

FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Approximately one-third of each year full-time entering freshmen are not at the same institution one year later (Noel & Levitts 1993). While after the first to second year transition persistence rates improve dramatically, this initial attrition percentage represents a significant loss of student potential and institutional resources. What are the most common reasons for attrition? What strategies have institutions taken to reduce this statistic? What programs or actions have been most successful? A comprehensive review of literature and some recent national surveys will indicate some successful endeavors and programs. One of the most successful, which this presentation will then focus on, are programs and courses that “help freshmen connect to their new environment.”

A survey of over 1,000 institutions by the National Resource Center for First Year Experiences (2000) indicated that 74% responded that they offered some special courses for first year students. These courses have met with acceptance, rejection and mostly suspicion by many faculty. The presentation will review this information and delve into what the purpose is of such courses, what has been the problem in developing and offering these courses, how do they differ, and what really are the true results.

The presentation will end with a review of Kutztown University College of Business successful development and offering of a Freshman Seminar students majoring in Business and some recent happenings that may put what has become a successful program in jeopardy.

IN THE BEGINNING

Ever wonder where the word freshman came from? Maybe it's a good beginning point.

Actually, it first appeared in 1550 and was used to describe a newcomer or novice in a field of endeavors. It took 40 years – 1590, when it referred to first year students in the English University, and has been with us ever since.

The first American freshmen, of course, were at Harvard in the fall of 1638. From that time to the early 1920's, entering students called freshmen devoted themselves almost exclusively to the task of gaining acceptance among the privileged few or to their mentors. It was the education process! Freshmen had to become accustomed to being told what to do – others knew what was right. They had to fit in – they had to earn the right to become educated! Very little coddling was done.

Not until the early 1900's did we see an effort to help freshmen gain acceptance and support. My research has uncovered early college publications, e.g. 1921 University of Michigan publication, “Advice to Freshmen by Freshmen” or even as early as 1913, an English professor at the University of Arizona wrote a manual, “The

Freshman and His College,” containing chapters entitled, “What a College Education Really Means” and “Freshmen Difficulties and Dangers.”

So we began seeing a shift, a concern to help freshmen “fit in better”.

Scrutiny of freshman students became even more sophisticated in the 50's contemporary history, probably due to the number of new colleges forming and the need to hold on to the only students on the campus in the institution's first years.

In the 60's, 70's and 80's, a number of factors came together that convinced college administrators and faculty that programs were needed to help freshmen learn about the college system and deal with it successfully. Factors such as the fact that many new students were the first members of their families to go beyond high school, more open access to higher education, competitive forces, government programs, etc.

The 90's produced lots of research, and theories on helping students be oriented to college. Words like student “persistence,” “retention rate,” with a corresponding number of publications and seminars on these topics resulted in a large number of

institutions developing, offering, and in many cases, requiring a course for freshmen.

In fact, today over 75% of all colleges and universities offer a special course for first year students.

But here also lies some confusion as well as strong ongoing debate on freshmen courses.

While most institution administrators indeed like freshmen experience programs as a way of reducing attrition and supporting a premise that an institution has a responsibility to provide maximum opportunity for freshmen success, not an equal percent of faculty agree that the institution has the responsibility to reduce freshmen attrition nor agree with what they perceive as coddling the students – more on this later.

THE FRESHMAN COURSE

Let's first define what a freshman experience course is. Although called a variety of names, Freshman Seminar, First Year Experience, University Studies, Student Success Course, etc., the course is designed to enhance the academic, personal, and social integration of first term or first year students. While course content varies widely, most focus on the freshman "connection" to the institution.

Areas such as helping students to "connect" with the environment helping students make the transition to college and helping the student work towards their goals in term of academic major, degree and career and helping students succeed in the classroom are the major thrusts.

Back to the question of "why" a freshman experience course please refer to the pass out #1. This lists eight of the main reasons and for time sake, I will not read them, but allow me to share with you some quantitative "why's" as well.

1. Approximately 25% of each year's full-time entering freshmen are not at the same institution one year later. More than any other, the freshman year presents attrition hazards that institutions are concerned about.
2. The freshman's most critical transition period occurs during the first two to six weeks, and of the students who do drop out during the term of the freshman year, half drop out in the first six weeks.

