

# *The Case for a Holistic First-Year Seminar:* Promoting Student Success by Treating the Student as a Whole Person

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Considerable variability exists in the content of first-year seminars. Some “academic” seminars focus exclusively on a common academic theme that unites the content of all course sections (e.g., global awareness), or focus on specialized topics that vary from section to section depending on the specialized scholarly interest of the course instructor (e.g., women in the media or the history of drugs). Other seminars provide an introduction to a specific academic major or a pre-professional program field, which introduces and orients new students to that particular academic discipline or field of study (e.g., introduction to engineering).

This manuscript identifies content for first-year seminars that goes beyond strictly academic topics and embraces a comprehensive, holistic (whole-person) approach to promoting student success. The manuscript’s message is consistent with the holistic focus called for by Upcraft and Gardner (1989) in their seminal text, *The Freshman Year Experience*, in which they argue that “freshmen succeed when they make progress toward fulfilling [the following] educational and personal goals: (1) developing academic and intellectual competence; (2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; (3) developing an identity; (4) deciding on a career and life-style; (5) maintaining personal health and wellness; and (6) developing an integrated philosophy of life” (p. 2).

A holistic FYS is the quintessential “student-centered” course; its content centers squarely on, and is driven directly by, the first-year student experience. As Hunter and Linder (2005) argue, “At its core, the first-year seminar is centered on and concerned with the individual needs of entering students” (p. 275). Arguably, this type of course occupies a unique place in the college curriculum because it is the only course whose content *originates* with, *derives* from, and *focuses* on *the learner*, rather than on an external corpus of knowledge that reflects the research interests of discipline-based scholars. The holistic FYS exemplifies the recommendation made by a researcher who conducted an in-depth study of effective college instructors in multiple disciplines at multiple institutions: “Start with the students rather than the discipline” (Bain, 2004, p. 110). As one student anonymously wrote in an evaluation of the FYS, “This was the only course that was about me” (Cuseo, Williams, & Wu, 1993). A FYS instructor and researcher describes his students’ experience in the first-year seminar with the expression, “We have met the content and it is us” (Rice 1992).

It is also the type of FYS originally offered at the University of Carolina (University 101), which has served as a national model for more than a quarter of a century. “University 101 subscribes to the belief that development is not a one-dimensional affair but must reach far beyond the intellect and into emotional, spiritual, occupational, physical and social areas” (Jewler, 1989, p. 201). Indeed, the entire “freshman year experience” movement emerged from the concerns of a former president of the University of South Carolina, Tom Jones, who thought that the university needed to offer a course that would address the student as a whole person rather than just their intellect (Watts, 1999). The president was strongly influenced by Nevitt Sanford’s (1968) classic, *Where Colleges Fail*, in which Sanford argues that colleges fail whenever they treat students as less than a total person and ignore the fact that effective learning depends on the whole being, not only their “abstracted intelligence.”

The following collection of conceptual arguments and empirical findings provide strong support a holistic FYS with content that treats the student as a whole person addresses the variety of factors that impact student success.

**Student retention through the first year of college and persistence to college completion are strongly influenced by factors that are not strictly cognitive or academic in nature.** It has been repeatedly reported that the vast majority of students who withdraw from college are in good academic standing at the time of their departure (estimates range between 75-85%); in other words, most students who “drop out” do not “flunk out” (Gardiner, 1994; Carey, 2005). Noel,

1985; Tinto, 1988, 1993; Willingham, 1985). This is also true at open-access community colleges that serve the least academically prepared students. In a recent national survey of community college students, only 19% reported that “being academically unprepared” would cause them to withdraw from college, ranking behind such factors as “caring for dependents” (29%), “working full-time” (38%) and “lack of finances” (45%) (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). It has also been found first-generation college are at greater risk for attrition, regardless of their level of academic preparation for college—such as their entering SAT scores and the rigor of course work required by their high school) (Glenn, 2008).

