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2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

Between November 2012 and January 2013, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition undertook its ninth triennial National Survey of First-Year Seminars (NSFYS) 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 3,753 institutions received invitations to participate and 896 responded to the survey

- 3,753 survey invitations distributed
- 896 surveys completed (24% response rate)
- 804 institutions (89.7%) reported that they offered a first-year seminar

“The three most frequently reported objectives for first-year seminars were: (a) develop a connection with the institution, (b) provide orientation to campus resources and services, and (c) develop academic skills.”

Characteristics of Responding Institutions with First-Year Seminars

	Percent of NSFYS Sample with First-year Seminars (n=804)	National Percentage
<i>Institutional type</i>		
Two-year	25.6	38.3
Four-year	74.4	61.7
<i>Institutional control</i>		
Private	45.5	62.0
Public	54.5	38.0
<i>First-year class size</i>		
500 or less	29.5	57.5
501 - 1,000	22.6	20.6
1,001 - 2,000	19.4	13.3
2,001 -4,000	16.4	6.4
4,001+	12.0	2.2

Note: 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 804 institutions that reported offering a first-year seminar, nearly forty percent reported extended orientation seminar as the first-year seminar type with the highest enrollment of students. Academic seminar on various topics was reported as the next most frequent primary first-year seminar, followed in order of decreasing prevalence by academic seminar with uniform academic content, hybrid, basic study skill seminar, pre-professional or discipline-linked, and other. When combined, the two academic seminars (various topics and uniform content) were nearly as prevalent as the extended orientation seminar.

Student Characteristics: Student Populations, Special Sections

Nearly six in 10 institutions reported requiring more than 90% of their entering students to take a first-year seminar. When broken down by institutional type, a quarter of two-year institutions reported requiring 90% or more of first-year students to enroll in the course, compared to two thirds of four-year institutions. A larger difference occurred when

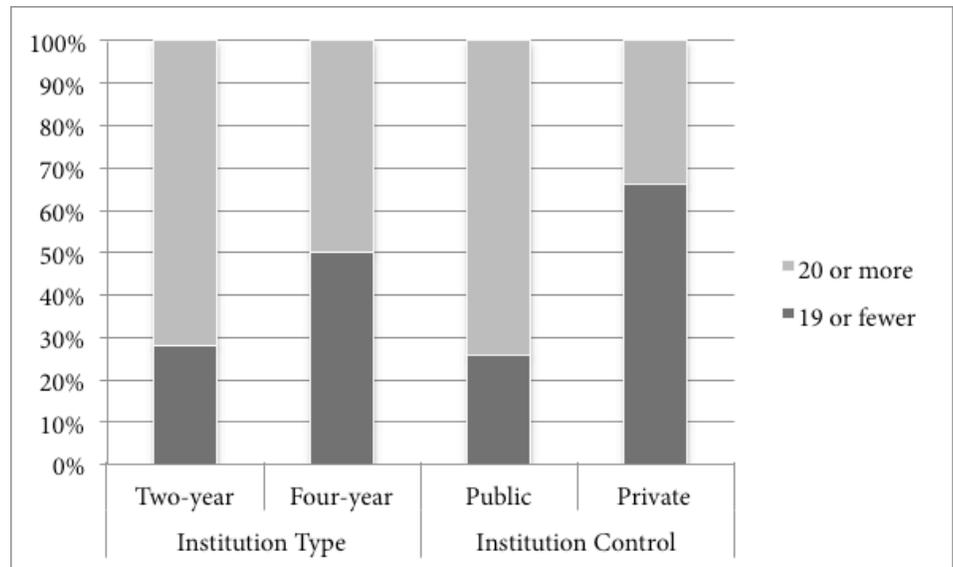
compared by institutional control, with one third of public institutions requiring 90% or more of entering first-year students to take a seminar, and more than 80 percent of private institutions requiring the same proportion.

