

SENATE COMMITTEE ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Report of the Ad Hoc First-Year Seminar Committee

(Legislative)

Implementation: Upon Approval by the President and Summer Session 2009

On December 11, 2007, and March 18, 2008, Kim Steiner and Patti Mills met with the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Education in order to report on the progress of the ad hoc committee in drafting a revision of the First-Year Seminar requirement. In December, the Undergraduate Education committee heard and commented on the ad hoc's goals and the outline of its vision for FYS. In March, Co-chairs Mills and Steiner presented the final report of the ad hoc committee and Undergraduate Education voted unanimously to endorse the proposal. Therefore, the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Education sponsors the Report of the Ad Hoc First-Year Seminar Committee for inclusion on the April 29, 2008 Senate Agenda.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

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REPORT OF THE AD HOC FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COMMITTEE

Revision to the First-Year Seminar Requirement

(Legislative)

Implementation: Upon Approval by the President and Summer Session 2009

Background

The current First-Year Seminar (FYS) requirement was created by the Senate in December 1997 as one of ten recommendations by the Special Committee on General Education (SCGE). The rationale for their recommendation focused on “the need to do a better job of engaging our incoming students, quickly and deliberately, in the educational enterprise.” The goals were to:

- engage students in learning and orient them to the scholarly community from the outset of their undergraduate studies in a way that will bridge to later experiences in their chosen majors, and
- facilitate students’ adjustment to the high expectations, demanding workload, increased liberties, and other aspects of the transition to college life.

In addition, the report advanced five objectives for the first-year seminar as guidelines for implementation of the proposed requirement:

- to introduce students to university study,
- to introduce students to Penn State as an academic community, including fields of study and areas of interest available to students,
- to acquaint students with the learning tools and resources available at Penn State,
- to provide an opportunity for students to develop relationships with full-time faculty and other students in an academic area of interest to them, and
- to introduce students to their responsibilities as part of the University community.

Although the report of the committee was fairly descriptive of its vision for the first-year seminar, the legislation that created the FYS requirement was Senate approval of a simple recommendation: “Establish a first-year seminar experience for incoming, first-year students, provided by each of the colleges and campuses as part of the general education program.” The details of the requirement were left to the General Education Implementation Committee (GEIC) to establish in its implementation protocol.

GEIC’s plan for implementing FYS was presented to the Senate as an informational report in Sept. 1998. GEIC restated the original two goals for the requirement (but not the objectives) and determined that all FYS courses must have academic content and be offered for academic credit; be taught by tenure-line faculty, full-time instructors, or Fixed-Term I faculty; be taught in sections of no more than 20 students each; and be taken by students during their first academic

year. Other than the requirement for academic content, GEIC placed no requirements on content or objectives of FYS courses.

Thus, the original proposal for a 1- to 3-credit first-year seminar experience, with a set of broad yet reasonably concrete objectives, was approved by the Senate in the form of a simpler recommendation to merely establish a first-year seminar, and finally implemented by GEIC with almost no limitations on the course itself other than the circumstances of delivery.

The FYS requirement was one of the major innovations in the General Education Reform of 1997. It represented widespread faculty desire to further the adjustment of freshmen as University students, but the requirement itself, a seminar, was controversial from the outset. Indeed, it was opposed even by some senators who were strong proponents of freshman seminars in contexts other than General Education.

FYS continues to be the most contentious of all General Education requirements. The topic has been thoroughly discussed in dozens of pages of transcript of Senate discussion including, most recently, a Senate forensic session in April 2006 and the debate on the motion that created our committee in Jan. 2007. It has been addressed by at least 6 student surveys, a joint Senate/Administration Task Force to Review the FYS Requirement (a 1-year effort), resolutions and recommendations by CCSG or USG on 3 occasions, and the accreditation team report of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Furthermore, FYS is a continual subject of discussion in visits by Senate Officers to campuses and colleges, as documented in numerous reports to the Provost and Senate. Finally, we note that the Senate action that created our committee was the culmination of 2½ years of deliberation by the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Education, which was charged in summer 2004 with revising the requirement in ways that would make it more uniformly successful and acceptable across colleges and campuses. Our committee was authorized in the Jan. 2007 Senate meeting as an alternative to eliminating the requirement. The previous motion, to eliminate the requirement, failed by a margin of only 4 votes out of 150.

Following a review of the record of debate and study on this topic, our committee has identified the following as principal weaknesses in the current FYS requirement:

- lack of specific, measurable objectives;
- variability in content, rigor, and format;
- low interest in teaching the FYS template in some units;
- uneven perceived need between University Park and other campuses; and
- difficulty in scheduling FYS for DUS students at University Park.

