



## A HUGE SUCCESS: How to Bridge the Gap Between Academic and Residential First Year Programs

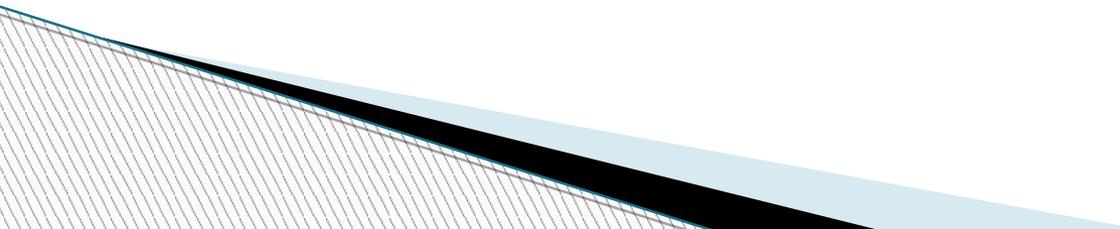
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28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on the First-Year  
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# The First Year Connection: Our Mission

SUNY Potsdam's First Year Programs provide a collaborative opportunity for first time, traditional age students to make meaningful connections with peers, faculty, and staff through academic and residential communities. The academic component connects courses from separate disciplines creating First Year Interest Groups (FIGs), some of which include a one-credit course called First Year Success Seminar (FYSS).

Our residential component, the First Year Experience (FYE) provides educational and social programming focused on helping students successfully transition into college life.

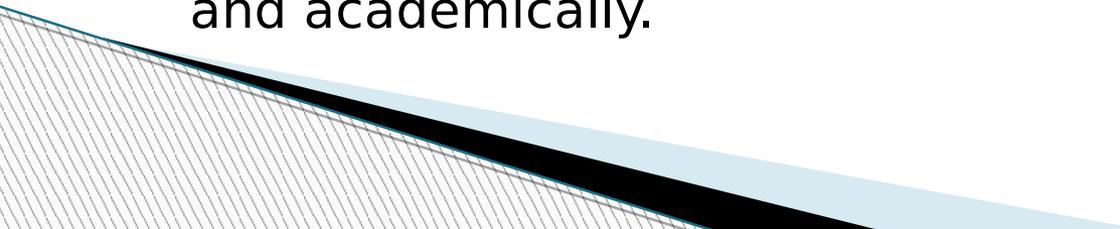


# The History of our First Year Experience Residential Program

The general idea behind this program was that first year students have unique and specific needs related to their adjustment from a highly structured high school environment to the freedom and independence of college.

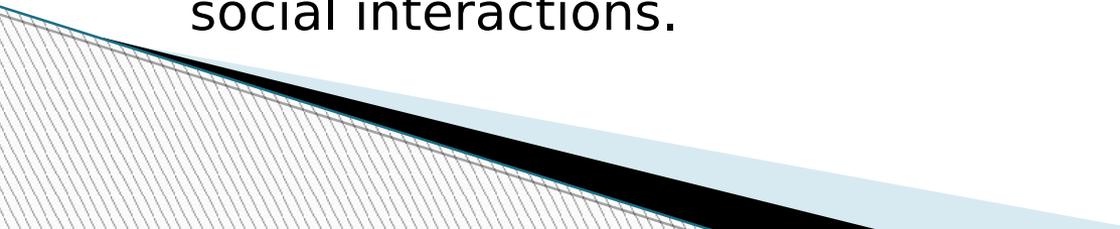
- ▶ Began in 1989
- ▶ Less than 100 students
- ▶ Graduate Hall Director

Our program provided an environment that supported the whole student- utilizing programs and activities that would encourage personal growth and development of the student as well as give them skills to survive in college both socially and academically.



# Goals of Residential FYE

The FYE program is dedicated to:

- ▶ Providing a fun, dynamic and academically focused experience for first year students.
  - ▶ Providing opportunities for first year students to make meaningful connections with their peers as well as faculty/staff at Potsdam.
  - ▶ Promoting awareness of and involvement in campus activities at Potsdam.
  - ▶ Providing educational programs geared toward helping students make a successful academic transition to college life.
  - ▶ Providing social activities to help students meet one another, have fun, make friends and offer healthy alternatives for social interactions.
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“In FYE, you meet a lot of people quickly, they become your instant friends and you never feel alone.”



“Your FYE floor gives you a second family here at SUNY Potsdam.”



