



First-Year Seminar Programs: Keeping The Academic Component Of The First-Year Experience Academic

By: **Martha McCaughey** and Jill Cermele

Abstract

As faculty directors of first-year seminar (FYS) programs, one of us at a large public university and the other on a small private liberal arts campus, we have learned how easily FYS directors can find themselves in the crosshairs of competing understandings and goals of the program. FYSs are often a part of a larger set of campus programming known as the “first-year experience” (FYE). Our focus here is on the FYS, specifically, as the academic component of this FYE. FYS directors and faculty are often asked to be all things to all people, which can compromise the academic integrity of FYS and its distinctive contribution to the FYE. Here, we articulate a model structure of FYS that centers the importance and integrity of the academic experience.

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As faculty directors of first-year seminar (FYS) programs, one of us at a large public university and the other on a small private liberal arts campus, we have learned how easily FYS directors can find themselves in the crosshairs of competing understandings and goals of the program. FYSs are often a part of a larger set of campus programming known as the “first-year experience” (FYE). Our focus here is on the FYS, specifically, as the academic component of this FYE. FYS directors and faculty are often asked to be all things to all people, which can compromise the academic integrity of FYS and its distinctive contribution to the FYE. Here, we articulate a model structure of FYS that centers the importance and integrity of the academic experience.

FYS benefits and helps retain all types of first-year students (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). But institutions and various units within them have different, sometimes conflicting ideas about the purpose of FYS programs. Some FYS programs, such as ours, are explicitly academic, while others are extensions of orientation and geared toward student success. Although the latter vision of FYS programs would focus on social support, health and safety, academic success strategies, or some combination thereof, we argue here that FYS should, as an academic course, teach key learning objectives as determined by FYS faculty—such as information literacy, communication skills, critical thinking, and intercultural competence—and that align with the SLOs of the larger college or university. The broader first-year experience appropriately includes social support networking, health and safety, learning about campus resources and services, and other such programming, but these experiences are not the subject of an academic course.

A key way to foster student success is to make sure your FYS courses are appropriately academic and collegiate. FYS should be run and taught by fully engaged, adequately compensated, well-qualified members of the faculty, and proposed FYS courses should be rooted in the faculty member's scholarly expertise and vetted by their colleagues. Typically, a FYS instructor meets the basic standards of the university's accreditation body, has experience teaching college courses, and, ideally, is an engaged, full-time member of your campus. Depending on the size of the school, FYS faculty members could be a new student's only teacher who knows their name, notices when they're not in class, does the intensive grading and interaction with students that assesses their strengths and deficits, and points them to resources for supporting and facilitating student success. FYS courses should be small, in-person academic classes that meet at least twice per week and include informal contact with faculty outside of the classroom (dining with students, attending campus events with students, etc.). Faculty members who are fully engaged university citizens model that citizenship for new students; this is not a reasonable or realistic expectation of a part-time, adjunct employee.

Complementing the academic focus of FYS are inclusive teaching methods such as transparent assignment design and the principles of Universal Design for Learning, which help a diversity of students learn and demonstrate their learning. To this end, FYS directors can design, or work with campus teaching and learning centers to design, unique faculty development opportunities for FYS faculty to align their teaching with the shared learning objectives and develop a community of practice wherein the FYS faculty become resources for one another (see McCaughey et al., 2019).

Our experience has been that, because the FYS students are a captive audience and "target market" of groups with messages, FYS faculty and directors are often asked or required to allot class time for all kinds of nonacademic programming. Without vigilance, the academic piece of FYS can get lost in a sea of safety trainings, wellness workshops, and social networking icebreakers. We literally had so many people ask to appropriate "just one hour" of our FYS classes that, had we said yes to them all, we would have filled the entire 15-week semester with these nonacademic guest presenters, their topics ranging from sexual assault prevention to career services to meditation to river cleanup to community charities to get-out-the-vote campaigns. Making FYS a vehicle for training sessions would inappropriately dilute the distinct, academic contribution that FYS makes to the FYE.

That said, FYS directors can surely build bridges to the nonacademic components of the FYE. For instance, FYS directors and faculty can share links to online student programming and resources, invite student life staff to FYS receptions, make videos and webinars showcasing those entities available to first-year students, and even categorize all the FYS courses by theme (the arts, sustainability, global issues, etc.) to make it easier for the co-curricular or student life staff to promote events that are relevant for particular FYS topics. For example, an environmental studies-focused FYS instructor might find an extracurricular opportunity to plant trees germane to their course objectives, while an instructor of a psychology-focused FYS course might invite a presentation from the counseling or wellness center. Building the bridge effectively maintains rather than blurs the boundaries between the academic FYS and extracurricular FYE programming.

To keep the academic component of the FYE academic, university leadership should be sure to integrate the FYS director into the leadership structure of the university, including perhaps new student recruitment and orientation, student retention and early alert programs, student athletics councils,

enrollment and space management, first-year advising, residential learning communities, common reading programs, assessment committees, and any general FYE coordinating committee. Importantly, the FYS director should have the authority and autonomy to develop the academic structure of FYS and to maintain its integrity by keeping the boundary between the academic and nonacademic experience. Upper-level administrators should ensure that students, faculty, administrators, orientation leaders, new student recruiters, advisors, and other student support staff all understand what is important and distinct about FYS. Academic leaders can convey the academic purpose of FYS and help ensure that all units concerned with first-year students work in complementary ways toward the university's mission.

References

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