

First-Year Seminar (FYS)—The Advantages That This Course Offers

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Abstract

First-Year Seminar (FYS) is an introductory class offered to first-year students to help them acclimate to the college environment, develop effective strategies for studying, and learn techniques that will allow them to swiftly complete small assignments and sizable research projects. In 2014, approximately 80 percent of universities offered FYS, and students who took the course, on average, were less likely to transfer to another school and more likely to receive higher grades. The class allows students to learn more information about the college, select courses that are related to their majors and/or minors, effectively utilize resources while they are studying, cooperate with other students to complete projects, and appreciate the benefits of taking a particular course. FYS also enriches the experiences of first-year students by helping them find organizations of interest, understand university policies, and pursue hobbies while attending the college. At some colleges, students who have already taken a FYS course volunteer to become mentors who provide assistance to first-year students while they are taking the class. Analysis has shown that a high percentage of new enrollees indicated that mentors had a very positive impact on their overall experiences. Moreover, at many colleges and universities, there were increases in the retention rate.

Keywords: students, course, FYS, professor, freshman, college, and mentors

1. Introduction

First-Year Seminar (FYS) was created to address the high dropout rate of students at colleges and universities as a result of their inability to transition to collegiate life as shown in Figure 1 below (CourseHero, 2011). Although first-year students enjoy the independence of choosing their classes, many have a difficult time with the accountability that comes with preparing for exams, independent study, and engagement in the classroom. For example, when students are in high school, teachers actively urge them to complete their homework on time and to study effectively for tests. Many teachers provide numerous reminders before an exam, and some teachers will allow students to spend time studying for an upcoming test during a class. In contrast, professors at colleges and universities generally provide only one or two reminders of a test, and if the student is not in the class during the day of the exam, the student will usually not be allowed to complete it. FYS provides students with an understanding about these types of changes in order to prepare them for the years ahead.

