Examining First-Year Seminars as a High-Impact Practice

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Why Examine First-Year Seminars?
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“FYS participation has statistically significant and substantial positive effects on a student’s successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college.”

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005
High-Impact Educational Practices

First-Year Seminars and Experiences
Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies.

First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research.

Common Intellectual Experiences
The older idea of a "core curriculum" has evolved into a variety of modern forms, such as a set of required common courses or a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community (see below). These programs often combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and cocurricular options for students.

Learning Communities
The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with "big questions" that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link "liberal arts" and "professional courses"; others feature service learning.

Writing-Intensive Courses
These courses emphasize writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum, including final-year projects. Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice "across the curriculum" has led to parallel efforts in such areas as quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and, on some campuses, ethical inquiry.

Collaborative Assignments and Projects
Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

Undergraduate Research
Many colleges and universities are now providing research experiences for students in all disciplines. Undergraduate research, however, has been most prominently used in science disciplines. With strong support from the National Science Foundation and the research community, scientists are reshaping their courses to connect key concepts and questions with student's early and active involvement in systematic investigation and research. The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.

Diversity/Global Learning
Many colleges and universities now emphasize courses and programs that help students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own. These studies—which may address U.S. diversity, world cultures, or both—often explore "difficult differences" such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power. Frequently, intercultural studies are augmented by experiential learning in the community and/or by study abroad.

Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
In these programs, field-based "experiential" work with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

Internships
Internships are another increasingly common form of experiential learning. The idea is to provide students with direct experience in a work setting—usually related to their career interests—and to give them the benefit of supervision and coaching from professionals in the field. If the internship is taken for course credit, students complete a project or paper that is approved by a faculty member.

Capstone Courses and Projects
Whether they're called "senior capstones" or some other name, these culminating experiences require students nearing the end of their college years to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they've learned. The project might be a research paper, a performance, a portfolio of "best work," or an exhibit of artwork. Capstones are offered both in departmental programs and, increasingly, in general education as well.

LEAP

Association of American Colleges and Universities
FYS as High-Impact Practice

First-Year Seminars and Experiences

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High-Impact Educational Practices

First-Year Seminars and Experiences
Many schools now have a curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring groups of students together with faculty or staff members to engage in high-quality first-year experiences that focus on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual, practical, and personal competencies. First-year seminars also involve students with current-edge questions, scholarly work, and faculty members’ own research.

Common Intellectual Experiences
The older idea was "core" curricula that evolved into a variety of modern forms, such as set of required common courses or a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community (or co-op). These programs often combine breadth with depth—e.g. technology and society, global and independent—with a variety of curricular and cocurricular options for students.

Learning Communities
The keys for learning communities are the exchange of integration of learning across courses and to involve students with "big questions" that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professor. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or come from reading through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link "literary" and "professional" courses; others feature service learning.

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“While promising, they are not a panacea. Only when they are implemented well and continually evaluated...will we realize their considerable potential.”

Kuh in Brownell & Swaner, 2010
What does it mean to be HIP?

The EVOLUTION of the HIPSTER
2010 – 2015

Photos by Maddy Booth
Models: Jess Smith & Ryan Vogel
Produced by Sarah Lawrence and Brittany Joyce

The Creative Free Vegan
DIY trends are up and hip.
Vegetarian and funny.
Fits in the world that
doesn’t want to judge.

The Colorful Crafter
DIY trends are up and hip.
Vegetarian and funny.
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The Chic Traveler
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The Festival Flower Girl
DIY trends are up and hip.
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The Lumbersexual
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The Coffee Shop Sophisticate
DIY trends are up and hip.
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www.sc.edu/fye
Characteristics of HIPs

- Creates an investment of time and energy
- Includes interaction with faculty and peers about substantive matters
- Demands reflection and integrated learning
- Real-world applications
- High expectations
- Includes frequent feedback
- Exposure to diverse perspectives
- Accountability
Criteria for FYS as HIP

- Quality of Effort
- Interpersonal Interactions
- Pedagogical Approaches
Quality of Effort

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Pedagogical Approaches

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• **Real-world applications**
• High expectations
• **Includes frequent feedback**
• Exposure to diverse perspectives
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2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

