year Experience Courses at UAB

In the Undergraduate Catalog 2020-2021, UAB’s First Year Experience Course Requirements[[1]](#footnote-1) are as follows:

Students entering UAB with fewer than 24 hours of college credit must enroll in and pass a first year experience (FYE) course in their first 24 credit hours at UAB. FYE courses can include CAS 112, BUS 101, EDU 100, EGR 110, EGR 111, HRP 101, NUR 100, PUH 101, UASC 101, and UASC 105. FYE courses are the gateway to undergraduate education at UAB. FYE courses improve your success by helping to bridge the gap between high school experiences and university achievement and holistic development.

First Year Experiences courses are not currently part of the Core Curriculum yet are listed above as a graduation requirement for all first-time degree-seeking undergraduates. Each undergraduate-serving school and college creates, maintains, and monitors its own FYE course(s) and curricula, including the Honors College and the Office of the Provost, which serves undeclared students and other populations as specified in the chart below.

Students usually register for the FYE course within their school or college, with Honors students registering for an Honors FYE seminar. Honors students may or may not also register for the FYE course within their degree-granting school or college. UAB’s FYE courses and seminars vary from 1-3 credit hours, and – per the chart below – some areas require a specific FYE course, while others allow students to transfer FYE credit from other UAB areas.

Current FYE Courses at UAB[[2]](#footnote-2)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **School** | **Course** | **Credit Hours** | **Notes** |
| Business | BUS 101 | 3 | Every business major must have BUS 101 or 102. 101 is for entering first-years; 102 is for those who changed majors or transferred in. |
| BUS 102 | 3 |
| Arts and Sciences | CAS 112 | 1 | Not required for all majors. |
| Education | EDU 100 | 2 | Not required for all majors. |
| Engineering | EGR 110 | 1 | Every EGR major must have either EGR 110 & 111, or 200. The 100-level sequence is for entering first-years. The 200 course can be taken by those who changed majors or transferred in. |
| EGR 111 | 1 |
| EGR 200 | 2 |
| Honors | HC 111-119 | 3 | Required for all Honors students. |
| STH 199 | 3 | Required for SciTech students. |
| Heath Professions | HRP 101 | 2 | Required of all School of HP majors unless they take an Honors FYE or transfer in another FYE. |
| Nursing | NUR 100 | 2 | Preferred FYE course for pre-nursing students; can take any other FYE or Honors College seminar course. |
| Public Health | PUH 101 | 1 | Not required for all majors. |
| Office of the Provost | UASC 101 | 3 | For undeclared students. Can accept students from any major with special circumstances, like non-traditional or online students. |
| UASC 105 | 2 | Required for Blazing Start and Birmingham Promise students; only these students may register. |
| UASC 203 | 2 | Elective course for transfer students of any major. |

FYE courses at UAB are taught by a variety of personnel depending on the school/college – including full-time staff from across campus, academic advisors, or faculty specifically hired to teach FYE courses. Honors courses are generally seminar-style – taught by faculty from across campus and concentrating on topics selected within each faculty member’s area of expertise. The level of FYE instructor/faculty support and training varies according to school or college.

Honors seminars are focused more on traditional academic content. In contrast, other areas’ FYE courses focus on varying combinations of the following topics: An introduction to the specific school/college, major, or academic content; skills to support college-level academics; support for the transition from high school to college (including academic and non-academic factors); an introduction to campus resources; an exploration of the purpose of college-level education and/or the student’s educational and career path.

To summarize, all undergraduate-serving areas at UAB require an FYE course, but the course content, credit hours, credit transferability, and level of instructor training and support varies. Similarly, the overall course purpose varies across school and college.

### A Summary of the UAB Listening Tour

From May-June 2020, the First Year Experience Workgroup met with every undergraduate-serving school/college at UAB, as well as representatives from Student Affairs, Parent and Family Services, and student groups – specified below -- to collect feedback on First Year Experience courses at UAB and on our workgroup’s recommended aims for these courses.

Listening Tour Session Participants

Athletics

Blazing Start (students)

Collat School of Business

College of Arts and Sciences

English Department (students)

Honors College

INTO UAB

Off-Campus Student Council (students)

Parent and Family Services

ROTC and Veterans Affairs

School of Education

School of Engineering

School of Health Professions

School of Nursing

School of Public Health

Student Affairs

Transfer Student Organization (students)

UASC Administrators and Instructors

USGA (students)

The remainder of this section briefly summarizes the 39 pages of data gathered from the Listening Tour. The recommendations and information in this section stem from the listening tour participants rather than from our workgroup members.

