

## ***Administration of the First-Year Seminar:*** Key Decisions and Decision-Making Criteria

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The impact of the first-year seminar depends not only on its content, but also its design and delivery—both pedagogical and administrative. Given the non-traditional nature of the seminar and the intense political resistance that typically accompanies its introduction into the college curriculum, administration of this course requires a much more intricate and delicate set of decisions than does the administration of standard, discipline-based courses. The numerous and often arduous decisions that must be made with respect to the first-year seminar fall into the following major categories.

### 1. *Course Title:*

- \* What course *name or title* should be ascribed to the FYS?

### 2. *Course Location*

- \* *Where* should the FYS be *housed or positioned* in the college's *organizational structure*?

### 3. *Course Leadership:*

- \* Who should *direct or coordinate* the FYS?

### 4. *Course Instructors:*

- \* *Who* should *teach* the FYS, and how should these instructors be *recruited*?
- \* Should instructors receive special *training or preparation* to teach the FYS?
- \* How should FYS instructors be *rewarded or compensated* for teaching the FYS?

### 5. *Awarding of Academic Credit:*

- \* Should the FYS be offered for *academic credit*?
- \* What number of *credits (units)* should the FYS carry?

### 6. *Application of Credit:*

- \* Should the FYS be offered as a *mandatory* graduation requirement?
- \* If the FYS is offered as an elective, how should students be *recruited or encouraged* to enroll in the course?
- \* Should the FYS be offered for *general education* credit?

### 7. *Student Grading:*

- \* Should student performance in the FYS be evaluated with a *letter grade* that is included in the student's grade-point average, or should it be offered as a *pass/fail* (credit/no-credit) course?

8. Degree of *Consistency/Commonality or Variability/Individuality of Course Content* across Course Sections:

\* Should content for the FYS be tightly *standardized* across course sections to ensure a common learning experience, or should content be allowed to *vary* from section to section to provide course instructors with a greater degree of academic freedom?

\* Should *special, customized sections* of the FYS be created to accommodate the distinctive needs of students with different demographic characteristics, levels of academic preparation, or educational plans?

9. *Class Size*:

\* What is the optimal *class size* for the FYS?

10. *Class Scheduling*:

\* *When* should the FYS *begin* and *end*?

\* What should be the *length* and *frequency* of class meetings?

\* Should some or all sections of the FYS meet *at the same time*?

11. *Linkages with Other Courses and Programs*:

\* Should the FYS be delivered as a *stand-alone* course, or should it be *linked* with other courses in the curriculum to form *learning communities*?

\* Should the FYS be linked with *programs* outside of the formal curriculum?

Specific decision-making recommendations will be offered for each of the foregoing aspects of course administration, and to place these recommendations in a national context, relevant survey data will be cited about how these administrative decisions have been made at other campuses nationwide. The recommendations offered are not intended to be prescriptive; instead, they are offered with the understanding that administrative decisions may need to be tempered by and tailored to the fiscal, logistical, and political realities that characterize the particular campus culture in which the course is developed and delivered.

## Academic Credit

### Should the FYS be offered for academic credit?

National survey research on first-year seminars conducted by the National Resource Center for The First Year Experience & Students in Transition reveals that more than 92% of responding institutions indicate that they offer the FYS for academic credit toward graduation (Tobolowski,

2008), and rightfully so. This practice elevates the status of the FYS to the same level of academic legitimacy as other college courses, and it sends a clear message to students that the course is credible, valuable, and worthy of their time and effort.

Course critics who argue that the course is “remedial” and, therefore, not deserving of academic credit, may need to be reminded that research on the FYS demonstrates that the course benefits students of all levels of academic ability (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Davis, 1993). First-year seminars, as Fidler and Hunter put it, “help the talented student perform better while at the same time helping weaker students survive” (Fidler & Hunter, 1989, p. 228).

Well-prepared students who enter higher education still need exposure to FYS content (e.g., the meaning and value of general education) because such information is not covered in high school, nor is it intentionally and explicitly covered anywhere else in the college curriculum. First-year students who enter college with good academic qualifications also profit from exposure to strategies for coping with social and emotional adjustments in college that may otherwise interfere with their academic performance. In fact, research suggests that honors students enter higher education with higher levels of anxiety than non-honors students, perhaps because they fear that heightened academic competition will threaten and possibly displace their previous high school status (Gordon, 1983). Research also indicates that honors students experience significant stress with respect to time-management issues (Stephens & Eison, 1986-1987; Fleming, 2002), which suggests that they would profit from a FYS that includes discussion of these issues. Among academically well-prepared students are also “undecided” students who have had no systematic exposure to the academic fields (and potential majors) that comprise the liberal arts, and do not understand the complex relationships between college majors and potential careers. Surveys conducted at the University of Maryland indicate that honors students have an interest in and need for personal and career counseling (“First-Year Honors Students,” 1994). In fact, Levitz and Noel (1989) report that the number-one reason cited by high-ability students for their decision to withdraw from college is lack of certainty about a major and/or career. As Levitz (1994) points out, “Students with good academic histories may easily succumb to problems unrelated to their academic competency” (p. 5). These findings strongly suggest that the FYS should not be deemed as remedial or supplemental, but as integral to the success of all students entering higher education, regardless of their level of academic preparedness.

### **What number of credits (units) should the FYS carry?**

The most recent national survey of first-year seminars reveals that 42.5% of responding campuses offer the FYS for one unit of credit, 12.6% offer it for two units, 33% offer it for three units, and about 10% for four or more units (Tobolowski, 2008). Several conceptually sound arguments can be made for the FYS to carry as many credit hours and as much contact time as possible, such as the following:

- \* More credit hours allow for greater breadth (and depth) of content coverage and more extensive (and intensive) skill development.
- \* More credit hours provides longer “incubation time” for the development of social-emotional

ties (bonding) between students and the instructor, and among students themselves.

\* The larger the amount of credit carried by the seminar, the greater weight it will carry toward students' GPA. A course carrying more units is more likely to be taken seriously by students and provide students with a greater *incentive* to invest more *effort* in the course. A course carrying more units is also likely to elevate *faculty expectations* of the amount of time and effort that students commit to the class. This combination of heightened student effort and higher faculty expectations is likely to magnify the seminar's potential impact on student learning and retention.

\* More credit hours create more class-contact time for instructors to make use of engaging, student-centered pedagogy, such as class discussions and small-group work. Limiting course credit and contact time in the FYS is likely lead to greater use of the lecture method to disseminate as much information as possible in an attempt to "beat the clock" and cover as much as possible with the limited amount of contact time they have with their students.

\* More credit hours allow the FYS to better accommodate coverage of additional topics or issues that are likely to emerge over time. It is common for the seminar to be the curricular place or space for addressing student needs and campus issues that cannot be addressed elsewhere in the traditional college curriculum (e.g., technological literacy, money management, academic integrity). The seminar has displayed a capacity for functioning as a "meta-curriculum" that transcends specialized content and traverses disciplinary boundaries As Hunter and Linder (2005) note: "The use of first-year seminars to address important topics, content, and processes that do not fit logically into, or that transcend, existing disciplines has been in practice for some time" (p. 289). One FYS practitioner and researcher refers to the seminar as the "spare room" in the college curriculum, where any and all issues that do not fit into other rooms (courses) are conveniently deposited (Barefoot, 1993).

\* Offering the seminar for the same number of credits that characterize most other courses in the college curriculum (for example, three credit hours) enhances the seminar's *credibility* in the eyes of students because the course will more likely be perceived as equivalent in value to other college courses. In contrast, a one-unit course may send the message (to both students and instructors) that the seminar is devalued, and not worthy of the amount of classroom contact time that characterizes the vast majority of courses in the college curriculum.

Empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of more credit hours and contact time for the FYS is provided in a critical review of the research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) who found that "orientation interventions" that are longer in duration and more comprehensive in scope tend to be empirically associated with stronger direct effects on student retention. The FYS may be viewed as an "extended-orientation intervention" that extends orientation into and through the first term, thereby increasing its duration and comprehensiveness. According to Pascarella and Terenzini's research review, this should increase the course's potential to exert stronger, direct effects on student retention.

Additional evidence for first-year seminars that carry more credit hours is provided by

research conducted by Swing (2002c). Working under the aegis of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, survey-generated data were obtained from more than 31,000 students at 62 different institutions, and it was found that students enrolled in seminars that involved more contact hours generally reported larger gains in learning outcomes than students enrolled in seminars with fewer contact hours. In the principal investigator's own words:

Three-contact hour courses exceeded both 1- and 2-contact hour courses on the two factors measuring gains in academic skills (writing, speaking, and library skills), and critical thinking skills. Overall, the data show that 3-contact hour courses produce the widest range of [positive] learning outcomes. These data confirm the common wisdom applied to first-year seminars that 1-contact hour is better than none, 2 are better than 1, and 3 are better than 1 or 2 (Swing, 2002c, p. 2).

These empirical findings are consistent with Astin's (1984) theory of academic involvement, which posits that when students invest more time in the learning process (e.g., the amount of time spent in class and on course-related work outside of class). Based on a 4-year longitudinal analysis of pre/post data collected from a national survey (CIRP) that included more than 4,000 students, Astin (1993) found that the amount of time students allot to classes and out-of-class coursework correlated strongly with self-reported gains in cognitive development.

The foregoing logical arguments and empirical findings point to the conclusion that first-year seminars should be offered for as many academic units as campus culture and politics will allow. This conclusion is consistent with the recommendation offered by John Gardner (1989), founding father of the "freshman year experience" movement,

I believe in asking for as much credit as the political process seems willing to grant. The more credit awarded, the more work can be legitimately asked of students and hence the more likely the probability of achieving desirable outcomes. Possible outcomes for freshman seminars are much more likely to be achieved in an academic credit-bearing course awarding three semester credits rather than one, because more time will be spent in instruction, more time can be asked of the students to do out-of-class assignments, more effort will be expended, and more student time, energy, and interest will be invested (p. 46).

## **Application of Credit**

### **Should the FYS be offered for as a *mandatory* graduation requirement?**

National survey results on first-year seminars indicate that 46% of responding institutions require their FYS, 34.6% required it for some, but not all students and 19.4% offer it only as an

elective. Potential disadvantages associated with making the course mandatory include the following:

- \* It may generate more political resistance from faculty (Gardner, 1989), and it may necessitate an increase in the number of units required for graduation.
- \* Research on student evaluations of college courses indicates that student perceptions (course evaluations) are lower for courses they are *required* to take than for courses they *elect* to take (Abrami, d'Apollonia, & Cohen, 1990; Cashin, 1995). This increases the risk that students will resent being there, which may have adverse effects on classroom climate and the teaching-learning process. This may make teaching the seminar more difficult for instructors and may also result in resentful students badmouthing the course, thereby tarnishing its reputation.
- \* A large number of instructors may be needed to cover all sections of a FYS that is required of all entering students. The demand for a sizable number of instructors may reduce the course director's capacity to selectively recruit the very best candidates to teach the course, perhaps to the point where instructor recruitment becomes tantamount to finding enough "warm bodies" to cover all course sections.