Of course, not everyone is dissatisfied with the requirement. In some units there is strong support for the requirement from both faculty and students, and evidence suggests that there is broad support within the University for the *idea* of the requirement if not the way in which it has been implemented.

The committee saw its task as identifying a model that would embrace the original goals of the first-year seminar experience as envisioned by the SCGE and endorsed by the Senate, bring more

focus and clarity to the requirement, and provide flexibility in implementation in order to accommodate the varying circumstances of different colleges and campuses. We have sought a model that would fulfill the goals of the requirement, preserve its strengths, and eliminate or sidestep its weaknesses.

Analysis and Rationale

Unlike other General Education requirements, FYS does not represent an institutional declaration of essential skills or knowledge for a University degree. Instead, it represents our commitment that students have a baseline opportunity during their first year of study to become engaged with the faculty in a seminar environment and with academic subject-matter in their general area of interest. In the words of one SCGE member in 1997, FYS was an attempt to “guarantee that all students have access to a freshman seminar.” In effect, it is an obligation the University placed on itself to improve student engagement in the learning process, by means of coursework in small classes with full-time faculty, and the Senate employed the General Education curriculum to ensure that we would follow through.

Although the SCGE laid out a set of laudable educational objectives, these were left out of the implementation of FYS and attention was focused on the delivery characteristics listed above. Thus, although many FYS courses are highly regarded and successfully address the goals of FYS, those qualities may arise principally from characteristics of the courses that are not addressed by the current General Education FYS requirement, *i.e.*, format, content, instructional objectives, and of course the qualities of the individual instructor. In other words, we believe that the structure of the requirement falls considerably short of ensuring that its own goals will be met, and the effectiveness of the courses in meeting those goals depends largely on factors beyond University-level control.

The most consistent thread among factors that influence learning is the powerful impact of *engagement*, defined as the level at which students invest physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual energy in educationally related activities.¹ Obviously, a single course is not a sufficient institutional commitment to achieving student engagement, and every curriculum at the University must certainly address this outcome in many ways, both explicitly and implicitly. Yet successful engagement early in a student’s course of study is critical, and we believe that early engagement is sometimes insufficient at Penn State, where students do not normally “belong” to a major until near the end of the sophomore year and where freshman class sizes are often very large (or taught by graduate students or part-time instructors), especially at University Park.

First-year seminars in small-class settings are one response to the need for better early engagement. A rather large body of research evidence over the past two decades tends to show that participation in first-year seminars has a statistically significant and positive influence on retention and subsequent achievement.² Research indicates that the first-year seminars which

¹ Terenzini, P. T. and R. D. Reason. 2007. Bad rap or regrettable truth? Engagement and student learning at research universities. Pp. 165-185 in R. L. Geiger *et al.* (eds.), *Future of the American Public Research University*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

² Pascarella, E. T. and P. T. Terenzini. 2005. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research (Vol. 2)*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

engage students most effectively have rigorous academic content (the national trend is away from University 101, how-to-be-a-student courses), are taught in a 3-credit rather than 1- or 2-credit format (if a little is good, then more is better), and are optional. The last-named characteristic is grounded in the notion that engagement by force is a poor idea, a point of view that was expressed several times during the debate on the original legislation.³

While we find this logic appealing, there is widespread belief within the University that first-year seminars would largely disappear at University Park if they were made elective. This idea troubles the committee and, we believe, a very large number of others who are concerned about student engagement. University Park is an order of magnitude larger than any other Penn State campus in the size of its enrollment and, very often, in the size of its classes. In light of this categorical difference, we believe that the logic for a required freshman seminar is compellingly strong for University Park, but less so for other campuses where small classes are the norm and instructors are typically continuing faculty members.

But first-year seminars are not necessarily the only way to engage students, nor are they necessarily sufficient to that purpose. Furthermore, the goal of nurturing student engagement is no less appropriate for Commonwealth campuses, where the long-term attrition of an entering cohort averages nearly three times higher than at University Park⁴, even if the obstacles may be different. It is the conclusion of our committee that although the FYS requirement as implemented within General Education is flawed, the original goals and objectives defined by the Special Committee on General Education for the “first-year seminar experience” are beyond contention and still very much relevant to the University. The specific recommendation of SCGE to implement a first-year seminar requirement was controversial, but the goals and objectives of the recommendation were never disputed on the floor of the Senate and appeared to be accepted as ideals worth pursuing. We believe that the University, in each college and on each campus, should recommit to achieving those goals and to seek other avenues, in addition to first-year seminars, to accomplish those ends.