Smaller class sizes (50 students or fewer) were generally recommended, and 2-3 credit hours were considered more appropriate than 1-credit FYE courses. There was general agreement that 1-credit courses do not have enough time to cover all the content needed, nor are they reportedly taken seriously enough by students. Those who already teach FYE courses advocated for 3-credit courses; non-FYE instructors tended to be more interested in the 2-credit option. Some schools requested flexibility in choosing between 2-3 credits.

The course aims we drafted were accepted by tour participants with little requested change. There were no major patterns of concern, except that several groups expressed the need for assistance with teaching financial literacy and/or questioned its inclusion in the FYE content. Others expressed a need for assistance teaching diversity as well as health and wellness.

*Who*teaches this course is very important. It was widely agreed that the instructor should be approachable and accessible to students and should ideally be a full time UAB employee – whether faculty or staff. Advisors or other staff were generally recommended to either be the primary instructor or to have significant involvement due to students perceiving staff members as “more approachable and less intimidating” than faculty, in addition to staff members tending to have more in-depth knowledge of campus resources and policies. Conversely, faculty were recommended for courses with more academic content, such as honors seminars.  One area of

feedback that was prominent across sessions was a desire to prioritize training, support, resources, and cross-campus networking for anyone who teaches FYE courses at UAB.

Prominent unanswered questions from these sessions are below and were used to inform the creation of our workgroup’s Recommendations section later in this report:

* Are FYE courses meant to transition students through their first year, through graduation, or all the way into the workforce? This answer may alter some of the course aims.
* Should UAB’s FYE courses be more standardized across campus, or more tailored to different populations’ needs (such as veterans, athletes, transfer students, non-traditional students, first generation, etc.)?
* How much should a focus on or introduction to major/school be part of the FYE courses?
  + What if we incorporate this focus into our FYE courses, and a student changes school or major later?
  + If we focus on intro to school/major in FYE courses, these areas will be most impacted: Honors, CAS, and UASC.
  + Students expressed a high priority for early connection with schools/majors.
* How do we ensure that FYE courses are stimulating enough for students and not simply extended orientation courses?

## External Data

### National Research on First Year Experience Courses

Appendix 1 contains an examination of “First Year Experience Courses: A gateway towards a successful college experience.” The abstract is included below for immediate reference.

**Abstract**

First-year experience courses have been found to be variable in terms of their content and delivery methods, yet their intended purpose is the same to ensure a successful transition of students from high school to college. Many more studies suggest that First Year Experience (FYE) courses can be customized towards a specific major, like business and/or marketing, to provide hands-on experience related to that field of study. In STEM, these courses serve as a vital platform for the students to build valuable relationships with professors, to participate in undergraduate research endeavors with an intent to gain a deeper insight into their respective majors. Alternatively, these courses can also strictly aim to integrate students into campus life. This literature review aims to highlight some effective teaching methodologies utilized within different academic disciplines such as non-STEM, STEM, honors students, freshmen students, and transfer students.

### Peer Institutions’ Approaches to First Year Experience Courses

Appendix 2 contains an examination of “Institutional Approaches to First Year Experience Courses as Compared to The University of Alabama at Birmingham.” The abstract and conclusion of the appendix are included below for immediate reference.

**Abstract**

The first year of college often causes students to experience hardships; however, courses have been designed to help ease this transition. Many schools, including The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), have designed First-Year Experience (FYE) courses to help students overcome and better adapt to this transition. UAB uses peer and aspirant schools to help improve the current approach to FYEs by deeming what works best and what does not for the other schools. Different aspects are taken into consideration, from covering various topics to exposing students to different cultures. UAB designs these courses to help students advance in their academic and professional life, while continually making changes to give students the optimal first-year experience.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, UAB strives to implement the most effective First Year Experience programs to accommodate their students’ best. UAB’s current FYE program compares to UCI, UC, UIC, USF, VCU, and RU programs with similar aims and styles. However, UAB aspires for its FYEs to be similar to UCSD and UP’s courses, which offer various topics within their seminars to accommodate as many freshmen as possible. FYEs provide freshmen with the proper tools needed to succeed throughout their whole college career and personal life. The invaluable experiences FYE programs offer to incoming first-year students guide their transition into higher education. The various forms FYEs have allow for more versatility, so as many students as possible benefit. For UAB’s students to reach their full potential, UAB must provide the most efficient FYE courses for their students to gain knowledge and experience.