On the other side of the ledger, if the seminar is offered as a requirement, it will ensure that all students who *need* the course to be successful in college cannot opt out of it. Research indicates that students who are most likely to benefit from support programs are often those who are least likely to seek out these programs on their own (Knapp & Karabenick, 1988; Abrams & Jernigan, 1984); Levin & Levin, 1991). Thus, if the seminar is offered as an elective, it may only reach the choir or the already converted —i.e., those students who are motivated enough to take it. In contrast, if the seminar is delivered as a requirement, it implements the time-honored retention principle of "intrusive" program delivery, meaning that the *college initiates* supportive action by *reaching out* and *delivering it* to students, rather than offering the program passively and hoping that students will come to take advantage of it (Beal and Noel, 1980). Delivering the FYS as a required course implements the principle of *intrusive* delivery and circumvents the limitations of "passive programming" by ensuring that the course reaches all students who will profit from it, thus giving it the potential to exert pervasive or systemic effects on first-year students. Furthermore, on many campuses there are no other courses that all students take in common. Thus, the FYS becomes the one-and-only curricular vehicle for ensuring delivering of information that all undergraduates should receive (Hunter & Linder, 2005). It could be argued that a FYS that all new students experience in common may simulate or approximate the advantages associated with a true core curriculum by providing a "core" learning experience that is shared by all students.

Since strong arguments can be offered on both sides of the issue of whether the FYS should be offered as an elective or required course, individual campuses may need to conduct their own cost/benefit analysis and resolve this issue in a manner that is most congruent with the college's historical mission, current priorities, and prevailing campus culture. If the institution's culture and curriculum are amenable to addition of the FYS as a required course, there are significant and compelling advantages to doing so. However, if attempting to do so is likely to trigger

intense resistance and hostility, then discretion may be the better part of valor. Securing approval to offer the FYS as an elective is better than running the risk of inciting such rabid resistance to a required FYS that the option of offering the course in any form is lost or killed in the process.

**If the FYS is offered as an elective, how will students be *recruited* or encouraged to enroll in the course?**

Offering the course as an elective may necessitate vigorous course marketing and student recruitment to ensure that the course reaches a substantial number of students. The following strategies are recommended for promoting course enrollment and maximizing the number of new students who experience the benefits of the FYS.

(a) Make early contact with prospective students in advance of the course-registration period. For instance, new students could be contacted during the summer and encouraged to enroll in the course via letters, electronic messages, phone calls (e.g., from peer leaders), or personal invitations during summer orientation. A personal letter could be constructed that highlights the course's benefits and interesting features, thereby encouraging student enrollment.

(b) Creating attractive websites, brochures, pamphlets, posters, or tee shirts that showcase the course's distinctive features and benefits, and make them very visible during new-student orientation and registration. Brochures could include course-endorsing quotes from high-ranking college officials and former FYS students (e.g., positive student comments made on their course evaluations).

(c) Enlist the support of academic advisors to encourage students to register for the course.

(d) Enlist the interest and support of the parents of new students by showcasing how the course can enhance their son or daughter's initial transition to college and subsequent success throughout college. This type of "parent recruitment" may take the form of a letter or brochure that is included in summer mailings to families of new students, in the first edition of a parent or family newsletter published by the college, or during parent (family) orientation. The increasing cost of and demand for a college education, coupled with the increasingly dotting nature of parents of today's "millennial students" may combine to produce high levels of parental expectation and anxiety about their student's success (Keeling, 2003). Thus, parents may be eager and effective student recruiters for any college program that they know has been intentionally designed to promote their son or daughter's success.

A good illustration of an effective student-recruitment program for an elective FYS is the multi-modal approach utilized at the University of South Carolina, where more than 80% of new students enroll in the course (University 101). The following set of strategies is used to promote student enrollment in University 101:

(a) The course director speaks to all entering students and their parents at each summer-orientation session offered by the university.

(b) The director works with student orientation leaders to inform them about the course and how to promote recruitment.

(c) Letters and information packets about the course are sent to all academic advisors.

(d) Parents of traditional-aged students are mailed a letter that appraises them of the course's

benefits.

### **Should the FYS be offered for *general education credit*?**

One key advantage of offering the FYS as a component of the general education curriculum is that it sends a message to students, as well as to other members of the college community, that the course is deemed central to the undergraduate experience. This should heighten the course's visibility in the curriculum, increase its perceived value by members of the college community, and perhaps, stimulate student enrollment.

The holistic focus of the FYS is congruent with the “broadening” goals of liberal learning and general education. Research reveals that the vast majority of college mission statements and institutional goals refer to student outcomes that are not strictly academic or cognitive in nature (Astin, 1991; Grandy, 1988; Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1987; Lenning, 1988). Kuh, Shedd, and Whitt (1987) argue persuasively that student development and liberal education are often “unrecognized (and unappreciated) common law partners” (p. 252). The marriage of holistic development and liberal learning via the FYS may also provide as a foundation for productive partnerships between student development professionals—who promote liberal education via the co-curriculum, and college faculty—who promote it through the formal, general education curriculum.

Furthermore, the transferable learning skills emphasized by the FYS dovetail nicely with the *lifelong learning* goals of liberal learning and general education. It is noteworthy that the goals of a liberal arts education tend to be student-centered and emphasize transferable life skills, yet the general education curriculum is typically department-centered and focused on the acquisition of discipline-based knowledge (Palmer, 1982). A common criticism of the college curriculum is that it is dominated by content-driven, information-loaded courses, while giving comparatively short shrift to courses designed to develop students' lifelong learning skills (Cross, 1993). The FYS is a course that can redress some of this imbalance through its focus on the development of student-success strategies and skills that have *lifelong* value, which is an oft-cited goal of liberal education (Stark, & Lattuca 1997; Weingarten, 1993). Gordon and Grites (1984) argue forcefully for the lifelong value of the FYS: “To determine the credit value of a freshman seminar course, ask yourself to identify an undergraduate course you had that you are not using in your work today. If you can identify only one, you are very fortunate. The skills, attitudes, and knowledge learned in a freshman seminar usually outlive those learned in many other courses because they are used daily” (p. 317).

These arguments suggest the FYS is a course whose intended learning outcomes are very compatible with those of a liberal education and whose holistic, learner-centered, and skill-oriented focus fills a void in an otherwise content-driven general education curriculum. Supporting this argument are national survey data, which indicate that more than 50% of responding colleges and universities offer the FYS for general education credit (Tobolowski, 2008).

## **Student Grading**

**Should student performance in the FYS be evaluated with a *letter grade* that is included in the student's grade-point average, or should the course be delivered on a *pass/fail* (credit/no-credit) basis?**

National surveys reveal that the percentage of institutions offering the FYS or a letter grade has consistently increased (Hunter & Linden, 2005). Currently, more than 80% of colleges now report offering first-year seminars for a letter grade for the course that is counted in students' overall grade-point average (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). This practice is recommended for three essential reasons:

- a) A course grade ensures the seminar's academic *legitimacy and credibility*, because most college courses are graded on an A-F basis. In contrast, absence of a letter grade may send a message to students (and other members of the college community) that the course is not worthy of a grade that actually "counts" toward a college GPA and, therefore, should not be taken as seriously as other "real," grade-bearing college courses.
- b) A course grade supplies a strong motivational *incentive* for students that should increase their *level of effort and depth of involvement* in the course, as well as increase *instructors' expectations* of the amount of time and effort students should devote to the course. These heightened student incentives and instructor expectations should increase the course's potential power for exerting salutary effects on student learning, development, and success.
- c) There is evidence that students *prefer* to take the FYS for a grade, rather than on a pass/fail basis (Carney & Weber, 1987). It is noteworthy that during the early years of the University of South Carolina's first-year seminar (University 101), which continues to serve as a national model (Morris & Cutright, 2005), students taking the course complained about not receiving a letter grade for the amount of work they did, and they resented the fact that students who did much less work than they did, still received the same "passing" grade (Watts, 1999). Eventually, the grading policy for University 101 was changed from pass-fail to letter grade, in order to accommodate students' expressed preferences (Berman, 1993). After the change was made, course enrollment actually increased (Barefoot, cited in Levitz, 1994).

**If students *fail* the FYS, should or must they *repeat* the course?**

Though this may not appear to be a significant course-administration question, the frequency with which it has been raised on the First-Year Experience Listserv (e.g., Henderson, 2005) suggests that it is an issue that should be anticipated and resolved prior to course implementation. The case *for* students repeating the FYS includes the following points:

- a) If a student *fails* a *mandatory* (required-for-graduation) FYS, it would logically follow that this student could *not graduate* unless the course is retaken and completed with a passing grade.
- b) Students are typically allowed to repeat other courses in the college curriculum if they failed

them the first time, so it is logically consistent to allow them to repeat the FYS.

c) Students should be allowed to repeat a first-term course in which they did not do well because the first term is a major transitional adjustment period for beginning college students. Their poor performance may reflect initial, transient adjustment difficulties, rather than students' negative attitudes toward the course or college in general. Since the primary purpose of the FYS is to promote college success, students should be allowed to repeat the course because they may have resolved their first-term adjustment problems and are now "ready" to learn what they missed the first time.

This argument is consistent with "academic forgiveness" policies in place on many campuses, which allow students to erase their entire first-term academic record and start over again with a clean slate. The logic behind this policy is that it removes the albatross or scarlet letter associated with an extremely low first-term GPA, along with the long-term drain it can have on a student's cumulative GPA, which, in turn, can improve the student's motivation to continue in college and persist to degree completion. The policy also provides new college students with the opportunity to mature and use their initial failure as a learning experience, enabling them to transform a setback into a comeback.

Arguments *against* allowing students to repeat the FYS include the following:

a) It is a course that is explicitly designed for *first-term* students, so students taking the course at a later point in their college experience will encounter information that is no longer relevant, or may be redundant. This is neither an effective nor an efficient use of students' time and may further increase their negativity toward the course.

b) Students who need to repeat the course may represent a *selective or biased sample* of students who have *negative attitudes* toward the course, or perhaps college in general (which may account for why they did so poorly the first time), and their negativity can "*rub off*" on new (*first-term*)

*students* who are taking the course with them. Thus, allowing students to repeat the course to improve a bad grade may have an adverse effect on new students who are enrolled in the same class by sending them an early message that the course is difficult or boring and giving them a negative first impression of the student body. Some empirical evidence of these adverse effects is provided by qualitative assessment conducted at Marymount College (CA), where personal interviews were conducted with new students whose section of FYS included students repeating the class because they had previously failed it. New students reported that students repeating the course tended to detract from or interfere with their learning experience, reduced their enthusiasm for the course, and gave them a negative first impression of the college's student body. Furthermore, instructors teaching course sections that included new and repeating students reported that it was extremely difficult to meet the differing needs of both sets of students in the same class setting (Cuseo, 2004b).