- 3,753 institutions were invited to participate
  - 4 waves: CAO, CEO, CSAO, 2009 participants
  - Administered from Nov., 2012-Jan., 2013
- 896 campuses responded (23.9% response rate)
- **804** (89.7% of sample) indicated that they had one or more FYS
- **Limitation**: Not the most recent data set
Criteria for FYS as HIP

- Quality of Effort
- Interpersonal Interactions
- Pedagogical Approaches
Investment of Time & Effort

SUCCESS IS DEPENDENT ON EFFORT
Investment of Time and Effort

**STRUCTURE (Quantity)**

- Three-quarters of FYS are one term in duration
- Credit hours
  - 45% of FYS carry three credit hours
  - 44% of FYS carry one credit hour
- 48% report 3+ classroom contact hours a week
Investment of Time and Effort

ENGAGING PEDAGOGY (Quality)

• A variety of teaching methods
• Meaningful discussion of homework
• Challenging assignments
• Productive use of class time
• Encouragement for students to speak in class and work together
Performance Expectations Set at Appropriately High Levels
Course Cues for High Expectations

• Are duration, credit, & contact hours for FYS the same as other first-year courses? Not always.

• Application of credit hours
  – GE: 59%
  – Elective: 38%
  – Major requirements: 9%
  – No credit: 6%

• Grading
  – Letter grade: 84%
  – Pass/fail: 12%
Criteria for FYS as HIP

- Quality of Effort
- Interpersonal Interactions
- Pedagogical Approaches

HIPs
Interactions with Faculty

Two foundational conditions are necessary for FYS to even have the possibility of fulfilling this tenet of HIP:

1. Faculty are, in fact, serving as instructors.

2. Course enrollment is small enough to afford the ratio of students to faculty that is optimal for substantive interaction.
## First-Year Seminar Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenure-track faculty</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT non-tenure-track faculty</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student affairs professionals</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct faculty</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other campus professionals</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate students</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Types</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other campus professionals</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate students</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over 60% of institutions intentionally place at least some first-year students in sections taught by their academic advisors.

*(Young & Hopp, 2014)*
Interactions with Faculty

• 44% of FYS limit enrollment to < 20 students
• Seminars with < 20 students tend to be:
  – At private colleges and universities
  – At four-year campuses
  – At smaller institutions
  – Academic seminars & especially w/variable content
• Seminars with > 20 students tend to be:
  – Extended orientation
  – Pre-professional/discipline linked
  – Basic study skills
Interactions with Peers
Interaction with Peers

Interacted “daily” with:

- Close friends at this institution: 75
- Family: 36
- Close friends not at this institution: 33
- Siblings or extended family: 24
- Faculty & staff: 15
- GAs/Tas: 3
- Academic advisors: 1

*2016 YFYC Survey
“The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years”
(Astin, 1993, p. 398)
Interaction with Peers

• Structure matters (AGAIN!)
  – “The length and frequency of the class, the student-centered nature of the course, & a sense of shared exploration and empowerment among the participants” were catalysts for the development of meaningful academic and social relationships. (Enke, 2011, p. 9)

• Students are more likely to study together and appreciate group activities more in FYS than other FYE courses
Interaction with Peers

- Experiential learning (e.g., wilderness) seminars increases and enhances connections with peers

- Relationships in FYS extend far beyond course, year, and even undergraduate experience (Enku, 201; Foote, 2010)

- Peer leaders in the seminar
  - FYS instructors of record in 5-10% of institutions
  - Play a role in FYS at 46% of institutions
Experiences with Diversity
4 Elements of Diversity and Campus Culture

• Historical
• Structural
• Behavioral
• Psychological

(Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998)
Experiences with Diversity

STRUCTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

• National data on identity areas of students enrolled in FYS does not exist
• FYS and GE courses expose students to various majors and diversity of disciplinary perspectives
• Restricted enrollment types of seminars versus open enrollment
• > 60% of institutions report they offer special FYS sections for student subpopulations
Experiences with Diversity

TOPICS COVERED IN THE CLASSROOM

• 59% of institutions report that their FYS incorporates diversity/global learning

• FYS yield bigger gains in multicultural awareness, commitment to social justice, attributional complexity than other FY courses

  *(Engberg & Mayhew, 2007)*

• Class-level structural diversity + engaging pedagogy = behavioral diversity
Criteria for FYS as HIP

