

Should the First-Year Seminar 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 first-year seminar (FYS) for academic credit toward graduation (Tobolowsky & Associates, 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.

Should student performance in the First-Year Seminar be evaluated with a *letter grade* that is included in the student’s grade-point average?

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).

How Many Credit Hours (Units) Should the First-Year Seminar (FYS) Carry?

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 (2002). 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, 2002, 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).

In addition to empirical evidence, 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.

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