

Alternative Models of First-Year General Education Programming

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Presented at AAC&U's Network for Academic Renewal conference,
General Education and Outcomes That Matter in a Changing World,
Phoenix, AZ, March 9, 2006

Summary

This session describes a new program model for our first-year General Education curriculum being pilot-tested in fall 2005 and presents early assessment results of its effectiveness. The First Seminar/Learning Community initiative is the cornerstone of the plan to revamp Millersville's General Education program. For the pilot-test, incoming Exploratory students (undecided majors) were randomly assigned to the experimental program or to alternative first-year programming. In the experimental program, students were assigned, based upon their stated preferences, to one of five new three-credit, content-based thematic seminars linked to a fundamentals course (English Composition or Fundamentals of Speech) as part of a living-learning community. Faculty were encouraged to develop seminars that do not fit within the traditional curriculum, that they are passionate about, and that would both challenge and engage first-semester students. Students taking part in the pilot-test initiative (N=100) were compared to two control groups of other Exploratory students: one group participated in the more traditional one-credit seminar and learning community and the other was not assigned to any seminar/learning community.

This initiative builds upon the four-year success of the Freshman Year Experience (FYE) program which uses a one-credit freshman seminar modeled on the "extended orientation" approach. Previous studies have found substantial increases in second-year persistence, increased GPA, and decreased alcohol and behavior problems among participants in the traditional FYE program. In addition, student surveys and focus groups confirm these favorable findings. However, faculty have long clamored for a more academic focus for credit-bearing freshman seminars, and surveys have suggested the need for greater intellectual and social

engagement and for a more intentional orientation to the liberal arts for incoming students. These needs have given rise to the First Seminar/Learning Community initiative which represents a switch from a one-credit, extended orientation seminar model to a three-credit academically focused seminar model.

The objectives being pursued by the new first-year seminar/learning community initiative include:

- Promote coherence and intentionality in the General Education program and facilitate integration of knowledge across disciplines.
- Provide learning structures and pedagogy that challenge, support, and engage incoming students more effectively than traditional first-year General Education programming.
- Create a greater sense of community by developing connections between and among students and teachers.
- Support students' successful transition to college life and engagement with the University in the broadest sense.

Components of the initiative also include special Student Affairs programming, a service learning requirement, advisement by seminar instructors, and the use of peer mentors, who reside with students and collaborate closely with faculty in fostering engagement of new students.

In addition to presenting a description and assessment results for the new initiative, the session will also examine some of the practical issues in implementing new models for General Education programming and suggest both successful strategies and potential pitfalls in the implementation process.

Profile of Millersville University

- Undergrad enrollment of just under 7000
 - 91% fulltime
 - 14% minority
 - 96% Instate
- Entering fall 2005 class of 1320 students (new freshman) –
 - mean SATs = 1061;
 - Mean Percentile Rank = 69%
- 7th Ranked Public in US News & World Report's Master's Universities in the North
- Top Majors:
 - Undecided (852)
 - Buad (815)
 - EIEd (772)
 - Biol (482)
 - ITech (443)
 - Comm (422)
 - Psyc (351)



Components of the First-Year Seminar/Learning Community (FYS/LC) Initiative

- FYS Passion course paired with first-year fundamental course (Composition or Speech)
- Living-learning connection (Students live together in Freshman dorms)
- Service Learning (15 hour requirement)
- Attentive advising by seminar instructors with support from Resident Life and Exploratory programs
- Peer mentors (live in dorms; one assigned to each seminar)

First-Year Seminar (Passion Course) Topics (Fall 2005)

- Homes and Homelessness
- The Dream of America
- Facing Fear
- “Why Don’t They Speak English?”
- Why We Hate

See brochure for descriptions and binder for syllabi and course materials.

Pilot-test Evaluation Methods

- 110 of the 284 Exploratory (Undecided) students were randomly assigned to the FYS/LC pilot-test program
- Pilot-test students were assigned to one of five FYS/LC topics based on their stated preferences
- Students completed mid-semester and end-of-semester Web-based surveys
- Focus group of pilot-test students held at end of semester by assessment staff
- Passion course instructors completed opened-ended surveys
- Students will be followed to check academic progress and persistence

Freshman Year Mid-Term Survey – Fall 2005

Results

Students in the freshman seminar had more serious conversations with different students, worked more with classmates outside of class, researched for a paper more, contributed more to class, and came to class more prepared than students who were not in a freshman seminar.