# 3 Components of FYE

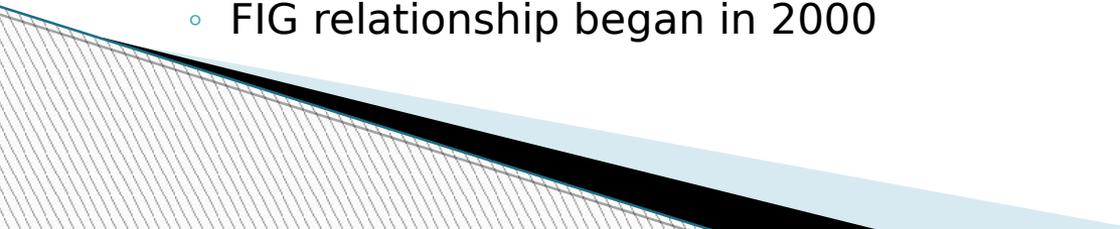
## Residential

- Housed in same area
- One RA and one Academic Peer Mentor per floor
- Professional live in Hall Director
- Roommate contract

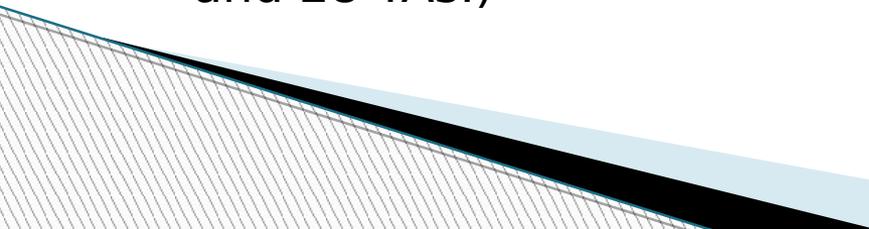
## Programmatic

- Activity Day, Day trips to Lake Placid, Ottawa
- Siblings Weekend
- Spirit Night
- M.A.P.S.

## Academic

- Residential Fellows serving as FYSS instructor and/or academic advisor
  - All FYE folks enrolled in an FYSS 1999
  - Theme floors
  - FIG relationship began in 2000
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# The History of our First Year Success Seminar (FYSS) Program

- ▶ 1999 – Collaborative efforts are made to enroll all students living in the FYE residential program in one of five First Year Success Seminars (1 credit hour/grade bearing course.) Upper class student mentors become Teaching Assistants (TAs) for the FYSS Instructors.
  - ▶ 2001 – New collaborative efforts between Residence Life and First Year Transitions with the Director of Learning Communities to implement FYSS into some of the clusters of First Year Interest Groups (18 sections offered.)
  - ▶ 2003 – In order to serve students who are not signed up to live in the FYE program or enrolled in a FIG that has a section of FYSS, 4 free-standing FYSS sections are offered (20 sections offered.)
  - ▶ 2006 to Present - Common Reading Program implemented (26 sections offered, 26 FYSS Instructors hired for a \$1,000 stipend and 28 TAs.)
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# The History of our Learning Communities Program

**Learning communities (LCs) are defined as a group of students taking the same interdisciplinary set of 2-5 courses together. First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs) are learning communities targeted for first-year students only. FIGs are two or more courses of different disciplines shared by a cohort of 10-25 students. FIGs are usually assembled around a common theme, the instructors may or may not coordinate their syllabi to connect their courses around that theme.**

▶1994 - The Adirondacks Environmental Studies coordinator awarded a FIPSE/NEH/NSF grant to develop interdisciplinary course work for first year students.\_

▶2000 - The new Learning Communities is supported at half-time for a senior committee board of students to grow and new FIG of



# LCs History - cont'd

- ▶ 2000 - FIGs integrate with the FYE Program. Some clusters include a residential component. Students from these clusters reside on the same floor and participate in the FYE programming.
- ▶ 2001 - FIGs integrate with First Year Success Seminars. Thus some clusters start including a First Year Success Seminar. At this time the seminar is taught by an instructor teaching another FIG course. The seminar becomes a key factor in sparking a learning community identity among FIG students.
- ▶ 2006 - The Assistant Registrar begins to oversee the creation of course registration numbers and computer links among FIG courses. Fall FIGs reach a significant level: 24 - 27 offerings.
  - 1 coordinated studies cluster: Environmental Studies.
  - 4 FIGs are housed in the FYE program: Business, Natural Science, Archaeology, and School and Community.
  - 22 FIGs with interdisciplinary themes in which courses meet General Education requirements (i.e. Art Studio, Invitation to Health, Theatre Studies, American Cultures, FIG Newton, Get Psyched, Bridging Cultures.)
- ▶ 2007 - A comparative study of our program to other SUNY campuses, it is evident that no other program has as many diverse features (coordinated study, clusters, paired courses, and upper division offerings), plays as significant a role in the first year experience of students (FYE plus FYSS integration), and has as many offerings.

