**First-Year Seminar Fact Sheet (for faculty)**

**What is a First- Year Seminar (FYS) Course?**

A course available only to first-year students designed to assist them in academic and social development as they transition to university. Seminars are small discussion-based courses in which small groups of students together (typically 20-30 students) and the faculty instructor(s) meet on a regular basis to exchange ideas and information with a strong emphasis on creating a community in the classroom (Hunter and Linder, 2005). The highest-quality experiences usually have a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning and other skills to develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies (Kuh, 2008).

While, some seminars are team taught, most rely on a single instructor model. (Murray and Wolf, 2016). The seminars usually feature an overarching theme/ topic which is selected according the instructor’s discretion. The only criteria for themes are that they be interdisciplinary, relevant, and intriguing, while maintaining a flexible seminar structure. Traditional lectures and examinations are not considered appropriate. Therefore, instructors are encouraged to be creative and to adopt non-traditional and active learning pedagogies (e.g., experiential learning, project-based learning, or problem-based learning, etc.). In some cases, instructors may choose to have students participate in fieldtrips, construct models or engage with the community (Murray and Wolf, 2016).

First-year Seminars are offered in Universities across Canada with a notably successful program at the University of Guelph (https://www.uoguelph.ca/vpacademic/fys/).

**What is the purpose of a FYS?**

The main purpose of the FYS is to increase student engagement and provide a high-impact learning experience to students. Barefoot, et al. suggests that high-impact practices (HIP) improve student success as well as increase retention in undergraduate programs (Barefoot, Griffin & Koch, 2012). Kuh and O’Donnell provide a framework for what can be considered a HIP. The criteria for HIP include (Kuh and O’Donnelle, 2013):

* Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels
* Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time
* Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
* Experience with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar
* Frequent, timely and constructive feedback
* Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect on and integrate learning
* Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
* Public demonstrations of competence

Some **example learning goals** based off of FYS syllabi from various universities, relevant to the practices indicated above include:

* Critical analysis of research papers (Identify bias and logical fallacies)
* Communicating scientific ideas
* Thinking like a scientist (experimental design, data collection, analysis, reporting)
* Teaching practical skills in critical thinking and communication
* Developing summarization skills
* Information literacy skills
* Ability to collaborate in a group setting
* Providing constructive criticism and applying feedback
* Demonstrate keen oral and written communication skills through presentations, discussions, online and classroom activities

**Benefit to students?**

Research has been done to assess the impact of FYS on students. In a National Survey on Enhancing Student Success and Retention throughout Undergraduate Education by Barefoot et al. the question: “As determined by qualitative or quantitative research, does participation in the first-year seminar at your institution correlate with the following outcomes: improved retention and/or graduation rates, higher levels of academic achievement, improved critical thinking, greater understanding of your institution’s academic culture and expectations, higher utilization levels of campus resources, improved connections between students, improved connections between students and faculty?” was posed to and response rates shown below (Barefoot et al., 2012):



Further, one study by Summerlee and Murray focused on a cohort of students who enrolled a FYS at the University of Guelph and found a correlation between using closed-loop, reiterative, enquiry-based learning pedagogy in the FYS and higher student grades in the following years, regardless of their program of study or their grades upon entrance to university. These students were also more likely to volunteer in the community, engage on international experience opportunities and assume leadership roles on campus than students who did not enroll in a FYS (Summerlee & Murray, 2010).

**Benefit to Faculty?**

 In a survey done by Murray and Wolf to assess the impacts of FYS on faculty, the results indicated that the skills instructors learned in FYS were transferable to larger classes. Almost half of the respondents (47%) indicated that after teaching a FYS course they used a greater variety of teaching techniques in other courses, ranging from icebreakers and increased discussion to more writing and additional technologies. Faculty also found that teaching small groups of first-year students gave them a greater appreciation for students’ abilities as they saw what they were able to achieve. As a result, they made their other courses more challenging and increased the stress on critical thinking (Barefoot et al., 1998). Some studies suggest that if faculty members are freed from the constraints of discipline-based, content-focused lectures, they are better able to “unleash their creative energies, fuel their desire to learn new instructional technologies, and become actualizing teachers” (Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). Teaching a FYS can influence an individual’s sense of self as a teacher and the overall role of faculty in the university. For example, in previous research, some faculty became sensitive to the fact their activities as teachers were expanding to include providing advice and addressing student issues. As one respondent from the survey noted, “It was enriching for me and it made connections with students that were not possible in larger classes I have taught. I am still in contact with many of the students ... some now graduating from grad school at other institutions.” (Murray & Wolf, 2016). Despite the challenges of a new situation, many instructors, even those who were already experienced teachers, reported feeling more confident and relaxed about teaching and more focused on teaching excellence. Instructors also reported gaining a wider sense of commitment to their university and a deeper, more complex understanding of the role and responsibilities of a faculty member (Fidler et al., 1999; Stassen, 2000; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002; Wills & Allegretti, 2013).

**Summary**

The FYS experience has been shown to provide long-lasting benefits to students, both in terms of learning how to learn, and in increased engagement with the academic community. The faculty who lead FYS courses also report highly positive experiences and more connection to their students.

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