

Notes on the Series

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was founded in 1986 as an outgrowth of the first-year seminar (University 101) at the University of South Carolina and a national conference series that began as a discussion of the freshman seminar concept. Over the years, the Center's mission has expanded from a focus on a single course to the first college year to a range of transitions students may experience as they enter, make their way through, and move out of institutions of higher education. Yet, the Center continues to be housed within the University 101 program at the University of South Carolina, evidence of our ongoing connection and commitment to the first-year seminar as an invaluable learning experience for entering college students.

This commitment is also evidenced in the research activities, publications, and professional development events sponsored by the Center. Since the mid-1980s, the Center has conducted a triennial national survey examining the prevalence, structure, and administration of first-year seminars in American higher education. In 2010-2011, this research agenda expanded to examine the relationship between seminar characteristics and specific student outcomes. We have also contributed to a growing literature base about the efficacy of the seminar in promoting student learning, development, and retention in the first college year and beyond. To this end, we produced four volumes of campus-based research reports on the outcomes related to first-year seminars. And to date, more than 40 articles describing empirical research on first-year seminars have been published in the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*. The First-Year Experience Monograph Series has included volumes on a research-based rationale for launching the course (Cuseo, 1991), faculty development for the seminar (Hunter & Skipper, 1999), using peer leaders in the course (Hamid, 2001), and embedding first-year seminars in learning communities (Henscheid, 2004). The Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience frequently features concurrent sessions and extended learning opportunities on select aspects of first-year seminar development and administration, and in recent years, the Center has hosted two institutes for first-year seminar leadership.

Despite this body of work, my colleagues at the Center and I frequently encounter educators—either new to the profession or new to first-year program leadership—who want more guidance on the design and launch of first-year seminars. The research and publications produced by the Center provide insight into how the courses are typically organized and offer a compelling rationale for why an institution might develop one, but they give little guidance on the myriad considerations that go into program design and institutionalization. As noted above, our publications have examined specific aspects of first-year seminars (e.g., faculty development, peer instruction), but the course has never been treated in its entirety. Finally, while the professional development events offered by the Center highlight the practical aspects of seminar administration, the nature of these events does not lend itself to a coherent, easily accessible discussion of practice.

To respond to this gap in the literature, my colleagues at the Center and I have developed a five-volume series on seminar design, implementation, administration, and assessment. One of the challenges in writing the series is that there is really no such thing as *the first-year seminar*. In reality, there are many first-year seminars, with different versions frequently co-existing on the same campus. Some seminars focus primarily on students' personal development and on their social and academic adjustment to college; others may look more like a traditional general education course taught in a small section where the instructor may emphasize academic skill development; and still others may offer interdisciplinary explorations of current or enduring issues while emphasizing the development of critical thinking and writing skills. As Jennifer Keup and Joni Petschauer note in this volume, decisions about the type or types of seminar to offer are driven by institutional culture, the characteristics of incoming students, and a host of other local factors. And the nature of the seminar will inform decisions about course goals, selection and training of instructors, content and pedagogy, and strategies for assessment. As such, this series does not offer a blueprint for designing and administering the first-year seminar as a specific course. Rather, it seeks to help readers see the possibilities for structuring first-year seminars in general and to offer some guidance on how to make choices among the various possibilities.

We also recognize that readers will come to this series at different points in their careers and at different points in the life cycle of a seminar. At its most basic level, the series is designed to offer new professionals or educators who are new to first-year program leadership with a crash course in seminar design and administration. However, it will also be useful to educators who are seeking ways to redesign a seminar program, to build in new components, or to

enhance specific aspects of seminar administration. In this first volume, Keup and Petschauer outline the entire scope of seminar design and administration, drawing on what we know from national research and practice on individual campuses. Many of the issues discussed here, such as instructor recruitment and selection and course assessment, will be addressed in greater detail in later volumes, yet volume I offers a comprehensive discussion of the range of choices facing program leaders as they design (or redesign), administer, assess, and seek to sustain first-year seminars.

Volume II of the series, by Mary Stuart Hunter and James Groccia, will examine identifying and selecting instructors for the seminar, offer models for faculty development, and describe both content and pedagogies for faculty development initiatives. Building on this discussion, Brad Garner will examine teaching in the first-year seminar in volume III. Garner will describe the current population of college students and suggest how their characteristics coupled with what we know about effective teaching and learning should inform classroom practice. In addition to describing specific teaching strategies, Garner will also discuss course evaluation and assessment.

The Center's research on first-year seminars suggests that the use of peer instruction in the course is currently low (about 10% according to Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). Yet, there is ample evidence to suggest the value of peer interactions in supporting the learning and adjustment of students in college (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While less research exists on the impact of these experiences on peer leaders, a national study conducted by the National Resource Center in 2009 found that peer educators felt more connected to the institution and had more meaningful interactions with faculty and with their peers. About half of them reported that their academic performance improved as a result of their peer leadership experience (Keup & Mullins, 2010). It is our contention that the use of peers as mentors or co-instructors has the potential to greatly enhance the impact of the seminar. As such, volume IV, by Jennifer Latino and Michelle Ashcraft, will focus on incorporating peer education in the design and administration of the first-year seminar.

Throughout the series, the authors touch on assessing various aspects of the course—from implementing course evaluations and student self-assessments (volume III) to using course evaluations as a faculty development tool (volume II) to evaluating the impact of peer educators on the students in the course, on the peers themselves, and on the program (volume IV). Yet, given the increasing importance of measuring student learning and demonstrating program effectiveness, the series includes an entire volume on comprehensive program

assessment. Dan Friedman concludes the series in volume V, offering a useful primer on assessment while tailoring the discussion to an examination of the first-year seminar.

We at the Center frequently encounter educators for whom the first-year experience is the first-year seminar. Yet, we take a much wider view, recognizing that the first-year experience is the sum total of the formal and informal academic and social encounters students have during their first year in higher education. On many campuses, implementing a first-year seminar may be the first step in the intentional design of a formal first-year experience. On others, a longstanding seminar is the signature event in the formal first-year experience, serving as a connecting point for other coursework, academic advising, and campus and civic engagement. At whatever point readers find the first-year seminar on their campuses, we hope this series will provide valuable insights for structuring courses that support individual student learning and success in the first college year.

Through the ongoing connection to the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina, many of the staff of the National Resource Center have direct experience in administering and teaching the first-year seminar. We have also had the opportunity to study its evolution in the higher education landscape and to learn from the countless educators in our network who have shared their own research and programmatic experiences with us over the years. So while I thank my colleagues at the University of South Carolina and elsewhere who served as authors for this series, I also want to acknowledge the contributions of members of the first-year experience and students in transition network. This network of educators and the students they serve provide the impetus for our work, but they also make it possible. As a reader of this series, you now are a part of this network. We welcome your feedback on this series and look forward to your own contributions to our collective knowledge about the first-year experience and other student transitions.

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Series Editor

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in Transition

University of South Carolina