- Quality of Effort
- Interpersonal Interactions
- Pedagogical Approaches
Opportunities to Discover Relevance Through Real-World Applications
## Most Important Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a connection with the institution</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide orientation to campus resources &amp; services</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop academic skills</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop critical thinking skills</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create common first-year experience</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop study skills</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-exploration or personal development</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop support network or friendships</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve second-year return rates</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase student-faculty interaction</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop writing skills</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relevance & Real World Application

• 16% of institutions offer pre-professional/discipline-linked FYS; 4% as primary FYS
• 61% of campuses offer special sections of FYS
  – Academic preparation (honors and developmental)
  – Identify areas
  – Enrollment patterns
  – Campus experiences
• Other HIPs: 37% of FYS have LCs, 32% include SL, and 13% have UGR

Reflection!
Opportunities to Reflect; Demonstration of Competence

Learning = Experience + Reflection
Reflection & Competence

- Collection of FYS syllabi on the National Resource Center resources database
- 46 syllabi from 39 institutions
- Represents 2- and 4-year campuses in U.S. and internationally
- Not systematic data collection for the purposes of research
Reflection & Competence

• Measures of competence: assignments
  – Most often include traditional metrics (papers, quizzes, exams, presentations, homework)
  – Some innovative and engaging assignments (journals, reflection papers, personal/academic plans, scavenger hunts, campus/diversity activities)
  – Most FYS include multiple means of evaluating student performance and competence

• Public displays of competence were in the form of presentations, group work, & faculty interviews
Reflection & Competence

• Opportunities for reflection: assignments
  – Most FYS syllabi included structured opportunities for reflection (journals, reflections, opinion essays, thought pieces) for course completion and grading
  – Self-assessments and typologies are also popular
  – Assignments related to cultural events, global citizenship, diversity, and service (nearly) always had a reflection component

• FYS is often a faculty learning lab for teaching & pedagogy (Cuseo, 2009)
Frequent, Timely, & Constructive Feedback
Frequent Feedback

“Few studies offer specific evidence about the implementation and impact of this tenet of high-impact practices in first-year seminars. One notable exception is a small literature base on writing assignments in the first year and in first-year seminars. Writing assignments, especially those that required multiple drafts, are a common and effective vehicle for frequent, timely, and constructive feedback in first-year seminars (Foote, 2010; Skipper, 2014).” (Keup & Young, forthcoming)
HIPs by Seminar Type

- Writing
- Service-learning
- Learning community
- Common reading
- Undergraduate research

Legend:
- EO
- AUC
- AVC
Emphasis on Writing

• In academic seminars of both types ($p < .05$)
  – Less likely in extended orientation and pre-professional seminars ($p < .05$)

• When section size in less than 19 ($p < .001$)

• When tenure-track faculty serve as course instructors ($p < .001$)
  – Less likely when student affairs professionals are instructors ($p < .001$)
## Evidence of Meaning-Making Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EO  ((n = 75))</th>
<th>AUC ((n = 81))</th>
<th>AVC  ((n = 105))</th>
<th>Hybrid  ((n = 45))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expository writing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article review, critique, analysis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline-specific writing assignments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Other Writing Assignments

| Category                                      | EO  
|----------------------------------------------|-----|
|                                              | \(n = 75\) | AUC  
|                                              | \(n = 81\) | AVC  
|                                              | \(n = 105\) | Hybrid  
|                                              | \(n = 45\) 
| Journal                                      | 21  | 18  | 6  | 12 
| Career exploration/academic planning        | 16  | 10  | 1  | 3  
| Personal exploration/reflection             | 22  | 20  | 6  | 13 
| Electronic writing                          | 5   | 6   | 3  | 2  
| Response papers                             | 22  | 14  | 19 | 11 
| Analysis of inventories                     | 4   | 2   | 0  | 0  
| Career-related documents                     | 3   | 3   | 1  | 0  
| Business writing                            | 2   | 1   | 0  | 0  


QUESTIONS, CONCLUDING THOUGHTS & TAKEAWAYS
Concluding Thoughts & Takeaways

- Engaging pedagogy is critical to FYS success as HIPs
- Structure matters
- Academic FYS are models of emerging best practice
- Data are often clear what we **should** be doing in FYS to uphold principles of HIPs, but less clear about what we are **actually** doing
- We need to study classroom practices
- **FYS does appear to be a HIP via these 8 criteria**
Questions? Comments?

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