A *middle-ground* position on this issue might be struck by adopting the following practices:

- a) Students who initially earn a *passing grade* in a mandatory FYS are not allowed to repeat it simply to improve their grade-point average.
- b) Students who initially *fail* the FYS can enroll in a specially designed section of the course during the following term and improve their initial grade from an F to a passing grade. This second-chance course would not be identical in content and process to the FYS; instead, it would be intentionally designed to be *relevant to the experiences of second-term students* and would *build on their first-term experience*. For example, the course would involve reflection on the first-term experience and troubleshoot problems that led to poor performance in the FYS or the first term of college in general. Perhaps the course could be offered in an individual “contract” format, whereby students work independently to complete those specific components of the course that they failed to complete the first time. This independent study approach would also avoid the scenario of repeating students being segregated into a special class section—which could create feelings of stigmatization.

### **Commonality or Variability of Course Content across Course Sections**

**Should content for the FYS be tightly *standardized* across course sections to ensure a common learning experience, or should content be allowed to *vary* from section to section, thereby providing course instructors with greater academic freedom?**

Arguments for allowing coverage to vary somewhat across course sections include the following:

- (a) Instructors’ attitude toward the course and their intrinsic motivation to teach it will increase if they are allowed some choice about what to teach, and may also facilitate instructor recruitment and retention.
- (b) Instructors will be more effective because are likely to be more comfortable with, and enthusiastic about, teaching material they have chosen.

Although there is logic and merit to both of these arguments, there is a very compelling counterargument for covering common (uniform) content in all course sections: It provides students a common learning experience for new students. It could be argued that common course content in the FYS may simulate, on a smaller scale, the advantages associated with a true “core curriculum” by providing a “core course” in which all students have a common learning experience. Empirical support for common learning experiences is provided by a comprehensive, four-year longitudinal study of approximately 500,000 college students at 1300 institutions (Astin, 1993). The study revealed that the particular course-distribution requirements which comprise the general education curricula at different colleges and universities had no significant effect on educational outcomes. The only curricular variable that had positive effects on learning outcomes

was a *true core curriculum*, whereby students took exactly the same courses. This finding suggests that what matters more than the particular content covered in the general education curriculum is whether or not the content was commonly experienced by all students. As

philosopher George Santayana once stated in response to a query about what “great books” young people should read. He replied: “It doesn’t matter, as long as they read the same ones” (cited in Atlas, 1988).

Common learning experiences, such as a common summer reading or common course content in a first-term course, can magnify student learning by increasing the number and variety of conversations students have about their shared learning experience. Formal, classroom-based discussions can “spill over” to settings outside the classroom and be continued with students from other class sections who are experiencing the same content. Promoting learning by promoting conversations about common content among multiple partners is consistent with the epistemological theory of *social constructivism*, which posits that human thinking is shaped by social interaction and interpersonal dialogue; an individual’s thinking is an internal representation

of these external dialogues (Vygotsky, 1978). Conversations among students that center on a shared learning experience, such as a course covering common content, may particularly powerful because this dialogue occurs among *peers* who (a) are at “proximal” (nearby) stages of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978) and (b) have similar levels of experience with respect to the content being discussed (Whitman, 1988).

It is reasonable to expect that the positive impact of shared conversations revolving around a common course experience can be magnified further when these conversations relate to *common life-transition issues* that students experience *at the same time*, such as common issues relating to the student transition from high school to higher education, or the re-entry student transition from work world to college. When students have a common classroom experience that is concurrent with a commonly experienced life transition, the personal meaning and significance of the classroom experience is deepened. The classroom then becomes a supportive sounding board or sanctuary for student reflection that can promote a heightened sense of community and the feeling that “we’re all in this together.” It is noteworthy that in a national survey of first-year seminars, 30.4% of the responding institutions report that one of their most important course objectives is to “create a common first-year experience” (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005).

. Such commonality has the potential to create a collective energy and synergy that can magnify the positive impact of the FYS.

Clearly, there are advantages to having students experience uniform content across different sections of the FYS. However, it may be possible to allow some academic freedom for course instructors, while simultaneously preserving common course content across course sections. This balance could be struck by asking instructors to agree to cover common content (topics), but allowing them room for individuality and creativity with respect to how they explicate or illustrate that content, what instructional methods (pedagogy) they choose to teach the content, and how they assess or evaluate student learning of the content that is taught.

**Should *special, customized sections* of the FYS be created to accommodate the distinctive needs of students with different demographic characteristics, levels of academic preparation, or educational plans?**

Given the increasing diversity of students in American higher education, the question of whether students with different demographic characteristics, needs, and prior experiences should be accommodated by different course sections is a significant issue. Should different course sections be offered for adult (re-entry) students and traditional-age students? At community colleges, should different sections be offered for liberal arts (transfer-oriented) students and vocationally-oriented students whose terminal objective is a program certificate or associate degree?

The primary advantages associated with homogenous grouping of students in the same course sections are the following: (a) It enables students who share similar backgrounds and characteristics to cohere into a mutually supportive, self-help group; and (b) it increases the likelihood that students will perceive the FYS as relevant because they will encounter course topics that more closely match their particular needs or plans. For example, in contrast to traditional-aged student, re-entry students often return to college with a renewed commitment to higher education and the motivation to make the most of their investment. Thus, their FYS experience may need to be tailored in a fashion that places less emphasis on issues relating to goal-setting, self-discipline, and handling personal freedom responsibly. Two instructors at Empire State College, one of the first colleges designed specially for adults, argue forcefully for homogeneous grouping of adult students in special sections of the FYS:

Our experiences as faculty members working with adults entering or reentering college convinced us they have special needs that should be addressed so they can successfully make the transition from citizen-in-the-world to college student. The provision of a comprehensive entry course for adult students would aid these students in making a more comfortable and successful transition to college. We are convinced that for maximum effectiveness the course should consist entirely of entry or reentry adults and be the first study in college (Steltenpohl and Shipton, 1986, pp. 127 & 128).

Married re-entry women might also profit from special sections addressing college-adjustment issues that are common to them, such as coping with negative reactions from friends or family (Levine, 1976; Swift, Colvin, & Mills, 1987), or dealing with “role overload” associated with family care and school work (Markus, 1976; Wilkie & Thompson, 1993). Patrick Henry Community College (VA) offers a special FYS for single parents that focuses on strategies for managing their multiple-demand roles of parents, school, and work (Barefoot, 1993). National surveys reveal that special FYS sections have been created for a wide variety of student groups, including: undecided (undeclared) students; students with the same major; provisionally or conditionally admitted students and “at risk” students; (e) honors and scholarship students; minority (underrepresented) students; commuter students; student athletes; international students; students on academic probation or eligible for academic dismissal after their first term; transfer students; students with disabilities; ROTC students; and incarcerated students (Barefoot et al., 1998; National Resource Center, 2002; Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005).

However, one major drawback associated with homogeneous grouping of students in special

sections of the FYS is that the homogeneity may reduce new students' exposure to the full spectrum of diversity that is represented among their first-year cohorts. A heterogeneous class of FYS students can provide a rich context for nurturing students' appreciation of cross-cultural and cross-generational diversity. As Helfgot (1986) illustrates,

The late adolescent who has trouble communicating with parents may find that a classmate who is a peer of his/her parents is easy to talk to, understanding, and open. Conversely, the adult student having trouble understanding children in late adolescence may gain valuable insight, information, and perspective from a fellow student in the same stage as his/her children. Diversity among students must be viewed as a resource, and clear messages must be given to expand, to innovate, and to use the diversity in the student body (pp. 33 & 35)

Another form of homogeneous grouping that has its drawbacks is the grouping of "at risk" in special sections. It is noteworthy that the most frequently reported type of special-section FYS reported in national surveys of first-year seminars is for "academically underprepared students" (Tobolowski, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005). While offering special sections of the FYS to academically at-risk students is better than not offering them the course at all, it incurs the potential disadvantages of stigmatizing under-prepared students and preventing them from experiencing the FYS with more academically qualified first-year students—who may serve as academic role models, exhibiting effective learning strategies that less-prepared students can observe and emulate. Research indicates that observing a peer experience success on a task can result in a vicarious increase in the observing peers' sense of self-efficacy, enabling the observer to gain greater self-confidence that they can succeed on the task as well (Rosenthal & Bandura, 1978).

One middle-ground strategy for blending the advantages of both homogeneous and heterogeneous sections of the FYS is to offer the same course content to sections comprised of diverse (heterogeneous) students, but encourage instructors to periodically place students in homogeneous subgroups for in-class discussions (e.g., small-group discussions) and out-of-class assignments (e.g., group projects). This would allow homogeneous subgroups of students to congregate, identify, and support each other on issues that are relevant to their distinctive educational needs and personal adjustments.

Another strategy for minimizing the disadvantages of homogeneous sections is to periodically arrange for inter-section interactions or intergroup activities. For example, a section designed for international students may devote one or more of its class sessions to an intercultural interaction with students from a domestic section. If different homogeneous-group sections of the course are intentionally scheduled during the same time slot, these sorts of inter-section interchanges can be more easily arranged.

## Course Title

**What course *name or title* should be ascribed to the FYS?**

The title if the FYS is an administrative decision should not be underestimated or made without due consideration. At institutions where the seminar is offered as an elective, the course's title may play an instrumental role in attracting student attention to the course and influence their decision to enroll in it. It could be said that the seminar's title represents students' *first impression* of the course; as such, it can create a favorable "anticipatory set" or positive predisposition toward the course that renders students more receptive to its content and pedagogy.

It is recommended that the course title selected for the FYS be one that (a) captures student attention and interest, (b) reflects its holistic (whole-person) focus, (c) sends a message that it is educationally substantive, and (d) highlights its development of skills and strategies that have lifelong value. Its title should also reflect what the course stands for and is designed to do. Listed below is a sample of FYS course titles that have been shared on the First-year Experience Listserv:

Orientation to College (North Central State College)  
 Mastering the College Experience (Coastline Community College)  
 Introduction to College and Beyond (Northern Kentucky University)  
 Achieving Academic Success (Dundalk Community College)  
 Success Express (University of Arizona)  
 Foundations of Success (Warren Community College)  
 Foundations for Learning (Ferris State University)  
 First-Year Experience: Spirit, Mind, and Body (Springfield College)  
 The Art of Being Human: Strategies for Lifelong Learning & Personal Development (Marymount College).

## Class Size

### **What would be the optimal *class size* for the FYS?**

By definition, a "seminar" is a teaching-learning experience that takes place in an intimate group setting and is characterized by an active exchange of ideas among its participants. To be true to its name, 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

(Schnell, 1993) 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 about 18.% of responding institutions offer first-year seminars with a maximum class sizes of 15 or fewer students; approximately 37% offer their seminar in class sizes ranging between 16-20 students, and roughly 30% have class sizes ranging between 21-25 students (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). Admittedly, large class sizes are more cost effective, but small class sizes are more educationally effective. Thus, it is recommended that class size for the FYS be kept as small as possible and as close to what research suggests is the ideal class size: 15 or fewer students.

## Class Scheduling

### ***When should the FYS begin and end?***

Perhaps the first administrative decision that needs to be made with respect to *scheduling* the FYS is when the course should start and stop. Although all first-year seminars are designed for delivery during the student's first term in college, some seminars start *before* their first term *begins*, and some stop *before* their first term *ends*. For instance, Gardner-Webb College (NC) begins its FYS during the orientation period that precedes the fall term. The University of Colorado at Colorado Springs begins its FYS two days prior to the onset of new students' first term and ends its course at midterm, as does Castleton State College (VT).