# The Natural Science FIG

- ▶ 9 credits for 20 students
- ▶ Coordinator: Dr. Jan Trybula (Biology)
- ▶ Resides in First-Year Experience
- ▶ Description: The basic science courses for students interested in majoring in the sciences or medical fields.
- ▶ Courses (5):
  - ▶ BIOL 151 General Biology -Lecture
  - ▶ BIOL 151 General Biology-Lab
  - ▶ CHEM 105 General Chemistry I Lecture
  - ▶ CHEM 105 General Chemistry I-Lab
  - ▶ FY 100 First Year Success Seminar-Dr. Jan Trybula

# The School and Community FIG

- ▶ 14 credits for 20 students
- ▶ Coordinator: Dr. Joel Foisy (Mathematics)
- ▶ Resides in First-Year Experience
- ▶ Description: Early childhood and Childhood Education students have the unique opportunity to complete their practicum and student teaching placement in local schools. This cluster develops analytical and communication skills and addresses the importance of developing connections between school and community to ensure academic success for diverse learners.
- ▶ Courses (6):
  - ▶ HIST 201 US to 1877
  - ▶ BIOL 125 Biological Concepts - Lecture
  - ▶ BIOL 125 Biological Concepts - Lab
  - ▶ COM 101 Writing and Critical Thinking
  - ▶ MATH 101 Math for Elementary Education. Dr. Joel Foisy
  - ▶ FY 100 First Year Success Seminar

# SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES of FYE

- ▶ 1990 Introduction of Peer Mentor

- 2000 Peer Mentor becomes Academic Peer Mentor

What is their role:

- ▶ Provide an atmosphere within the residence halls which fosters the development of a community based on consideration, respect, and appreciation of all individuals.
  - Specifically trained in awareness of transition issues first year students face
- ▶ Assist students in the attainment of personal development and increased self-awareness.
- ▶ Serve as an academic resource person to first year students.
  - Sponsor M.A.P.S. programs, Advising Door to Door, serve as FYSS TA
- ▶ Promote and develop an environment that is conducive to academic achievement and endeavors.
  - Mentors assigned to Theme and FIG related housing are current students within major/minor or area of interest

# more FYE Strategies...

## Residential Fellows Program

- Established in 1998
- ▶ Faculty or staff members of the college who volunteer their time to enhance the experience of first year students and help them in their adjustment to college
- ▶ At least two Residential Fellows assigned to every FYE floor who serve as resource people and initiate social and educational programming for students.
  - Program examples: Yoga, Hikes, home visits with Barbeques/holiday activities, Pumpkin Carving, Talent Show, McDreamy and Sundaes, Pizza and Pool, Cookies In a Jar, Hanging with the Donkey's, Brownies and Babies
- ▶ Some may also serve as the academic advisor for students living on their floor.

## Theme floors

- Honor's, Arts, and Elementary Education

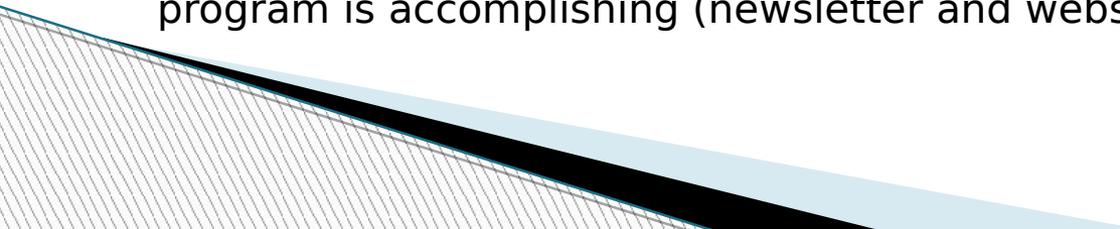
## FIGS

- Human Behavior, Natural Science, Early Childhood Education, Business, and Archeology
  - ▢ Students share core courses, FYSS and residential environment
  - ▢ Great for study groups to form

