

“Freshman Interest Groups: Designing A Model For Success”

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Abstract

Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS) have become a popular model for academic and student affairs colleagues who are concerned that first-year students learn to reflect on life experiences and daily events as part of the learning process. A well-designed FIG model meets the academic, social and career concerns for first-year students by providing an immediate and inclusive support system in a campus living-and-learning environment. In addition, a well-designed FIG model includes a coordinated syllabus of classroom assignments, small group projects, and residence hall activities that foster an integrative experience in each of the linked courses in the FIG. The focus is holistic, to weave together a seamless array of shared classes in specific disciplinary subjects, residential programs and collaborative student group projects.

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In designing a freshman Interest Group (FIG) model to enhance the potential success of first year students, it is important that we as faculty serve as facilitators who elicit student responses, promote reflective learning principles and encourage collaborative problem solving. An essential ingredient in an interactive FIG is that it feature cooperative teaching and learning techniques as well as small group process learning activities. The focus is holistic, weaving together faculty academic knowledge and first year student personal or practical experience to enrich a “group learning” dynamic. The FIG model itself—for both faculty and students—should be a seamless instructional experience of shared classes in specific disciplinary subjects, collaborative group study, individualized faculty and peer mentoring, experiential options and an opportunity to engage in personal development activities that are more likely to enrich a student’s academic and personal success.

### Teaching Strategy

First year students are in the initial stages of transition and assimilation—making and awkward adjustment to their new role as independent thinkers as they explore different avenues of access to a more competitive academic and cultural environment. Traditional instructional approaches (e. g., formal lecture, text interpretation, comparative analysis or theoretical perspectives) may not initially address more basic first year student needs (e.g., time management, critical thinking skills, information literacy and lack of experience self-directed small group projects.)

Faculty who may be accustomed to setting classroom expectations for active participation and consistent preparedness will no doubt be surprised to discover that a FIG model is more successful when it is framed more as a “skills” class than a content

class. Rather than routinely memorizing content or concepts, first year students must be more actively engaged in first understanding and then applying new knowledge to their own personal experiences or to familiar contexts. Our FIG teaching strategies, therefore, should include a more frequent use of illustrative examples, role-playing exercises, and group problem-solving assignments when first year students are asked to translate their critical thinking skills into specific arguments or contextual points of view.

### Basic Principles

The FIG model provides an immediate and inclusive support system for first year students. Typically, courses included in the FIG model are those that would be taken by first year students as basic foundation courses for an anticipated field of study, e.g. liberal arts major, teacher preparation, business administration, pre-law, medicine or health sciences among others. The FIG model is frequently used to deliver General Education course requirements or prerequisite courses to institutional programs e.g. honors, multi-cultural studies, women's and gender studies issues, environmental studies, international programs or allied health professions. The FIG model may also target identified first year populations, e.g. athletes, students at-risk, special admits, adult learners, historically under-represented students, international students or students with disabilities.

### FIG Template

An ideal FIG template for first year students enrolls one cohort of fifteen students and provides an equivalent quarter or semester course load of three or more courses across academic disciplines that integrate different learning skills and modes of inquiry. The basic foundation of the template includes both a writing and a speaking course linked with one or more content course and an applied or theoretical foundations course. There is a faculty team coordinated syllabus of reading, writing and speaking assignments as well as small group project activities that foster an integrative learning experience in each of the linked courses in the template. The FIG template is generally based on a unifying

theme, significant issue, historical period, current event, or ethical/moral question, e.g., “Film and Society,” “The Politics of Religion,” “The Psychology of Women,” “Technology and Global Warming,” “Our Classical Heritage,” or “The History of Rock-and-Roll.”

The FIG model features a mid-morning to late afternoon sequential schedule of classes determined by content sequence, and includes a weekly or bi-weekly evening seminar or open forum slot for selected plenary sessions and student collaborative projects to be shared for comment. The template may include blocked class time set aside for relevant field trips, invited guest speakers or social events that give added dimension to the inked courses and promote integrative learning experiences as well. Classroom time should also be set aside for timely assessment of student responses to all learning activities or educational experiences designed for the FIG template.

### Residential Component

A FIG model might include a residential component as well. The residential component is essentially a theme-based residence floor that reinforces the academic content and program activities of the FIG. Frequent daily interaction of faculty and students living and working together in a shared space presents an unlimited number of positive and productive educational and social engagement opportunities e.g. small group dining, informal mentoring, film series, book discussions, poetry readings and field trips to museums, theatre events or historical sites. The residential FIG model emphasizes an integrative perspective for students to translate theory into practice through group study assignments, and residential faculty play a more active role in planning collaborative co-curricular events. The residential FIG model also encourages first year students to identify their own supportive peer groups and engage in more purposeful activities outside the classroom environment.

### Additional Dimension

The FIG model presents abundant opportunities for first year students to engage in experiential or service learning projects that promote collaborative, shared learning experiences beyond linked classes or the residence hall environment. An experiential learning component—e.g., group visits to an art exhibition, lecture series, community symposium, panel discussion or athletic contest—may offer an alternative delivery mode to promote group learning exercises or encourage more active classroom discussion of course learning objectives. Similarly, a service learning component—e.g., group volunteer projects, reading hours at the campus literacy center, tutoring assignments in local high schools or visits to area hospitals and nursing homes—may also provide a more practical application and understanding of the course curriculum.

### Lessons Learned

Designing a FIG model that fosters academic success and promotes a profound sense of community for first year students through purposeful activities is a challenge that offers measurable rewards as well as meaningful lessons learned. (1) FIG faculty need to begin meeting one year in advance to determine speaking and writing assignments, plan group projects, schedule guest speakers, set a social calendar of events and identify collaborative activities that may be integrated with the FIG theme. (2) FIG students will need an orientation session the first scheduled day of class to receive a syllabus and an introduction to the pedagogical practices at work in the FIG. (3) Cultivate a close working relationship with the institutional assessment officer to explore appropriate evaluative instruments to measure the effectiveness of the FIG program design and to measure student cognitive and affective responses to FIG activities. (4) FIG models that include a residential component will need to work closely with the campus residence life office to identify needs for student housing and space for meeting rooms, small group

rehearsals or workshops and social events. (5) Identifying a mature student with a FIG-theme related interest to serve as peer assistant will provide an additional measure of support in program planning and project coordination.

## Summary

The primary role of designing a FIG model is to promote collaborative teaching and learning that connects individual courses from separate academic disciplines to enrich the intellectual life and sense of community for first year students and participating faculty. From both an epistemological and pedagogical perspective, the FIG model is an invaluable strategic blueprint that fosters a social context for learning, provides interdisciplinary learning opportunities, makes explicit curricular connections through themes or texts and promotes an integrated and interactive learning environment.

## References

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