The three most frequently reported categories of students who were required to take the first-year seminar were (a) academically underprepared students, (b) students within specific majors, and (c) students enrolled in developmental or remedial courses. At public and two-year institutions, which are less likely to require all students to enroll in first-year seminars, students specifically targeted to enroll in first-year seminar are predominantly those students who might not be considered college-ready, such as those students who have been deemed academically underprepared, enrolled in developmental courses, or admitted provisionally. At public institutions in particular, students participating in student support programs such as TRIO and learning communities are more likely to be required to enroll in first-year seminar.

A majority of participating institutions reported offering at least one special section of the first-year seminar. Nearly one in six two-year institutions reported offering a special section of the seminar for academically underprepared students. However, one in four of four-year institutions reported offering a special section for honors students. Respondents from public institutions most frequently reported offering special sections for students within learning communities, and more than a quarter of private institutions reported offering special sections for honors students.

Course Characteristics: Class Size, Credit, and Contact Hours

Percentage of Seminar Class Size by Institutional Type, Control, and Number of Entering First-Year Students (n = 783)



Over half of all institutions reported the first-year seminar counted for general education requirements, with approximately 40 percent reporting the seminar counted for elective credit. Roughly 10 percent of institutions reported the course fulfilled a requirement for the students' major. Seminars were reported by just under 90 percent of institutions to be letter graded, whereas only one in 10 reported the seminar to be a pass/fail course. Only one percent of participating institutions reported that the seminar was not graded.

Three in 10 responding institutions report that the course consists of one contact hour per week. An additional 20 percent hold class for two hours and another 40 percent for three hours each week. Combined, over 90 percent of colleges and universities indicated that the seminar met for three or fewer hours per week.

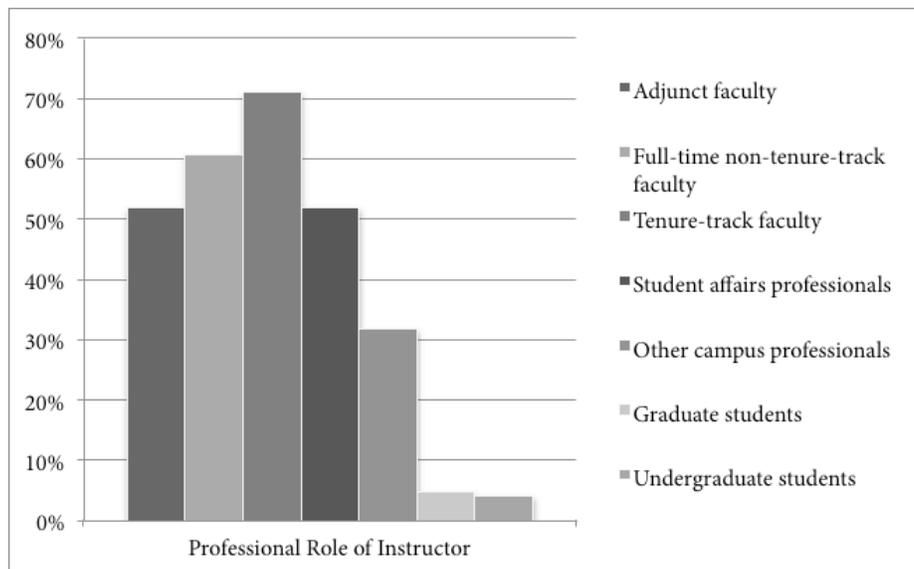
“Over 90% of survey respondents reported intentionally connecting at least one high-impact practice (HIP) into their first-year seminar.”

Course Objectives & Seminar Topics

The three most frequently reported objectives for first-year seminars were: (a) develop a connection with the institution, (b) provide orientation to campus resources and services, and (c) develop academic skills. Over one third of institutions reported campus resources as a seminar topic, followed by academic planning/advising, and critical thinking. Half of two-year institutions reported study skills as a first-year seminar course topic, while nearly forty percent of four-year institutions reported critical thinking as a course topic. Campus resources was listed as a course topic for nearly half of public institutions that responded, and over forty percent of private institutions reported critical thinking as a course topic.