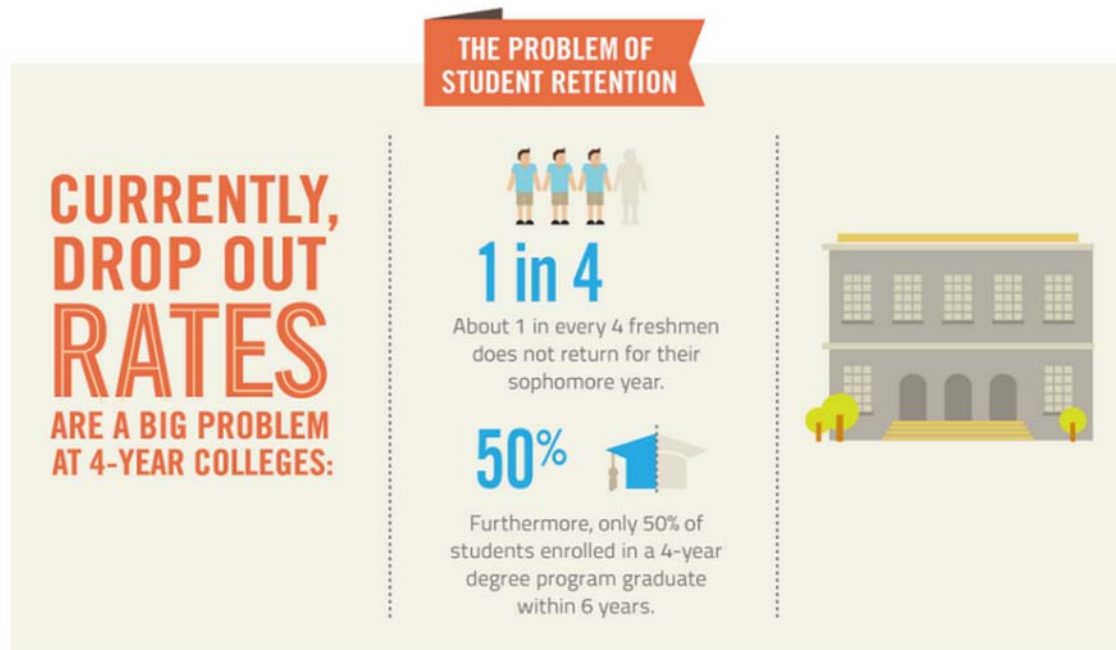


Figure 1. Difficulty in adapting to college life

At many colleges and universities, there are approximately 20-30 FYS courses given each semester taught by professors from various academic departments. These courses are structured to provide students with an exposure to specific academic areas such as business, history, science, and the arts and to improve their development skills such as time management, coping with stress, and interviewing skills (Padgett, 2013). The major learning goals of these FYS courses include foundations for global learning, campus & community connections, life skills, and strategies for academic success as shown below in Figure 2 (Boettler, 2012).

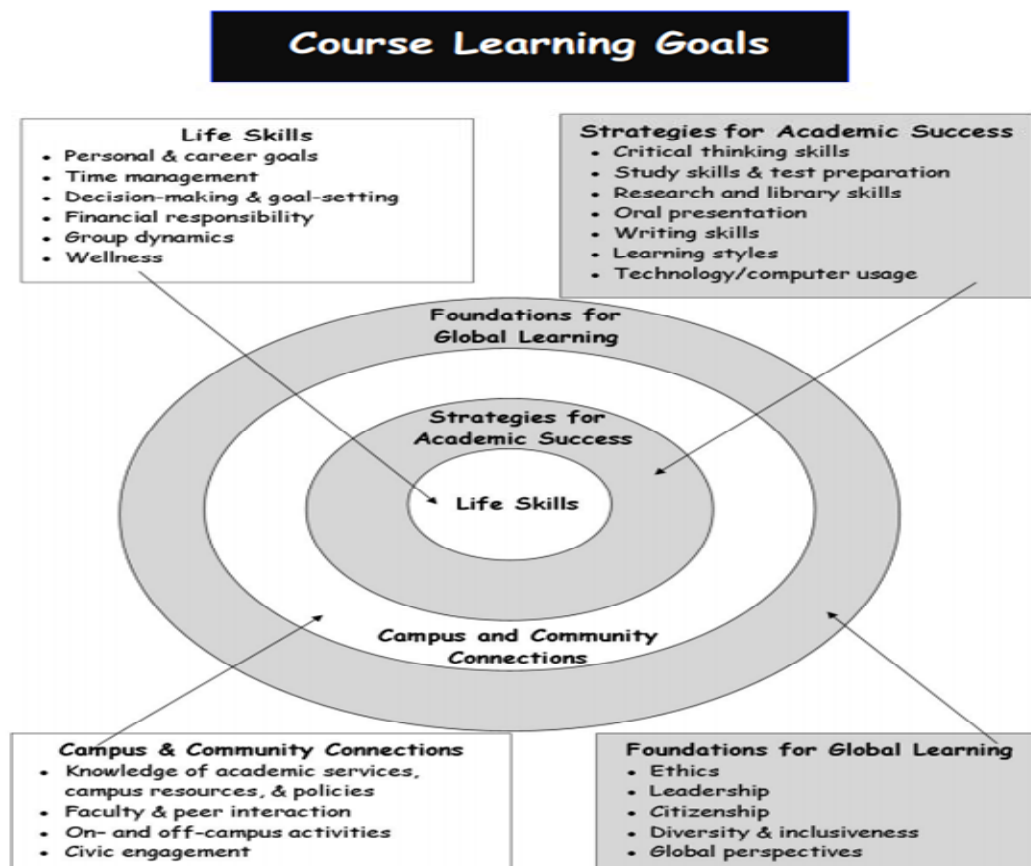


Figure 2. FYS major learning goals

2. Core Areas Covered in the FYS Course for Freshman Students

2.1 Credit Hours

One of the first things a FYS professor will teach in class is the number of credits a student needs in order to graduate. A professor may offer handouts that specify the maximum amount of courses that can be taken during each semester. Furthermore, the professor might help students decide how many classes to take per year by recounting the experiences of other students.

2.2 Grades

If the FYS course relates to a certain major or a branch of the school, the teacher will likely specify the minimum grades that the student needs to receive in order to major in that curriculum. The professor will also advise first-year students in determining the courses that they must take, if required, for their minors.