# Recommendations

## Number of Credit Hours

Based on the feedback from current FYE faculty and instructors at UAB and on comparisons with peer institutions, one credit hour would not allow sufficient time to cover the recommended FYE course learning outcomes and concepts included below.

Our workgroup recommends that First Year Experience courses in UAB’s Core Curriculum be 2 credit hours; furthermore, any FYE course should be transferrable to satisfy the Core Curriculum FYE requirement among any undergraduate degree program at UAB.

Additionally, our workgroup recommends that schools and colleges have the flexibility to add one hour (for a total of 3 credits) onto their FYE courses to cover school/area-specific information or other content as desired.

In summary, to satisfy the Core Curriculum’s FYE requirement, a First Year Experience course must provide 2 credit hours covering the below recommended learning outcomes. Any FYE course shall satisfy the Core FYE requirement regardless of student major or degree program. FYE courses may have an optional credit added on to cover additional information not specified below, but addition of this extra credit hour should not prevent the transferability of FYE courses among degree programs at UAB.

## Shared Learning Outcomes and Concepts

**Overview**

To thrive in college, students need to develop a number of capacities at once. They need to discover a sense of direction and purpose, to form a tangible academic plan, to feel that they are important members of our diverse university community, to connect with faculty and with other students, to learn the skills and behaviors that will let them succeed in their courses, and to keep themselves physically and emotionally healthy. The First Year Experience courses aim to help entering students in all of these areas, so they can enjoy and profit from their time at UAB.

Below are the central aims of every FYE course:

**Help students connect with the institution and community.**

FYE courses will help students gain a sense of belonging and connection at UAB. Students will learn about UAB resources, services, and institutional values; they will meet faculty, advisors, and student leaders; they will be encouraged to participate in campus activities; and they will learn ways to be involved with the local community beyond the university. Students will also build connections to their peers by talking and working closely with other students in the class and learning how to engage with topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; in this way, FYE will serve as a safe and supportive space for students.

**Help students articulate their educational goals and plans.**

FYE courses will challenge students to reflect on their own reasons for attending college and to articulate what they hope to learn and experience in their time at UAB. Students will be guided through the process of exploring academic programs and career paths that match their goals and values. Within the professional schools, an FYE may additionally serve as an introduction to the profession, teaching students about the options available to them during and after college, and helping them decide whether this is the professional path they wish to pursue.

**Equip students with strategies for academic success and personal well-being.**

FYE courses will help students with the transition to UAB by teaching them skills and strategies they will need to know to succeed in college. These could range from study skills, to classroom protocols and expectations, to information about the registration process. The courses will also help students learn how to take care of their physical and emotional health, navigate financial choices related to college, and engage productively with a diversity of people and ideas. Students will have opportunities to think critically and problem solve.

## Instructor Training and Other Resources

As mentioned in the Listening Tour summary, *who*teaches this course is very important. The workgroup agrees that the FYE instructor should be approachable and accessible to students and should be eager to specifically teach an FYE course. The FYE instructor should ideally be a person – whether faculty or staff – who has more than surface-level familiarity with UAB and who is thus able to help students form connections at the university and learn about campus policies and resources for meeting the shared concepts of FYE courses recommended above. We recommend that schools and colleges retain the flexibility to choose the primary instructor who best serves the focus or approach of the specific FYE course.

To support the inclusion of First Year Experience courses in the Core Curriculum, we recommend that UAB implement the following resources and instructor training opportunities:

Highly Recommended

* Designation of a UAB Core Curriculum Director with responsibility for the following FYE-related areas:
  + Provision of a clear course creation and approval process within Core standards
  + Monitoring FYE course compliance within Core standards
  + Provision of instructor training and support, including an annual orientation for those who teach FYE
* Institutional support for course content creation and instructor training
  + Module-specific information: (ideally from on-campus experts) for the topics of health and wellness, financial literacy, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. We recommend that the FYE Council and/or the UAB Core Curriculum Director have oversight of the creation of this module-specific information for instructors’ optional use in FYE courses.
  + Course mode options: Support to help course creators consider and implement alternative approaches to FYE courses, such as experiential learning, service learning, or FYE seminars (like those FYE courses offered in the Honors College)
* An institutional subscription available through UAB’s libraries to the *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition[[3]](#footnote-3)*
  + Note: Our workgroup identified the need for this resource, and UAB added institutional access to this journal in October 2020.
* An annual conference on campus for FYE instructors (also open to anyone who teaches first-year students) providing the following opportunities:
  + A keynote speaker (either internal or external to campus)
  + Regular conference sessions for instructors to present ideas or attend training
  + Networking for on-campus personnel
  + Student feedback sessions
  + Presentations of national and institutional FYE-related data
  + Support to prepare instructors to present at national FYE conferences
  + Presentation of an annual UAB award or recognition for an outstanding FYE instructor with the ability for the recipient to attend a regional or national conference on First Year Experience

