

Offering the First-Year Seminar (FYS) as a Required or Elective Course: Pros & Cons

Potential disadvantages associated with making the FYS mandatory include the following:

* It may generate more political resistance from faculty (Gardner, 1989), and it may necessitate an increase in the number of units required for graduation.

* Research on student evaluations of college courses indicates that student perceptions (course evaluations) are lower for courses they are *required* to take than for courses they *elect* to take (Abrami, d'Apollonia, & Cohen, 1990; Cashin, 1995). This increases the risk that students will resent being there, which may have adverse effects on classroom climate and the teaching-learning process. This may make teaching the seminar more difficult for instructors and may also result in resentful students badmouthing the course, thereby tarnishing its reputation.

* A large number of instructors may be needed to cover all sections of a FYS that is required of all entering students. The demand for a sizable number of instructors may reduce the course director's capacity to selectively recruit the very best candidates to teach the course, perhaps to the point where instructor recruitment becomes tantamount to finding enough "warm bodies" to cover all course sections.

On the other side of the ledger, if the seminar is offered as a requirement, it will ensure that all students who *need* the course to be successful in college cannot opt out of it. Research indicates that students who are most likely to benefit from support programs are often those who are least likely to seek out these programs on their own (Knapp & Karabenick, 1988; Abrams & Jernigan, 1984); Levin & Levin, 1991). Thus, if the seminar is offered as an elective, it may only reach the choir or the already converted —i.e., those students who are motivated enough to take it. In contrast, if the seminar is delivered as a requirement, it implements the time-honored retention principle of "intrusive" program delivery, meaning that the *college initiates* supportive action by *reaching out* and *delivering it* to students, rather than offering the program passively and hoping that students will come to take advantage of it (Beal and Noel, 1980). Delivering the FYS as a required course implements the principle of *intrusive* delivery and circumvents the limitations of "passive programming" by ensuring that the course reaches all students who will profit from it, thus giving it the potential to exert pervasive or systemic effects on first-year students. Furthermore, on many campuses there are no other courses that all students take in common. Thus, the FYS becomes the one-and-only curricular vehicle for ensuring delivering of information that all undergraduates should receive (Hunter & Linder, 2005). It could be argued that a FYS that all new students experience in common may simulate or approximate the advantages associated with a true core curriculum by providing a "core" learning experience that is shared by all students.

Since strong arguments can be offered on both sides of the issue of whether the FYS should be offered as an elective or required course, individual campuses may need to conduct their own cost/benefit analysis and resolve this issue in a manner that is most congruent with the college's

historical mission, current priorities, and prevailing campus culture. If the institution's culture and curriculum are amenable to addition of the FYS as a required course, there are significant and compelling advantages to doing so. However, if attempting to do so is likely to trigger intense resistance and hostility, then discretion may be the better part of valor. Securing approval to offer the FYS as an elective is better than running the risk of inciting such rabid resistance to a required FYS that the option of offering the course in any form is lost or killed in the process.

If the FYS is offered as an elective, how will students be *recruited* or encouraged to enroll in the course?

Offering the course as an elective may necessitate vigorous course marketing and student recruitment to ensure that the course reaches a substantial number of students. The following strategies are recommended for promoting course enrollment and maximizing the number of new students who experience the benefits of the FYS.

(a) Make early contact with prospective students in advance of the course-registration period. For instance, new students could be contacted during the summer and encouraged to enroll in the course via letters, electronic messages, phone calls (e.g., from peer leaders), or personal invitations during summer orientation. A personal letter could be constructed that highlights the course's benefits and interesting features, thereby encouraging student enrollment.

(b) Creating attractive websites, brochures, pamphlets, posters, or tee shirts that showcase the course's distinctive features and benefits, and make them very visible during new-student orientation and registration. Brochures could include course-endorsing quotes from high-ranking college officials and former FYS students (e.g., positive student comments made on their course evaluations).

(c) Enlist the support of academic advisors to encourage students to register for the course.

(d) Enlist the interest and support of the parents of new students by showcasing how the course can enhance their son or daughter's initial transition to college and subsequent success throughout college. This type of "parent recruitment" may take the form of a letter or brochure that is included in summer mailings to families of new students, in the first edition of a parent or family newsletter published by the college, or during parent (family) orientation. The increasing cost of and demand for a college education, coupled with the increasingly doting nature of parents of today's "millennial students" may combine to produce high levels of parental expectation and anxiety about their student's success (Keeling, 2003). Thus, parents may be eager and effective student recruiters for any college program that they know has been intentionally designed to promote their son or daughter's success.

A good illustration of an effective student-recruitment program for an elective FYS is the multi-modal approach utilized at the University of South Carolina, where more than 80% of new students enroll in the course (University 101). The following set of strategies is used to promote student enrollment in University 101:

(a) The course director speaks to all entering students and their parents at each summer-orientation session offered by the university.

- (b) The director works with student orientation leaders to inform them about the course and how to promote recruitment.
- (c) Letters and information packets about the course are sent to all academic advisors.
- (d) Parents of traditional-aged students are mailed a letter that appraises them of the course's benefits.

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