Students who were involved in a freshman seminar . . .	Means (all differences $p < .05$) [Based on scale of 1 (Never) to 4 (Very Often)]
Had more serious conversations with students who were very different in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values than students who were not involved in a freshman seminar.	Seminar = 2.28 No Seminar= 2.02
Worked more with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments than students who were not involved in a freshman seminar.	Seminar = 2.59 No Seminar= 2.32
Worked more on a paper or project that required researching ideas or information from various sources than students who were not involved in a freshman seminar.	Seminar = 2.71 No Seminar= 2.40
Asked more questions in class and contributed to class discussions than students who were not involved in a freshman seminar.	Seminar = 2.87 No Seminar= 2.63
Came to class without completing readings or assignments less than students who were not involved in a freshman seminar.	Seminar = 1.61 No Seminar= 1.83

Freshman Year Mid-Term Survey – Fall 2005 Results

Students in a learning community meet more with classmates outside of class and tend to believe more that the University provides them with needed support than students who are not in a learning community.

Students who were involved in a learning community . . .	Means
Worked more with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments than students who were not involved in a learning community.	Learning Community = 2.62 No Learning Community = 2.19 $p < .01$ [Based on scale of 1 (Never) to 4 (Very Often)]
Believe more than students who are not in a learning community that Millersville provides the support needed to help one succeed academically.	Learning Community = 3.17 No Learning Community = 2.98 $p < .10$ [Based on scale of 1 (Very little) to 5 (Very much)]

The one-credit seminar was rated higher than the three-credit seminar for meeting with faculty outside of class and marginally higher for evaluation of the entire educational experience.

	Means
Students in the one-credit seminar met with faculty members outside of class for advising or to discuss assignments or grades more than students in the three-credit seminar.	One-Credit = 2.00 Three-Credit = 1.65 $p < .05$ [Based on scale of 1 (Never) to 4 (Very Often)]
Students in the one-credit seminar evaluate their entire educational experience received at Millersville higher than students in the three-credit seminar.	One-Credit = 3.93 Three-Credit = 3.59 $p < .10$ [Based on scale of 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent)]

Chart 1. How do you rate your freshman seminar experience?