Other Recommendations

* The creation of UAB-specific FYE course materials of minimal or no cost for students, including but not limited to Canvas modules (optional for FYE course use)
* A UAB CTL track for teaching first-year students
* Regular nomination of a UAB FYE instructor for the annual Excellence in Teaching First-Year Seminars Award from the National Resource Center[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Opportunities for future research:
  + Investigation of the correlation between FYE grades and student success (including but not limited to retention and graduation rates)

These recommendations are designed to enable a campus-wide training and support system for bringing the First Year Experience courses into the Core Curriculum. While the FYE courses will continue to be decentralized across the University, our ultimate recommendation for this category is to designate an individual within the authority of the Core Curriculum (or possibly the Center for Teaching and Learning) to have responsibility for and funding to provide the recommended support for UAB’s FYE courses across campus. To clarify -- authority for approval of a course that fulfills the FYE standards in the Core should reside within the Core Curriculum, but individual FYE course curricula and logistics would otherwise reside within the respective school, college, or office.

## Catalog Update

We recommend that the Core Curriculum and First Year Experience sections of the UAB Undergraduate Academic Catalog be updated with this text:

**First Year Experience (FYE) Courses**

Students entering UAB with fewer than 24 hours of college credit must enroll in and pass a First Year Experience course in their first 24 credit hours at UAB. FYE courses are part of UAB’s Core Curriculum and are the gateway to undergraduate education at UAB. These courses help students articulate their educational goals and plans, equip students with strategies for academic success and personal well-being, and show students how to connect with others in the university and the broader community. The aim of all FYE courses is to help students enjoy and profit from their years in college.

# Appendix 1

First Year Experience Courses: A gateway towards a successful college experience

## Abstract

First-year experience courses have been found to be variable in terms of their content and delivery methods, yet their intended purpose is the same to ensure a successful transition of students from high school to college. Many more studies suggest that First Year Experience (FYE) courses can be customized towards a specific major, like business and/or marketing, to provide hands-on experience related to that field of study. In STEM, these courses serve as a vital platform for the students to build valuable relationships with professors, to participate in undergraduate research endeavors with an intent to gain a deeper insight into their respective majors. Alternatively, these courses can also strictly aim to integrate students into campus life. This literature review aims to highlight some effective teaching methodologies utilized within different academic disciplines such as non-STEM, STEM, honors students, freshmen students, and transfer students.

**Keywords:** first year, honors students, freshmen students, transfer students, STEM and Non-STEM

## Introduction

First Year Experience (FYE) courses aim to increase overall college success for incoming students with a strong focus on student retention and hence, graduation. Interestingly, these types of courses have a long history, with the first one being offered in 1882, by Lee College in Kentucky. Thereafter, the overall movement for the improvement of these courses took off in the 1970s. With that being stated, there are a variety of FYE courses that aim to complement and correspond to the different majors offered by different institutions. Non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) FYE courses give students a preview into their chosen field of study. The curricula within these courses can have a large influence on whether a student continues to pursue their chosen career path. At one northeastern university, an effective teaching method was implemented to engage and challenge their students. Freshman courses help students become more engaged and contribute later towards their retention in college. Honors courses have a primary aim of creating an engaging environment where students feel welcomed. For example, at schools like the University of Florida, each incoming freshman student is paired with two senior students as mentors, and they are given various opportunities to network with faculty and gain professional development skills.