These findings underscore the importance of providing support programs that address the first-year student as a whole person and accommodate the multiplicity of factors that affect their success. First-year seminars that focus exclusively on academic or cognitive skill development will “miss the boat” in terms of targeting many of the key issues that underlie the bulk of student attrition. This argument is consistent with the results of campus-specific research conducted at Indiana University-Bloomington where a broad range of initiatives were implemented to enhance the quality of the first-year experience and improve student retention. The results of their first-year initiatives pointed to the conclusion that strict concentration on academic matters is unlikely to increase retention without equal attention to non-academic elements of student life (Smith, 2003). This campus-specific finding is reinforced by the cross-institutional work of Kuh, et al. (2005) who identified campuses with significantly higher rates of student engagement and graduation than would be predicted from their student and institutional characteristics (e.g., admissions selectivity and percentage of commuting students). Kuh’s research team made multiple site visits to these high-performing campuses to identify common themes that accounted for their unusually high rates of student success. The team noted that one common theme traversing these campuses was “an emphasis on holistic student learning [that] runs broad and deep in institutional policies and practices” (p. 65).

**Institutional efforts at promoting student retention are more effective when academic and student affairs professionals collaborate in the delivery of educational and support programs.** In a study involving a consortium of twelve colleges formed to jointly implement and assess practices designed to promote student retention, it was found that those initiatives developed collaboratively through the combined efforts of Academic and Student Affairs proved more effective than programs previously developed independently by these two administrative units (Stodt & Klepper, 1987). More recently, a research project designed to document effective educational practices (Project DEEP) revealed that among the key characteristic of institutions with higher-than-predicted graduation rates was a high degree of respect and collaboration between academic and student affairs, and a president who had a “holistic perspective on student development and the institution’s responsibilities with regard to student success” (Kuh, et al., 2005, p. 309). Similarly, an in-depth study of state universities with higher-than-average graduation rates (given their institutional characteristics and student population) revealed that one of their distinctive features was campus-wide coordination of retention efforts that stimulated communication and cooperation between academic and student affairs (AAC&U, 2005).

An FYS with a comprehensive, holistic focus lends itself to collaboration among academic and student affairs, providing an opportunity for cross-divisional partnerships that can result in a more unified sense of campus community. The joining together of faculty and student development professionals in the design and delivery of a holistic FYS may be one vehicle for reducing the historic “schism” or “persistent gap” between academic and student affairs, which is responsible for the deleterious “disconnect” between the students’ curricular and co-curricular learning experiences (Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Miller & Prince, 1976; ACPA, 1994; ACPA & NASPA, 1997, 2004). The partnership-building potential of the FYS was noted 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 “(1980, pp. 6 & 7).

**A holistic approach to promoting student success addresses the full range of educational goals expressed in *college mission statements*, whose intended educational outcomes go**

**well beyond the academic or cognitive domain.** Even a cursory review of college catalogues or bulletins will reveal that the vast majority of institutional mission statements embrace educational goals that are much broader and diverse than merely knowledge acquisition and cognitive skills. Formal research on the goals of postsecondary institutions indicates that the goals of higher education include student outcomes that are not exclusively academic or cognitive, but embrace outcomes that are psychosocial, experiential, and holistic in nature (Astin, 1991; Kuh, Shedd, & Witt, 1987; Lenning, 1988).

**Promoting students' holistic development is consistent with the goals of liberal (general) education.** Historically, general education has been viewed almost exclusively in terms of the array of courses that comprise the liberal arts curriculum. However, the goals of liberal education—which traditionally lie in the domain of Academic Affairs, and the goals of holistic development—which traditionally lie in the domain of Student Affairs, are strikingly similar and complementary (Astin, 1991; Grandy, 1988; Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1987; Meacham & Gaff, 2006). As Berg (1983) notes, “To educate liberally, learning experiences must be offered which facilitate the maturity of the whole person and enhance development of intellectual maturity. These are the goals of student development and clearly they are consistent with the mission and goals of liberal education” (p. 12). Together, the goals of liberal learning and holistic development form the foundation of a college education and represent the essence of what it means to be a well-educated and well-rounded person. Based on an exhaustive review of studies on how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reached the following conclusion: “The evidence strongly suggests that these [college] outcomes are interdependent, that learning is holistic rather than segmented, and that multiple forces operate in multiple setting to shape student learning in ways that cross the ‘cognitive-affective’ divide” (p. 269).

