Supporting Undecided Students: Assessing a First-Year Seminar and Learning Communities

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Today’s presentation

• Review the development and assessment of a program
• Designed to increase success of undecided FTICs (GPA, academic standing, retention)
• Involved several campus units
  – Undergraduate Studies
  – Other academic departments
  – Institutional Research
  – Student Affairs
• Evidence of efficacy
The outline...

• Context for the intervention
  – University of North Texas
  – Organization, student profile

• Literature
  – Undecided students
  – First-year seminars
  – Learning communities

• Program development

• The assessment plan

• Results

• Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations

• References
About UNT

- Main campus – Denton, TX
- Enrollment
  - 35,754 total headcount
  - 28,319 undergraduates
- Moderately selective
  - SAT 1105
  - ACT 23.4
- 11 Colleges/Schools
- Degrees
  - 97 Bachelor’s
  - 88 Master’s
  - 40 Doctoral
- Faculty
  - 1051 FT
  - 405 PT
- Median Class Size - 28
A few more items of interest...

• Gender
  – Female (54.0%)
• Ethnicity
  – White (58.1%)
  – African American (12.7)
  – Latino (15.4)
  – Asian (6.1)
  – Native American (1.4)
  – Non-resident Alien (5.1)
  – Other (1.2)
• Over 80% from <100 mi
• 25% Pell eligible
• 49% first-generation
• Students admitted into colleges and schools
• Mandatory three-day summer orientation
• FTIC retention rate – 78.5% (2010 cohort)
• Six-year graduation rate – 49.4% (2004 cohort)
Literature Review

• Undecided Students
  – Uncertain academic goals
  – Lack of certainty about a career

• One view...
  – Greater risk for attrition
  – Limits on academic progress

• Another view
  – No relationship between being “decided” and academic success
  – Comparable attrition risk levels
<table>
<thead>
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First-Year Seminars (FYS)

• Relatively common course-based student success intervention
• Described as a “movement”
• **Types** *(Hunter and Linder, 2005)*
  – Extended orientation
  – Academic seminar with generally uniform content
  – Academic seminar on various topics
  – Professional or disciplinary
  – Basic study skills
FYS Results

• Mixed, but generally positive, results
  – GPA
  – Retention
  – Graduation
• Williford, Chapman, and Kahrig (2001)
  – Higher GPA, retention, and graduation rates/Two-credit course, required
• Clark and Cundiff (2011)
  – Higher retention rate/Propensity score analysis
• Barton and Donahue (2009)
  – Higher GPA/Compared to other success interventions
Learning Communities (LCs)

- Another relatively common student success intervention
- Also described as a “movement”
- Course enrollment strategy allowing co-enrollment by cohort (Tinto, 1999)
- Curricular, living-learning, and virtual LCs (Laufgraben, 2005)
- FYS is a common course in LCs (Henscheid, 2004)
FYS/LC Outcomes

• Difficult to parse the differential outcomes

• Two studies

  – Potts and Schultz (2008)
    • FTIC Business students/retention, progression, GPA
    • At-risk sub-groups (off campus, ACT, HS rank)
    • FYS and FYS/LC – Higher retention for off campus students

  – Soldner, Lee, and Duby (1999)
    • FTIC/Academic standing, retention
    • FYS/LC – Higher percentage in good standing
Elements of the First-year Seminar (FYS)

- Three-credit, graded, core course (semester system)
- Topics course
- Learning outcomes
  - Think critically and creatively, learning to apply different systems of analysis - Journaling
  - Engage with a variety of others in thoughtful and well-crafted communication – Presentations (group and individual)
  - Be able to articulate the values that undergird their lives, the campus community, and the larger society – Values section of major paper
  - Cultivate self-awareness, balance, and an openness to change – Guided reflections on the self-assessments
- Our topic – Career and Major Exploration
Career and Major – Course elements

• Values, skills, personality, interests
  – Strong Interest Inventory
  – Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
  – Combined report (CPP – Skills One)
  – Values clarification

• Group interview within prospective major

• Individual career interview

• Decision-making

• Goal setting application
Success Topics

• Life of the mind
• Goal setting concepts
• Learning styles
• Time management
• Study skills (note-taking and test-taking)
• Diversity
• Campus engagement and resources
• Preparation for advising
• Information literacy
Course delivery

• Volunteer, SACS-qualified instructors
  – Advisors, Hall directors, Librarians, SA staff, Asst./Assoc. Deans,
• Instructor workshop
• Prepared lesson plans for each topical area
• “Brown bags” throughout the semester
• Blackboard site for all instructors
• Undergraduate peer mentor with each section
Instructor Training Essentials