## History of FYE courses

In the past three decades, there has been an increased emphasis on perfecting FYE courses to better accommodate incoming freshmen to the collegiate environment. In terms of origin, Lee College is credited with having the first freshman seminar. In the decades to follow, the focus was primarily on orienting freshmen to college. In the 1970s, there was a large increase in the number of first-generation and lower-income students who attended post-secondary school due to the introduction of community colleges and the formation of 4-year institutions. It was not until 1972 that the first freshman course was introduced by John Gardner, entitled “University 101” at the University of South Carolina. The goal of this course was to increase the student retention rate and to humanize the collegiate environment. Gardner’s efforts were credited with initiating more of a “movement” towards improving first year transition to post-secondary education. As the drive for this movement gained momentum, Gardner established the National Resource Center in 1986, then renamed it the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition in 1995. The efforts of those who contributed to the introduction of such courses were able to carry the momentum into the 1990s, and this movement presently is being further expanded to accommodate a variety of curricula offered by different institutions.

## FYE as a part of a curriculum

FYE courses are key contributors to students’ and universities’ successes in the academic and business world. Coming out of high school, many students face challenges in transitioning to the rigor of college. This can lead students down a slippery slope of “maladaptive responses” impacting the attrition of students attending colleges, which has an overall impact on the retention rates of a university. Herein we summarize some advantages associated with the FYE courses:   
  
Pursuing an undergraduate education can be very lucrative for students entering the world of commerce. For example, in 2003 the median annual salary in the U.S. was $30,800 for a worker with only a high school diploma. Comparatively, the earnings for someone with a bachelor’s degree augmented to median earnings of $49,900 (The College Board 2005). Additionally, retention is important to universities because of the monetary value attached to a student. Students provide financial support to universities through tuition and school fees. A low retention rate means that universities are always looking to replace students who leave. Retention rates additionally exemplify a college’s performance in maintaining and cultivating a strong student population, which affects a university’s ranking and further affects recruitment for future populations of students. Therefore, universities foresee use in FYE courses as an effort to improve student experiences and transition to college to increase their retention rates and academic standing among other universities. FYE courses are designed to add both “curricular and extracurricular components to existing core courses in an effort to integrate students into the university community” (Jamelske, Eric 2009).

Such student integration is accomplished by incorporating engagement between students and the university community through seminars. These seminars explore topics related to the values of higher education and how to learn and cultivate academic habits that can prove useful during one’s academic career. These skills can include collaboration among academic affairs, student affairs, and university resources such as academic advising, co-curricular programs, health and wellness, residential life, community-based initiatives, academic support services, and career planning. Over the years, many universities have seen the effects of implementation of FYE courses within college curricula and have published the associated success rates. One example being in 2007, when Southern Connecticut State University implemented a comprehensive FYE program within its college curriculum. Along with its implementation, they conducted a comparison study in which they tracked the performance of their freshman class with the effect of having an FYE course present. The study split the freshman class into two halves and kept 50% of the students as the control group (unaffected by the presence of the FYE course) and the other 50% as the experimental group, where the students were required to be enrolled in an FYE course. Seminar participants demonstrated “higher rates of retention, higher GPAs, and more credits earned than non-seminar students” (Michael Ben-Avie, et al. 2012).

Overall, the use of FYE courses within the college curriculum is to improve student performance and development by enabling individuals “to seek goals, make decisions, explore career options, solve problems, speak up for themselves, understand support mechanisms for fostering student success, and evaluate outcomes” (Test, Aspel, and Everson 2006, 160). In the following discussion, we describe the FYE in the context of different parameters.

### A. FYE in Non-STEM fields

First year courses can be tailored to any major -- such as business, marketing, and other non-stem majors. A northeastern university implemented BUS 101, a marketing first year experience course, with a primary objective of orienting students to campus life, preparing students to be successful throughout their academic careers, and teaching students important business and marketing strategies (Greene, 2011). The execution of experiential learning produced a beneficial environment in which freshmen students could learn important marketing topics. The curriculum consisted of “The Great Cookie Challenge,” where students were put into groups and created a marketing campaign for the eventual sale of chocolate chip cookies (Greene, 2011). Over the following eight weeks, the students created their own “companies” and marketing strategies, performed pertinent business/marketing analyses, and were given free rein on how to generate revenue for their company as well as how to advertise their company with social media and charities (Greene, 2011). The students were asked to document their experiences with photos and create a PowerPoint presentation to additionally convey their specific business/marketing strategies. “The Great Cookie Challenge” was considered a success and taught students how to collaborate with others, meet deadlines, give oral presentations, and ultimately give students valuable insight on what it is like to work within the world of commerce. To incoming freshmen, this FYE approach might have appeared to be challenging, but there is significance in a first-year experience course with this curriculum model. The students were given an opportunity to be creative and step outside of their comfort zones. Additionally, this extreme hands-on experience gave them the ability to solidify their interests in the business/marketing field or comparatively encouraged them to explore more suitable career options.

