

## First-Year Initiative (FYI) Overview

*Note: This essay is the first in a series of essays describing the results of a national survey of first-year seminar students. The series is archived at: <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/FYI/Index.htm>*

First-year seminars are a key feature of the first college year at over 70% of American institutions of higher education (USC National Resource Center research). While it is commonly reported that first-year seminars are among the most frequently assessed structures in American higher education, there are two serious deficiencies in the research literature on these programs. First, very few attempts at cross-institutional research have been reported – the kind of meta-analyses that could provide answers to important questions about the unique impact of various course structures. Second, it is not unusual to find assessment of grade point averages and retention, but far fewer studies have investigated broader learning outcomes of first-year seminars such as gains in skills and knowledge (writing, speaking, critical thinking, and campus specific information).

With grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Atlantic Philanthropies, The Policy Center on the First Year of College\* (links and notes provided at the end of this essay are noted with an asterisk), in partnership with Educational Benchmarking, Inc.\*, developed a two-page benchmarking survey designed for in-class administration during the last two weeks of first-year seminars. A small field test of the survey instrument was conducted in Spring 2000 at 8 institutions. After instrument refinement, a large-scale pilot administration was conducted in Fall 2001 at 62 institutions\* and with over 30,000 student respondents. The pilot institutions roughly approximated the proportion of 4-year American colleges across the Carnegie Classification system.

In-depth telephone interviews with seminar coordinators/directors explored the structural characteristics of first-year seminars on each campus. These interviews captured information about the inter-institutional variations at the section-level of the course so that campuses using multiple section structures could be properly coded. The institutional profile template is available at: <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/profile.htm>.

Survey responses were received in December, 2001. Analyses confirmed fourteen factors\* (constructs formed by a group of related questions – see factors and survey questions at [www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/2001surveyfactors.htm](http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/2001surveyfactors.htm)).

Each participating institution received individual analyses of their data and comparison to six peer institutions. Peer institution selection insured that comparisons were among institutions enrolling similar students and using similar first-year seminar formats. In other words, peer selection insured that comparisons were made, as nearly as possible, across equivalent institutional types, seminar formats, and student populations. Any differences in outcomes could reasonably be attributed, then, to differences in the quality/effectiveness of the seminar and used to confirm current practices or guide course improvements.

The FYI survey investigates fourteen aspects of first-year seminars. Ten factors are learning outcomes:

1. Course improved study strategies (Alpha\* = .91)
2. Course improved academic/cognitive skills (Alpha = .88)
3. Course improved critical thinking skills (Alpha = .91)
4. Course improved connections with faculty (Alpha = .77)
5. Course improved connections with peers/others (Alpha = .83)
6. Course increased out-of-class engagement (Alpha = .86)
7. Course improved knowledge of campus policies/procedures (Alpha = .82)
8. Course improved knowledge of campus services (Alpha = .82)
9. Course improved managing time/priorities (Alpha = .89)
10. Course improved knowledge of wellness/spirituality issues (Alpha = .92)

Two factors assessed the course delivery and course effectiveness:

11. Course included engaging pedagogy (Alpha = .91)
12. Overall course effectiveness (Alpha = .89)

Two factors assessed the overall satisfaction with the institution and “student/institution fit”:

13. Overall satisfaction with the institution (Alpha = .77)
14. Sense of belonging/acceptance (Alpha = .89)

Results of the 2001 pilot administration led to minor changes in the FYI instrument. A small number of questions were dropped, a few were added, and the new instructions provide options for reporting the outcomes of a course or an "experience" such as would be the case for a group of courses linked as a learning community or some other first-year initiative which is not limited to "a course." The second pilot administration is

jointly supported participating campuses and by grant funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies and The Pew Charitable Trusts. The open enrollment period continues through October 15, 2002. Information about this year's FYI survey is available at [www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/index.htm](http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/index.htm)

Randy Swing, August 28, 2002

*The next essay in this series investigates the role of engaging pedagogy as a predictor of seminar learning outcomes.*

#### Links and Notes:

- The Policy Center on the First Year of College - <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc>.
- Educational Benchmarking, Inc. – <http://www.webebi.com>
- The list of fall 2001 participating institutions - <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/ListofPilots.pdf>.
- Factors are formed by averaging responses from a group of questions which are designed to explore a single construct. For example, five questions about study skill practices might be combined into a single score to create a factor on study skills. Factors provide more stable and richer information than individual questions because they are composed of multiple views of the core construct.
- Alpha is a measure of internal consistency where 1.0 would be considered to be the best possible form of a factor. Generally, internal consistency at or above 0.70 is considered acceptable in social science research. The FYI factors were formed around constructs found in the research literature to matter in first-year programs and then statistically evaluated to form the final set of questions which comprise each factor.

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