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FRESHMEN INTEREST GROUP (FIGs) PILOT PROGRAM REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by Kris Bulcroft and Gary R. McKinney

INTRODUCTION

The Freshmen Interest Group (FIGs) program pilot was developed as one of the recommendations by the Freshmen-Year Experience Task Force to improve Western's freshman year experience, including curricular and co-curricular dimensions. FIGs provide both small group experiences and integrated coursework for new freshmen. Research indicated that FIGs have had good results, addressing many of the problems identified by the task force.

Western's FIGs had elements typical, and basic, to such programs found elsewhere. A Western student enrolled in two large GUR courses with shared thematic connections, and a 2-credit seminar. There were four sets of connected GUR courses and three seminar formats: 1) taught by the GUR course professors; 2) taught by graduate teaching assistants; and 3) taught by Western librarians. The long-term goal of the FIGs programs is to establish one systematic format for all the integrated seminars, but due to the "pilot" aspect of this past year's pro-

gram, a variety of seminar formats was encouraged. Importantly, although seminar enrollment totaled 175 students, over 1300 students—the combined GUR enrollment—benefitted from the technological and pedagogical innovations embedded in the faculty development phase of the program.

An added component of Western's FIGs program was technical support from the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII), which provided FIGs faculty access to computer-based technology instruction and, during summer quarter, 1999, a series of eight workshops that focused on pedagogical issues germane to the FIGs concept. The CII also provided support for those faculty who wished to incorporate more instructional technologies into their FIGs courses. In addition, the CII developed a portal Internet website, called ClassWeb, that served to direct students to instructional materials on the web.

The FIG Program included Peer Advisors, experienced returning students who had a strong understanding of Western's resources



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and past experience working with new students. Their duties were two-fold: 1) to assist the faculty and teaching assistants in the seminars; and 2) to coordinate evening workshops in the residence hall setting for FIG students.

To carry out the first year of the pilot project, new collaborative ties had to be forged. The orchestration and management of the FIGs program was complex, and one outcome of the pilot project was a clearer understanding of the interrelated sectors at Western that are needed to launch and maintain such an ambitious first-year experience.

ASSESSMENT

Great pains were taken during the initial phases of developing Western's FIG Program to include a thorough assessment component. Indeed, no less than seven different assessment techniques were utilized. These included:

- The Lecture Course Survey of all connected large lecture courses conducted in-class near the beginning and end of the quarter.
- The FIGs Participant Survey administered in the FIGs seminars by the instructors, pre and post.
- A FIGs Focus Group conducted during "dead" week.
- Open-Ended Responses by FIGs Participants Survey analyzed using a qualitative software program.
- Student Tracking System Data (gpa's, ethnicity, gender, etc.) analyzed for both non-FIG and FIG course participants.

- Freshmen Survey Data incorporated into the analysis where appropriate.
- Open-ended Faculty Comments solicited and received from most FIGs instructors.

FINDINGS

Demographically, FIGs participants did not look much different when compared to the over all population of fall quarter, 1999, freshmen. Neither did issues of "self-selection" play much part in the analysis of FIG assessment. (See discussion in the main body of the report.) In fact, no statistical evidence was found that greatly differentiated Western's FIG students from the general population of Western students.

Highlights from the findings included the following:

- The vast majority of FIGs students found it a worthwhile experience that helped their transition to college.
- Most students found it easy to register for the FIGs at Summerstart and that Summerstart advisors (faculty and students) were critical to FIGs enrollment process.
- Among other appeals, FIGs helped course access and scheduling.
- Participants valued the residential/peer component of FIGs, for both social and academic reasons.
- Most FIG students made use of the technological enhancements used in the courses.

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- More synthesis between GUR courses and the integrative seminar is needed.
- FIGs freshmen earned a higher WWU gpa than non-FIGs freshmen. The 174 FIGs freshmen had an overall Western gpa of 2.74, compared to the 2.65 earned by the 211 non-FIG's freshmen enrolled in the same large lecture courses. Moreover, 41.2% of FIGs freshmen earned a grade of B or better, compared to 33.6% of non-FIGs freshmen enrolled in the same large lecture classes.
- FIGs effects withdrawal rate. The course withdrawal rate for non-FIGs participants was 2.8% versus 1.1% for FIGs participants.
- Peer Advisor role need clarification. Students in the focus groups noted that peer advisors sometimes seemed more like aides than advisors.
- The evening presentations need further development.

Based on the program and student outcomes assessment of year one of the FIGs, a number of changes are being implemented in the second year. These include the following:

- A systematic and outcomes-based integrative seminar model will be developed.
- Peer advisors will be dedicated to two living/learning cohorts of FIG students. Under the direction of New Students Programs, they will assist these students with study groups and transition to Western.
- The format for the faculty workshops will shift from the summer-long weekly seminars to a two-day retreat in early June.
- The recruitment efforts for the FIGs have been expanded in year two to include more coordination with the Offices of Admissions and Academic Advising.
- Students will be encouraged to register prior to Summerstart through the web or by mailing their course requests in early June.
- To insure continued support of first-year students, follow-ups in winter and spring quarters will be organize with assistance from New Student Programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Year one of the FIGs program at Western was a rousing success. Overall, results were positive and encouraging. Aided by the scope and breadth of the assessment component, program developers easily identified problems and were later able to address the issues while designing year two of the program. Faculty exhibited clear enthusiasm—as can be noted by the number of faculty interested in participating in the program next fall. Students, too, were enthusiastic. Indeed, many were interested in taking a FIGs cluster again in the winter quarter.



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