## Programs

Ex: M.A.P.S. (Mentor Academic Program Series), A Major Affair, Library Expo

# SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES for FIGs

- ▶ Annually attend our Admissions Offices' Open House program to introduce students to our collaborative first year programs
  - ▶ Create "Get Connected: First Year Interest Groups" brochure for new students and summer orientation advisors.
  - ▶ Encourage FIG instructors to use the Common Reading book in their course work.
  - ▶ Broaden the range of disciplinary areas included in offerings (i.e. gender studies, criminal justice studies.)
  - ▶ Create intersections with other programs (Honors FIG, Native American Studies, Service Learning.)
  - ▶ Adapt residential component to create space for positive interaction among FIG students (move students from same floor to clusters inside same building.)
  - ▶ Include more seminar courses in FIGs to facilitate more student-student and student-faculty interaction.
  - ▶ Develop and secure faculty incentives to participate in FIGs such as grants, receptions, workshops, and coordinator stipends.
  - ▶ Disseminate and update information to keep faculty updated on what the program is accomplishing (newsletter and website pages.)
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# SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES for FYSS

- Stay focused on key transition issues and changes that meet current student needs
    - Early program goals – FYSS built community from a “social transition” viewpoint, thus many classes were held in the lounges in the residential halls.
    - In 2006 we moved most courses into academic classrooms.
    - Implemented mandatory events such as the Common Reading Program and author’s visit, Library Expo and Technology Workshops.
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# Retention and Assessment

## FYE Residential Program- previous 5 years

	FYE	Non FYE
Average H.S. G.P.A.	87.24	86.91
Average SAT score	1064	1075
Average 1 <sup>st</sup> year cumulative GPA	2.72	2.67
Average 1 <sup>st</sup> year retention	79.41%	75.84%

## Fall 2008

Average H.S. G.P.A.	87.01	87.46
Average SAT score	1046	1048
Average 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester GPA	2.66	2.73
Average 1 <sup>st</sup> semester retention	95.63%	92.21%

# Student Response to FYSS Focus Group Questions

▸Methodology: Primary goal was to ask at least ten, but no more than twenty-five, upper-class students a series of reflective questions about their experiences on campus since taking their FYSS class.

Q1 - What did you know about campus resources (that serve both academic and social needs) prior to taking the FY 100 course?

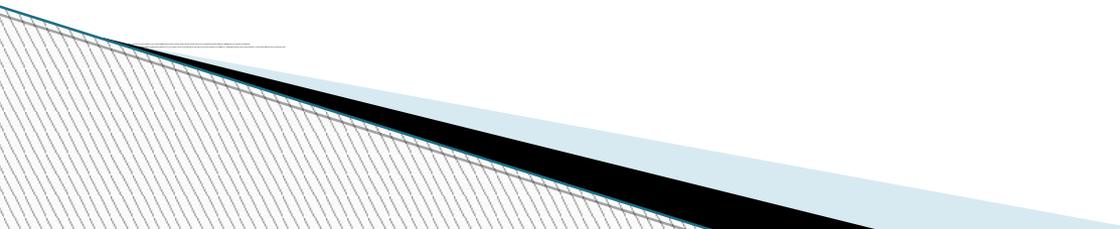
“We didn’t know much other than what was on the campus website.”

“I knew how to sign up for classes and sign into Blackboard from attending orientation.”

Q2 - What did you learn about our college resources by taking this class?

“FY 100 instructors would bring in guest speakers from the writing center, health services, diversity center. Some instructors would take us on a tour of the Maxcy fitness center or the Crane complex.”

“My instructor assigned coming of age films like Higher Learning and Stand By Me and we discussed the relevance to our first year in class.”



## Questions/Answers cont'd

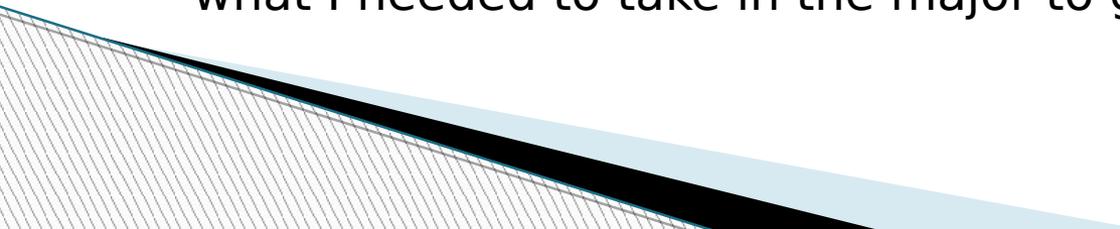
“Our class had a student teaching assistant who lived on our floor, so when I didn’t know what was due for class or if I had any questions I just asked him. He also lead a class on partying and brought in the University Police to discuss binge drinking.”

