

Assessment of First Year Seminar Courses: Part One

FYS courses are specially designed for first-year students and focus on an intellectual theme or problem based on the expertise of the faculty member. FYS courses are limited to 20 students, providing students with a unique opportunity to engage in a small group learning experience. A subset of items from the *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)* was administered to 342 students who were enrolled in First Year Seminar (FYS) courses during the 2004-2005 academic school year (82.6% response rate).

FYS students completed the survey at the end of the one-semester course (late fall or late spring). The NSSE, which has been administered nationwide to over 175,000 first-year and senior college students, assesses the extent to which students engage in educationally purposeful activities predictive of their learning and personal development. Use of the NSSE questions allows us to compare the responses of FYS students with the responses of a national sample of first-year students at Doctoral Intensive institutions as well as a sample of Miami first-year students.

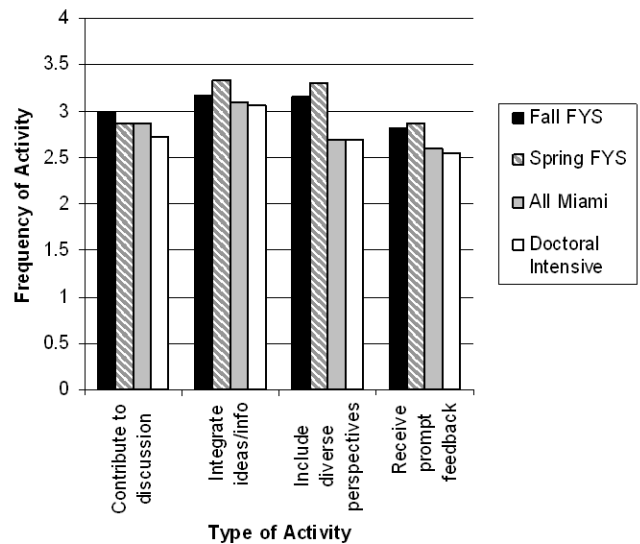
The Experiences of FYS Students

The survey results revolved around four main themes and, overall, favored the FYS students. Two of these themes are presented below. The remaining themes will be discussed in the next brief.

1. Classroom activities: FYS students indicated that they more frequently asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions; integrated ideas or information from various sources; included diverse perspectives in discussions or writing assignments; and received prompt feedback from the instructor than did students in the comparison groups. FYS students were less likely to come to class without completing readings or assignments. However, students in the comparison groups were more likely to prepare two or more drafts of a paper than were students in the FYS courses.
2. Skills and personal development: Spring FYS students were more likely to report that their coursework contributed to their ability to work effectively with others than were students in the comparison groups, although fall FYS students were less likely than the comparison groups to report that their course contributed to this ability.

Students in the comparison groups were also more likely than both fall and spring FYS students to report that their courses provided the support they need to succeed academically and contributed to their spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work.

Frequency of Classroom Activities



Making Large Classes Seem Small

While small class sections, such as the FYS seminars, provide an opportunity for students to become actively engaged in the classroom, large class size does not prohibit student involvement. Consider the following techniques for engaging students in large class sections:

- Use the Think-Pair-Share technique to involve all students in an activity. Pose a brief question to the class. Ask students to think about their answer individually, then share their answer with a person sitting nearby. Call on some students to share their partner's answer.
- Break students into small groups to work on a longer assignment or problem. Make sure to share the solution to the problem before the end of class.

For additional suggestions consult the following books:
McKeachie, W. J. (1999) *Teaching Tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Davis, B. G. (1993) *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.