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2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

In October 2009, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition undertook its eighth triennial national survey of first-year seminar programming in American higher education. The purpose of the study was to gather information about first-year seminars in American higher education.

Chief Academic Officers, Chief Executive Officers, or Chief Student Affairs Officers at accredited colleges and universities with undergraduate and lower divisions were e-mailed a link to the web-based survey. A total of 2,519 institutions received invitations to participate and 1,019 responded to the survey.

- » 2,519 survey invitations distributed
- » 1,019 surveys completed (40% response rate)
- » 890 institutions reported that they offered a first-year seminar

Characteristics of Responding Institutions with First-Year Seminars

	Percent of responding institutions with first-year seminars	National percentage
<i>Institutional type (n=890)</i>		
Two-year	26.4	38.3
Four-year	73.6	61.7
<i>Institutional affiliation (n=890)</i>		
Private	47.9	62.0
Public	52.1	38.0
<i>First-year class size (n=890)</i>		
500 or less	34.3	49.1
501 - 1,000	23.6	22.4
1,001 - 2,000	19.9	12.9
2,001 - 3,000	8.3	6.0
3,001 - 4,000	6.1	3.0
4,001+	7.9	3.1
<i>Institutional selectivity</i>		
Two-year college	26.6	39.7
Special focus institution	5.2	18.5
Inclusive	13.5	18.8
Selective	32.4	15.7
More selective	15.1	7.3

Notes: Figures for the national percentages are from The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System at <http://nces.edu.gov/IPEDS> and The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education at <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org>.

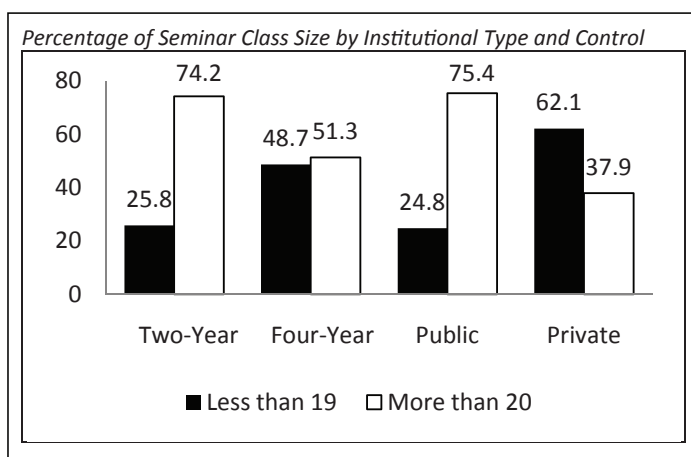
First-Year Seminar Type

Of the 890 institutions that reported offering a first-year seminar, over forty percent (41.1%) reported extended orientation seminar as the primary first-year seminar type. Academic seminar with uniform academic content was reported as the primary first-year seminar by 16.1% institutions, followed by academic seminar on various topics (15.4%), hybrid (15.3%), basic study skill seminar (4.9%), pre-professional or discipline-linked (3.7%), and other (3.5%).

Student Populations, Special Sections, & Class Size

Over fourteen percent (14.1%) of all institutions reported requiring academically under-prepared students to take a first-year seminar. When compared by institutional type, 18.3% of two-year institutions reported requiring academically underprepared students to take a seminar, whereas 13.0% of four-year institutions required the same population. A larger difference occurred when compared by institutional control, with 19.0% of public institutions requiring academically underprepared students to take a seminar, and only 9.0% of private institutions requiring the same population.

Over half (57.1%) of the participating institutions reported offering at least one special section of the first-year seminar. Over twenty percent (21.3%) of two-year institutions reported offering a special section of the seminar for academically underprepared students, however 24.4% of four-year institutions reported offering a special section for honors students. Respondents from public institutions reported 25.9% offered special sections for students within learning communities, and over twenty percent (20.9%) of private institutions reported offering special sections for honors students.



Course Objectives & Seminar Topics

The three most reported objectives for first-year seminars were: 1. developing academic skills (54.6%), 2. developing a connection with the institution (50.2%), and 3. providing an orientation to various campus resources and services (47.6%).

Over forty percent (42.4%) of institutions reported campus resources as a seminar topic, followed by study skills (39.8%), and academic planning/advising (35.7%). Nearly sixty percent (59.6%) of two-year institutions reported study skills as a first-year seminar course topic, while over forty percent (40.6%) of four-year institutions reported critical thinking as a course topic. Campus resources was listed as a course topic for over half of public institutions that responded (51.7%), and over forty percent (43.2%) of private institutions reported critical thinking as a course topic.

