



# RESEARCH BRIEFS

## How HIP are First-Year Seminars for Developmental Education and Provisionally Admitted Students?

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### Summary

This study represents an in-depth qualitative analysis of first-year seminar syllabi from sections targeted to students in developmental education or who were provisionally admitted for evidence of the eight characteristics of high-impact practices (HIPs). Results indicate that these syllabi were missing key opportunities for high-impact pedagogical practices, particularly for interaction with faculty and peers and exposure to diverse perspectives. However, these syllabi maintained academic rigor and high expectations; engaged developmental education students in opportunities for real-world applications; illustrated important differences in integrated learning approaches; and offered examples of promising practices for online and distance learning in FYSs. These results can be used to inform and refine FYSs for students in developmental education and who are provisionally admitted so they remain true to the HIPs model, maximize their potential as tools for equity and student success, and advance diversity and inclusion efforts.

### Background

First-year seminars (FYSs), courses intended to improve the academic, social, and personal transition of first-year college students (Barefoot, 1992; Greenfield et al., 2013; Hunter & Linder, 2005), date back to the early days of American higher education (Young & Keup, 2019). Today, FYSs represent one of the most common tools employed by institutions of higher education to facilitate the development, learning, transition, and success of entering college students. National studies reveal that as many as 90% of accredited four-year colleges and universities and 80% of two-year institutions in the United States offer a FYS to at least some students (Barefoot et al., 2012; Koch et al., 2014; Young & Hopp, 2014). Further, FYSs are a tool used to provide targeted support to provisionally admitted students, as an additional support for academically under-prepared students, and in learning communities comprised of developmental education courses.

The FYS is known as one of the most important instructional vehicles for achieving the learning and developmental



objectives of undergraduate education in the United States. FYS have been found to impact student retention, persistence to graduation, and academic performance (summarized in Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Campbell et al., 2013; Porter & Swing, 2006). In addition, participation in the FYS has a positive impact on a range of outcomes, such as student involvement in campus activities (Stark et al., 2001), interaction with faculty (Foote, 2010; Keup & Barefoot, 2005), student engagement and learning (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007; Kuh, 2005; Padgett et al., 2013), and improvement of students' skills in problem-solving, critical reading, writing, and general study behaviors (Barefoot et al., 1998; Tobolowsky et al., 2005). Although research indicates that high-impact practices (HIPs), including FYSs, are helpful for all students, they have great equity potential and are especially effective for low-income, historically minoritized, first-generation, and transfer students (Finley & McNair, 2013) and may be able to "compensate for shortcomings in academic preparation" (Kuh in Brownell & Swaner, 2010, p. xi).

However, FYSs only meet their full potential for student success and equity when they are continually evaluated for fidelity to the HIPs model. One foundation for ongoing assessment and interrogation of HIPs are the eight conditions identified by Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) that make these interventions work so well. Accordingly, HIPs must: 1) set appropriately high expectations for performance; 2) require investment of time and effort; 3) facilitate substantive interactions with faculty and peers; 4) expose students to diverse perspectives; 5) offer frequent, timely, and constructive feedback; 6) include reflection and integrative learning; 7) have real-world application; and 8) require students to demonstrate competence (Skipper, 2017). Engaging pedagogy is a consistent, positive contributor to the FYS classroom (Karp et al., 2012; Padgett et al., 2013; Porter & Swing, 2006; Young, 2019), and the eight tenets of HIPs are related to pedagogical approaches. Yet, studies generally do not collect or analyze data on FYS instructors' pedagogical decisions as evidenced by classroom assignments, activities, and evaluation of learning in the FYS.

## Method

To fill this gap in the research and best-practice literature, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (the Center) engaged in a large-scale qualitative research project, conducting an in-depth content analysis of FYS syllabi for evidence of the eight characteristics of HIPs. The results highlighted in this brief indicate findings from analyses of FYS syllabi that are targeted to developmental education and/or provisionally admitted students specifically.

A national call and survey for first-year seminar syllabi for sections targeted to students in developmental education coursework and/or who were provisionally admitted was launched by the Center in Spring 2022 and supplemented by recruitment efforts from Strong Start to Finish. This effort

yielded 17 syllabi. First-year seminar syllabi were submitted from four community colleges and 12 four-year institutions. Additionally, one syllabus represented a collaboration between a two-year college and a four-year university. The sample also contained 13 public institutions and four private campuses. The distribution across size of institutions in the sample was large, ranging from approximately 350 students to an enrollment of nearly 38,000, with a generally even representation across all size categories. Further, the sample included a historically Black college and a system campus of a U.S. institution located in the middle east.