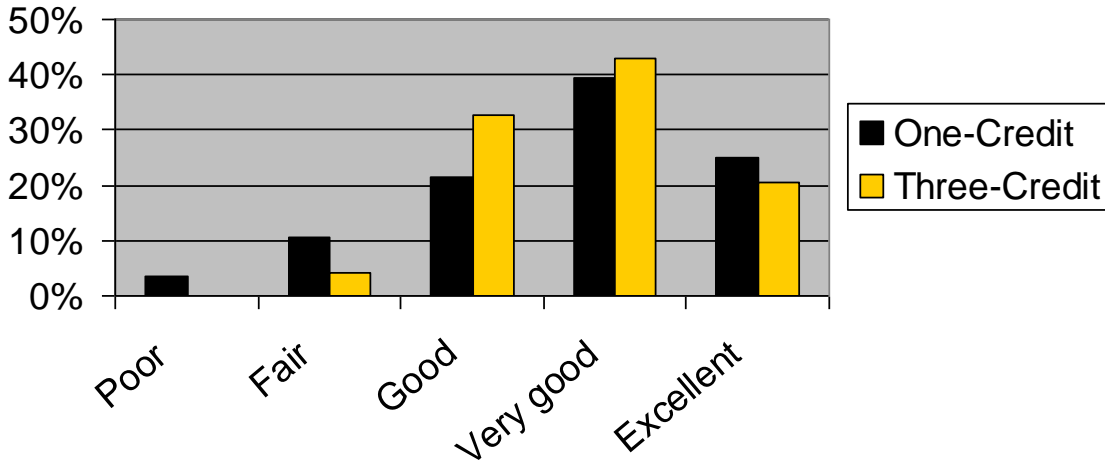
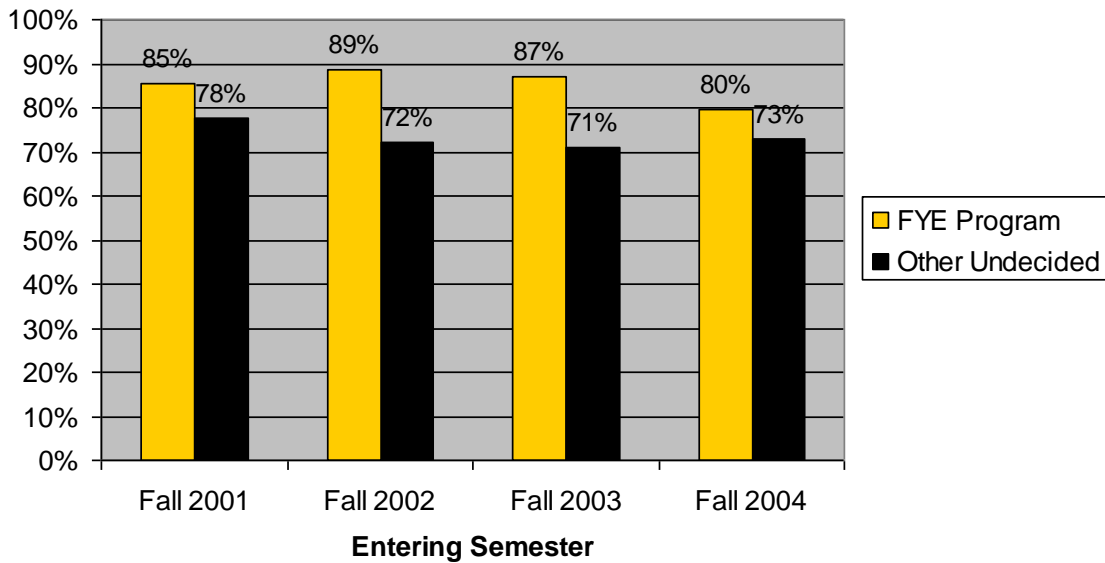


Chart 2. Persistence into Sophomore Year for Exploratory Students at Millersville University



FACULTY REACTIONS TO TEACHING THE FIRST SEMINAR

- “Energizing”
- “I enjoyed a chance to spread my wings after a steady diet of required courses.”
- “Got me out of a teaching rut!”
- “I really enjoyed the opportunity to get to know students well—both academically and personally.”
- “Students rose to my high expectations.”
- “Being both teacher and advisor made me better at both!”
- “I could convey to students that college involves a high level of intellectual rigor.”

FACULTY REACTIONS: IMPORTANT THEMES

- Scholarly Growth
- Professional Development
- Relationships
- Faculty Collaboration
- Quality of Student Work
- Service Learning
- Challenges

See binder for elaboration of these seven themes.

FACULTY REACTIONS: CHALLENGES

- Developing a brand new course involves a tremendous amount of work and preparation.
- Choosing the course topic well. Ideally the chosen topic “has clear impact on students’ personal lives...and can be treated with academic integrity.”
- Concentrating on “course content and goals, and students’ general academic and personal progress all at once.”
- Providing a Service Learning component often the “most difficult part of the course to administer”. Identifying service opportunities, arranging transportation and other logistics etc. requires considerable advance planning and coordination with other campus offices.

Alternative Models for First-Year Seminars (FYS)

- One-credit FYS (UNIV 101) in linked Living-Learning Communities
 - Themed Exploratory sections (Theme titles: Risky Business; School Days – It’s Elementary; Earth, Wind, and Fire; Serving Our Community; Culture, Class, and Change)
 - Major-based sections (BSE-Citizenship, Business, Biology, Comm/Thea, Earth Sciences, Socy/Anth, Special Ed)
- One-credit major-based Stand Alone FYS
 - Math, Physics

See Binder for additional details.

Key Components of One-Credit FYE Seminar (UNIV 101)

- Seminar format
- Problem Based Learning element
- Information Literacy piece
- Service Learning Activity
- Co-Curricular & Extracurricular Activities
- Discussion about General Education/Liberal Arts Education

See Binder for additional details.