### B. FYE in STEM Fields

Stem courses are normally seen as “high-risk core” courses (Cuevas, M., Campbell, K., Lowery-Hart, R. D., Mallard, J., Andersen, A. (2013). This indicates numerous propositions. Specifically, STEM courses are quite rigorous, just as college courses are in any discipline. However, STEM courses have an augmented version of rigor in comparison to non-STEM courses. One must consider the increased acceleration of the class and workload that comes with a STEM course. Some may even say that STEM can be quite competitive and stressing. STEM is considered high-risk because there are more opportunities to fail then there are to succeed. That is precisely why it is so important to establish “Learning communities” early during one’s academic career (2013). Learning communities have expressed results that exemplify an increase in obtaining study skills, promoting connection with faculty, creating a sense of belonging and acceptance, and increasing grade point averages and overall retention rates (Gardner, Upcraft, 7 Barefoot, 2005; Laufgraben, 2005; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Smith et al., 2004; Swing, 2004; Fink, 2003; Barefoot, Fidler, Gardner, Moore, & Roberts, 1999). The most common way of establishing learning communities is using an FYE course. FYE courses encourage and increase peer-to-peer connections. Specifically, FYE courses related to STEM courses improve students’ efforts to get to know students within their classes, their ability to meet new people with common interests, and their ability to establish friendships with peers (Swing, p. 12). Establishing these relationships not only helps students feel accepted and helps students establish learning communities, but it also increases their overall satisfaction with the courses they are taking. A study conducted at Georgia State University by Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts (2006) sought results regarding the efficacy or inefficacy of learning communities and their effects on academic performance and retention rates. Within the study there were a total of 45 students enrolled in a STEM course. 19 (42%) of the students were also enrolled with the companion FYE course. The outcome of the results was determined by a comparison study of the two groups and their test results over four examinations. Students within the learning community (FYE course learning) had a “drop and failure rate of 15%” for the STEM course, whereas the students who were not enrolled in the companion FYE course had a “drop and failure rate of 24%” (Cuevas, M., Campbell, K., Lowery-Hart, R. D., Mallard, J., Andersen, A. (2013).  Additionally, the study expressed that belonging to an FYE learning community increased a student’s GPA from about “three-quarters to one full letter grade” (Hotchkiss et al., p.207). Ultimately, establishing learning communities with FYE courses helped increase retention rates within STEM courses and helped increase the GPA of students taking STEM classes, overall conveying a positive correlation between the use of FYE courses alongside STEM courses.

### C. Honors FYE courses

An example of such courses is the first year experience course provided by the University of Florida, taught by honors advisors (in STEM) along with the assistance of two honor students. The aim of this course is to provide students with opportunities to network with faculty in terms of research, internships, and mentorship (Johnson, Podjed and Taasan). It allows students to gain professional development skills and is a hybrid course where they complete online modules to prepare for class each week. This course is a one-credit hour course that meets once a week. The aim of this course is to engage students in an environment that aids to personalize their path, maintain their honors membership, and help honors students succeed academically. Other benefits of Honors FYE courses include encouraging students to take honors courses within their majors and to take part in leadership positions (Goodstein and Szarek).

### D. FYE for freshman: Variable Focus

First year courses are one of the most important aspects to take into consideration for universities across the United States. FYE courses have classes to empower students toward success in their undergraduate years, starting from the freshman year. Most universities offer classes such as Success in College for 1-3 credit hours. For example, The University of Alabama at Birmingham offers classes like Success in College (1 credit), Introduction to Business for business-related majors (3 credits), Touch the Future (2-3 credits), Experience the University Transition (2 credits), and Keys to Academic Success (2 credit). However, FYE courses additionally include topics such as stress management, psychosocial adjustment, college attendance, and mentor intervention to accommodate the mental transition from a high school environment to a four-year collegiate institution. A study conducted by some researchers shows the importance of incorporating stress management into FYE seminars during the freshman year (Conley et al.2013). This study aimed to promote mental health awareness via FYE courses and concluded their research as a gain towards academic achievement for the students throughout university. Another study showed that providing mentors to the students as an FYE course also resulted in similar gains (Young et al. 2017). Another approach towards making students more engaged in universities is by creating a library orientation. A study conducted by The University of California at San Diego showed that creating an engaging library orientation helps students to become successful at their university (Goldman et al.2016). Another study conducted by The University of Minnesota stated that peer or mentor involvement in FYE courses is necessary for student retention (Złotkowski et al.2002). Enhancing an existing FYE course is not only important for an institution but also beneficial for student engagement. Introducing organizations and events to FYE can also maintain the retention rate and could help students in their freshman year (Martin et al.2017).

