

Using First-Year Seminars to Fulfill Core Curriculum Credit

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**26th Annual Conference on the
First-Year Experience
14 February 2010**

University of Colorado Denver

The University of Colorado Denver is an urban, research university located on the Auraria campus shared with Community College of Denver and Metropolitan State College of Denver.

- ⊗ 14,000 students
- ⊗ 9,000 undergraduate students
- ⊗ 1,100 Fall first-year freshmen students
- ⊗ 1,400 Fall transfer students, many from community colleges
- ⊗ history as both transfer-in and transfer-out institution
- ⊗ common general education 'core' for all undergraduates

UC Denver Dynamic Nature

- ⊗ only 35 years as stand alone campus in CU system
- ⊗ historically, a commuter school with few traditional freshmen students
- ⊗ 2004 consolidation with Health Sciences Center
- ⊗ 2006 first residence hall – 30% of FYS
- ⊗ strong 15-yr enrollment growth, centered on first-year students – from 220 to 1,100 per Fall semester
- ⊗ strong minority student enrollment – now 35-40% of entering first-year students
- ⊗ NSSE data: high % employed off-campus and high % care for dependent children or parents

First-Year Experiences

In the 1990s, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences developed a required freshmen seminar program.

In 2004, the Quality Undergraduate Education (QUE) initiative recommended a new:

- ⊗ general education core curriculum
- ⊗ campus-wide honors program
- ⊗ first-year experience that included a first-year seminar required for all students (incl. transfer).

Original FYS Objectives (2005)

- encourage a student's choice to attend UC Denver
- serve as a foundation for both new freshmen and new transfer students
- set the standard of academic expectations and rigor for undergraduates on the Downtown Denver Campus
- provide first-year students an introduction to the university community within the downtown Denver area
- stimulate intellectual dialogue through academic themes that demonstrates the role and vision of UC Denver within Colorado, the west and the world
- provide faculty with the opportunity to be engaged and contribute to the first semester of an undergraduate student's academic career

Economic & Political Realities

Early modifications to the original QUE recommendations included:

- ⊗ new freshmen only, exclude transfer students – allowed for common curriculum, and less expensive
- ⊗ optional, not required – avoided faculty governance vote in each school/college, and less expensive to initiate
- ⊗ focus on retention and student success – assessments required for permanent budget

Modified FYS Objectives (2007)

- ⊗ assist FY students' transition to college: personally, academically, socially, and culturally
- ⊗ develop a sense of community and engage FY students in the intellectual, cultural and social activities of university life
- ⊗ develop an appreciation of diversity
- ⊗ explore personal goals – identify what FY students want from their education in majors and careers, and increase student responsibility in academic and personal lives
- ⊗ enhance critical thinking, writing and academic skills that assist students in their transition from high school to college
- ⊗ provide FY students the opportunity to interact with and gain support from other students, faculty and staff at the University

Overall FYS Goals (2009)

- ⊗ in conjunction with Early Alert, improve FYS student persistence and academic success
- ⊗ integrate with UC Denver FYE programs – orientation, academic advising, registration, learning communities, supplemental instruction, etc.
- ⊗ utilize faculty to maintain academic rigor and provide oversight
- ⊗ reach 50% of new freshmen within five years
- ⊗ permanent FYS funding within 3 years
- ⊗ develop expanded academic skills with assistance student support offices

First-Year Seminar Format

UC Denver designed FYS courses to assist students transitioning from high school, improve student persistence, and boost student self-confidence.

- ⊗ 3-credit hours, content driven, transferable credit
- ⊗ broad FYS content from art to environment to education
- ⊗ integrated academic skills through workshops, engagement activities and service learning projects
- ⊗ campus-wide, encouraged for students in all colleges
- ⊗ content emphasizes critical thinking and writing
- ⊗ taught by faculty (both tenure-track and instructors)
- ⊗ class size limited to 24 incoming students

Advisor Promotion of FYS

Prior to receiving core curriculum credit, there was mixed support from college advisors for FYS courses.

- ⊗ no room in curriculum for FYS elective – music, sciences, and engineering
- ⊗ reluctance to add elective course and push a student over 120-hr limit
- ⊗ FYS course oriented toward student's major field was working

FYS as Core Credit

Introduced to improve advisor support, the FYS as a general education, core curriculum, course was perceived to have multiple advantages:

- ⊗ increased promotion by academic advisors
- ⊗ core credit rather than elective credit for increased student selection
- ⊗ enhanced perceptions of academic rigor among non-participating faculty
- ⊗ informal list for core credit

UC Denver Core Curriculum

The UC Denver Core is influenced by the CCHE guaranteed transfer of general education courses.