Among the advantages associated with starting the FYS before the start of the term is that it allows students special time together to bond as a unit and get situated on campus before the onset and onslaught of a full schedule of classes. The pre-term FYS experience can also be used to promote academically-related peer interactions prior to the start of the term—a time that would otherwise be entirely consumed by social activities. Although there appears to be no published evidence on the comparative effectiveness of early-starting versus traditionally scheduled seminars, a FYS that includes a pre-term component represents a very *proactive* approach to promoting the success of new students, allowing them the opportunity get settled in, get early support, and get a “jump start” on the college experience. This practice is consistent with the oft-cited principle of “front loading”—redistributing resources to provide support to new college students because it is the time when support and can have the most impact (National Institute of Education, 1984). For this reason, it is recommended that this proactive strategy be adopted, if the college can accommodate the logistical and fiscal demands associated with bringing new students to campus prior to the onset of their first-term classes.

Offering a firm recommendation about when to *end* the FYS is more challenging. Some institutions end the FYS at midterm, rather than at the end of the first term. Solid arguments can be made for concluding the course at either time. Listed below are the pros and cons of both decisions, along with some suggested strategies for resolving the issue empirically.

The Case for Concluding the FYS *Before* the End of the Academic Term

If the FYS is offered for one or two units, it might be advantageous to offer the course only during the *first half or first two-thirds of the term*. This scheduling strategy has three potential advantages: (a) It further “front loads” the course so that students experience it, in its entirety, at an earlier point in their first term, thus delivering the course’s content more *proactively*. (b) It can promote greater *course continuity* by having students meet *more frequently* during a more limited time frame, rather than spreading out class sessions out across the entire term—which results in larger time gaps between successive class meetings. (c) If the FYS carries only one or two academic credits, it will meet during the first half of the term with about the *same frequency and regularity* as a “normal” 3-unit course, perhaps sending the message to students that the seminar is *equally important* as other courses in their class schedule. (d) By concluding the seminar before the end of the term, new students will have one less course to manage during the last weeks of the term and one less exam to take during finals week, thereby relieving some of the stress that is likely to accompany their first experience with college finals.

#### The Case for Continuing the Course *Throughout* the Academic Term

This scheduling strategy has the following advantages: (a) At midterm, students often experience their “first wave” of college exams, deadlines, and evaluations. Because first-year students often receive their first formal academic feedback at this time, the period after midterm can often serve as a key “teachable moment” for new college students. For students who are struggling academically, this may be the first time they become aware of how poorly they are actually doing. Immediately after midterm, the FYS can provide a meaningful forum or supportive sanctuary for intentional reflection and discussion on how to effectively self-monitor academic progress, how to respond constructively (rather than defensively) to midterm feedback, and how to use their midterm grades as feedback to improve their subsequent academic performance—before it eventuates in low first-term grades, academic probation, or academic dismissal. Support through and after midterms may also enable students to better cope with the “midterm slump”—a time of the semester when the “honeymoon” period for first-term college students may begin to decline, and the novelty or thrill of simply being in college is replaced by their first major encounter with its academic demands. In their book, *Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester*, Duffy and Jones (1995) refer to this period as the “doldrums” and describe it as, “A time when the reality of papers, projects, and exams seem to color every course. More students are absent from class, and those who are in class frequently appear distracted or overwhelmed” (p. 162).

(b) For beginning college students, the last weeks of their first academic term can be a very stressful period in terms of time-management demands and performance pressures relating to meeting imminent deadlines for term papers or final projects, and preparing for their first “final-exam week” in college. A FYS that continues through to the end of the first term can provide support for new students during this “crunch period.”

(c) The last weeks of the fall term are often sandwiched in-between two major holidays—Thanksgiving and Christmas—a time when students return home, revisiting hometown friends and family, and possibly rekindle separation-anxiety issues. These social developments have the

potential to adversely affect new students' persistence to successful completion of their first time, or their motivation to return for a second term.

Terminating the FYS at midterm would mean that students lose access to a class and classmates that may be evolved into a social support system by this point in the term. Sudden withdrawal of this support at this time may leave new students more vulnerable to the academic, emotional, and social stressors that can emerge during the critical final weeks of the first term.

Since sound arguments can be made for ending the FYS before, or at the end of the first term, both scheduling strategies may be offered as options for FYS instructors. If an instructor has a strong preference for one or the other of these course-scheduling formats, that instructor will probably be a more enthusiastic and effective teacher when working with his or her preferred scheduling format. Also, providing instructors a choice between scheduling formats is another way to give instructors a sense of ownership or control of the course, which should increase their instructional satisfaction and motivation.

Another potential advantage of allowing instructors either scheduling option is that it creates two scheduling formats, which allows for a comparative assessment of student and instructor perceptions of each format. For instance, a question could be included on the course-evaluation instrument that asks students for their views on the scheduling format of the course. Students in the full-term course could be asked whether they felt the course would have been more effective if it met more frequently and ended at midterm. In contrast, students in the half-term course could be asked whether they felt the seminar would have been more effective if it met less frequently and continued throughout the entire term. Or, the two scheduling formats could be compared with respect to their impact on the intended outcomes of the FYS (e.g., student retention or first-term GPA).

Lastly, it should be noted that some institutions offer a two-term FYS, extending it into a course that spans the entire first year. For example, Clark Atlanta University (GA), Ferris State University (MI), and the University of Charleston (WV) continue the FYS into the following terms, thus making it a yearlong course. Extending the FYS beyond the first term to create a full-year course is clearly advantageous, because it generates extended course-contact time, which is likely to result in greater course impact. Furthermore, a second-term FYS can supply timely support for student adjustments that peak during the second half of the first college year (Hunter & Gahagan, 2004). It is noteworthy that most first-year attrition tend to occur between the end of the first year and the start of the second (sophomore) year, which suggests that supporting students at the end of their first year may be a timely strategy for increasing the likelihood that first-year students will return for their sophomore year.

### **What should be the *length and frequency* of class meetings?**

Another scheduling decision to be made is the *length and frequency* of individual class sessions. It may be advantageous to schedule class meetings for a longer period than the common 50-minute session because this will provide the instructor more time and flexibility to accommodate the logistical demands of small-group work, such as preparing students for the group task, rearranging seats for students to form groups, and reconvening the whole class

following completion of small-group tasks. Naturally, selecting longer class periods carries with it the disadvantages of less frequent class meetings per week and longer time gaps between successive class sessions. However, since it is strongly recommended that the FYS involve less instructor-centered lecturing and more student-centered pedagogy, such as the use of collaborative learning groups, the benefits of longer class sessions should outweigh their costs.

### **Should some or all sections of the FYS meet *at the same time*?**

Yet another scheduling issue to consider is whether different sections of the FYS should be offered concurrently. It may be advantageous to offer at least some sections of the course in the same time slot so that instructors may combine their sections and enable their students to have common learning experiences. At the University of Oregon, two sections of the FYS are intentionally scheduled during the same time block, so that these classes can be united periodically for group discussions (“Building Communities,” 1995). At Marymount College (CA), two instructors schedule their sections at the same time, with one teaching a special section designated for international students and the other a standard section for domestic students. These two instructors periodically combine their sections for “cross-cultural encounters” designed to promote student awareness and appreciation of diversity (Cuseo, 1999). Scheduling some course sections at the same time also allows for more convenient use of guest speakers, whose presentations may then be experienced by a larger number of students at the same time, thereby minimizing the need for speakers to repeat the same presentation in other course sections offered at different times.

Naturally, scheduling *all* course sections during the same time period would allow all FYS students to come together for special events. If the FYS is required of all new students, the entire first-year class could then convene at the same time to partake in a common learning experience, which may build a stronger sense of community among first-year students. While these may be distinctive advantages of scheduling all course sections during the same time block, this scheduling strategy also carries with it the disadvantage of reducing or eliminating student choice

about what days and times they elect to take the course. This may hamper student enrollment if the course is offered as an elective. If the FYS is required of all students, this scheduling strategy may further fuel negative attitudes toward a course that students not only have to take, but which they have to take at time chosen by the college, not by the student. Another disadvantage of scheduling all sections of the FYS at the same time is that restricts the course-scheduling options for first-year students by precluding them from taking courses that overlap with the seminar’s scheduled time slot, including science laboratory and courses and art studio courses that often are scheduled for extended time periods (e.g., 3 hours).

## **Course Instructors**

***Who should teach the FYS, and how should these instructors be recruited?***

National data indicate that the FYS is taught by (a) college faculty from a variety of academic disciplines, (b) student affairs personnel—e.g., career counselors and residential directors, (c) academic support-service specialists—e.g., academic advisors and learning assistance professionals, (d) administrative staff—e.g., financial aid counselors and (e) college administrators—e.g., academic dean and college president (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005). This section explores the advantages of using faculty and non-faculty instructors for the FYS, as well as the use of team-teaching formats.

### *Faculty as FYS Instructors*

One major advantage of having faculty serve as course instructors is that their involvement increases the likelihood that the FYS is perceived to be academically credible and central to the educational mission of the college. However, because of the seminar's non-traditional course content and holistic, student-centered focus, not all faculty are equally desirable candidates for handling the instructional challenges of the FYS. As Gordon and Grites (1984) contend, "Freshman students deserve the best instructors the institution can provide in a course that will be critically important to their understanding of the college experience and to their success" (p. 316).

It is recommended that instructor-recruitment efforts selectively target faculty who possess the following characteristics:

- \* *Student-centered* educational philosophy
- \* Demonstrated excellence in teaching *first-year* students and courses
- \* Prior experience with teaching the *first-year seminar* (student-success course) and/or *first-year experience* initiatives
- \* Use of *engaging pedagogy* that *involves* students in the learning process
- \* Genuine interest in *advising and mentoring* new students.
- \* Capable of *relating to* students and developing *rapport* with them inside and outside the classroom.
- \* Evidence of commitment to *out-of-class contact* with, and *mentoring* of students.
- \* Commitment to *general education*, the *liberal arts*, and development of the student as a *whole person*.
- \* Willingness to work with and faculty and staff across *different academic disciplines* and *academic-support services*
- \* Appreciation of the educational role of *student development* professionals and the *co-curriculum*

In addition to the foregoing qualities, it is recommended that faculty be selected who are *respected by their peers* as effective educators with high academic standards and who are *respected by administrators* for their history of commitment and service to the college. Nominations may be solicited from Division or Department Chairs who are familiar with faculty members' course evaluations. Nominations may also be garnered from students—particularly experienced students and student leaders who have displayed a commitment to the college.

Academic deans and faculty development specialists may be able to facilitate the identification of FYS faculty with the foregoing qualities, and they may assist in the instructor-recruitment process as well—by personally encouraging faculty involvement (for instance, via personal note, call, or lunch contact) and by enlisting the support of their department chairs. Students could also be asked to recommend or nominate faculty members who relate well to students and whose instructional style or methods encourage active student involvement.