### E. Transfer FYE

The process of transferring is challenging for many students, and transfer students are characterized by a phenomenon known as “Transfer Shock.” Close to 71% of students enrolled in community colleges declare transferring to a four-year institution as their primary goal, but only 7-20% ever really transfer to four-year universities (Mosqueda, Cynthia). In addition to the rigorous process of transferring, there are additional adjustments that impact a transfer student’s academic performance. Specifically, students experiencing Transfer Shock come in unprepared for the academic rigor and experience a decrease in GPA. This is further characterized by dropping out of college. It is therefore imperative to have well-designed FYE courses specially for transfer students. FYE courses play a significant role in first-year transfer student retention and engagement (Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2019). FYE programs establish learning communities through first year seminars that help create relations between students, on-campus services, and faculty. FYE courses have this characteristic that resonates with the average transfer student -- being that there is no “one-size fits all” FYE course curriculum (Hunter 2006; Jaffee, 2004; Kuh et al, 2008; Finlet and Staub, 2007). This flexibility of approach to FYE is important because it exemplifies just how diverse, accepting, and intuitive FYE courses can be and how they are able to prepare all students for academic success through different approaches and methods. This flexible approach further conveys the fact that FYE courses are not implemented to create uniformity but rather to grant access to tools that students lack coming into college that can aid in their college transfer experience.

## Overall significance

The main objectives in the various categories of first year experience courses remain the same: to increase the overall retention and success rate of first year college students. Previous studies demonstrate that those who participate in these courses are more likely to achieve higher grades in their first semester classes, gain better professional relationships with faculty members at their school, and have a greater participation rate in campus activities, clubs, or service events (Porter and Swing). The purpose of these courses is to serve as a mentorship to provide freshman students with the required skills and expectations of those in the collegiate environment (Porter and Swing). Most institutions today incorporate FYE courses into their curriculum with the intentions of providing an environment where new students feel comfortable, welcomed, and supported. The Tinto model (1987) suggests that lack of academic and social integration in college contributes towards attrition of students (Brock). With the changing college landscape, these first year experience courses should be considered for revision in order to meet the specific needs of incoming students (Woolfork-Barnes). In summary, these courses are able to create a strong campus culture, so that students feel capable of being successful in college regardless of their respective backgrounds.

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# Appendix 2

Institutional Approaches to First Year Experience Courses as Compared to The University of Alabama at Birmingham

## Abstract

The first year of college often causes students to experience hardships; however, courses have been designed to help ease this transition. Many schools, including The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), have designed First Year Experience (FYE) courses to help students overcome and better adapt to this transition. UAB uses peer and aspirant schools to help improve the current approach to FYEs by deeming what works best and what does not for the other schools. Different aspects are taken into consideration, from covering various topics to exposing students to different cultures. UAB designs these courses to help students advance in their academic and professional life, while continually making changes to give students the optimal first year experience.

## Introduction

Students transitioning to four-year universities in the United States are more susceptible than those who go to a community college or trade school to experience hardships; thus, many colleges have implemented different types of first year experience (FYE) courses - some of which help ease and accommodate the transition by covering academic topics, critical life lessons, engaging students in their self and community, and exposing students to different cultures. The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) strives to have one of the nation's leading FYE programs. In this regard, UAB must approach the designing of FYEs course in keeping at par with peers, including the University of California - Irvine (UCI), University of Cincinnati (UC), University of Illinois - Chicago (UIC), University of South Florida (USF), Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and Rutgers University (RU). Moreover, schools that UAB aspires to be comparable to are The University of California - San Diego (UCSD) and the University of Pittsburgh (UP).

