

First Year Seminars (FYS) Update

Background

The proposal to create a required FYS for all incoming freshmen at WSU, originated in the General Education committee in 2014-15, based on the premise that such an offering would promote retention and student success. The idea was a modification to the WSU 101 courses which had not been as well received as had been hoped. The new proposal was to offer courses with specific disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) content combined with student success content. The proposal was presented to the Faculty Senate in November 2015, and was accepted as a *pilot project* in December 2015, to be implemented in the Fall of 2016.

Faculty were recruited and curricula were approved by the Gen Ed committee in Spring 2016, and 11 courses were offered this past Fall. Although the Senate only approved courses for the Fall semester, several instructors were asked to offer their courses a second time in the Spring 2017 semester in order to gather more data to present to the Faculty Senate for a final decision regarding FYS in the Fall 2017. In the meantime, the Senate would like a preliminary report on the Fall 2016 courses.

Assessments

A qualtrics survey was created and administered voluntarily by most of the FYS faculty (results are attached). Faculty also submitted two writing samples from their classes to be evaluated by an external (contracted) reviewer based on the AACU Writing rubric (results also attached). The survey questions were designed to capture some of the outcomes specified in the original proposal, specifically:

“Upon completion of a first-year seminar, a student will have been exposed to the following learning outcomes, varying by discipline:

- Acquired knowledge in the arts, humanities, and/or natural and social science
- Effectively write and speak
- Developed fundamentals of information literacy and library research
- Developed an appreciation for diversity”

The survey had quantitative measures as well as open ended questions, which provided some insights into student perspectives on their FYS experiences.

There were three questions that mirrored questions asked in surveys administered in 2013, 2014 and 2015 for the WSU 101 courses. These results are provided as a comparison.

Results

The survey results seem largely positive. Some of the measures, as well as the written comments, reveal very diverse experiences for students in different classes, so the aggregate data captures the middle ground. There does not appear to be any alarming or particularly disappointing outcomes.

Reflections

Framework / Goals

Some instructors felt that the framework for the FYS was so loose that it was hard to decide what elements of the course design were essential and which were optional. The freedom was nice in a way, but frustrating in others. We could invite outside speakers to the class to address budgeting, info literacy, schedule building, etc, or not. We could incorporate service learning, or not. We could include the common read, or not. We could require extracurricular activities for community building, or not. Given this openness, it would have been helpful to have more concrete goals for the FYS program as a whole.

Although there were learning outcomes in the proposal, it did not actually contain specific goals for what the FYS were designed to accomplish. Faculty tend to build writing, speaking, problem solving, critical thinking skills, etc. in all of our classes, so how is FYS supposed to be unique? It seems like the pieces that need to be more explicit are the community building piece and student success piece. Community can be built through a variety of different approaches that fit different faculty members' styles, but if community building is a specific desired outcome, that should be stated upfront so faculty can design courses with this goal in mind. Some of this is articulated in the "Rationale" of the original proposal, but it is not explicit.

Developing Some Tips / Strategic Considerations

While it is important for faculty to have the freedom to develop their FYS courses, those who taught an FYS this past semester wanted to share some of their own tips with those developing new courses (some of these are found below). Many of us found these courses were more challenging than we expected in a variety of ways, including the diverse interests of the class (made up of non majors with only rudimentary knowledge of topics), the effort to build in peer-peer and faculty-peer relationships, and an entire class that is on the campus for the first time (learning basic appropriate behaviors in college courses).

Student Success Coaches

The freshmen seemed to have a positive perspective on their interactions with their student success coaches, but some faculty felt that perhaps these students created a barrier to the freshmen connecting with and coming to faculty for assistance. It is hard to tell if this is always a trade off, or where the value comes down in terms of connecting with senior peers or with faculty members to provide mentoring, or whether this task can be shared effectively.

Looking Forward

The FYS pilot project is an initiative of the Gen Ed committee and has been given Senate support. If the committee believes this FYS project is worth pursuing, the following steps make sense:

- **February 2017: Report Fall 2016 results to the Senate and request a second year of pilot courses to be developed.** This will allow faculty to modify/improve their courses, and allow additional faculty to experiment with developing FYS courses. This will include a call for and review of new curricular proposals in Spring 2017 to be taught in the 2017-18 academic year (presumably in preparation for meeting the demands for a *required* FYS in AY 2018-19).
- **Fall 2017: Present full data from 2016-17 to Senate and make recommendation regarding whether FYS should become a permanent part of the curriculum or not starting in 2018-19.** (Approval in the Fall 2017 would allow all departments that want to offer FYS courses to be able to complete Fall 2018 schedule building by the Jan/Feb 2018 deadline.)

Tips / Strategic Considerations

[Some of these are obviously good practices for all classes, but the impact is high when carrying out these strategies for a class full of first semester freshman.]

- *Explain the learning value of each activity.* Take a few minutes to regularly communicate to the class *why* the course includes the modules that it does: student success components, extracurricular components, service learning, etc. It can be obvious to us (who designed the course) why these elements are included and how they advance the FYS goals, but it may be less obvious to the students. A few quick sentences when introducing a class visitor from OSMM or the Career Center regarding the goal of helping students succeed outside the classroom and beyond college is likely all that is needed.
- *Explain concepts and norms that we might assume that they already know.* Its ok for those who know to get a reminder, but it might be the first time a student hears about key concepts or norms as a college student. [Ex: if you skip class, your professor is likely to assume it is a deliberate choice, not that you were sick. Communicate with your professor.]
- *Work collaboratively with the student Success Coaches.* They are in the course to build connections with the students. They can help serve as a liaison between the faculty member and students. They provide insights for faculty into what students might be struggling with or thinking about with regard to the content and structure of the course. They can serve as an additional voice to drive home the key points the faculty member wants to convey (additional 'words of wisdom', and from a peer sometimes have more impact). Keep the success coach in the loop and find ways they can enhance the students' experiences in the course.
- *Carefully consider the level of knowledge the students might bring to the class.* If your course is designed to appeal broadly, you may not have any majors in the course, and in fact might be teaching to students from multiple colleges. This requires a different approach than courses that are designed to draw in students from more specific majors.
- *Have them create some evaluation materials like a quiz and use it.* It may help them read the materials in a different way.
- *Do several activities so the students team up or mingle.* Building community contributes to the goal of retaining these students at WSU.
- *Work on peer-review activities.* This can provide opportunities for mentoring and well as learning from each other.

- *Encourage discussion outside the class* (Blackboard forum, Facebook group, etc.)
- *Encourage them to get out of their comfort zone as a learning tool* and give them support in doing this. This might take many forms (role playing, giving a speech, interviewing someone on/off campus, discussing controversial topics, attending talks or performances, etc.).
- *Take them to places like the library or a talk.*
- *Invite a guest to talk about x topic.*
- *Have some kind of personal meeting(s) with them.* They have met with advisors, but likely have not had any personal meetings with a faculty member on campus. Help them recognize that faculty members are people who want to see them succeed.
- *Send reminders a couple days before each deadline,* and encourage them to learn how to keep calendars and take responsibility for their assignments because not all faculty will provide reminders.
- *Put everything on Blackboard* for easy and timely location. Explain the format you want for each assignment and put it on Blackboard.
- *Give them all the good feedback you can.* You are helping them transition effectively to the college environment and they need to know what their expectations are and how they can improve their work.
- *Submit mid semester evaluations and use SEAS* (Student Early Alert System). They need to be told explicitly if they are performing well or if adjustments are needed to achieve the grade they want in the class.