#### *Student Development Professionals as FYS Instructors*

Professionals from the Student Affairs or Student Life division of the college may also serve as effective instructors for the FYS because their graduate education and professional focus is on college student development, which is congruent with the student-centered focus of the course. Moreover, student development professionals are often more ready and willing to use involving or engaging forms of pedagogy than many faculty who have grown accustomed to relying on the lecture method in their content-driven disciplinary courses.

A major advantage of including both faculty and student development professionals in the FYS teaching corps is that their joint involvement may lead to collaboration between these two historically separated divisions of the college. This bridge-building potential is captured in one of John Gardner's earliest reports on the University 101 program at South Carolina: "The program integrates faculty and professional staff at the university in a joint undertaking [which] tends to reduce the barriers between the faculty and staff camps, reduces stereotyping and has promoted better relationships between faculty and especially student affairs staff" (Gardner, 1980, pp. 6 & 7). For the same reason, it is recommended that academic administrators and academic support staff (such as librarians and learning assistance professionals) should be encouraged to teach the FYS.

While involving "non-faculty" as instructors for the FYS may provoke political opposition on the part of some faculty members, it should in no way diminish the potential impact of the course on student learning and development. It cannot be automatically assumed that faculty are more effective instructors than other professional member of the college community simply because they have more extensive classroom teaching experience. If faculty are accustomed to being content-driven rather than student-centered, or if they use the lecture method exclusively rather than "engaging" pedagogical methods that promote active student in the classroom, their prior teaching experience may actually be more of a liability than an asset.

#### *Advisors as FYS Instructors*

According to the 2003 national survey conducted by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience (University of South Carolina), 30.4% of all institutions offering first-year seminars intentionally place students in sections taught by their academic advisors. Institutions that have adopted this practice include liberal arts colleges (e.g., Concordia University in Wisconsin), comprehensive state universities (e.g., State University of New York at Cortland), and research universities (e.g., University of Maine). At Memphis State University, all of its academic advisors

are trained to teach the FYS.

If academic advisors serve as FYS instructors, the seminar may serve as a vehicle for ensuring that students have close and continuous contact with a key academic-support agent during the critical first term of the college experience. Research conducted at North Dakota State University indicates that when new students' academic advisors also serve as their FYS instructors, these students have *significantly more out-of-class contact* with their academic advisor during their first term than students whose advisors do not co-serve as their FYS instructor (Soldner, 1998).

An additional advantage of having advisors serve as FYS instructors is that it may promote student recruitment to and enrollment in the FYS. If advisors are directly and intimately involved in the course as instructors, they are more likely to recommend the FYS to prospective students.

### *FYS Teaching Teams*

National survey data indicate that 39.1 % of all institutions that report offering first-year seminars employ *teaching teams*. A wide variety of teaching teams have been used in FYS, including the following team-teaching partnerships: (a) faculty members from different academic disciplines, (b) veteran faculty member (mentor) with a new faculty member (protégé), (c) faculty and student affairs professionals, (d) faculty and academic support-service professionals, (e) faculty and academic administrators, (f) faculty and students (for example, graduate student, upper-division undergraduate student, or college sophomore), (g) college seniors with graduate students or college alumni, (h) male-female teaching teams, and (i) team-teaching triads (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005).

Teaching teams that involve faculty from different academic disciplines allow participating instructors to be exposed to different disciplinary thinking styles and pedagogical approaches, thus providing a potentially fertile context for promoting *faculty development*. Another positive byproduct of the team-teaching experience is that individual faculty gain greater appreciation of other academic disciplines and may become more cognizant of making interdisciplinary connections within the context of their department-based courses, particularly those that are offered as general education courses designed for lower-division students.

Another potential advantage of bringing together faculty from different disciplines to team-teach the FYS is that it may encourage students to view course topics from different disciplinary perspectives. The ability to view issues from multiple perspectives is an important student outcome and a major objective of a liberal arts education (Cuseo, Fecas, & Thompson, 2007). If faculty from different disciplines teach the FYS, "participating faculty will have the opportunity to think more carefully about the college experience as a whole rather than only from the point of view of the English department, or the chemistry department. In other words, they will become more conscious of their roles in a much larger enterprise" (Siegel, 2005, p. 180).

Lastly, faculty teaching teams may serve to model the value of collaboration and teamwork for new students. At the very least, it ensures that undergraduates have at least one curricular-based experience in which they witness faculty working interdependently as a team, rather than independently and in isolation.

FYS team-teaching partnerships that bring together members from different functional units of

the college are highly recommended because they serve to promote campus-wide ownership of the FYS and a stronger sense of campus community. The potential of FYS instructor training programs to promote partnerships *between faculty and student development professionals* may be especially important, given the historical “schism” or “persistent gap” that has existed between student life and academic life in higher education (Boyer, 1987; Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Barr & Upcraft, 1990). Evidence for the first-year seminar’s capacity for bridging this gap is highlighted by the University of South Carolina’s reception of an institutional reward from NASPA in recognition of its seminar’s ability to promote partnerships between the divisions of Academic and Student Affairs (Gardner, 1986). More recently, Gardner, Upcraft, and Barefoot (2005) have identified partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs as one of the major principles of good practice for the first college year: “First-year students have a better chance of success if these two units work closely together and implement jointly sponsored programs such as first-year seminars” (p. 516). Faculty and staff can bring different, but complementary skills to the FYS. Faculty bring classroom-based teaching and student-evaluation experience to the seminar, while student development professionals bring knowledge of today’s students and skills for facilitating student interaction and involvement. Both faculty and student development professionals may also benefit professionally from partnering as FYS instructors. For example, faculty may benefit by gaining a deeper understanding of students that includes student life outside the classroom and greater knowledge of campus support services that have been intentionally designed to promote student development. Student affairs professionals may benefit by having an opportunity to witness the academic side of student life.

Faculty may also partner with professional advisors to teach the FYS. This collaborative arrangement would enable faculty who do not serve as academic advisors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of first-year students’ educational aspirations, plans, and choices. At the same time, advisors would benefit by getting a directly observe first-year students’ academic behavior inside the classroom (Evenbeck & Jackson, 2005), as well as gaining insight into students’ out-of-class work habits (e.g., student reliability and work quality with respect to course assignments).

Lastly, it should be noted that *inter-institutional* teaching teams have also been utilized in the FYS, whereby faculty from two-year and four-year institutions have joined forces to teach the course for the purpose of promoting successful student transfer (Donovan & Schaiier-Peleg, 1988). For instance, Pima Community College (AZ) offers a course called Transfer Strategies (STU 210), which is designed primarily for students who plan to transfer to the University of Arizona, but the course is also taken by students transferring to other 4-year institutions. It is taught in conjunction with professional staff from the University of Arizona, and approximately about half its class-contact hours are experienced at the university campus (Scott, 2005).

Such “intersegmental” partnerships have great potential for promoting the educational advancement of *underrepresented* students—who are more likely to enter higher education at public community colleges (Ambron, 1991). Approximately 50% of all minority students begin higher education at 2-year institutions (Carter & Wilson, 1995; Levitz, 1992), despite the fact

that they represent less than 25% of all students in American higher education (American Council on Education, 1995). For example, students of Hispanic origin enter two-year colleges at almost twice their rate of entry at four-year institutions (Tinto, 1993).

#### *Graduate Students as FYS Instructors*

Graduate students can and have been used as instructors for the FYS at large research universities, enabling these institutions to staff a large number of course sections. It may even allow universities to require the course for all its first-year students, as has been done at Ohio State University, where graduate students have served as FYS instructors, allowing the institution to offer approximately 300 sections of the FYS (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

An advantage of employing graduate students as course instructors is that it provides both a meaningful and convenient “teaching internship” for prospective college faculty. The need for improved preparation of graduate students for their role as college teachers is underscored by John Gardner: “Most college teachers were not trained in graduate school to teach anything, let alone a freshman seminar. Instead, they were trained in a body of knowledge, how to produce new knowledge, and how to communicate that knowledge to fellow scholars, not to first-year college students” (Gardner, 1992, p. 3).

#### *Peer (Undergraduate) FYS Instructors*

National survey data indicates that 6-10% of responding colleges and universities involve peer (undergraduate) instructors in their FYS (National Resource Center, 2002; Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005; Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). For example, at Coastal Carolina University (SC), peer mentors work with faculty members to plan and teach the FYS. Undergraduates apply and interview for an FYS peer-mentoring program, and those accepted are required to enroll in a 1-unit course, “Principles of Peer Mentoring,” which is taken in the spring term. This course is followed by a training workshop with FYS faculty that is designed to initiate the formation and development of teaching teams. Finally, the mentors enroll in a 2-unit course, “Applied Principles of Peer Mentoring,” taken in the fall term at the same time they are involved in team-teaching the FYS. Peer mentors who would like to return the following year have the option of enrolling in a third course, “Mentoring Capstone Experience,” and they receive additional units for again serving as mentors (Harmon, 2003). At some institutions, such as Oregon State University and Lynchburg College (VA), specially trained upper-division students serve as the sole instructor for the course.

Multiple advantages are associated with the use of peer leaders in the FYS class:

- (a) they are likely to be effective as discussion facilitators because they are less likely to be perceived as intimidating authority figures;
- (b) peer leaders are likely to develop higher-level cognitive skills as a result of their teaching experience (Whitman, 1988);
- (c) their involvement in the FYS increases their contact time with the faculty or staff member who is teaching the course, which serves to promote their retention and leadership development; and
- (d) they represent a very cost-effective form of student support for new students.

Involving trained undergraduates as peer instructors in the FYS is a teaching strategy that benefits both new students and the more advanced peers who work with them. New students profit from exposure to caring, more experienced peers, and the helping peers also profit by gaining leadership skills and increased feelings of self-worth (Whitman, 1988). Kuh et al. (2005) identified campuses that had substantially higher-than-predicted rates of student engagement and graduation than would be expected based on their student and institutional characteristics (e.g., admissions selectivity and percentage of commuting students). Based on multiple site visits to these campuses to identify distinctive practices that accounted for these institutions' unusually high rates of student success that might serve as recommended benchmarks of "best practice," the research team recommends using undergraduates as "junior professors" to teach and mentor their peers. This peer-teaching strategy is likely to promote the retention of both new students and their peer teachers, and it would do so in a cost-effective manner because peers are the least expensive members of the college community to employ in any type of support program. In addition, John Gardner (1996) notes that there are other advantages of involving students as peer leaders in the FYS:

The use of peer leaders may provide a sounding board, a reality test for the older and ostensibly wiser instructor-of-record who each year is increasingly older than traditionally aged freshmen. Service as a peer leader provides an additional learning and leadership experience for the best and brightest students on your campus. The peer leader concept makes possible more student ownership of the freshman seminar. Students, in turn, recruit other students not only to take the course but also take it seriously. And finally, the peer leader program may encourage some of our very best students to join our profession, a profession that is rarely considered by entering college students because they have had no exposure to it prior to matriculation (p. 2).