- ⊗ Intellectual Competency 9-10 hours
 - English composition
 - mathematics
- ⊗ Knowledge Areas 19-20 hours
 - arts and humanities
 - social and behavioral sciences
 - biological and physical sciences
- ⊗ Cultural Diversity 3 hours
- ⊗ International Perspectives 3 hours

Core Curriculum Approval

The UC Denver Core Curriculum Oversight Committee must approve each FYS course.

- ⊗ Knowledge Areas – arts, humanities, behavioral science, social science, biological/physical sciences
- ⊗ English, Mathematics, Cultural Diversity, and International Perspectives areas are ineligible.
- ⊗ strong learning objectives for discipline content, writing and critical thinking
- ⊗ required assessment of learning objectives
- ⊗ pilot program with on-going assessment

FYS Enrollment

Fall	Sections	FYS Enrollment	Average Section	% FY Students
2006	7	99	14.1	10.4
2007	11	190	17.3	17.2
2008*	14	289	20.6	26.1
2009*	15	358	23.9	32.7

* FYS courses qualified for core curriculum

FYS Recruiting

Fall and Spring Open House events – parent interest is stronger than that of student

46% summer advising session

42% new student orientation

5% student recommendation

4% letter to admitted student and/or parents

3% other initial information

Student Selection of FYS Course

Fall 2009 FYS survey results based on a 82% response rate.

- 24.9% core credit
- 23.5% interest in academic content
- 14.9% academic support and skill development
- 13.1% other – advisor recommendation, follow another student, etc.
- 12.5% FYS course fit schedule
- 7.8% social contacts
- 3.6% faculty mentoring

Student Self-Assessment

Fall 2009 FYS assessment results using a 5-point or percentage of respondents scale.

- 3.71 student engagement – in/out of class
- 3.62 development of critical thinking
- 3.50 integration of content with academic skills
- 3.41 development of writing skills
- 72% recommend FYS to incoming students
- 86% self-reported first-year persistence
- 24% transfer to another institution for degree

FYS Student Comments

Fall 2009 FYS student comments.

- ⊗ Writing emphasis helped with English composition.
- ⊗ Content was not interesting, not related to major.
- ⊗ Content was very interesting, may change major.
- ⊗ Academic content integrated with academic skills content didn't work well.
- ⊗ Time commitment for workshops, service learning and academic skills was excessive.
- ⊗ Academic skills and faculty mentoring were more helpful than academic content.

FYS Faculty Comments

FYS faculty comments after switch to using FYS courses for core credit.

- ⊗ Restructured content to emphasize critical thinking, writing and research.
- ⊗ Student motivation not always in line with FYS goals.
- ⊗ Increase in non-majors broadened content discussions.
- ⊗ Restructured content to accommodate non-majors.
- ⊗ Reduced content breadth and increased content depth to accommodate academic skills and critical thinking.

Student Advisor Comments

Academic advisors' comments after switch to using FYS courses for core credit.

- ⊗ Core credit increases ability to 'sell' FYS course to students and parents during orientation.
- ⊗ Moving to core credit is very helpful in assisting students to meet graduation requirements.
- ⊗ Students are universally advised to take a core course their first semester, and now FYS is an option.
- ⊗ FYS helps with major and career exploration.
- ⊗ FYS courses are a huge 'hit' when given core credit.

FYS Director Assessment

The two FYS Directors' comments after switch to using FYS courses for core credit.

- ⊗ Core review process requires instructor identity and syllabus 4-6 months before classes start.
- ⊗ Core credit justifies academic rigor, especially on critical thinking and writing.
- ⊗ Advisor enthusiasm for FYS is markedly increased.
- ⊗ Enrollment pressure is for more FYS courses.
- ⊗ Individual FYS faculty don't equally support core, content and skills integration.

Conclusions

Based on a two-year experiment of using the FYS courses to satisfy general education core.

- ⊗ Core credit for FYS courses requires faculty-taught, content-driven FYS formats.
- ⊗ Core credit increases faculty governance oversight.
- ⊗ Core credit increases administrative effort and time before classes start.
- ⊗ Advisor, student and faculty support at UC Denver is strong after change to core credit.
- ⊗ Formal assessment remains for impact on learning objectives, quality control, and retention.