

Notes on the Series

In this final volume of *The First-Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning and Success*, Dan Friedman argues that we need to move beyond simply looking at retention and graduation rates and student satisfaction when assessing the first-year seminar. In reflecting on this volume, I thought it might be useful to briefly examine what we know about the assessment of these courses and suggest where examinations of the seminar might move in the future.

Since the early 1990s, the National Resource Center has collected and published approximately 140 campus-based reports on the outcomes associated with the first-year seminar (Barefoot, 1993; Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, & Roberts, 1998; Griffin & Romm, 2008; Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005). Just over 60% of the research reports examined the seminar's impact on retention, and a little less than half focused on academic performance as measured by grade point average. Other frequently assessed course outcomes included student satisfaction with the seminar, its components, or with the institution (26.1%); self-assessment of learning or personal development (19.7%); or involvement or engagement with the academic and/or social life of the campus (19.0%). Less frequently assessed outcomes included academic progress as measured by credits attempted and/or credits earned, graduation rates, academic and career decision making, academic skills, course structure and instructional strategies, use of campus services, attitudes toward or understanding of higher education or important social values, impact on course instructors, and financial impact of the course. In a relatively few cases, institutions examined the differential impact of the seminar on retention and/or academic performance by race or ethnicity, gender, or academic preparation.

The assessment practices described in these research reports mirror those reported by respondents to the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Here the four most commonly reported assessment outcomes were (a) persistence to sophomore year (73.7%), (b) satisfaction with

faculty (70.9%), (c) satisfaction with the institution (65.3%), and (d) grade point average (58.0%). Interestingly, only 15.5% of respondents to that survey identified improving sophomore return rates (i.e., retention) as an important course objective. However, other objectives, such as developing a connection with the institution (50.2%), providing an orientation to campus resources and services (47.6%), developing a support network (17.4%), and increasing student-faculty interactions (16.9%), could be interpreted as fitting under the retention umbrella.

The overriding emphasis on retention, academic performance, and satisfaction is not difficult to understand. After all, these are relatively easy data to collect, analyze, and report. First-year seminars are instituted on many campuses to respond to concerns about retention; thus, examining the impact of the seminar on persistence to the second semester, the second year, and beyond is not surprising. Yet, once the seminar has been established as having a positive impact on retention (or academic performance or satisfaction), what else is there to learn? Plenty—as suggested by Friedman’s work here. For example, we might examine which aspects of the seminar (e.g., instructional strategies, course content, use of peer leaders, grading policies, class size) have the greatest impact on these outcomes, or we might look at the differential impact of the seminar vis-à-vis these outcomes on various groups of students. As accrediting bodies and local, state, and federal governments have begun to pay increasing attention to not only whether institutions are graduating students but also to what those students know and can do upon graduation, it becomes increasingly important to examine the impact of the seminar on a wide range of learning and personal development outcomes.

Demonstrating that seminars are successful is essential to their continued presence on college and university campuses, but knowing why they are successful and how they might be made more so is vital to the academic and personal success of the current and future students enrolled in them. Thus, it is not really surprising that each volume in this series has touched on some aspect of assessing the first-year seminar. In volume I, Keup and Petschauer described the role of assessment in developing and launching a seminar, but they also noted its importance in managing change within the course and ensuring its institutionalization. Groccia and Hunter in volume II explored the assessment and evaluation of instruction as a professional development activity, yet it can also help explain how and why certain course outcomes are

being achieved. Similarly, evaluation of instruction can suggest why progress on key objectives is flagging and identify a focus for future faculty development and training events.

In volume III, Garner offered suggestions for nontraditional assessments of student learning. While assessments based on student performance (e.g., presentations, portfolios, essays) rather than recall (e.g., tests and quizzes) may give us better insight into what students know and can do, they can also form an important component of programmatic assessment. In volume IV, Latino and Ashcraft provided a 360-degree plan for assessing the peer leader component of the first-year seminar, evaluating the impact of the peer leadership on the students served, on the peers themselves, and on the overall effectiveness of the course. The current volume brings those disparate pieces together in a comprehensive assessment plan for the seminar.

As such, I close the series with a sense that we have come full circle. Assessing a pilot course is essential to the launch of a first-year seminar program. Once the course is established, ongoing assessment efforts point to the need to revisit major aspects of the seminar. For example, what new topics should be addressed or activities incorporated into instructor training? Which teaching strategies need to be more widely adopted to help students meet key learning outcomes and improve satisfaction with the course? Which strategies could be deemphasized? How can peer leaders be used more effectively to support their own learning and development and that of the students they serve? My hope is that as readers conduct assessment of the first-year seminar on their campuses, they will be drawn back to the earlier volumes in the series for ideas on how to make use of what they are learning.

I began this piece with the suggestion that we need to broaden our assessment horizon with respect to the first-year seminar. Yet, I also want to note that we need to increase assessment activity—period. When respondents to the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminar were asked whether the course had been formally assessed in the previous three years, about one third reported that it had not been, and another 10% indicated they did not know whether it had been assessed (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Clearly, the majority of these courses are being assessed, but the possibility that 30–40% of colleges and universities may not be assessing the first-year seminar is a concern.

The need for more and broader assessment studies suggests two key purposes for this book. The first is to help those who are launching a new seminar or who have never formally assessed the seminar to come up with a plan for doing

so. For those readers with assessed seminars, the book can offer strategies for refining current assessment plans. Hopefully, it will inspire these readers to consider new questions about the seminar, moving beyond asking whether the seminar is working to asking why and how it is working.

As Friedman notes, the prospect of conducting assessment can prove daunting. It is my hope that his work will demystify that process for readers. As always, we welcome your feedback on this book and on the other volumes in the series.

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