3. Studies of the cause of freshman attrition refute some of the commonly held assumptions about dropping out – a large majority are not flunk outs or withdraw due to financial problems. Causes such as incompatibility, uncertainty about a major, transition difficulty, academic under preparedness, unrealistic expectations of college, time management difficulties, a sense of irrelevance, academic boredom.
4. Numerous studies have suggested and demonstrated that if students make it through the first year successfully, the chances that they will persist improves dramatically. Data examined suggests that attrition generally decreases by almost 50% with each passing year of a student's education.

A NATIONAL RESEARCH STUDY

A few years ago at another institution, I was involved with a national study sponsored by the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience.

That study consisted of a survey instrument that was mailed to vice presidents for academic affairs at all regionally accredited colleges and universities with a student population of 200 or more, resulting in a little over 2,500 institutions. Over 1,000 responded to the survey (actually 40%), and of this number just about 75% reported that they offered a special course for first year students.

The type of courses or offerings varied and I have clustered them into six types reflected in pass out #2.

Since this large study and continuing research by me, there appears a shift to more required freshmen courses that would be grouped under Academic Course with Common Content Across Sections plus I have noticed more freshmen courses being housed within colleges and would be under the heading Professional Course.

Some other particulars of the survey were that over 60% carried two or more academic credits and the application of credit was interesting. Please refer to the passout #3.

As you can see:

43% of first year courses carried elective credit

35% carried general education credit

22% carried credit towards core requirement

5% carried credit towards major requirement.

On passout #3 also is information on who teaches these courses, and I added some stats on training as well. I found interesting the academic advising statistic.

KUTZTOWN UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE

Let me digress quickly to tell you how I got involved with this area and then more on to some recent involvement. I was a full-time faculty member at Allentown College of St. Francis DeSales, now DeSales University (near Allentown) for 10 years when the president asked me to take a year off from teaching and work on three projects. First, help change the name of the institution; second, develop an institutional marketing plan; and three, develop some strategies to help retention and reduce attrition. I got deeply involved with freshmen experience courses at the time.

I came to KU about four years ago at the same time that they decided to offer a course entitled, "First Year Seminar in Business", which was a course required by all freshmen entering the College of Business. Its primary purpose was, I believe, an initiative by the administration to improve retention. The faculty buy-in was mainly offering a common experience to all freshmen business majors. The selection of faculty to teach the many course sections I believe was to pick the "more student-centered faculty." Faculty who were perhaps more open, approachable and empathic to students and their needs. Ten to eleven sections are offered each fall, taught by six or seven different faculty. The course is taught many different ways, with different approaches, different content and indeed, different objectives. A committee was formed about a year ago to look at the course and to develop a common syllabus containing a course description, course rationale, learning goals, and objectives. We (I was a member of that committee) completed our charge. It is in our dean's hands and it will probably go to the current faculty teaching it for reaction and discussion, and perhaps implementation.

Along side this, I am also a member (the past 2-1/2 years of weekly meetings) of the University's General Education Restructuring Team,

where we are looking at the institution's general education requirements and developing a new institutional model. In doing much research at what other institutions are doing, I chaired a small committee to look at potential of the first year course for freshmen. Our final model (which will be released in about four weeks) will contain such a course entitled "A First Year Inquiry". The restructuring team and administration realize this is a course that will result in a great deal of debate, lots of strong feelings and lots of incorrect perceptions. It will be an interesting spring when the new model goes to the faculty for a vote. You can see how my immersion in both of these endeavors first year course for COB students, first year course for other ed. Re-established my involvement in this area once again.

If any of you are interested in what we are doing at KU in either area, I will be happy to answer questions at the end or talk throughout the conference.

RECENT HAPPENINGS

My experience at KU with two similar courses reflect what additional research I have done on more recent happenings.

- There has not been a substantial increase in institutions offering such courses, so perhaps the 75% figure is now 80%. In fact, with emphasis from state legislature or state system to increase retention to attrition figures being used as a barometer or exclusive criteria, to competition among departments, more institutions are developing offering.
- More institutions are relocating freshmen seminar courses within professional schools/colleges where there appears more faculty buy-in.
- Faculty in many disciplines under a liberal arts and sciences are less open, less embracing of freshmen experiences. Those debates appear to be centered around course content and academic rigor.
- While retention is undoubtedly a main goal of such programs and courses, there appears a shifting of the focus on what institutions can do to contribute to student success.