The research team conducted an in-depth content analysis using a rubric developed from relevant research on HIPs and FYS. Additionally, the research team analyzed data drawn from notes they captured during coding and from the brief survey institutions submitted with the syllabus for the study. Each syllabus in the study was analyzed by one primary coder and two confirmatory coders using Dedoose software. Thereafter, the Principal Investigator did a final (fourth) round of coding review and revision to ensure appropriate and consistent application of codes across all the syllabi.

## Findings and Discussion

### First-Year Seminar Characteristics

Data from the syllabus submission survey provided some insight into the characteristics of the first-year seminars that were collected for this study. First, only one of the participating institutions indicated that their first-year seminar could best be described as a basic study skills course, which was defined on the survey as having "a focus is on basic academic skills, such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts. This type of seminar might be targeted or even limited to academically underprepared students." One other institution indicated that their course represented a combination of FYS types, reporting "this course blends the extended orientation with a deeper dive into basic study skills, holistic wellness, and mindfulness practices." Data from the submission survey on the remaining syllabi indicated a near even split between courses that fall under the category of extended orientation (i.e., "Sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, college transition, or student success course. Content often includes introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues.") and those that were reported as an academic first-year seminar (i.e., "May be an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented course,...primary focus is on academic theme or discipline, but will often include academic skills components, such as critical thinking and expository writing.").

These data highlight two important findings. First, when compared to national data, these FYS syllabi for students in developmental education or who were provisionally admitted are generally representative of extended orientation and

academic first-year seminars but under-represent those courses focused on basic study skills (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Young, 2019). Second, given the focus of basic study skills types of FYS on academically under-prepared students, it is perhaps surprising that they are not more prevalent in this sample of syllabi. These results suggest that FYS sections targeting this population of students may not focus on basic study skills as the primary purpose but aim to address academic content and skills, critical and analytical thinking, as well as enhancing writing skills, time management, major and career planning, campus connections, and academic success strategies.

Further, the syllabus submission survey data showed that all the FYSs in this study were reported as credit bearing, with five stating they carried one-credit, one reported being for two credits, and eight carrying three or more credits (two institutions did not report the number of credits). These findings indicate that these seminars are rigorous, time intensive, and demand enough academic output from students to bear credit and often be worth as much as other academic courses. Finally, the survey asked for the titles/roles for the primary instructor of record who teaches the first-year seminar for which they were submitting a syllabus. The majority of entries included tenure-track faculty members, academic advisors, first-year experience directors, and full-time non-tenure-track faculty. Student affairs professionals and adjunct faculty were mentioned but were less represented than academic titles.

Although it was not formally captured on the syllabus submission survey, the coders noted a prevalence of online seminars, hybrid courses, and/or virtual modules and options on the FYS syllabi analyzed for this study. It is unclear whether this is due to shifts in course delivery because of the COVID-19 pandemic or if it is specific to FYS for developmental education and provisionally admitted students. However, this finding was worthy of note, particularly when compared to the general FYS syllabus study where this medium of seminar delivery was rare. The online, virtual, and hybrid syllabi in this study utilized strategies to encourage interaction and discussion, including detailed instructions for class engagement, frequent use of online discussion boards, statements for online course "netiquette," and high expectations for peer interaction in a virtual capacity.

## Presence of High-Impact Practice Tenets

The presence of HIPs in the FYS syllabi were the basis of this study and the foundation of the coding rubric. Two of the eight HIPs tenets were further delineated such that there were ten primary categories for coding:

1. Creates an investment of time and energy
2. Includes interaction with faculty about substantive matters
3. Includes interaction with peers about substantive matters

4. Includes reflection
5. Includes integrated learning opportunities
6. Has real-world (college) applications
7. Includes frequent feedback
8. Provides exposure to diverse perspectives
9. Has public displays of accountability
10. Includes high expectations

