

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: USING STUDENT NARRATIVES TO UNDERSTAND WHAT MATTERS MOST IN FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS

Session CR 87

Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience
Denver, CO ♦ February 14, 2010

One-Minute Reflection

Please respond to the following:

1. What do you think is or are the aspects of your first-year seminar that students perceive to have the greatest impact?
2. What aspects do you think students perceive as having the least impact?
3. How do you gather this information?
4. How do you use this information?

Student Perceptions of First-Year Seminars¹

- The first-year seminar helped facilitate the transition to college because it provided an opportunity to learn about campus resources and customs.
- Students gained academic confidence from participation in a first-year seminar.
- Through the course, students developed a sense of trust for their first-year seminar instructor.
- Students developed friendships with peers in the first-year seminar.

"Impactful" Aspects of the First-Year Seminars



High Impact

- In-class interactions and activities
- Instructors and opportunities to connect with peers
- Course content

Low Impact

- Out-of-class presentations
- Course assignments/content
- College success skill info.



What Impacts Students in Your First-Year Seminar? Find out through:

- Student Interviews (*example*)
- One-Minute Papers (*example*)
- Mid-Course Evaluations (*example*)
- Conferences with Students

Strategies for Instructors (see separate handout for examples)

- Examine assignments and activities in the context of the course goals and purpose.
- Describe the significance or role of activities and assignments up front.
- Involve your students in creating the questions that shape class discussions.
- Debrief to help students see the connection between aspects of the course and the larger goals and purpose.

References

- Bain, K., & Zimmerman, J. (2009). Understanding great teaching. *Peer Review*, 11(2), 9-12.
- Erickson, B. L., Peters, C. B., & Strommer, D. W. (2006). *Teaching first-year college students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Foote, S. M. (2009). High impact, high engagement: Designing first-year seminar activities to promote learning and application. *E-Source for College Transitions*, 7(1).
- Saroyan, A., & Amundsen, C. (Eds.). (2004). *Rethinking teaching in higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

¹ Foote, S. M. (2009). *A multi-campus study of the perceived effects of first-year seminars on the experience of students in their first semester of college*. Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Sample Interview Protocol (Additional Questions for Student Interviews)²

I. Student Precollege Characteristics & Experiences

Sociodemographic traits, abilities, HS curriculum, and other experiences

- What is your major?
- Do you live on campus or off campus?
- Where are you from?
- Why did you choose to attend this institution? Was it your first choice? Are you still happy with your decision to come here?
- At what point in life did you know you would attend college?
- Did your parents go to college? Do you have any siblings in college? Older friends? Other relatives? Did their experiences impact your perceptions of college? College choice, major, etc.?

II. Individual Student Experiences

A. Classroom Experiences

- Why did you decide to take the course?
- How did you first find out about the course?
- Before taking the first-year seminar what did you hope to gain from taking this course?
- How did you choose your section? What influenced your decision to take this section?
- Tell me about your experiences with the course. Which of the following have been most useful so far?
 - a. in-class activities?; b. textbook(s)?; c. assignments?; d. in-class interactions?;
 - e. out-of-class interactions with your instructor(s) or peers?

B. Out-of-Class Experiences

- How has your first semester of college been so far?
- How has college life lived up to your expectations?
- How often do you interact with your first-year seminar instructor outside of class? How did you interact (e.g., visit them during office hours, email, etc.)?
- During these out-of-class interactions, what do you talk with your instructor about?
- Have you used anything you learned in the first-year seminar? If you did, what have you used?
- What has been the most difficult aspect/biggest challenge of your college experience?
- At this point in the semester, what would you tell other students about the first-year seminar?
- What were your expectations of this course? Has the course fulfilled your expectations so far?
- In retrospect, would you choose to take the first-year seminar again? Why or why not?

C. Curricular Experiences

- What have you done so far in the course?
- What has been the most interesting? Least interesting?
- What has been most helpful? Least helpful? (Please give examples).
- What do you think you have learned so far in the first-year seminar?
- What grade are you currently earning in the course? How does this compare to the grades you are earning in your other courses this semester?
- From your perspective, what do you think is the purpose of this course?

For more information, contact:

Stephanie M. Foote, Ph.D.

Director, Academic Success Center and First-Year Experience

University of South Carolina Aiken

☎803.641.3321 | ✉stephanief@usca.edu

² Interview protocol developed and organized with respect to research questions and the College Experience Model described in Reason, R. D., Terenzini, P. T., & Domingo, R. J. (2006). First things first: Developing academic competence in the first year of college. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(2), 149-175.