Student mentors might assist students in the calculation of their overall grades by analyzing the scores for tests, homework, and presentations. When explaining each major, these seasoned students may provide information that they gained from first-hand experience.

2.3 Resources

Professors and student mentors will also provide first-year students with information about the school's library, the college's bookstore, or the main newspaper on the campus (Cooper, 2002). New students are guided about the computers or types of equipment that are rarely used, sections of the library that contain books that are related to a particular course or locations on the campus that are optimal for studying. Student mentors can also help first-year students use vital features of the university's website in order to sign up for classes or to modify their information. Professors, in turn, can also help students effectively scan books for important ideas and to find newspapers with articles that relate to their homework.

2.4 Language

The majority of universities typically require students to take at least two foreign language courses, and according to numerous analyses, students commonly take these classes during their first year at the school. In FYS, professors advise students on which language will be most useful for their topics of interest, and the professor can assist the first-year students when they are determining which courses are available.

Student mentors who have already taken certain language classes can also assist students by letting them borrow some of the materials that were used for the course. An involved student mentor can even practice the language with the first-year student before a test.

2.5 Alcohol Consumption

With the freedom and independence of being in a new environment, many first-year students attend parties and engage in alcohol consumption and in some cases binge drinking. FYS commonly outlines the negative, long-term effects of binge drinking and specify the percentage of people who drink heavily at universities every year. Professors dispel myths around particular techniques can help a person become sober more swiftly. Moreover, professors provide effective strategies for taking care of a friend who has had too many drinks. Recent studies show that students who take a course that covers these topics are less likely to get into trouble that is related to drinking alcohol.

2.6 Hobbies

During FYS, the professor can offer strategies for utilizing hobbies to increase students' success while they are at the university. A professor might encourage freshmen to meet new friends when they are running, lifting weights or playing a sport, or professors may help students find others who enjoy similar hobbies (Anderson, Lerstrom, & Tintle, 2014). Additionally, the professor might make students aware of facilities that relate to their particular interests.

2.7 Local Community

At some universities, students will learn about the community in which the college is situated, and the professor will encourage students to participate in local projects and in the city's government. Students who take FYS at certain schools will receive extra credit for being involved in community service that is designed to help disadvantaged residents of cities near the university. Student mentors can explain the activities that are performed in numerous types of community service and recount the experiences of older students who were involved in similar local projects. Subsequently, freshmen are generally required to give a presentation about their service during a class.

2.8 Techniques for Studying

According to some analyses, 62 percent of freshmen only begin to prepare for tests two days before taking the exams; however, 27 percent of students who have participated in a class that provides strategies for studying do not wait until the last minute to study for tests. FYS may also offer strategies for effectively highlighting vital information on handouts, and the professor will likely teach students techniques that will help them take more detailed notes during a class.

At some colleges, students will be taught a wide variety of methods for mitigating the effects of distractions while they are studying. This includes hands on sessions prioritizing requests and dealing with stress. The professor and/or mentor might give a student a list of places on campus that are specifically designed for students who want to study without interruptions.

2.9 Housing

At some universities, the professor will explain the process of signing up for a room in a dormitory on the campus and offer techniques for renting a house or an apartment that is located near the school. Moreover, the teacher might provide in-depth information about the college's policies, such as requirements for freshmen or sophomores to live on campus, the maximum number of students who can reside in a single room, or the yearly cost of each type of housing offered. A mentor might help new enrollees to determine which dorms offer better amenities and how to search for the "ideal" roommates.

3. Important Factors That Help in Implementing the Overall FYS Process and Success

3.1 Mentors

A wide range of college and universities are allowing mentors to participate in the class, and in some cases, each mentor may be assigned to a group of students. These experienced students help FYS students to find services on the campus, to meet friends who share similar interests and to use new technology to finish homework. One analysis indicates that new students are substantially more likely to ask important questions when they are talking to a FYS mentor (Tucker, 2014).

The course's mentor will teach students to utilize the syllabus that each professor provides. The freshmen may also be taught to use online resources that are created by the college, and these platforms will offer the dates of tests, the due dates for homework and lists of upcoming projects. Some of these software programs also allow students to see their overall grades in a class and to determine the scores that they received on exams or presentations.