“The teacher began class every week with a 10-minute Q and A session for anyone to ask questions from financial aid and advising to getting caught drinking underage to how to withdraw from a class.”

Q3 - If you took a FY 100 class associated with a FIG, what did you expect or know about a FIG?

“I wanted to go down that road because I knew the group of people was taking classes with had the same interests.”

“I knew what I wanted to declare as my major and I learned early what I needed to take in the major to graduate.”



## Questions/Answers cont'd

Q4 - Did your FY 100 class help you navigate the challenges of your first semester? How so?

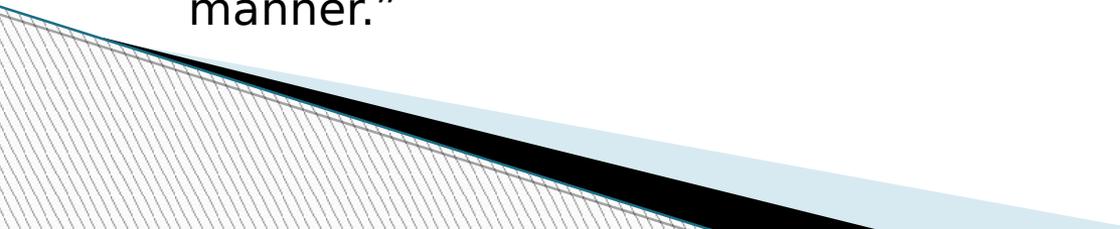
“My instructor invited the class to a cookout to meet all the FIG instructors early in the semester. We met a couple of more times as a group to discuss advising and how to declare a major.”

“FYSS helped everyone calm down when we got bad grades back.”

Q5 - How have you applied the skills learned since your first semester?

“I taught my friend who didn't take a FYSS class how to use the library catalog and she asked where I learned all this from and I told her my FYSS class.”

“The class gave me tougher skin to get used to things, especially after failing a couple of quizzes and I learned how to act in a respectful manner.”



## Question and Answer cont'd

"The peer mentor was always on the floor to go to, they had practical experience because they had already been through the same situations."

"I learned how to take care of my health, where to go if I was sick and where to eat on campus."

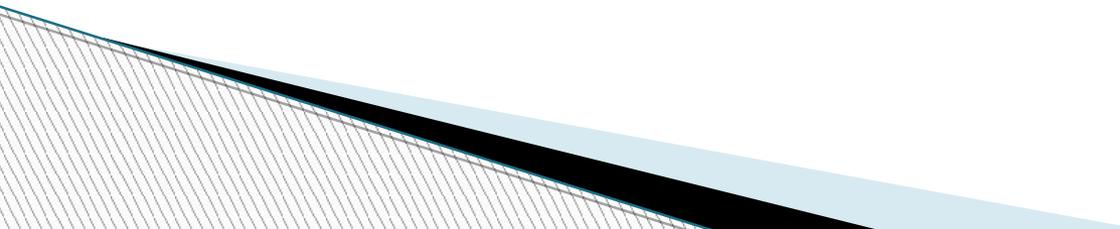
Q6 - Other feedback?

"We didn't know the class was not mandatory, but even so, we would take it again if they were given the choice."

"Felt frustrated with the writing assignments and going to campus events, but liked the discussion and laid back environment."

" Really enjoyed the sense of community and we made friends they we are still close to as juniors and seniors."

"I didn't like the fact I lived on the same floor with the same people I went to class with, by the end of the semester we were sick of each other."



# First-year student comments



“FYSS helped me get to know other students on my floor better, and it helped me get used to the college experience.”

“I think we covered a lot of helpful topics, good teachers and we had lots of laughs.”



## Learning Communities Assessment

In 2005 the previous director reported that:

- ▶ The college participates in the very well known National Survey of Student Engagement. In the section "Enriching Education Experiences," one question asked if the student has or plans to "participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together.
- ▶ 55% of the first-year students in Fall 2003 said yes and 32% of seniors said yes. Both of these figures were statistically significantly higher than other institutions participating in the NSSE, including those matched to us for type (four year liberal arts college). The reason that the senior number is lower than the FY number is that many of our seniors transferred in.