**Brain research indicates that the impact of cognitive and emotional experiences on human learning are inextricably interrelated.** After reviewing neurological and psychobiological research in *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*, Caine & Caine (1991) reached the following conclusion: “The brain does not separate emotions from cognition, either anatomically or perceptually. Such artificial categorization may be helpful in designing research projects, but it can actually distort our understanding of learning” (p. vii). Positive emotions, such as those associated with optimism and excitement, have been found to facilitate learning by enhancing the brain's ability to process, store, and retrieve information (Rosenfield, 1988). In contrast, feelings of anxiety and personal threat have been found to interfere with the brain's ability to (a) store new information (Jacobs and Nadel, 1985), (b) retrieve already-stored memories (O'Keefe & Nadel, 1985), and (c) engage in higher-level thinking (Caine & Caine, 1991). Furthermore, research indicates that information is first processed through emotional centers of the brain—*before* it is passed on to parts of the brain that specialize in cognition and reasoning (LeDoux, 1998).

Collectively, these brain-based findings lend strong support to an argument made long ago by a taskforce report that influenced the creation of University 101 at the University of South Carolina: “Cognitive growth which is separated from the development of other aspects of the human personality is illusory and distorted” (Committee on the Student in Higher Education, in Barefoot & Fidler, 1992, p. 63).

**Research suggests that first-year seminars with a holistic focus are the most effective type of seminar for promoting student learning outcomes.** Working under the auspices of the Policy Center for the First Year of College (Brevard, NC), Swing (2002) conducted a large-scale comparative study of outcomes associated with different types of first-year seminars. Based on self-reported student outcomes from over 31,000 students attending 62 institutions, he found that *college transition* seminars, which focus on academic and non-academic (holistic) topics, “performed best overall across the ten learning outcomes investigated” (p. 1). College transition seminars with a holistic focus were especially more effective than *discipline-based* seminars housed in academic departments that focused exclusively on introducing first-year students to an academic discipline or major field of study.

## Summary & Conclusion

A holistically-focused FYS has the following major benefits:

- \* It addresses the full range of factors that promote student success and prevent student attrition.
- \* It serves as a stimulus for promoting partnerships between academic affairs and student development professionals, leading to more coordinated and collaborative efforts to promote student retention.
- \* It addresses the full range of educational goals expressed in college mission statements, which espouse student outcomes that are broader than academic and cognitive development.
- \* It is congruent with the goals of liberal education, which represents the foundation of a college education and the essence of what it means to be an educated person.
- \* It is consistent with research that indicates the human brain does not compartmentalize affect and cognition while learning; instead, they work interdependently during the learning process.
- \* It is the type of first-year seminar that is most likely to have a positive impact on multiple, student learning outcomes.

The research reviewed in this manuscript suggests that the distinction that's often made between "academic" and "college success" or "extended orientation" seminars is a false or artificial dichotomy that defines "academic" narrowly in terms of discipline-driven "academic content"--i.e., an academic subject or topic that is "covered" in a departmentally-organized academic discipline--rather than as transferable academic *skills, strategies, or learning processes* that traverse and transcend disciplinary boundaries.

The academic rigor and credibility of the first-year experience course lies in the development of students' academic skills of oral/written communication, higher-level (critical and creative) thinking, and lifelong-learning strategies. These skills and strategies can be applied to FYE topics that are really life-success issues that encompass multiple dimensions of the whole person, including social, emotional, and intrapersonal intelligence. Students can use the academic skills/strategies of speaking eloquently, writing clearly, learning deeply, and thinking critically not only with respect to academic topics identified by discipline-based researchers; they can also be applied to their current and future life, their personal choices and decisions, and their development as whole human beings. As the American Association of Higher Education Assessment Forum points out, "Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities, but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom" (1996, p. 1)

When students become aware of and proficient at speaking, writing, thinking critically, learning deeply, and relating effectively to others, they are acquiring lifelong-learning skills that can be applied to both their current college experiences and future life. Appreciation of this point would go a long way in toward reducing the artificial compartmentalization and delivery of FYE courses as either "academic" or "non-academic". A holistic seminar integrates the best of what these two historically "different" types of seminars have to offer, and in so doing, gains the capacity to exert a synergistic effect on student success in college and beyond.

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