

Demonstrating the Impact of First-Year Seminars on Student Outcomes

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Background

“The freshman seminar is a course intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students by introducing them:

- to a variety of specific topics, which vary by seminar type [*6 types*],
- to essential skills for college success, and
- to selected processes, the most common of which is the creation of a peer support group.”

(Barefoot, 1992)



Background

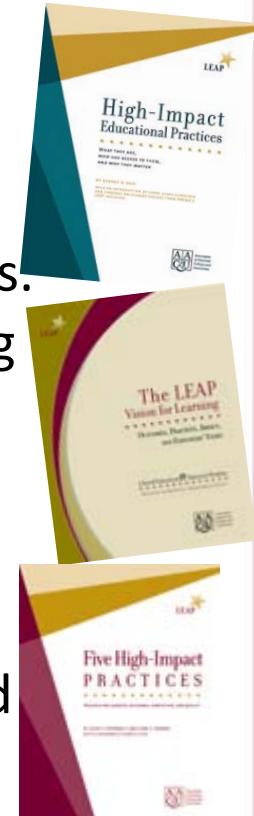
- Evidence of FYS can be found as early as 1880s but experienced a “renaissance” in 1970s
- National data indicate pervasive use (*Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012; Padgett & Keup, 2011*)
 - 96% of institutions offer a FYS
 - Half offer a FYS to 90% or more first-year students
 - Growing use among 2-year colleges
- Evolution in type, structural characteristics, & content



FYS as High-Impact Practice

First-Year Seminars and Experiences

“Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members’ own research.”



Previous Research: Findings

- Positive impact on retention to second year, persistence to graduate, and academic performance
- Positive effect on behavioral outcomes
 - Involvement in campus activities
 - Interaction with faculty and peers
 - Student engagement
- FYS faculty development also linked to improved teaching performance



Previous Research Findings

- Positive impact on persistence
– FYS participation has statistically significant and substantial, positive effects on a student's successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college”
(Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 403)
- Positive impact on student engagement
– Instructor interaction
- FYS faculty development and linked to improved teaching performance



Previous Research: Limitations

- Reliance upon single-institution studies
- Inability to capture the wide range of seminar characteristics
 - Seminar type
 - Seminar structure
 - Students served
 - Instructional features



Research Questions

- Which characteristics of first-year seminars (i.e., structural elements, institutional characteristics, course objectives, and seminar content) have an impact on students' first-year grades?
- Which characteristics of first-year seminars (i.e., structural elements, institutional characteristics, course objectives, and seminar content) have an impact on students' persistence to the second year?



Method

- Data source
 - Institutional respondents to the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars ($n = 890$)
 - Respondents to a Spencer Foundation funded follow-up survey to collect outcomes data ($n = 185$)
- Sample representativeness
 - Not nationally representative
 - Representative of institutions that offer first-year seminars



Method

- Dependent variables
 - Average cumulative first-year GPA for FYS
 - Average sophomore return rate for FYS students
- Independent variables
 - Institutional and seminar controls
 - Structural characteristics of FYS
 - Instructional characteristics of FYS
 - Course objectives
 - Course content



Method

- Descriptive statistics
- A series of OLS regression analyses
 - Five regression analyses for each of the two outcomes
 - Each included institution controls and one of the other blocks of independent variables
 - Final models (one for each outcome) included all of the variables that proved to be significant in previous regression analyses



Results: Separate Models

	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
Content		
College policies and procedures	-.208*	
Health and wellness	.201*	
Critical thinking		.199*
Instructional Characteristics		
Seminar instructor: Adjunct faculty	-.315***	
Seminar includes online components	-.207*	

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05



	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
Objectives		
Improve sophomore return rates	-.272***	
Develop writing skills		.246*
Self-exploration/personal development		.180*
Structural Characteristics	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
Primary FYS type: Academic Variable Content	.387*	.192*
Primary FYS type: Basic Study Skills	-.355*	-.260**
FYS class size	-.253***	
Credits seminar carries	.343***	
Percent of students taking a first-year seminar		.191*
Administrative unit for FYS: Student Affairs	.238**	
Seminar has been assessed	-.221*	

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Results: Combined Model



	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
Structural Characteristics		
Primary FYS type: Academic Variable Content	.388***	
Primary FYS type: Basic Study Skills	-.381***	-.294***
Percent of students taking a first-year seminar		.256**
Instructional Characteristics		
Seminar instructor: Adjunct faculty	-.331***	
Seminar includes online components	-.195*	
Course Objectives		
Develop writing skills		.267**
Personal development/exploration		.202*
Improve sophomore return rates	-.187*	
Course Content		
College policies and procedures	-.255**	
Health and wellness	.248**	
Critical thinking		.231*

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p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

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Discussion & Implications

- Seminar characteristics do matter to outcomes
 - Greater impact and wider range of effect on GPA than persistence
 - Little overlap in characteristics that predict outcomes
- Effect of FYS structural characteristics on outcome is mediated by other characteristics
- Characteristics that are aligned with core academic activities of the institution have a greater affect on outcomes

Discussion & Implications

- Bring attention to the need to include FYS characteristics in the study of this intervention
- Findings can help inform the development and refinement of FYS, especially in resource-sensitive times
 - Provide empirical evidence for FYS decisions
- Institutional data as the nexus between student analyses and policy



Future Research

- Look at a wider range of outcomes
- Examine high-impact practices associated with FYS
- Methodologically expand to include decision-tree analysis





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2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

- Administration: Oct. 30 – Dec. 18, 2010
- Invitation sent to 3,225 institutions in 3 waves:
 - Chief Academic Officer
 - Chief Executive Officer
 - Chief Student Affairs Officer
- Incentive program
- 1,028 usable responses
 - 32% response rate
 - 890 with FYS



2010 Follow-Up Survey

- Funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation
- Primary purpose was to gather information on student outcomes
 - Students in FYS in 2009-2010 academic year
 - General population of first-year students
- Survey sent to 890 respondents with FYS from the 2009 survey
- Incentive program
- 185 usable responses