Instruction of the Course

Professional Role of Instructor of First-Year Seminar (n = 779)



High-Impact Practices Connected to the FYS

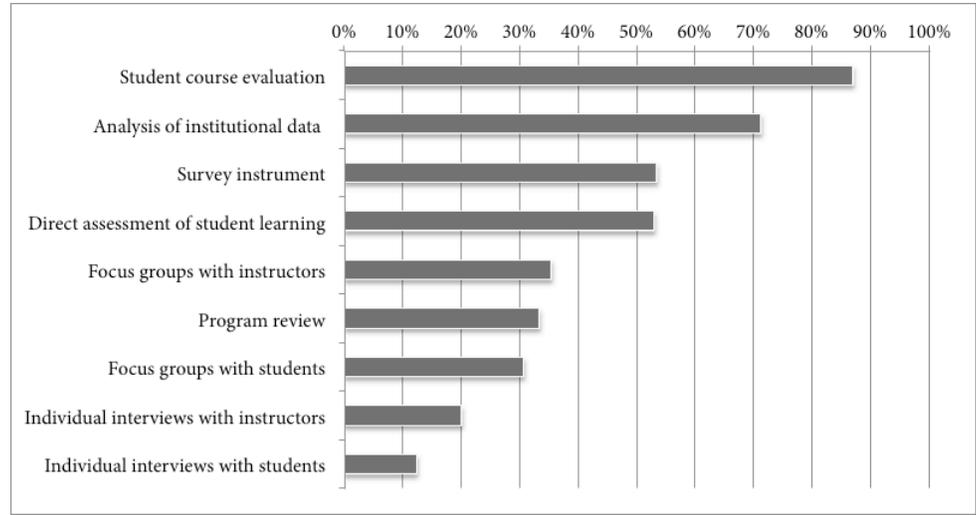
Over 90% of survey respondents reported intentionally connecting at least one high-impact practice (HIP) into their first-year seminar. More than two thirds of responding institutions reported including collaborative assignments and more than half included diversity and global learning in their FYS. In addition, a third of campuses indicated that their FYS included a service-learning component, while another third reported their FYS was connected to a learning community. Nearly forty percent reported incorporating a common reading program.

Four-year institutions were more likely to report intentionally including five of the seven HIPs in the first-year seminar: (a) common reading experiences, (b) service-learning, (c) writing-intensive projects, (d) diversity and global learning, and (e) undergraduate research. The remaining two approaches, collaborative assignments and learning communities were offered at roughly the same percentage of four- and two-year institutions. When the specific HIPs are broken down by institutional control, private institutions were statistically more likely to report including collaborative assignments and projects and learning communities in the first-year seminar than public institutions. Public institutions, on the other hand, were statistically more likely to report including common reading experience, writing-intensive projects, and service-learning. The educational activities associated with undergraduate research and diversity and global learning were offered on public and private campuses at approximately the same rate.

Assessment

Nearly six in 10 survey respondents reported formally assessing or evaluating the first-year seminar. However, one third of survey respondents reported no formal assessment or evaluation and just fewer than 10 percent reported not knowing if formal assessment or evaluation had been conducted for their institutions. Student course evaluations were identified most frequently as the type of assessment followed by the use of institutional data and employing a survey instrument to gather assessment data.

Method Used to Conduct Assessment of First-Year Seminar (n = 444)



As mentioned earlier, the three top objectives reported by survey respondents for first-year seminars were: (a) develop a connection with the institution, (b) provide orientation to campus resources and services, and (c) develop academic skills. 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: (a) satisfaction with the seminar, (b) achievement of learning or course outcomes, and (c) persistence to the second year. While these data suggest institutional reliance upon easily acquired assessment outcomes such as retention rates and satisfaction measures, nearly seven colleges and universities in 10 focused on measuring student achievement of course learning outcomes.

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 program creation and improvement. Each institution uniquely defines and administers its seminar based on the purpose it serves within the context of the goals and mission of the institution. In other words, there is no perfect model for the first-year seminar.


 For more on the 2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, please visit www.sc.edu/fye. A full report of the findings is available at <http://www.nrcpubs.com/p/120/national-survey-of-first-year-seminars>