The variety of FYS instructors employed at different campuses across the country strongly suggests that the FYS can be taught effectively by many different members of the college community. Involving a variety of instructors with the FYS is recommended because it increases campus-wide awareness and ownership of the course. It also serves to provide a larger, more diverse pool of instructors to choose from—which can help maintain smaller class sizes, as well as provide more instructor options—which may allow for greater instructor selectivity and quality control. More importantly, when a variety of faculty and staff are involved in the design and delivery of the FYS, the course serves as a linchpin for uniting different members of the campus community in a concerted effort in pursuit of a common cause.

### **Should instructors receive special *training* or *preparation* to teach the FYS?**

The answer to his question is an unqualified "yes." The quality of any FYS is likely to depend as much on the quality of instructor preparation as it does on any other factor. National survey data indicate that approximately 52% of reporting institutions *require* instructor training as a prerequisite for teaching the course (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). However, the majority of

these institutions (58.9%) offer training for one day or less (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005).

It is strongly recommended that a substantive instructor-training program be provided for FYS course instructors. New FYS instructors can often be apprehensive about teaching a course that lies beyond the boundaries of their professional purview, so they need and deserve to receive the as much preparatory support as possible. A substantive program is likely to require more than a half-day or single day of instructor preparation. Appalachian State University (NC) has made a temporal and fiscal commitment to instructor training that could serve a benchmark for other colleges to emulate. Its faculty instructors participate in a weeklong training program to teach the FYS and they are paid to do so (Petschaurer-Webb, 2004).

The *timing* of instructor training is also an important administrative issue. It is recommended that instructor-training sessions be scheduled in two segments: One in early summer—immediately after spring term and before instructors leave for summer vacation, and another in late summer—immediately before the start of fall term. The spring session can deliver introductory information that participants reflect on during the summer. Since the syllabus serves as the centerpiece and driving force for any course, as well as a potential source of security for new instructors, it is recommended that one objective of instructor training in the spring should be the development of a tentative course syllabus. This should provide instructors with a big-picture framework that they can take home, reflect upon, and fine-tune during the summer.

The *content* of the instructor-training program should relate closely to the content covered in the course. For instance, it should include discussion of the course's (a) purpose and primary goals or objectives, (b) major topics and their "infrastructure" (topic components or subtopics), (c) topic timing and sequence, (d) student assignments, and (e) student evaluation (grading) procedures. Participants could gradually build on and refine their course syllabi as the session progresses, with one intended outcome of the training being the completion a tentative course outline. This would save subsequent work time and give the participants a concrete sense of closure and accomplishment.

Course pedagogy should also receive substantial attention and the instructional process used in the instructor-training program should model or simulate the instructional process that instructors are expected to use in the FYS, such as active and collaborative learning. It is beyond the scope of this monograph to provide an intensive and extensive description of all the elements that should be included in a comprehensive instructor-training program. For a detailed discussion of the content and process of instructor training, see Hunter and Skipper (1999).

The fall instructor-training session could provide participants with a timely review and synthesis just before the course actually begins. An additional advantage of offering an instructional training session prior to the start of the academic year is that it may also be linked with the college's new-faculty and new-staff orientation program for newly hired personnel. Topics typically covered in a FYS instructor-development program, such as "understanding the institution" and "understanding first-year students," are valuable for all new faculty and staff to experience, whether or not they will be teaching the seminar. Also, newly-hired faculty that are entering the professoriate directly from graduate school often receive teaching assignments that

include introductory courses that are inhabited by a sizable number of first-year students. Consequently, these newly hired faculty may profit immeasurably from discussions of effective college-teaching strategies, some of which they might be able to adopt immediately in their discipline-based introductory courses.

FYS instructor training could also be extended through the fall term, so that it runs concurrently with the course. This would transform instructor training from a pre-term, preparatory experience into a full-term, instructor support-and-development program. Instructional development sessions offered during the term can promote program continuity and provide ongoing support for FYS instructors, allowing them to follow-up on how instructional strategies learned before the term are currently working during the term. Research suggests that such follow-up activities play a pivotal role in determining whether teacher-training workshops have significant long-term impact on instructors (Joyce & Showers, 1983).

Follow-up sessions during the term in which the seminar is being taught can provide FYS instructors with a regular forum for sharing their course experiences. These sessions may be scheduled as informal “brown-bag lunches” during which instructors could talk about their teaching successes and frustrations. Keen College (New Hampshire) holds monthly dinner meetings are held throughout the term for FYS instructors (Backes, 1994). At Champlain College

(Vermont), their FYS is offered as a 2-unit course that meets for two hour-long sessions per week. However, the course counts as three units on teaching load because seminar instructors are expected to meet for an additional (third) hour per week to discuss their instructional experiences and strategies (Goldsweig, 1993).

*Where* instructor training should take place is also a significant administrative decision because atmosphere or milieu matters; for example it can affect participants’ receptivity to new ideas and propensity to bond with colleagues. The location for instructor training should be intentionally selected for its capacity to convey a warm welcome, an ambience that is informal, and an atmosphere that is amenable to social interaction and team-building. For example, a well-furnished lounge or conference room will provide a more effective ambience than a sterile classroom. The instructor-training programs at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, and Keen College (NH) are conducted at an off-campus retreat site (Backes, 1994; Staley, 2000). This environmental setting is ideal for eliminating on-campus distractions and interruptions, such as phone or mail messages, and provides a more intimate atmosphere for team building among program participants. (Shirts with a program logo are provided for all participants in Keen College’s program to further foster team building and a sense of common purpose.)

*Who* should conduct instructor-training workshops is also an important consideration. Clearly the FYS program director should play a major role in the delivery instructor training. However, if there is a respected faculty development specialist on campus, this person could also be an effective facilitator for certain aspects of the training program. Faculty development frequently involves instructional development programming relating to innovative, student-centered (non-lecture) pedagogy that is ideal for the FYS. (See chapter 3.) Also, instructors with prior FYS experience can be a valuable resource because they have the capacity to serve as effective

personal mentors to brand new instructors. Thus, input from more experienced instructors should be solicited regularly throughout the workshop (for example: What worked well for you last year?), and networking opportunities between new instructors and experienced instructors should be built into the workshop process, because these interactions may provide the early foundation upon which future mentoring relationships are built. Furthermore, providing opportunities for experienced instructors to lend their expertise via new-instructor training or mentoring serves to validate their efforts, and increases their level of course investment and ownership.

### **How should FYS instructors be *rewarded* or *compensated* for teaching the FYS?**

Effective incentives and rewards can play a major role in facilitating the recruitment of faculty instructors. As Bonwell and Eison (1991) suggest, “One of the major barriers to educational reform and instructional change is limited incentives for faculty to change” (p. v). This barrier to reform also applies to faculty involvement with the FYS because, as Barefoot and Fidler (1996) suggest, “Traditional institutional reward systems often do not favor the teaching of courses that are ‘extradisciplinary’—outside of the traditionally defined academic disciplines” (p. 6). To circumvent this barrier to faculty involvement with the FYS, college administrators may need to intentionally earmark rewards and incentives to attract faculty instructors to teach the course. Practices that have been used to stimulate and reward faculty interest in becoming FYS instructors include the following: (a) supplemental stipends for teaching the course, (b) load reduction, (c) release time from some another institutional responsibility (for example, committee work), (d) mini-sabbatical or summer stipend for course preparation, (e) travel funds for professional development relating to the first-year experience or the instructor’s home discipline, and (f) special consideration in promotion and tenure decisions.

At the very least, administrators should seek to combat disincentives that discourage *non-tenured faculty* from becoming involved in the FYS because it takes time and energy from other professional activities count toward their *promotion and tenure*. Overcoming this impediment will require the efforts of higher-level administrators, working in conjunction with department chairs, to creatively and consensually credit faculty contributions to the seminar, and assign significant weight to these contributions in departmental decisions about professional promotion.

An attempt should also be made to avoid the policy of only allowing faculty to teach the seminar on an *overload basis*. National survey data indicate that the majority (56%) of reporting institutions have faculty teach the FYS as part of their normal (base) teaching load. Teaching the seminar as an “overload” may do just that—overload faculty and compromise their time and commitment to a course that is intensively student-centered, which requires them to stretch beyond the comfort zone of their own discipline and participate in special instructional training. Incorporating the seminar into a faculty member’s normal (base) teaching load sends a strong message to the college community that teaching the course is an important professional activity. An illustration of an effective institutional practice with respect to faculty compensation for teaching the seminar is one employed by Ferrum College (VA). At Ferrum, faculty who teach the seminar do it as part of their regular teaching load, with the seminar replacing a course in their disciplinary field. In addition, seminar instructors are given a stipend for participating in

training-and-development workshops offered before and during the academic year (Grimes, 2000).

Professional *staff*, such as academic support or student life professionals, may teach the seminar as part of their regular work duties, or they may receive extra compensation for teaching the course as an added responsibility—for example, receiving a stipend for teaching the course at times before or after their regular work hours. National survey data indicate that the majority (59%) of responding institutions have administrative staff teach the FYS as an extra responsibility (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005). It is recommended that staff members who serve as seminar instructors receive compensation for doing so. Even if the course is taught during working hours, take-home paperwork is often required to grade and respond personally to students' written work. Staff members who take on the challenge and time commitment to teach the FYS should be fairly compensated for their effort; it is both the equitable and ethical thing to do.

Reward or compensation for peer instructors typically takes the following forms: (a) academic credit (e.g., under the rubric of peer leadership), (b) fiscal reward (e.g., a stipend), and/or (c) official recognition on a student development/cocurricular transcript. For example, at Loyola College (MD), the seminar is taught by a 3-member team, which includes a faculty member, an administrator, and a student. The faculty member and the administrator receive a \$1000 stipend; the student receives one academic credit as part of a leadership seminar, plus a \$100 gift certificate for use at the campus bookstore (Fenzel, 2000). At other institutions, undergraduates majoring in education or graduate students enrolled in student development programs, receive practicum or internship credit for serving as FYS peer instructors. For instance, at the University of South Carolina, graduate students pursuing a Master's degree in the university's Student Personnel Program co-teach some sections of the FYS, for which they receive graduate credit in a practicum course supervised by a professor in the College of Education.

## **Administrative Location and Leadership**

### **Who should *direct or coordinate* the FYS?**

Since faculty involvement and leadership is important to the academic credibility and long-term survival of the FYS, it is recommended that faculty be involved in FYS administration. However, it is recommended that faculty not have *sole or exclusive* ownership of the FYS program because this may result in disproportionate course emphasis on strictly academic (cognitive) elements of the first-year experience at the expense of attention to co-curricular (psychosocial) elements. It is important to remember that preponderance of student attrition in higher education is not directly related to students' lack of academic preparedness. As previously documented, the vast majority of students who withdraw from college are not "forced out" due to academic failure; instead, they "opt out" for reasons relating to other issues (e.g., social, emotional, or motivational). To respond to this reality, administration of the FYS should involve a close working partnership between the divisions of Academic and Student Affairs. Such a partnership is essential for integrating first-year students' in-class and out-of-class learning

experiences (Gardner, Upcraft, & Barefoot, 2005). Moreover, as Davis and Murrell (1993) point out, “When students see these two areas [academic and student affairs] working together, it provides a model for them to emulate in reconciling their own out-of-class lives with their courses” (p. 75).