- Student demographic profile
- Sample lesson plans
- Role playing
- Campus resource refresher
- Complete the assessments – MBTI, Strong Interest Inventory
- Making the most of the Peer Mentor relationship
Peer Mentor (PM) Essentials

• Successful upper class student (2.5 GPA; full-time)
• Hire and train in spring
• Refresh training before opening for fall
• Prospective PMs
  – Orientation leaders
  – Resident advisors
  – Supplemental Instruction leaders
  – Others?
PM Training

• Course content
  – “The 5-minute talk”
  – Buy them an instructor’s manual

• Campus resources

• Social media applications

• Active presence and credible witness

• Attend one course meeting per week
Planning Learning Communities

• Aim for completion by early spring semester
• Establish a single point of contact with the Registrar
• Survey advisors for course suggestions
• Work through department chairs for seats in sections
• Conceal the open seats in the registration system
• Agree on a release date for the seats
Our Approach

• Enrollment in two other required courses
• Mostly large enrollment sections of Core courses
• No curricular integration
• No “overhead” for faculty
• “Bundled” in the registration system (PeopleSoft)
• Required for all undecided students

In theory...
In reality...

- Dual credit, AP, CC credit
- Course scheduling conflicts
- Varying advising approaches
- Resulted in enrollments:
  - FYS/LC (n=165)
  - FYS only (n=69)
  - Neither (n=109)
- Not exactly random selection, but a nice quasi experimental design
- So, “Neither” becomes “Control”
Assessment

• Interested in three academic outcomes
  – GPA
  – % in good academic standing (GPA≥2.0)
  – Retention

• Measured at
  – End of fall semester
  – End of academic year

• No planned curricular integration
  (we didn’t examine individual course outcomes)
# Comparing the groups (Gender, Pell eligibility)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (%)</th>
<th>FYS/LC</th>
<th>FYS</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \chi^2 = 7.89, p = .207 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pell eligibility</th>
<th>FYS/LC</th>
<th>FYS</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \chi^2 = 3.69, p = .158 \)
Comparing the groups (SAT and HS rank)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAT (%)</th>
<th>FYS/LC</th>
<th>FYS</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High (&gt;1131)</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Med (1001-1130)</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (&lt;1000)</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = 7.33, \ p = .120$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HS rank (%)</th>
<th>FYS/LC</th>
<th>FYS</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High (&gt; 81)</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Med (64-80)</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (&lt;63)</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = 7.19, \ p = .126$
Comparing the groups (Ethnicity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity (%)</th>
<th>FYS/LC</th>
<th>FYS</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2=7.12, p=.714$
Notable distinctions

• Comparatively highest SATs in the Control group
• Most men in the FYS
• Comparatively more men in FYS/LC
• Fewest Pell eligible in the Control
• More lowest HS rank in FYS/LC
• Fewest women in the FYS
• Comparable ethnic distributions
# Academic Outcomes - Fall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>FYS/LC</th>
<th>FYS</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retention (%)</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t= 1.89, p≤0.06</td>
<td>t= -0.06, p≤0.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t= 2.28, p≤0.02</td>
<td>t= 2.19, p≤0.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Standing (%)</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t= 2.54, p≤0.01</td>
<td>t= 2.70, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fall outcomes summary

• FYS and FYS/LC showed improved academic outcomes
  – GPA
  – Academic standing
• FYS/LC showed sizeable but not significant positive difference in retention
• No difference between FYS and Control in retention
### Academic Outcomes - Year

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Retention (%)</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t= 1.37, p≤0.17</td>
<td>t= -0.08, p≤0.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t= 1.23, p≤0.22</td>
<td>t= 1.67, p≤0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Standing (%)</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t= 0.35, p≤0.73</td>
<td>t= 0.86, p&lt;0.39</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Academic Year Outcomes

- Numerical differences remain
- All significant differences diminish
- Note that the FYS and Retention rates are again nearly identical
- And what happened to the overall retention rate of undecided students?
Encouraging data...

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Implications

• FYS/LC is tantalizingly promising as a retention tool for undecided students.
• FYS alone not so much.
• FYS showed encouraging results in GPA and academic standing.
• FYS/LC less so.
• Overall decline in efficacy through the academic year suggests a Spring intervention might be fruitful.
Limitations and Recommendations

• Limitations
  – Single campus study
  – Self-selection bias
  – Variability within FYS treatment (instruction, peer mentors)

• Recommendations
  – Include engagement and satisfaction measures
  – Add curricular integration
  – Measure learning
  – Look at individual course outcomes
Selected References


A final few.


QUESTIONS?