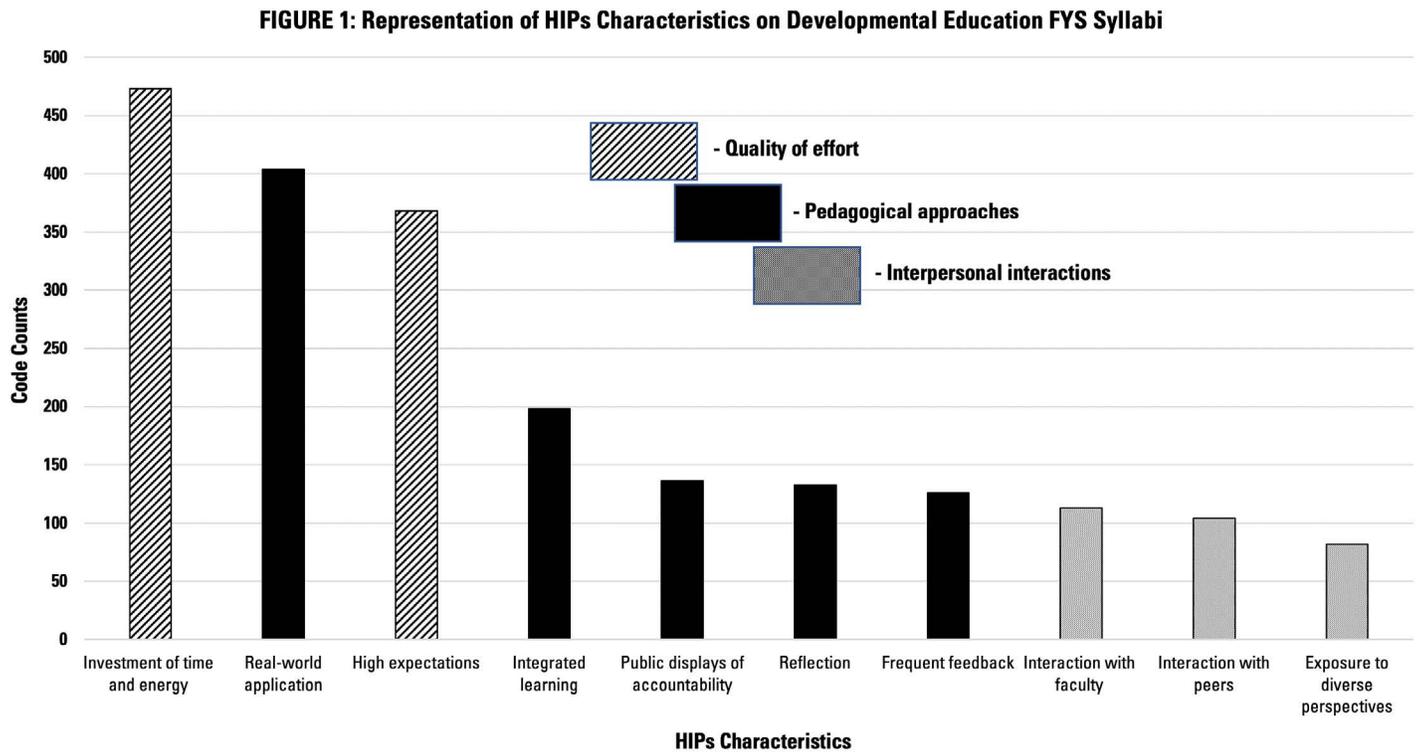
Figure 1 shows the frequency of code application for each of these codes representing the definitional characteristics of HIPs. These tenets can be clustered into three primary categories: quality of effort metrics (striped bars), pedagogical approaches (black bars), and interpersonal interactions (gray bars), which are noted in the figure. This study of FYS for sections targeted and delivered to students in developmental education or who were provisionally admitted generally yielded the most frequent application of codes in the quality of effort category (i.e., investment of time and effort and high expectations), indicating that the content of these FYS syllabi set high standards and offer opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Conversely, the codes that represent HIPs characteristics related to interpersonal interactions were least represented on these syllabi. These results were consistent with findings from the general study of HIPs characteristics on FYS syllabi. However, it is still worthy of note that classes designed to be small, discussion-based, and have a low student-to-faculty ratio for the purposes of building community and connection with the institution had such underrepresentation of interpersonal HIPs tenets on the syllabus. In addition, while the HIPs characteristics that fall under the category of pedagogical approaches are in the middle of the distribution, there was a substantial drop-off in code application for all but one of these HIPs characteristics (real-world applications) from the top three parent codes.

A deeper dive into the codes and notes provided additional themes for consideration and a more nuanced understanding of the presence of HIP elements on these syllabi:

- The very high instances of the **time and effort** HIPs code was most often illustrated on syllabi in detailed descriptions of assignments and readings for these courses. FYSs generally have a lot of assignments, and the syllabi in this sample for developmental education sections had even greater expectations for readings and assignments and included more explicit detail about them than general FYS syllabi. However, it is important to note that the description of assignments and readings that comprised the bulk of this category had a very large range in tone, from dry and highly transactional to deeply developmental and connected to student learning outcomes.