A truly comprehensive (holistic) FYS is one that addresses the full range of factors that contribute to and detract from student success. This integrative challenge cannot be met without a concerted and collaborative effort by the offices of Academic and Student Affairs. Research indicates that the conclusion that the most effective educational and student retention programs are those that are characterized by cross-functional coordination and collaboration between these divisions of the college (Cuseo, 2002). With respect to the FYS, faculty involvement is necessary to ensure the academic credibility of the course, but involvement of student development professionals is also necessary to ensure that the program meets the needs of the “whole” student. Campuses with significantly higher-than-predicted rates of student engagement and graduation, a holistic philosophy of talent development permeated the campus, and student affairs staff were full partners in the implementation of this philosophy, including the management of first-year seminars” (Kuh, et al., 2005, p. 312).

It is recommended that a specific individual be designated as FYS *Director or Coordinator*, as is the practice at about 75% of institutions across the country that report offering a FYS (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005). An identifiable person occupying an identifiable position in the college’s organizational blueprint serves to increase the visibility and centrality of the FYS. Given the aforementioned arguments for collaboration between Academic and Student Affairs, it would be ideal if the FYS program were co-directed by a faculty member and a student development professional, as is done at Longview College (VA). If employing co-directors is not a feasible option, it is recommended that the director be a faculty member, because this will serve to enhance the academic credibility and viability of the course. That being said, the faculty director should be someone with a history of sensitivity to and respect for the educational role of student development professionals.

It is further recommended that the FYS director(s) assemble and work closely with an advisory or steering committee that has cross-divisional representation. To obtain a representative and balanced perspective, members of this committee should include (a) faculty from different academic divisions, (b) student development professionals, and (c) at least one administrator from the office of academic affairs and student affairs. Students may also be included on this committee, either directly as committee members or indirectly as committee advisors and consultants. The FYS director should honor this committee’s input and give it serious consideration when making administrative decisions about the program’s content, delivery, and future direction.

Lastly, it is recommended that the director teach at least one section of the course. This increases the likelihood that other FYS instructors will not perceive the director as an administrator, but as an instructional peer and colleague who is “in the trenches” with them. When perceived in this manner, the director’s credibility and influence is likely to be enhanced.

**Where should the FYS be housed or positioned in the college's organizational structure?**

The significance of this administrative issue is highlighted by the fact that the FYS offered at the University of South Carolina, which has developed into a national model, initially experienced difficulty receiving course approval because “it had no home in any of the traditional disciplines” (Watts, 1999, p. 268). Today, colleges and universities now use a wide variety of administrative sites as a “home” for the FYS, such as those listed below.

- \* A *free-standing* administrative unit of the college whose *sole function* is the coordination and management of the FYS. For example, the University of South Carolina and California State University-Long Beach administer the FYS through their “University 101” division.
- \* *University College*—a separate organizational division of the college not tied to any academic discipline or department, which administers academic advisement, career development, academic skill-development programs and selected courses—such as the FYS. For example, the University of Rhode Island, Wright State University, and Texas A & M International University administer the FYS through this type of organizational structure.
- \* *Interdisciplinary (ID) or Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) department*. For example, Marymount College (CA) delivers its FYS (ID 117) through an Interdisciplinary department; Bloomfield College (NJ) delivers its FYS (IDS 161) through its division of Interdisciplinary Studies, as does the University of California, Santa Barbara (IDS 20).
- \* Department of *Human Development*—for example, Syracuse University.
- \* Department of *Education*—for example, UCLA offers its FYS as EDU 180: The Sociology of Education.
- \* Department of *Psychology*—for example, Point Loma Nazarene College offers its seminar as PSY 101: Psychology of Personal Development.
- \* *Multiple academic departments*—for example, the Rochester Institute of Technology offers discipline-specific, first-year seminars for any academic department that is willing to provide a faculty member to team-teach the course with a student affairs professional.
- \* *Learning/Student Success Center*—for example, North Central State College (IL)
- \* *Office of Students Affairs/Student Development*—for example, Dundalk Community College (MD) offers its seminar as SDEV 101: Student Development; and most colleges in the California Community College system offer their FYS through the Office of Counseling).

Results from the latest national survey of first-year seminars (Keup, 2010) reveal that the course is housed in the following areas:

- Academic Affairs (37%)
- Academic department (16%)
- Student Affairs (14%)
- First-Year Program Office (12%)
- College or School (8%)

One advantage of housing the FYS in an *academic* unit of the college is that it may be more

readily assimilated into the mainstream curriculum and more likely be perceived as having the same degree of academic credibility as other college courses. Offering the seminar through an interdisciplinary academic unit may carry the additional advantage of freeing the course from being exclusively “owned” and politically guarded by one academic discipline. This may serve to minimize political problems related to departmental territoriality and academic “turf” protection, while at the same time, encourage faculty across different disciplines to become involved with the course.

### **Linkages with Other Courses and Programs**

When the FYS is intentionally connected to other first-year programs or courses, the linkage can serve as an “anchor” that serves to stabilize and sustain a comprehensive first-year experience program (Natalicio & Smith, 2005). Such linkages also allow the yoked programs to work jointly, giving them the potential to exert a more systemic or synergistic effect on student success. As Barefoot (2000) notes: “First-year seminar effects can be multiplied through connection with other structures and programs” (p. 1).

#### **Should the FYS be delivered as a *stand-alone* course, or should it be *linked* with other first-year courses in the curriculum to form *learning communities*?**

What all forms of “learning communities” share as their defining or distinguishing feature is the co-registration of a cohort of students that take the same block of courses together during the same academic term. While this is the common theme that unites all learning-community models,

variations on this theme can occur with respect to: (a) the number of courses students take together during the term—which may range from two to an entire course load (4-5 courses), (b) whether the student cohort comprises the entire class, a subset of a larger class, or some combination thereof—for example, a cohort may comprise the entire enrollment of a small English composition class and co-enroll in a history course with a larger class size, and (c) the degree of instructional coordination among faculty who teach the blocked courses taken by the student cohort—for example, there may be no coordination by instructors, some instructional coordination of course content and assignments, or full coordination in which all instructors team-teach all courses together as part of an integrated, interdisciplinary program.

Empirical support for the educational effectiveness of learning community programs is provided by Tinto (1997, 2000) who found that students in learning communities: (a) become more actively involved in classroom learning, (b) report greater intellectual gains, (c) tend to form their own support groups that extend beyond the classroom, (d) spend more time together outside of class, and (e) display high rates of retention (persistence to course and degree completion).

National survey data indicate that approximately 35% of responding colleges and universities that offer a FYS link it with other first-year courses to form learning communities (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). Linking the FYS with another course or courses has the potential for

promoting symbiotic and synergistic relationships between the linked courses. For instance, students in the FYS may co-register for a skill-development course with a similar enrollment cap (e.g., courses in English or Speech), thus allowing assignments in the FYS to be coordinated with the course that is linked with the seminar. Students may then use concepts discussed in the FYS as topics for writing assignments in their linked English or Speech course. For example, at La Salle University (PA), the FYS is linked with an English course, and the two linked courses combine to carry a total of four credits (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

For students taking developmental courses during their first term, the FYS could also be linked or paired with a developmental English course, with the developmental course serving as a co-requisite for the seminar. Designating the FYS as a co-requisite allows developmental students the opportunity to experience the seminar *concurrently* with developmental courses during their critical first term of college—a time when they are most likely to have need for and profit from the FYS. Furthermore, assignments in the seminar can be used as the “content” for the developmental course, and the developmental course instructor could help “coach” students with their FYS assignments. For instance, developmental students could create a college-success plan in the FYS that includes meaningful exploration of their educational and career goals. Such an assignment should increase students’ motivation to complete their developmental coursework because they are more likely to view it as an integral first step of a systematic plan that connects with their future goals. Said in another way, student motivation is a necessary condition for developmental education to be effective. The seminar’s focus on connecting students’ present educational experience with their future life goals has the potential to elevate student motivation and effort in their developmental classes.

Another way in which the course-linking strategy could be used to stretch the depth and breadth of the FYS is to link the seminar with a *content*-oriented general education course (for example, History), so that students in the seminar also comprise the class taking the content course, or a subset of it. FYS students could then apply strategies and skills presented in the seminar (for example, note-taking and memory-improvement strategies) to the content covered in the general education course. This form of course linking allows students to make immediate use

of the learning strategies discussed in the FYS and apply them directly to concurrently experienced courses, thus increasing the immediate relevance of the seminar. This strategy also promotes student motivation and learning because empirical studies support the conclusion that students learn best when learning activities are intrinsically related to a relevant goal (Malone, 1981).

Linking the seminar with a general education course also provides meaningful *content* to which students can apply and practice effective learning skills. Research suggests that for effective learning skills to “take hold” in students, i.e., to become fully incorporated into their habitual approach to learning, students need to have a sense of purpose for using these skills in relation to a specific learning task. In contrast, attempting to teach learning skills within the confines of an isolated and insulated study skills course, or series of study-skills workshops,

typically results in limited transfer of these skills to courses in the curriculum (Hadwin & Winne, 1996; Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Weinstein & Underwood, 1985).

This limitation can be overcome by linking the FYS with a traditional *general-education course*, as is done at the University of Idaho, where all students who register for the FYS also register for a core curriculum course. The study skills portion of the seminar is taught within the context of the core course work, and the seminar instructor attends all class sessions in the core course with the seminar students (Simmons, Wallins, & George, 1995). Research conducted at the University of Idaho (Yockey & George, 1998), and at Temple University (Levine & Tompkins, 1996), indicates that first-year students who enroll in core (general education) courses that are linked with a FYS tend to achieve higher GPAs, have higher course completion rates, and have higher first-semester retention rates than new students who do not enroll in linked courses.

Another course-linking strategy involving the FYS is to link the seminar with an introductory course in the *student's academic major*. For instance, at Ithaca College (NY), student majoring in business co-register for Introduction to Business and a Business FYS—which covers topics similar to the FYS (for example, time management, diversity, test-taking strategies), but applies the topics to career development in business settings. Institutional research conducted at Ithaca College indicates that participants in the linked courses persist in the same major (Business) into the sophomore year at a rate twice that of students who did not participate in the linked classes (Lifton, 2005).

Middlesex Community College (MA) has extended the strategy of course linking beyond paired courses by yoking its FYS with two other courses to form three-course “clusters,” such as a “Liberal Arts cluster”—consisting of the FYS joined with courses in English Composition and Introduction to Psychology, and a “Business cluster”—comprised of the FYS linked with courses in Introduction to Computers and Introduction to Business. Using a block-registration format, the same cohort of new students enrolls in all courses that comprise the cluster, thus creating learning community of first-year students who share a common course schedule that includes the FYS (Levitz, 1993). One potentially positive byproduct of clustering courses in this fashion is that students may begin to look for and find meaningful connections across courses. As Kurfiss (1988) suggests, “In addition to serving as a bridge to future courses, freshman-year experience [courses] can help freshmen integrate their current learning” (p. 94).

*Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs)* represents another multi-course clustering strategy targeted exclusively for first-year students that were originally developed at the University of Oregon (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). This ambitious learning community model involves recruitment of small cohorts of first-year students (15-25) to register for the *same 3-4 courses*, which often constitute a related set of general education requirements or pre-major courses in the students' field of academic interest. This cohort of 15-25 freshmen travels together and forms a *subset* of three or four larger classes that they all take together. Typically, one of these courses has a small-class component that involves only FIG students—for example, a lab session or discussion group formed from a course that has a larger number of students.

A trained upper-division student is assigned as a *peer advisor* to each FIG and receives academic credit for leading the FIG group, typically in the form of an independent study or internship in leadership development. The peer advisor meets with FIG students regularly throughout the term (for example, in a weekly proseminar), and also meets with the coordinator of the entire FIG program—a staff member or graduate teaching assistant. Peer advisors are selected on the basis of their prior record of academic achievement or student leadership, and are brought together for an extended orientation and training session before the start of the academic year. Faculty teaching in the FIG program may attend meetings between students and their peer advisor, or other faculty may be invited to the meeting as guest speakers, thus serving to promote faculty-student contact outside the classroom.

Empirical support for the effectiveness of the FIG model is provided by research conducted at the University of Washington, where it has been demonstrated that FIG students are less likely to withdraw from academically competitive courses and display significantly higher grade-point averages than students taking the same courses without being members of a FIG program (Tokumo & Campbell, 1992).

Historically, FIGs have been offered without the FYS being part of the course cluster. However, given the empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of FIGs, inclusion of the seminar as a key course in the this learning community model appears to be a powerful strategy for generating synergy between the FYS and FIG programs, perhaps serving to multiply their respective effects on first-year student success.

### **Should the FYS be linked with *programs* outside of the formal curriculum?**

In addition to course linking or clustering, the FYS may also be linked with programs beyond the curriculum. The following potential targets for linkage with the FYS will be discussed in this section:

- \* residential life
- \* new-student orientation,
- \* co-curricular programming
- \* academic advisement and career counseling,
- \* service learning, and
- \* institutional assessment.

### Linking the FYS with *Residential Life* to form “Residential Learning Communities”

The learning community model may be adapted to include a residential-life component, whereby students enrolled in the same course, such as the FYS, also share the same living space on campus. For example, at Nazareth College of Rochester (NY), students living on the same residential floor enroll in the same section of the FYS. At the University of Charleston (WV), all first-year students participate in residential learning communities, whereby new students living in the same residence hall take the same sections of FYS and also co-enroll in a linked general education course (Clendinin, 2004).

At the University of Missouri-Columbia, Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) of 20 students

living on the same floor of a residence hall also enroll in the same four courses (Levine & Tompkins, 1996). Institutional research on this residential learning community revealed that students participating in the FIG cohort earned a higher mean grade-point average than non-participants and displayed a 12% higher three-year retention rate (Laufgraben-Levine, 2005).

Residential learning communities may also include “living-learning centers,” which offer residentially-based educational programs that integrate academic and student affairs programming. For example, academic advising and learning assistance services may be provided in student residences, or the FYS may be taught in residence lounges.

#### Linking the FYS with *New-Student Orientation*

New-orientation programs that take place prior to the start of classes have multiple purposes and advantages: (a) they provide 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) they capitalize on new students’ initial excitement and enthusiasm about starting college to create a favorable first impression of the institution and positive anticipation for the upcoming college experience, and (c) they supply 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 (e.g., 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).

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. At Marymount College (CA), entering students are informed via summer mailing that their participation in the college’s pre-semester orientation program is considered to be part of its required FYS. The college’s two-day orientation program involves a welcoming convocation ceremony and a series of small-group experiences, after which students complete short, “reflection papers” that are counted as course assignments and forwarded to FYS instructors for credit toward their course grade (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). After the college began linking its new-student orientation program with its required FYS in this fashion, the percentage of entering students attending new-student orientation practically doubled (Cuseo, 1999).

Linking the FYS and new-student programs can 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 is a natural marriage because the objectives of most new-student orientation programs dovetail with those of the FYS (e.g., promoting 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 one of its components.

#### Linking the FYS with *Co-Curricular Programming*

Research in higher education reveals 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 they 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' leadership qualities (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The potential of the FYS to address this problem is 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 via 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 semester from which they choose particular events to attend. (Students are encouraged to participate in events that relate to leadership development, service learning, and their academic or career plans.) After attending the event, students submit a short "reflection" paper to their seminar instructor (Cuseo, 2004b).

An innovative illustration of how connections can be made between the FYS and co-curricular experiences on a totally commuter campus is the "CLUE program," offered at the College of Staten Island (NY), where 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 in 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 others that focus on personal adjustment or growth (e.g., time management or career development workshops). The Dean of Students publishes a weekly calendar containing all certified events, which 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*

The FYS may be used to connect first-term students with academic support services for self-assessment of their learning styles, strategies, or habits. For instance, at Marymount College (CA), FYS students complete an electronic self-assessment of learning habits and study strategies (E-LASSI) in the first two weeks of class. Later in the term, students are given a follow-up assignment 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 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 the purpose of engaging them in long-term *educational and career* planning, which can help 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 students' long-term planning: (a) an *undergraduate* educational plan that includes courses in general education and the major field of study that the student is pursuing or considering, (b) a tentative *post-baccalaureate educational* plan for graduate or professional school, and (c) an exploratory *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 *portfolio* of materials that illustrates their developing competencies and educational achievements.

Norwich University (Vermont) uses its FYS to engage new students in long-range educational planning and to 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, FYS 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 40% of all responding colleges and universities report linking service-learning experiences to their FYS (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). An ambitious example of how service experience can be integrated with the FYS takes place. The University of Rhode Island offers approximately 100 sections of its FYS to involve more than 2400 new students in service learning by requiring it 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 curriculum. 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 other off-campus experiential learning opportunities for students.

#### Linking the FYS with *Institutional Assessment*

Since the FYS 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 course-relevant venue through which to administer instruments designed for institutional assessment of students’ college-entry characteristics, such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and instruments designed to assess new students’ risk for attrition. Data generated by these instruments may also be used to collect baseline (college-entry) data from students against which follow-up data collected on these same students may be later compared as part of a “value-added” or “talent-development” assessment program (Astin, 1991). Assessment conducted in the context of the FYS are likely to be perceived by new students as consistent with the seminar’s focus on self-awareness and personal growth (e.g., a developmental portfolio) and as a natural extension of other self-assessments that are part and parcel of this graded, credit-bearing course. When assessment is conducted as a meaningful class activity or course assignment, it addresses the common concern about how to recruit motivated students to participate in the assessment process.

Furthermore, required (or heavily enrolled) first-year seminars can provide a sizable sample of first-year students, as well as the place and time for entry-level assessment to be conducted. A common concern or complaint of assessment investigators is finding a sizable and representative sample of students to participate in the assessment process (Upcraft, 2005). A required FYS provides a captive and representative audience of substantial size, eliminates the need to solicit and reward student volunteers, and controls for the potentially confounding effects of sampling bias associated with the “volunteer effect” (self-selection bias). Students’ reflective writing in the FYS constitutes another source of useful assessment data. Reaction papers, one-minute paper, and journals that are commonly employed in the FYS may serve as form of qualitative, course-embedded assessment. Students’ individually written products may be anonymously aggregated and analyzed to gain insight into entering students’ initial values, early expectations, and first-term experiences on campus. As Upcraft, Ishler, and Swing (2005) note: “First-year seminars provide a central location to embed assessment that will capture data from all or most new students [and] afford unique opportunities to assess an entire cohort of new students” (p. 487).

Moreover, such course-embedded assessment can serve as a valuable source of institutional research data that may be reviewed and used to improve the quality of students’ first-year student experience on campus. For example, at Virginia Commonwealth University, first-year students’ one-minute papers were used to assess students’ feelings and experience with their classes and new-student orientation. The results led to changes in parking for commuter students and reduction in the number of large classes offered during the students’ first year on campus (Hodges & Yerian, 2001; Swing & Upcraft, 2005)

Lastly, early identification of at-risk students may be accomplished in the FYS through course administration of assessment instruments that have been explicitly designed to identify students whose college-entry characteristics render them vulnerable to attrition. For example, any of the following standardized instruments designed to predict at-risk students may administered in the FYS : (a) The Transition to College Inventory (TCI), (b) College Student Inventory (CSI), (c) The College Success Factors Index (CSFI), and (d) The Student Readiness Inventory (ACT). Institutions interested in using these diagnostic instruments for early identification and intervention must find the time and place to do so. The FYS could serve this function, providing a relevant curricular structure and a comfortable classroom context within which to conduct comprehensive assessment of new students’ needs during their critical first term in college.

## Conclusion

Research reviewed in this chapter suggests that in the “ideal case” scenario, administration of the FYS would be characterized by following top-ten practices.

1. It should be delivered as a *graded, credit-bearing* course, so as to maximize student motivation and effort.
2. It should be a course that carries *three (or more) academic units* in order to ensure sufficient class contact time, breadth of coverage, and comparability with other courses in the college curriculum.

3. It should be delivered to *all* students (as a required course) or the *vast majority* of students (via aggressive recruitment), so that it may exert *systemic* impact on the first-year student body.
4. It should cover *common content* across different course sections, so that student learning can be magnified by multiple student conversations students may have about their common learning experience. However, individual instructors should be allowed *academic freedom* to explicate and illustrate course content in a manner that respects their individuality and increases their intrinsic motivation for teaching the FYS.
5. It should be offered as a *general education* course, because its objectives are consistent with the mission and goals of a general (liberal) education.
6. Its *class size* should be small and intimate to promote active involvement, class bonding and delivery of frequent, personalized feedback to students.
7. It should be taught by the most *caring, engaging, and student-centered* instructors on campus, including faculty and other members of the college community, who are *trained* and *rewarded* for teaching the course.
8. It should have a clearly-defined *academic home* or *position* in the college's organizational structure in order to enhance its credibility and comparability with other credit-bearing courses in the college curriculum.
9. It should be *collaboratively* directed and coordinated by members from the divisions of *Academic and Student Affairs* so that the FYS maintains a comprehensive focus on the student as a "whole person."
10. It should be *integrated* with other first-year courses and programs so they can work collectively to exert multiplicative or synergistic effects on student success.

The foregoing ten recommendations are not meant to be prescriptive or formulaic; instead they represent ideal practices or "aspirational" benchmarks that can be emulated and approximated to maximize the impact of the FYS. Naturally, in the "real world," the ideal practice scenario often must be modified to accommodate the practical and political realities of the campus culture in which implementation takes place. Advocates and champions of the FYS may frequently find themselves playing the role of organizational change agents, whose well-intentioned and well-reasoned efforts to promote the success of first-year students may have to be tempered and tailored to the characteristics or constraints of their particular campus culture. FYS advocates can only create what their institution is willing to accommodate, assimilate, or tolerate. Thus, it may be necessary to initiate or maintain the FYS with less-than-ideal administrative practices, but with an ever-watchful eye toward making incremental improvements that allow for closer approximations of best practice when there is change in the existing and resisting campus culture—for example, when a supportive high-level administrator is newly hired, or when the college adopts a new strategic plan.

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