In the 2004 survey the first-year students and the seniors again responded "yes" in statistically significantly higher numbers than at all other schools in the survey as well as all schools of our type.

- ▶ This is strong evidence that we have an unusually extensive LC program. Quality or satisfaction is not being measured here. We're still looking for good ways to assess that."

In Fall 2007 a survey of faculty participating in FIGs was conducted:

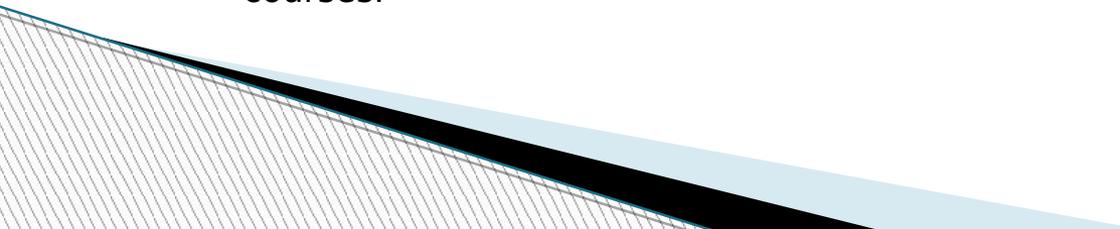
- ▶ Faculty describe their satisfaction with the experience of teaching in FIGs and how the clustering of courses, when paired with faculty interaction, becomes conducive to fostering learning and a sense of community among first year students.

In Fall 2008 a survey of student satisfaction is put together to be conducted in Spring of 2009. Director will also collect data from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

# Faculty Responses to FIGs

- ▶ The FIG program in my experience works best when all the students in all of the classes are a part of the FIG, which means that FIGs with three and four courses included tend to be somewhat less effective. When the FIG students become a cohort-within-a-cohort, I have noticed that they tend to be less engaged than when they are the whole class. I think paired-course FIGs, rather than three- and four-course clusters, are a much stronger arrangement, because it allows for greater integration of the courses.
- ▶ It gives the first-year student a support system and group from the very start of their college careers. If taken advantage of, this "network" supplies them with incredible resources to help them succeed as a college student.
- ▶ The best aspect of a FIG is the opportunity for instructors to coordinate curricula, assignments, out-of-class activities, student progress, etc.
- ▶ Working together with other faculty!
- ▶ Students get to know one another well. I have the time to spend on skill development--using the library, writing, public speaking. Since all students are in their first year, I can spend time on basics without seniors complaining. Everyone is at the same level of maturity.
- ▶ Students make lasting connections that helps them establish social networks necessary for success outside of the classroom.
- ▶ Students feel more comfortable speaking up in class because they know the other students so well.
- ▶ Students naturally fall into support groups with their classmates. This helps with homework and general transition to college.
- ▶ Some faculty do not interact with the other faculty to coordinate material to truly make it a FIG instead of just paired courses.
- ▶ Some students simply aren't motivated or do not manifest a serious commitment to academics. No matter how great the FIG program is, I wonder how much it can assist students like this.

# Spring 2009 Student Assessment of Learning Communities

- ▶ **5 = Strongly Agree - this applies to me!**
  - ▶ **4 = Agree - this applies to me pretty well**
  - ▶ **3 = Uncertain/Neutral**
  - ▶ **2 = Disagree - this doesn't apply to me**
  - ▶ **1 = Strongly Disagree - definitely not me!**
- 
- ▶ \_\_\_ I feel more comfortable offering opinions in these FIG classes than in a non-linked class.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ I feel FIG courses created a stronger sense of academic community than taking un-linked courses.
  - ▶ --- I have participated in FIG activities outside the classroom.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ I feel more comfortable speaking to my FIG professors than to my professors in other non- linked classes.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ I feel FIG professors have provided me with more information about my academic progress than professors teaching in non-linked courses.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ I know other students' names in the FIG.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ I talk with other students in this FIG outside of class about course material.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ I ask other students in this FIG about assignments.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ My learning has been enriched by the projects in common among courses in my FIG.
  - ▶ \_\_\_ As a result of taking this FIG I think I'm better at seeing the connections among other courses.
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# Always Working Together to Bridge the Gap @ SUNY Potsdam!

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