- There appears more hybrid models out there, one credit courses offered through student services, to a one credit five week course introductory course to critical thinking/writing combined with a one credit discipline based course. All perhaps providing support to a student's need for personal, career and transition assistance.
- As more and more students pursue college, we are finding that they come from a host of diverse backgrounds, including levels of academic preparation, personal unpreparedness, age, and socio-economic, making such courses more popular and perhaps needed.
- A large number of studies suggest that students who have taken a freshman course were less likely to drop out than non-participants.

FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDED

Further research is always good (and needed) in this case and my discussions with many institutions indicate the need in a few areas outlined below with questions. One is:

The Assessment of such Courses

- Are there links to better retention/less attrition?
- Are there links to higher grade point averages?
- Is there any link as to grades in these courses being a predictor of academic achievement or persistence?
- Do freshmen who take these courses know more about the institution, use student support services more, get involved with life on campus, etc.?

If There is a "Correlation" to Any of the Above - Why?

- Is it course content?
- Is it the instructor of the course?
- Is it the pedagogy used in the course?

The Debate Questions

- What should be taught in a freshman course? Orientation to the college, orientation to the learning process and orientation to the desired major?
- How things should be taught in such a course? Writing intensive, group projects, team taught, interactive and active learning pedagogy?
- And the degree of rigor and/or nurturing needed in such course.

PASSOUT #1

Why a First-Year Seminar?

1. Concern about student retention
2. Academic skills development (writing, oral communication, critical thinking, library skills, computer skills)
3. Providing an orientation to campus resources and facilities
4. Interaction – with fellow students and faculty
5. Linking theory and practice – involvement, community, institutional commitment, goal commitment, social/academic integration
6. Exploring the purpose of higher education and institutional mission
7. Beginning the process of career planning
8. Filling the gaps in the traditional curriculum: "What first-year students need to know"

PASSOUT #2

Types of Offerings

Extended Orientation Course (n=465)

62.1% of first-year seminars offer a blend of topics essential for student success.

Sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, or student success courses. May be taught by faculty, administrators, and/or student affairs professionals. Content will likely include introduction to campus resources, time management,

study skills, career planning, cultural diversity, and student development issues.

Academic Course with Common Content Across Sections (n=125)

Represents 16.7% of first-year seminars. These courses focus on a single topic or theme (i.e. diversity, environment)

May either be an elective or a required course, sometimes interdisciplinary or them oriented, sometimes a part of a required general education core. Will often include academic skills components such as critical thinking and expository writing.

Academic Course on Various Topics (n=96)

Represents 12.8% of first-year seminars. Section topics determined by instructors.

Topics may evolve from any discipline or may include societal issues such as biological and chemical warfare, urban culture, animal research, tropical rain forests, and the AIDS epidemic.

Professional Course (n=20)

2.7% of seminars are attached to professional schools or disciplines such as engineering, nursing, and business.

Generally taught to prepare students for the demands of the major and the profession.

Basic Study Skills Course (n=27)

Represents 3.6% of first-year seminars. Most likely was found at non-selective institutions.

Generally offered for academically under prepared students. Will focus on such basic skills as grammar, note taking and time management.

Other (n=16)

2.1% are a mix of any or all of the above topics.

PASSOUT #3

Application of Credit

43.2% of first-year seminars carry elective credit.

34.8% carry general education credit

22.1% carry credit toward core requirements

4.8% carry credit toward major requirements

6.0% carry other credit (i.e. graduation requirement, college requirement, non-degree credit).

Instructors, Instructor Training, and Academic Advising

Instructors:

89.1% of seminars are taught by faculty

53.9% are taught by student affairs professionals.

37.0% are taught by campus administrators

18.9% are taught by upper-level undergraduate students (9.6%) graduate students (4.8%), or others (4.5%)

Team Teaching:

32.7% of seminars are co-taught

Training of Instructors:

76.2% of institutions with first-year seminars offer instructor training for seminar instructors.

47.7% of institutions consider training a prerequisite for teaching.

Academic Advising:

In 19.9% of institutions, the first-year seminar instructor is the academic advisor for all students in that seminar.

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