A comprehensive study showed that students who have a mentor are 37 percent less likely to miss a class than the majority of students. The presence of a mentor also reduces the risk of using alcohol by 27 percent (Terrion, 2007).

3.2 Academic Advisor/Counselors

An experienced Academic Advisor is appointed for each student in the first year for the students who take admission into the university. After students determine their majors, they will likely select advisors who teach courses that are related to the field of study that they have chosen. A professor who manages FYS will be able to offer lists of highly experienced counselors for each major. A mentor may help a freshman select an advisor by explaining some of the experiences that other students have had while particular professors were assisting them.

At Bronx Community College (BCC), an advisement model was implemented to assist incoming freshman. This model was put forth to increase student achievement in the areas of academic success, personal development, adjustment to college life, and an increase in the rate of retention. During the first year at the college, students are assigned an academic advisor. The advisor's objective is for students to be accountable in achieving their short-term and long-term academic goals (Legasa & Bondar, 2015). Advisors become very visible in each FYS course by visiting each class several times over the span of a semester. They discuss and explain to each FYS class the benefits of advisement, and set-up appointments with each student by passing around an advisement sign-up form. To keep students engaged through-out the semester, a portion of student's final grade relies on students upholding their advisement appointments.

In addition, advisors work with faculty, college staff, and mentors throughout each semester to monitor student's academic progress. Students' attendance records, mid-term grades, engagement with faculty and mentors are maintained so that students that are "at-risk" of failing are contacted and appropriate guidance are provided to them. Moreover, quality control of advisement is maintained through careful review of electronic advisement forms, detailed notation in the advisement tracking database and end of semester student surveys. The results from the FYS student surveys showed great satisfaction with the advisement and support students have received. In spring 2014, 97% of FYS students reported being very satisfied or satisfied with their advisors willingness to help. Of the fall 2014 FYS students, 93.9% reported being very satisfied or satisfied with their "First Year Program" advisement experience (Legasa & Bondar, 2015).

3.3 Interacting with Professors and Cooperating with Other Students

Many colleges have opted to reduce the number of students who participate in each course. As a result, students are able to ask the professor more questions and are more engaged with additional inquiries during the class. Professors are able to teach students how to communicate with their professors and ask appropriate questions. Students will learn to complete numerous tasks and projects together. Certain professors provide handouts that help freshmen to build on the ideas of other people in a group. After the exercise, a professor may require students to take surveys with questions about the effectiveness of collaborating with other freshmen while they are studying or finishing homework.

As someone who has been teaching at the school for many years, a mentor may introduce freshmen to older students who have already taken a course. These students can offer information about the tests and homework of a particular class, and they might provide detailed explanations of the professor's style of teaching.

3.4 Designing an Agenda and a Schedule

Numerous studies have indicated that students who come to a college without a plan for their futures are much more likely to leave the college without graduating than those who have created goals. During FYS, a professor may help freshmen to set short-term goals and to create long-term milestones.

In the last decade, approximately 72 percent of college students changed their majors at least one time. To help them through this process, the professor and the mentor may offer strategies that allow freshmen to modify their goals without increasing the amount of time that the students will need to achieve these objectives.

Students may learn to create an extensive schedule and to allocate time for studying for classes, relaxation, and other activities on the campus. During some FYS courses, more experienced students will give presentations regarding the methods they used to more effectively manage their time when they were freshmen.

3.5 Joining Organizations

A professor and/or mentor may offer a list of organizations on campus, and this checklist will likely include the number of people who are in each organization, the focus of the group and the year during which every organization was created. Sometimes, a professor may help a student join a group at the university by facilitating meetings that include new students and established members of a particular organization. Certain professors will also provide lists of events and organized parties that are occurring during the semester. At some colleges, students will receive extra credit in the course for attending these events.

According to numerous studies, students who take FYS are more likely to become active members of numerous organizations at the college than those who did not finish or take the course. Moreover, a relatively high percentage of these students become the leaders of organizations while they are at a college.