## Institutional approaches at peer and aspirant institutions

FYE courses are a crucial aspect in transitioning to higher education. Most colleges throughout the United States have implemented FYEs to help ease the transition (Wajeeh and Micceri, 2020). UAB has compiled a list of schools it aspires to be like and schools it is similar to. For the aspirational schools, UAB has designated UCSD and UP, and for comparable schools, UCI, UC, UIC, USF, VCU, and RU. However, not all FYEs are designed the same. For example, USF has developed three different courses: Academic Foundations Seminar, Foundations of Interdisciplinary Knowledge and Inquiry, and Exploratory Curriculum Majors (First Year, 2020). These courses focus on various topics, such as developing academic strategies, STEM-based learning, examining social problems, utilizing critical thinking skills, and major/career exploration (First Year, 2020). Furthermore, as stated previously, there are various FYE designs colleges utilize to relate to the maximum number of first-year students. For example, UC's FYE courses allow their students with undeclared majors to “try on” different majors by offering numerous seminars that introduce an overview of the academic courses (FYE, 2020). Delivering various FYEs allows the students to be exposed, and therefore to develop strategies to overcome different areas of hardship that many students face during their transition.

Moreover, many students do not take into consideration that college is a time where critical life lessons are learned. With FYEs, students are exposed to a variety of life lessons, such as peer leadership experience at VCU (Gordon, Henry, and Dempster, 2013), the introduction of resources, such as academic, financial, and student affairs advisors at VCU (Student Success --- First Year Success Courses, 2020), and community living and health at RU (First-Year Experience -- Residence Life, 2020). Most FYE coursesaim to place their incoming freshmen in the best position by enabling them to succeed within and outside of the classroom by including a wide variety of experiences and opportunities in their programs. USDC’s FYE courses emphasize community involvement, engagement, professional development, and personal health and well-being (First Year Experience, 2020). Community involvement is a prioritized topic within most colleges’ FYEs, including UCI -- which encourages its students to host a philanthropy event, such as a food drive, to gain leadership experience and get them involved in the community (First Year Experience, 2020). Introducing students to crucial life lessons allows them to develop academically, personally, and professionally.

Furthermore, with learning life lessons, students are also exposed to different ways of life. Many colleges host numerous seminars within their FYE programs, including a wide variety of experiences -- from foreign dance to meditation techniques -- to accommodate every student’s unique needs (Learning Goals, 2020). These seminars, typically limited to 15-40 students, prove significantly useful in improving their first year in college (Learning Goals, 2020). At UCI, approximately 55% and 26% of their students in 2019 rated the overall quality of the Freshman Seminar Excellent and Very Good, respectively (Learning Goals, 2020). About 75% of these students recommend their friends and peers enroll in a Freshmen Seminar, while 72% of the students were interested in enrolling in another one-unit seminar at a more advanced level in the future (Learning Goals, 2020). FYEs are not limited to academics; they also prioritize students’ well-being and health by exposing them to different cultures and experiences to help them navigate throughout life. UCSD offered a “Building Social Confidence” seminar where certified counselors gave the students advice on forming positive relationships with their peers (Past Events Online, 2020). Moreover, one of UP’s seminars educates their students on Pittsburgh and all its cultural resources, and even offers film screenings (First Year Seminar (FP 0006), 2020). UP also provides relief from educational stress by offering a seminar that includes a “Fun & Games” portion, an ongoing discussion on capitalism, and an investigation on the “myths to contemporary TV and films” (First Year Seminar (FP 0006), 2020). Many FYEs, for example UCI’s, help students share and shape their identities and culture through student engagement and communication with fellow students (Thakral, et al., 2016). With various topics, life lessons, and cultural exposure, students have deemed FYEs beneficial -- so much that 50% of FSU students designated the course as helpful, 52% believed it helped them become familiar with services provided, and 40% felt they better understood the importance of life lessons (Wajeeh and Micceri, 2020).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, UAB strives to implement the most effective First Year Experience programs to accommodate their students’ best. UAB’s current FYE program compares to UCI, UC, UIC, USF, VCU, and RU programs with similar aims and styles. However, UAB aspires for its FYEs to be similar to UCSD and UP’s courses, which offer various topics within their seminars to accommodate as many freshmen as possible. FYEs provide freshmen with the proper tools needed to succeed throughout their whole college career and personal life. The invaluable experiences FYE programs offer to incoming first-year students guide their transition into higher education. The various forms FYEs have allow for more versatility, so as many students as possible benefit. For UAB’s students to reach their full potential, UAB must provide the most efficient FYE courses for their students to gain knowledge and experience.

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3. <https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/publications/journal/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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