## Figure 1: Representation of HIPs Characteristics on Developmental Education FYS Syllabi



- Expectations on these syllabi was the third highest category of coding application. Yet, the term “**high expectations**” may be a misnomer. Analyses of these syllabi showed that expectations that were baseline in nature (e.g., attendance, technology use, classroom behavior, and academic integrity or the communication of specific institutional policies in these, and other, areas) at an equal rate to the articulation of true high expectations. Examples of high expectations on these syllabi included statements about students’ anticipated levels of course involvement, creation and contribution to a classroom community, and introduction and communication of college-level academic standards and work. These findings were consistent with results from the general study of FYS syllabi. However, the one code under “high expectations” that was more prevalent on the FYS syllabi for developmental education and/or provisionally admitted students was that the course included writing assignments.
- Coding for **real-world applications** in the current study yielded some important differences from the general study of FYS syllabi. First, it held a slightly higher ranking among code frequencies: it was second in the current research and third in the general study. Second, the syllabi in the current study targeted to developmental education and provisionally admitted students included a wider array of skill development metrics representing real-world application, including academic success strategies, life skills (e.g., time management, employability skills), campus connections, career exploration, and health and wellness, with financial literacy and writing skills being especially prevalent on the FYS syllabi in the current study.
- **Integrated learning** was similarly present on syllabi in the current project as in the larger study. However, there were differences in how this code was represented in the study for developmental education sections compared to the general FYS study. Most notable was the fact that the syllabi in the current study often represented integrated learning by telling students how to engage with the HIPs tenets themselves. Examples included syllabi content related to how to meaningfully interact with peers, develop and integrate skills and course content into real world situations, interpret and apply feedback on assignments, especially writing assignments, and engage in reflective activities for learning. The HIPs tenets themselves were a key vehicle for integrated learning in these sections of the FYS.
- **Interaction with faculty and peers** were under-represented compared to other HIPs characteristics and an area in need of greater attention in these courses. However, the developmental education/provisionally admitted sections of FYSs represented more meaningful

faculty-student and student-student interaction on these syllabi than was thematically represented in the general study of FYS syllabi. Faculty-student interaction was represented by clear articulation of opportunities and expectations on these syllabi to meet with faculty in these courses, the presence of faculty and campus support in the communication of course policies, and in the use of learning and developmental language and tone on the syllabi. Examples of learning and developmental language included the presence of headings and big questions that guided learning, connecting course policies to learning objectives, and the tone being positive and respectful, inviting to the student as a learner, and addressing the student as competent. Student interaction with peers was represented on these syllabi in the form of descriptions of group projects, class activities, frequent use of discussion boards, and peer review of writing assignments. Further, the mention of engagement in class discussions on these syllabi was frequent enough to lead to the consideration of adding another code under “student interaction” and/or “public displays of accountability” to fully capture the frequency with which it was mentioned.

- Similar to interaction with faculty and peers, codes representing **exposure to diverse perspectives** were underrepresented and had the lowest level of code application among the HIP characteristics for the syllabi in this study. However, this parent code and the corresponding child codes appeared on syllabi for developmental education and provisionally admitted students at a higher rate and in a deeper capacity than in the general study of the FYS syllabi. Specific examples of how this code was represented included syllabus content that took students’ backgrounds into consideration, as well as assignments, readings, and explicit course objectives/outcomes related to diversity, equity, and social justice topics.

## Conclusion

After analyzing and coding the 17 syllabi, there is evidence that FYSs are addressing developmental education coursework and/or provisionally admitted students in a respectful, rigorous capacity with a clear focus on student transition and success rather than an emphasis solely on basic skills or remediation. Results indicate that, similar to general sections of FYSs, syllabi in the current study were missing key opportunities for high-impact pedagogical practices, particularly with respect to interaction with faculty and fellow students and exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby showcasing the need for work to be done within these characteristics. However, FYS syllabi for students who were in developmental education or who were provisionally admitted maintained academic rigor and high expectations; engaged students in more opportunities for real-world applications than general sections, especially for academic success strategies and writing skills; illustrated important differences in integrated learning approaches; and offered examples of promising practices for online and distance learning in FYSs.

These results can be used to inform and refine FYSs for students in developmental education and who are provisionally admitted so they remain true to the HIPs model, maximize their potential as tools for equity and student success, and advance diversity and inclusion at the institutional level and across higher education, writ large. More specific recommendations for practice include:

- Using the HIP tenets as a tool for evaluating and refining first-year seminars, training seminar instructors, and integrating learning strategies into FYSs to ensure the course represents a high-quality pedagogical approach.
- Creating opportunities for FYS to leverage their unique purpose, size, and format to forge meaningful faculty-student and student-student interactions and exposure to diverse perspectives that are represented on the course syllabus.
- Ensuring that syllabi include the development and demonstration of a wide range of real-world skills (e.g., academic success strategies, time management, campus connections, career exploration, and health and wellness) and especially writing skills and financial literacy for students in FYS sections for developmental education or for provisional admits.
- Identifying ways to raise the bar on the communication of student expectations on FYS syllabi beyond stating policies and baseline standards of practice and toward the articulation of students’ engagement in higher-order and integrative learning experiences.
- Maintaining rigorous, respectful, and high-impact pedagogical approaches for FYS dedicated to students who are in developmental education or provisionally admitted.

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