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The Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs) Program Report: Course Offerings in Fall, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

The First-year Interest Group (FIG) program at Western Washington University has been a curricular option for first-year students since 1999. In the fall, 2008, it entered its tenth interation. Briefly descibed, FIG program students register for a cluster of three courses: two general education courses (usually quite large) linked with a two-credit seminar (maximum enrollment 25). The FIG program is modeled on best practices culled from first year experience literature and poses that the learning community environment created by the combination of large lecture courses and a small seminar can help students connect more quickly to university life, as well as foster a smoother transition from high school to college. On average, about 10% of each in-coming freshmen class has opted to enroll in a FIG cluster.

To use assessment terminology, the FIG program has passed through its beginning and emergent stages and entered full maturity. Its mission has been crafted, student learning outcomes (SLOs) have been identified, and its identity has solidified. (Please see Appendix A to read the FIGs mission statement, course criteria, student learning outcomes, and other FIGs-related documents.) Yet while maturity has wrought a degree of self-confidence, it has not brought complacency. The program remains one of the most assessed academic programs on campus. Yearly, FIG administrators and instructors pore over results of surveys and quantitative data, searching for ways to improve both the program and its assessment. Data sources for this year's report include the pre- and post-surveys of all FIG clusters and quantitative data from the Data Warehouse, including the key institutional indicators of GPA, and retention and graduation rates.

This report will delve into two distinct assessment areas: 1) do students feel that the program has delivered what they were led to expect from it; and 2) are students learning what the program hoped they would learn? The first issue focuses on clear marketing and delivery of the services promised; the second issue focuses on the quality of those services as manifested in student learning outcomes assessments.

FIG SEMINAR SURVEY FINDINGS

In every year FIGs have been offered there has been an attendant pre/post seminar survey. The questions asked on the survey have been as many as forty, and as few as eighteen. The paring down occurred over time as questions that did not add insight or improve program value were eliminated. The current FIGs seminar survey focuses on the two issues mentioned above: 1) is the program delivering on its promises, and 2) is it effectively meeting its student learning outcomes goals?

DISCUSSION OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS: PROMOTION AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES

As noted above, one of the many issues facing a program is promoting itself in such a way that encourages participation and at the same time clearly delineates what the program is and what it does. Over the years, this has been a challenge for the FIG program. Too often, students signed up for a FIG cluster believing, among other misinterpretations, that the seminar was simply an officially sanctioned study group for the two large lecture courses. Of course it was never intended nor designed as such, but it took diligent efforts, especially when it came to marketing, to clear up this misperception. Finally, in the last three or four years, this effort has started to pay off.

Questions on the pre/post surveys appear as matched pairs, expectations versus experience. Take, for instance, this pair: "I expect the FIG will help my transition to Western" (expectation), and "The FIG helped my transition to Western" (experience). Responses to each question are then combined (in this case, "strongly agree" or "agree" were combined) and a percent generated. These two percentages are then compared and a single number generated, positive or negative, called the "gap," as in the gap between expectations and experience. This final number can then be examined over time. To use an example, in 2005, the "transition to Western" question noted above generated a gap of -26% between expectation and experience. In other words, quite a few students did not feel the program delivered what it claimed it would. That figure fell to -12% in 2006, fell again to -3% in 2007, then rose to -9% in 2008. What is important to researchers is not the negative number itself but rather that the gap fell over time. (Although the gap rose somewhat in 2008, there turned out to be a good reason for it, which will be discussed a little further on in this report.) Since entering freshmen have such widely varying ideas of what the transition to college should be, the ideal number of zero or even a postitive number is probably not realistic for the FIG program—although one the program strives for nonetheless. That the gap is lessening, however, is very encouraging.

Similarly, the other matched pairs of questions saw improvement over time. Two very important questions to FIG program developers included: 1) to what extent did the FIG seminar assist learning in other courses, and 2) to what extent did the FIG seminar provide skills and strategies that would help in future courses. (In these cases, the percentage was for students indicating "a great deal" or "somewhat.") And, again, the important finding to researchers was that the gap between expectation and experience lessened: 1) for "learning in other courses" from -43% in 2005 to -19% in 2008, and 2) for "skills and strategies in future courses" from -31% in 2005 to -5% in 2008.

Another very basic question any program needs to ask is: what are students' general feelings about it, positive or negative? In this case, the matched pair is "So far, based on your experiences in your FIG, are your feelings about it..." (expectation), and "Based on your experiences in your FIG, are your feelings about it..." (experience). Again, the responses "positive" and "very positive" were combined, a yearly number generated, then that yearly number was compared. In 2005, the gap between expectation and experience was -32%; by 2008, that number was +9%—an encouraging trend, indeed. (Please see Table 1 below.)

