

Then What? Extending the First-Year Experience Across the Undergraduate Curriculum

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This session will identify components of the First-Year Experience at Westminster College and identify ways this experience extends throughout the four-year curriculum.

The First-Year Experience at Westminster

Inquiry 111: An Introduction to the Liberal Arts: A full, four-credit course taken by all entering students (and sophomore transfer students). Inquiry introduces students to the philosophy and practice of a liberal arts education. Students evaluate traditional and contemporary discussion of liberal education, examine several “ways of knowing” and the liberal arts as practiced at Westminster, and investigate contemporary issues from multiple disciplinary and cultural perspectives. Common readings and assignments are used in all course sections.

The Next Chapter: All entering students have a summer reading in common. At present, the text is *The Ghost Map*, by Stephen Johnson. Students write an essay on this text and engage in peer-mentored discussion during the fall orientation period, called **Fresh Start**. Orientation and discussion groups are organized by Inquiry section, so that students come to know each other—and engage in academic work—prior meeting their course faculty and beginning the semester.

Library Instruction: Early in the fall semester, Westminster’s library faculty take over each section of Inquiry for an entire week. Students meet in the library and receive guidance completing a researched assignment that exposes them to information resources. Inquiry faculty must then follow this instruction with a second research assignment that requires students to use the skills they have learned during the week.

Co-Curricular Events: Throughout the semester, each student must attend at least three approved campus events—and reflect on these events in writing for their section of Inquiry.

Wellness: In addition to their Inquiry course, all fall semester students are enrolled in two other courses in common. One of these is a one-credit course in wellness, taught by faculty and staff in physical education.

Writing/Oral Communications: The other common course is either Writing or Speech. Each Inquiry group is designated as either a “W” section, with all students taking writing, or an “S” section, with all students taking speech. This commonality adds to the shared experience among students & allows faculty to design their sections in ways that coordinate with another course the students are taking.

The First-Year Experience Extended

Spring Course in Communications: When students take the second communications course in the SPRING semester, after they have had Inquiry, their faculty know two of the courses each student has already had and are able to build on the readings and assignments done in the fall semester. Communications faculty include assignments that ask students explicitly to reference work done in Inquiry.

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Extending the First-Year Experience Across the Undergraduate Curriculum

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(The First-Year Experience *Extended*)

Cluster Courses: At Westminster, the next answer to the title question, “And then what,” is the cluster requirement. A Cluster is a pair of courses from two different disciplines that are collaboratively designed and team-taught, to the same group of students. Students must have sophomore standing to take a cluster. Clusters intentionally build on the First-Year Experience by 1) creating an intellectual community engaged in studying a shared topic by using the methods and concepts of more than one discipline; 2) evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of disciplinary inquiry; 3) communicating effectively, evaluating critically, and conducting thorough and efficient research.

Intellectual Perspectives: The Intellectual Perspective (IP) requirement also helps students extend their FY Experience. The IPs continue the focus on various Ways of Knowing initiated and introduced in Inquiry. The seven IP areas replace a more traditional distribution model in that each area is defined by a set of outcomes rather than linked to a particular discipline. Courses from multiple disciplines may fulfill a particular area, provided they address the specified outcomes in their design.

Capstone: Whereas the FY Experience begins with Inquiry, a course not aligned with any particular discipline, the entire General Education Program culminates in the Capstone, which at Westminster is the final course in a given major. Capstone is linked to Inquiry by its emphasis on research and by its intensive investigation into the strengths and limitations of disciplinary inquiry.

Undergraduate Research: The capstone requirement has helped to extend the FY Experience even more broadly by creating the possibility—and the rationale—for a much more robust emphasis on Undergraduate Research. This emphasis on has created opportunities to extend the FY Experience in ways that, in turn, have a direct impact on Inquiry and other features of the FY Experience itself.

FY Research Prize: One example of such extension & reinforcement is the First-Year Research Prize. This is an opportunity for first-year students to develop one of their research assignments and present their work at the Poster Presentation session of Westminster’s annual Undergraduate Research and Arts Conference. Students are made aware of this contest at the start of the fall semester through an announcement included in their Inquiry Readers. The conference has grown steadily, with over 200 students involved this past year.

Researching the First Year Student: Undergraduate Research has also taken place on the first-year students themselves. Capstone students in Psychology and Sociology have frequently asked for access to Inquiry groups as populations for survey questionnaires and researched study.

Faculty Development: This final feature does not involve students directly but is nevertheless an important example of extending the FY Experience in ways that ultimately benefit students. The FY Program has enhanced Faculty Development by nurturing faculty **scholarship** and fostering **collaboration**. Scholarship has taken several forms and emerged from all components of the curriculum, most notably the cluster courses. Faculty **collaboration** has also increased. In seeking to foster a vibrant intellectual community for students, Westminster has also established many more opportunities for faculty to interact with one another.