The First-Year Initiative (FYI)* Benchmarking survey assesses the learning outcomes from first-year seminars AND guides improvement. To do both, an instrument must accurately measure learning outcomes and pinpoint structures and conditions that contribute to good performance. The FYI national database, representing 62 institutions and over 30,000 students, provides data about seminar structures and classroom environments that support best practices in first-year seminars.

Perennial debates among those involved in first-year seminars often center on course structures including the amount of credit, who teaches, how the course is graded, whether to require the course, and other structural elements which are usually determined when seminars are first established. In future essays, FYI data will be used to evaluate each of these structural elements; however this essay is about an aspect of first-year seminars that cuts across all structural elements.

The 2001 FYI survey results show that learning outcomes and student satisfaction with first-year seminars are highly correlated with the way teachers conduct first-year seminars. We measured the “engaging pedagogy” construct with student ratings of the degree to which their seminar includes a variety of teaching methods; meaningful discussion and homework; challenging assignments; productive use of class time; and encouragement for students to speak in class and work together. We believe students can accurately respond to these survey items based on their experiences in the first-year seminar classroom.

Using a 7-point scale, the mean score for the Engaging Pedagogy Factor ranged from a low of 3.03 to a high of 5.79. (A mean score of 4.0 is the center point of the scale and 5.50 includes 3/4 of the scale, indicating high performance.) Participants in the 2001 FYI were arranged into five groups based on their mean scores on the Engaging Pedagogy Factor for the analysis presented in this essay.

Five levels of mean scores on the Engaging Pedagogy factor
- Level 1: mean scores of 5.50 or higher (High performing), 5 institutions
- Level 2: mean scores of 5.0 - 5.49, 20 institutions
- Level 3: mean scores of 4.50 - 4.99, 24 institutions
- Level 4: mean scores of 4.0 - 4.49, 11 institutions
- Level 5: mean scores below 4.0 (Low Performing), 3 institutions

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical testing confirm that learning outcomes differ across the five grouping levels of engaging pedagogy so that higher mean scores on the Engaging Pedagogy factor are significantly associated with higher mean scores on most of the other measures of learning outcomes and overall course effectiveness. The clearest examples of this strong association is found between Engaging Pedagogy and two other factors, Course Improved Critical Thinking,* and Overall Course Effectiveness* where a linear association is observed. The mean scores for both the Critical Thinking and Overall Course Effectiveness factors decline as the level of Engaging Pedagogy moves from Level 1 to Level 2, from Level 2 to Level 3, etc.

While not statically different at all five levels of Engaging Pedagogy, these data also reveal a clear pattern of association between levels of Engaging Pedagogy and four other learning outcomes:
1) Course Improved Study Strategies, 2) Course Improved Academic/Cognitive Skills, 3) Course Improved Connections with Faculty, and 4) Course Improved Managing Time/Priorities. Of these four factors, generally, Level 1 and 2 of Engaging Pedagogy were similar to each other, Levels 3-5 were similar to each other, and the two groupings were statically different so that Levels 3-5 out performed Levels 1-2.

It is also important to know that engaging pedagogy was not associated with differences on the two learning outcomes, Course Improved Knowledge of Academic Services, and Course Improved Knowledge of Campus Policies/Procedures.

If the core goal of your first-year seminar is to communicate campus policies and introduce students to campus services, these data suggest that it may not matter how the information is presented to students, or that no campus has perfected engaging ways to present such information. If your seminar intends to produce learning outcomes in critical thinking, writing, reading, and oral presentation skills; connections with faculty; or time management skills, then a critical first-step is to ensure that seminars are delivered with a high level of engaging pedagogy. The use of a variety of teaching methods, challenging assignments, meaningful homework, and productive classroom time are associated with greater learning outcomes and higher student ratings on the Overall Course Effectiveness Factor. The FYI Survey is a way to measure the level of engaging pedagogy across first-year seminars and provides comparative benchmarks with peer institutions to guide improvement.

Randy Swing*
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Notes:

*See the FYI website at http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/essays/index.htm

*See the full set of survey items by factor at http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/2001surveyfactors.htm

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