Administrative Unit, Length of FYS, & Credit/Grading

Academic affairs was reported as the administrative unit for 37.0% of institutions, whereas 11.9% of institutions reported the first-year program office was the administrative unit for the first-year seminar.

Nearly seventy percent (67.8%) of institutions reported the length of the first-year seminar being one semester, followed by 12.6% reporting half a semester, 5.9% reporting one quarter, and 3.8% reporting one year, with 10.0% reporting other.

Over half (53.1%) of all institutions reported the first-year seminar counted for general education requirements, with 39.8% reporting the seminar counted for elective credit, followed by 9.7% reporting major requirements, and 9.4% reporting other credit. Seminars were reported by 80.5% of institutions to be letter graded, whereas only 13.0% reported the seminar to be a pass/fail course, and 4.0% reported that the seminar was not graded.

FYS Instructors: Compensation & Training

Instructor for seminar	Percentage
Tenure-track faculty	61.4
Full-time non-tenure track faculty	54.4
Student affairs professionals	48.2
Adjunct faculty	46.0
Other campus professionals	29.9
Graduate students	5.6
Undergraduate students	5.1

Note: Percentages will sum to more than 100 since respondents were allowed to mark more than one category.

Compensation for FYS Instructors varied with stipend being reported the most across all types of instructors. No compensation for FYS Instructors was reported at the second highest frequency, followed by other types of compensation: release time, professional development funds, and graduate student support.

Training for FYS Instructors was reported as offered by 76.1% of institutions and 50.1% of institutions reported requiring training for FYS Instructors. Length of training varied, with the most frequently reported length being less than a day (36.7%) followed by one day (21.7%), two days (11.5%), three days (5.1%), five days (3.1%), and four days (1.2%), with other being reported 20.7%.

Initiatives Associated with the FYS

Over half of survey respondents (52.9%) reported incorporating an online component into their FYS. Forty percent (40.3%) reported their FYS having a service-learning component, while 35.7% reported their FYS having a linked courses/learning community component, and over thirty percent (31.0%) reported incorporating a common reading program.

Assessment of First-Year Seminars

Over half of survey respondents (56.5%) reported formally assessing or evaluating the FYS, however one-third of survey respondents reported no formal assessment or evaluation and nearly 10% reported not knowing if formal assessment or evaluation existed for their institutions.

Eighty-four percent of survey respondents who reported having an assessment or evaluation for the first-year seminar reported using a locally developed survey instrument. Also, over half (52.4%) of these survey respondents reported using a national survey. Of these national surveys used, the National Survey of Student Engagement was most frequently reported by survey respondents (73.8%), followed by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey (35.3%).

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As mentioned earlier, the three top objectives reported by survey respondents for first-year seminars were: 1. developing academic skills (54.6%), 2. developing a connection with the institution (50.2%), and 3. providing an orientation to various campus resources and services (47.6%). Survey respondents were also asked to report the outcomes being measured by assessment initiatives on their campus. The top three outcomes reported by survey respondents were: 1. persistence to sophomore year (73.7%), 2. satisfaction with faculty (70.9%), and 3. satisfaction with institution (65.3%). As stated, “While not conclusive evidence, the statistics generated by the 2009 national survey suggest institutional over-reliance upon easily acquired assessment outcomes such as retention rates and satisfaction measures regardless of their alignment with stated goals of the seminar.”

<i>First-Year Seminar Assessment Methods (n = 475)</i>	
	Percent
<i>Quantitative Assessment Strategies</i>	
Student course evaluation	94.9
Survey instrument	75.3
Analysis of institutional data	75.3
<i>Qualitative Assessment Strategies</i>	
Focus groups with instructors	51.3
Individual interviews with instructors	45.6
Focus groups with students	42.6
Individual interviews with students	30.2

Note: Percentages will sum to more than 100 since respondents were allowed to mark more than one category.

Survey respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses related to the findings of assessment or evaluation initiatives, which were then coded by themes. The five most frequently reported findings were: 1. Improved persistence/retention, 2. recommendations and action items for course improvement, 3. student satisfaction with course/useful course overall, 4. increased grade point average/academic performance, 5. development of academic abilities, skills, and engagement.

Conclusion

These comparative data allow institutions to re-assess and evaluate their current understanding of how the first-year seminar is defined and utilized at the national level, which in turn can be used to inform and guide. Each institution uniquely defines and administers its seminar based on the purpose it serves within the context of the goals and missions of the institution. In other words, there is no perfect module for the first-year seminar.

For more on the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, please visit www.sc.edu/fye.