4. Findings

4.1 Retention Rate

Research conducted at the University of South Carolina, Ramapo College (New Jersey) and Widener University (Pennsylvania) have shown that students participation in FYS have a positive impact to colleges retention rate.

At the University of South Carolina, many studies of first-year student groups enrolled in the University's first-year seminar course revealed that for 16 consecutive years, students who took the seminar were more likely to continue to the sophomore year than first-year students who did not take the course. In 11 of the 16 years, these differences reached statistically significant levels, despite the fact that course participants had higher course loads and lower predicted academic success as measured by standardized-admissions test scores (Fidler, 1991).

At Ramapo College, a "time-series" research design has been employed to demonstrate that the average freshman-to-sophomore retention rate for cohorts of entering students who participated in the first-year seminar during a five-year period immediately after the course became a requirement was significantly higher than the average retention rate for first-year students who had entered the college during the three-year period immediately before course adoption (Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001).

At Widener University, first-year seminar participants returned for their sophomore year at a rate that was approximately 18% higher (87.3% vs. 69.6%) than their expected return rate, as predicted by entering SAT scores (Bushko, 1995).

4.2 Academic Experience

As part of a college-wide effort to increase the success of first year students at BCC, a First Year Program (FYP) and First Year Seminar (FYS) was created by the College. Moreover, a survey was conducted in the fall of 2014 of 570 FYS students and 27 FYS Peer Mentors about their experiences of the program and its effects on their academic experiences. As a result, a high percentage of both groups reported how FYS positively impacted their academic experiences (Efthimiou, Hizmetli, Ramos, & Ritze, 2015). Per figure 3 below, the survey shows that more than 85% of students reported that participation in FYS enabled them to: Reflect on academic performance (94%); better communicate with professors (93%); better resolve academic problems (93%); understand what to do to be successful in college (93%); participate in class with greater confidence (90%); think critically and analytically (90%) feel comfortable communicating with professors (90%); do research (88%); develop a multi-year plan (88%); participate in class regularly (87%); and have a better sense of career options (85%).

Participation in FYS Program enables me to:

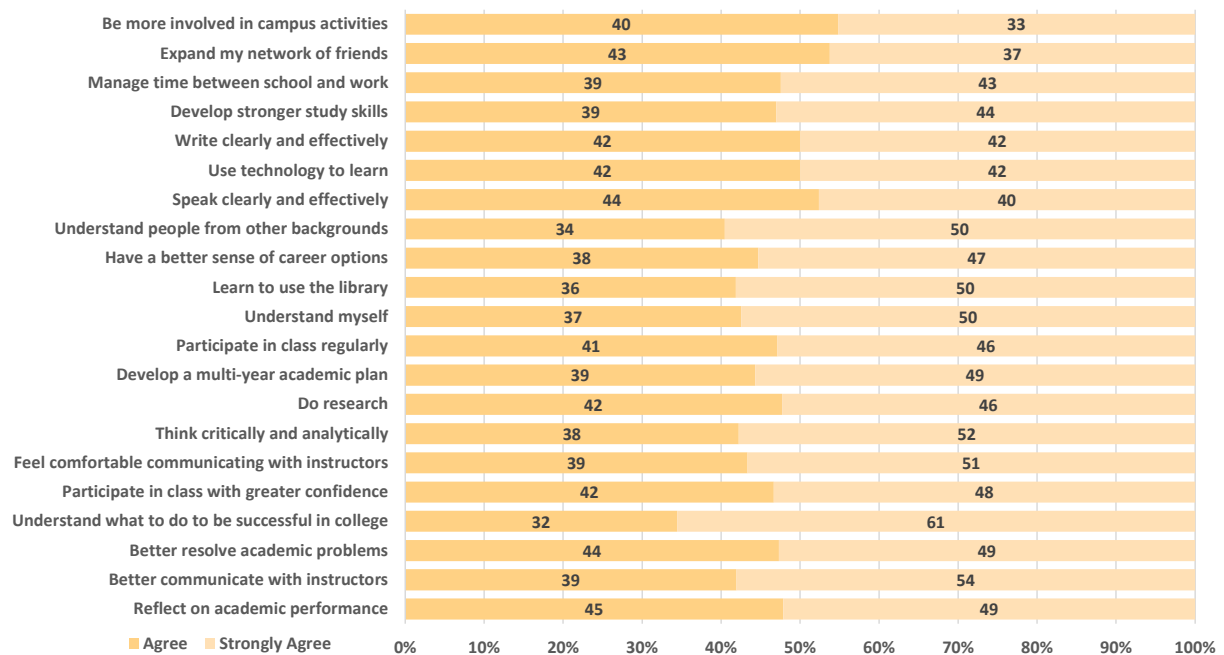


Figure 3. FYS academic experience survey

5. Overall Results

A wide range of analyses has indicated that students who take a FYS course receive better grades than those who do not participate in the class (Lake, 2012). Interestingly, freshmen who receive a high grade in FYS are more likely to achieve better grades for courses that they take when they are sophomores or juniors.

A recent study showed that students who have participated in FYS are 17 percent more likely to graduate than those who have not taken the course. Furthermore, students who signed up for the FYS class are 11 percent more likely to graduate on time than other students who did not complete the class (Leeger, 2012).

According to another analysis, only a small percentage of students who take the course will opt to miss some semesters. Additionally, freshmen who receive high grades for the class are also more likely to continue their studies via summer classes. The impact of FYS on the freshman students is also shown in Figure 4 below (CourseHero, 2011).

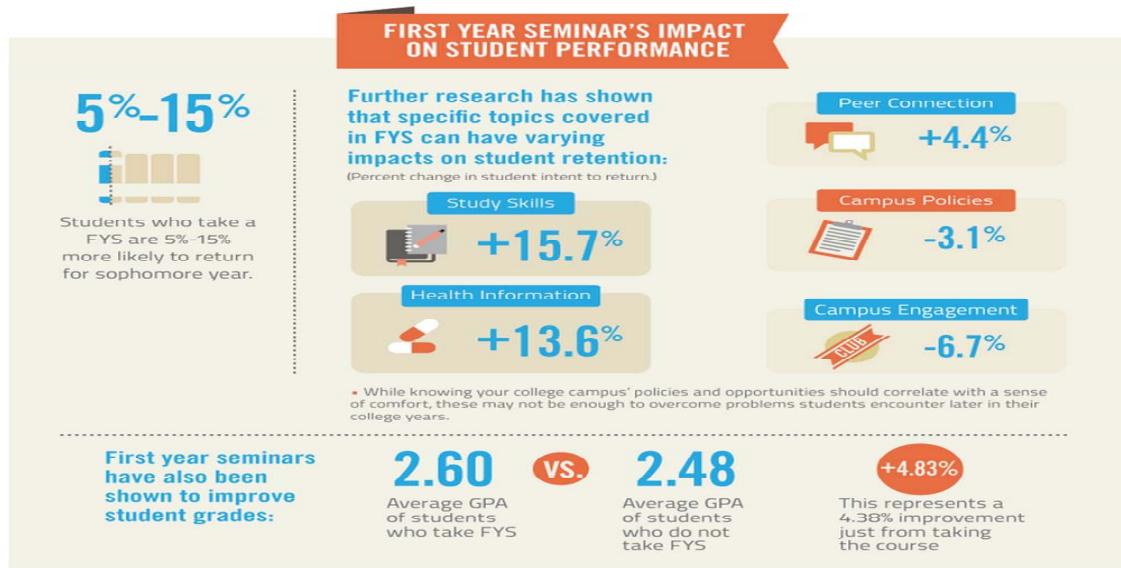


Figure 4. FYS impact on student's performance

6. Conclusion

FYS helps first year students make a smooth transition from high school to college, and it provides a road map for their future at the university. The class also allows freshmen to find their niches at the college and to select courses that will provide the most substantial benefits. FYS has a profound impact on the academic performance of students and on the overall involvement of freshmen. Analysis has proven that the course reduces the number of students who obtain poor grades, increases the percentage of students who participate in events on campus, and encourages group study and cooperation among freshman. FYS has been effective in increases in college's retention rate, as well as, helping students realize academic success.

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