Table 1: Pre-Post FIGs Survey Comparisons: Fall, 2005, to Fall, 2008

		2005	Gap	2006	Gap	2007	Gap	2008	Gap
	Percents below are for responses "Strongly agree" or "Agree"								
Pre	I expect that enrolling in a FIG will help with my transition to Western.	**98%**	**-26%**	**96%**	**-12%**	**95%**	**-3%**	**92%**	**-9%**
Post	Enrolling in a FIG helped my transition to Western	**72%**		**84%**		**92%**		**83%**	
	Percents below are for responses "A great deal" or "Somewhat"								
Pre	To what extent do you expect the FIGs seminar will assist your learning in your other courses this quarter?	**93%**	**-43%**	**96%**	**-23%**	**95%**	**-19%**	**94%**	**-19%**
Post	To what extent did the FIGs seminar assist your learning in your other courses this quarter?	**49%**		**73%**		**76%**		**75%**	
Pre	To what extent do you expect the FIGs seminar will provide you with some skills and strategies that will help you in future courses?	**96%**	**-31%**	**94%**	**-15%**	**97%**	**-13%**	**94%**	**-5%**
Post	To what extent did the FIGs seminar provide you with some skills and strategies that will help you in future courses?	**65%**		**79%**		**84%**		**89%**	
	Percents below are for responses "Very positive" and "Positive"								
Pre	So far, based on your experiences in your FIG, are your feelings about it:	**72%**	**-32%**	**77%**	**-11%**	**73%**	**+3%**	**66%**	**+9%**
Post	Based on your experiences in your FIG, are your feelings about it:	**40%**		**66%**		**76%**		**75%**	

DISCUSSION OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS: STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

A second important issue facing an academic program is whether it is achieving its stated student learning outcomes (SLOs). (Again, please see Appendix A to see the FIG program's course criteria and student learning outcomes.) Here, too, along with quantifiable data like GPA and retention rates, seminar survey results have helped FIG developers establish how well the program is working. The seminar survey contained two sets of questions that focused on student learing outcomes: 1) student perceptions about their preparedness regarding a list of academic skills before and after the FIG seminar, and 2) self ratings on a list of specific FIG student learning outcomes given at the end of the quarter.

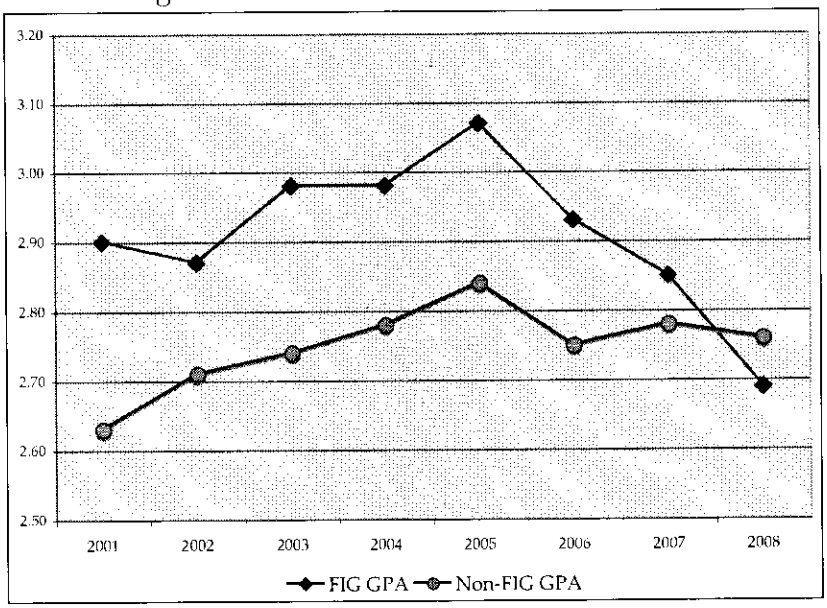
Student perceptions of their academic preparedness included questions about using effective study skills, managing their time effectively, and getting to know faculty. Again, the findings included a series of matched pairs of questions, and the responses "completely" or "somewhat" prepared were collapsed. These pre/post percentages were compared by looking at the difference between pre and post responses—the gap, as used in Table 1. In this case, the change over time was modest and mixed. For one thing, nearly all the collapsed figures (pre and post) were over 90%, setting a high bar immediately. Then over time some gaps lessened, while some stayed the same, and some widened.