³ The empirical evidence to support these assertions about course characteristics that promote student engagement is limited. We have relied heavily on an interpretation of the literature provided by Dr. Patrick Terenzini, Distinguished Professor and Senior Scientist, Center for the Study of Higher Education, Penn State, an interpretation that was fully supported by thoughtful emails to Pat (on our behalf) from John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot, both with the Policy Institute on the First Year of College. Informative essays on the topic may be found at <http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/assessment/essays/Swing-8.28.02.html>

⁴ Warcholak, N. and M. Dooris. 2007. Retention, attrition, and graduation patterns of baccalaureate students. Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment, The Pennsylvania State University.

Recommendation

Each University Park academic college, each of the 19 Commonwealth campuses, and the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), all of which are called “units” for the purposes of this report, shall submit a *First-Year Engagement Plan* for achieving the goals and objectives of first-year engagement, as stated in the 1997 report of the SCGE, for baccalaureate, associate degree, and provisional first-year students enrolled within the unit. To restate, these are as follows:

Goals

- to engage students in learning and orient them to the scholarly community from the outset of their undergraduate studies in a way that will bridge to later experiences in their chosen majors, and
- to facilitate students’ adjustment to the high expectations, demanding workload, increased liberties, and other aspects of the transition to college life.

Objectives

- to introduce students to university study,
- to introduce students to Penn State as an academic community, including fields of study and areas of interest available to students,
- to acquaint students with the learning tools and resources available at Penn State,
- to provide an opportunity for students to develop relationships with full-time faculty and other students in an academic area of interest to them, and
- to introduce students to their responsibilities as part of the University community.

First-Year Engagement Plans shall be brief and prepared in accordance with the following principles:

- University Park colleges **must** (and other units may) retain at least 1 credit of first-year seminar as a requirement for graduation. These courses must explicitly address the desired goals and objectives and possess the following attributes:
 - taught by tenure-line or other regular, full-time faculty members (not staff or graduate students)⁵
 - taught in the student’s college or campus of enrollment
 - taught in sections of not more than 25 students

⁵ The college dean may grant reasonable exceptions, such as for professional practitioners who teach annually but whose appointments are not full-time.

- academic in content, exemplifying the full weightiness and expectations of University-level coursework and ideally satisfying General Education or other College or Major Requirements
- Units may choose to offer sections of regular courses in seminar format for first-year seminar credit as long as they meet the conditions of the first bullet above, and the “S” suffix will continue to be available for such sections. The “S” suffix may be applied to any suitable course, including General Education courses or those that satisfy other College and Major Requirements.
- The committee believes the “gold standard” seminar to be a required, 3-credit course that fully meets the conditions of the first bullet above, and plans that incorporate such courses will suffice as First-Year Engagement Plans. First-year seminars carrying only 1 or 2 credits should normally be supplemented by other efforts (as described below) to achieve the desired goals and objectives.
- Whether or not units retain first-year seminars as requirements for graduation, all units must describe how small-classroom experiences taught by full-time faculty members are, or will be, achieved under the First-Year Engagement Plan.
- Units may reinforce the desired goals and objectives through a variety of means in addition to first-year seminars and small-classroom experiences, including other courses, special advising programs, intensive orientation experiences, special programs offered by Student Affairs, and other aspects of the first-year experience under the control of the unit.
- Plans by academic colleges at University Park shall describe how DUS students will be accommodated in first-year seminar courses according to anticipated student interest.
- The University Park DUS plan may be prepared under the assumption that at least 1 credit of first-year seminar will be available to each of its students through the academic colleges at University Park.
- Plans must describe the means by which units will assess whether the desired goals and objectives are met through implementation of unit plans.
- First-Year Engagement Plans shall be submitted for one-time review and approval by a special committee appointed by the Chair of the Senate and the Vice-President for Undergraduate Education. It is expected that in five years the Senate, in consultation with the office of the Vice-President for Undergraduate Education, will review the extent to which plans have been implemented in accordance with the provisions of this recommendation and assess their effectiveness in achieving the stated goals based on unit assessment data.
- Unit plans, or an appropriate summary of them, must be published on their Web sites.
- Requirements to take a first-year seminar should normally apply only to first-year students and be waived for students who have been enrolled for at least a year at another campus or institution and have not taken such a course.

Adoption of this recommendation would mean the elimination of FYS as a University-wide General Education requirement, although many colleges will have to retain FYS as a requirement for graduation.

NOTE: The committee will move that this recommendation be approved by the Senate. If the motion fails, the committee will move that the Senate adopt the following resolution:

"The current University-wide graduation requirement for First-Year Seminar shall be terminated Summer 2010."

AD HOC FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COMMITTEE

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