Sample Themes of One-Credit FYE Seminar (UNIV 101)

- Risky Business
- Culture, Class & Change
- Earth, Wind & Fire
- School Days – It's Elementary
- Serving Our Communities
- Ethnic Studies

See Binder for additional details.

The General Education Context

- Millersville is currently undertaking a major reform of its Gen Ed program after 2-3 years of study and dialogue
 - The inclusion of first-year seminars in conjunction with learning communities has been an important feature of this reform.
 - Creating a simpler, more flexible structure was a central guiding philosophy.

Draft: Goals & Objectives

Students, working with advisors, and taking into consideration prior-knowledge and experience, purposefully select courses in the Gen Ed curriculum that together with required courses, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and major areas of study help students:

- Think, speak, and write clearly. Specifically, Millersville students should demonstrate college level proficiency in the following areas:
 - Oral and written communication
 - Scientific and quantitative reasoning
 - Critical analysis and reasoning
 - Technological competency
 - Information literacy
- Develop an understanding of the applications, usefulness, limitations of, and differences between, different ways of knowing developed in the traditions of math, science, social science, and the humanities.
- Grow in their understanding of people that are separated by differing beliefs, values, power, wealth, and cultures.
- Develop civic and social responsibility.
- Gain personal enrichment by fostering wellness values, and through the study of literature, music, art, and other interests that can be developed and enjoyed throughout a lifetime.

The General Education Context

Outline of Curriculum Proposal

Foundations – 9 credits

- Composition
- Math
- Speech

Explore and More – 15 credits

- 9 credits “Explore”
 - First Year Seminars (FYS) are strongly encouraged and can count for up to 3 of these 9 credits. FYS include various options and are typically integrated into a Learning Community. Maximum 25 students for most seminar formats.
 - Except for First-Year Seminars, all Explore credits must come from programs outside the student’s major. BSE students may not count required education courses as Explore courses.
- Advanced writing –discipline specific sections encouraged that link with course(s) in major .
- Perspectives and / or Capstone.

Liberal Arts – 27 credits minimum

- 3 courses in Math / Science (1 lab science).
- 3 courses in Social Studies
- 3 courses in Humanities

Skills across the curriculum:

- 3 additional Writing-intensive courses in Gen Ed or major

Other curriculum components stressed through advisement guidelines.

Summary: Promising Practices & Pitfalls

- **Promising Practices (What has made things work better?)**
 - Getting widespread discussion & input
 - We used a Task Force process to re-design Gen Ed with three rounds of faculty/student focus groups, open campus meetings, and continuing occasions for faculty input & involvement.
 - Starting small and building up
 - Innovative programming (like the FYS/LC initiative) started as small pilot-test with assessment opportunities, expanded in second year, with full adoption planned for Year 3 or 4.
 - Faculty development
 - FYE Coordinator runs yearly two-day workshop to support FYS/LC programming
 - Outside experts (e.g., Jodi Levine Laufgraben, Peggy Maki, John Gardner, Randy Swing, Steven Briggs, Ed Zlotkowski, Ed Napieralski, John O'Connor, Doug Howard) brought to campus for consultation & training
 - Participation in Evergreen Summer LC Institute & Asheville Institute for Gen Ed
 - Center for Academic Excellence sponsors many additional programs
 - Bringing together academic and student affairs
 - Dedicated freshman dorms built on living/learning model
 - Co-curricular programming, often based in dorms
 - Peer mentors provide bridge between dorm/campus life and FYS classroom

Summary: Promising Practices & Pitfalls

- **Pitfalls (What obstacles have made things difficult?)**
 - Getting innovations to fit established structures
 - Where do the First-Year Seminars count? [Answer: Currently, one-credit FYS sections don't really count; three-credit FYS sections substitute as part of distributional, liberal arts requirement – an imperfect solution!]
 - Can major-based FYS sections count toward Gen Ed? [Answer: Yes - we're working on a system to make this possible.]
 - Resource constraints
 - How do you lure FYS instructors away from major-based courses or large introductory sections to small seminar courses? This works against “productivity” (higher student-faculty ratios) and takes away faculty complement from departmental needs.

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Go to <http://muweb.millersville.edu/~gened/> for information about our Gen Ed program and reform efforts.