Self rating questions were added in the 2006 seminar survey, and asked students about four abilities: to use vocabulary accurately, ask relevant questions, state a supportable point of view, and talk about the main ideas of themes of the course. In this case, students rated themselves "above average," "average," or "below average," but the figures were not collapsed, simply compared across time. Again, results were inconclusive, as there was not much difference between years. (However, this "non change" over time will also be a factor of interest a little further on in this report.) These findings can be found in Appendix B of this report.

QUANTITATIVE FINDNGS

Once the FIG program settled in, around the third year, positive results began appearing, not the least of which was that FIG students were earning higher overall Western GPAs than non-FIG students. From 2001 through 2005, the average difference was .21, a little less than a quarter of a point. Statistically, this was not a strong finding, but it was as encourging as it was unexpected. In 2007, however, that gap lessened considerably, to .07. Then in 2008 the GPA of non-FIG students was higher than FIG students, by .10. (See Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1: Western GPA's of FIG and non-FIG students, 2001 through 2008



At this point, FIG researchers asked the obvious question: what was up? And the first place to look for that answer was the Admissions Index (AI)[1]. The AI is a number derived from a formula that includes high school GPA and pre-college test scores, and is used as one of a number of criteria for college admissions. Furthermore, it is a reliable touchstone for predicting how well students might do in college, when using college GPA as an indicator of that success. In nearly every year since 1999, the AI for FIG students has been lower, slightly, than for non-FIG students. On average, between 1999 and 2006, the difference in AI between FIG and non-FIG students was 1.87. Yet despite the fact that the difference was relatively small, that FIG students with a lower AI continued year in and year out to have a higher average fall quarter Western GPA than non-FIG students has been of particular interest to researchers—one of many indicators that the program works. With their lower AI's, even as small as they were, FIG students would not have been predicted to have higher average GPAs than students with higher average AIs.

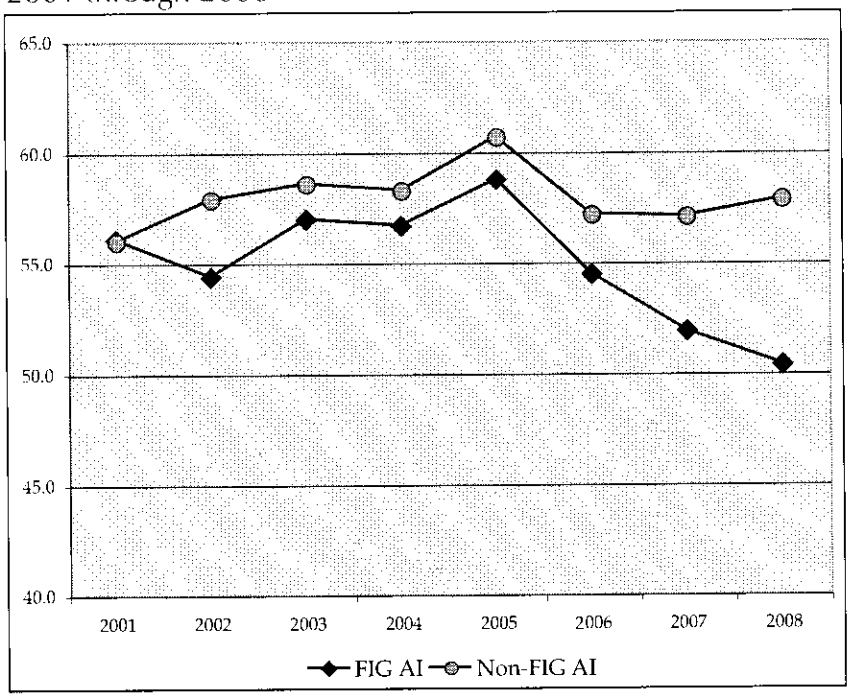
In 2007, however, that slight gap in AI between FIG and non-FIG students began to widen, to 5 points. Then in 2008, the gap widened again, to 8 points. Previous to 2007 the gap was evident, but not statistically significant. But in 2007 and 2008 that gap was statistically significant, and is at least part of the story explaining the change in GPAs between FIG and non-FIG students. Apparently, there is a point at which the FIG program was not able to generate the kind of results it was having previously. (See Table 1 and Figure 2 below.)

Table 1: Average Admissions Index (AI) scores for FIG and non-FIG freshmen, 2003 to 2008

Year	FIG	non-FIG
2003	57	59
2004	57	58
2005	59	61
2006	55	57
2007	52	57
2008	50	58

[1]According to the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, the "admissions index number estimates the 'probability of success' as public four-year colleges and universities review freshmen student applications." The Admissions Index (AI) is used as a guide by all four-year public universities in the State of Washington. The two components making up the Admissions Index are high school GPA and scores on standardized admissions tests, the SAT or the ACT. According to the Board, high school GPA counts 3 times as much as standardized test scores in calculating the AI.

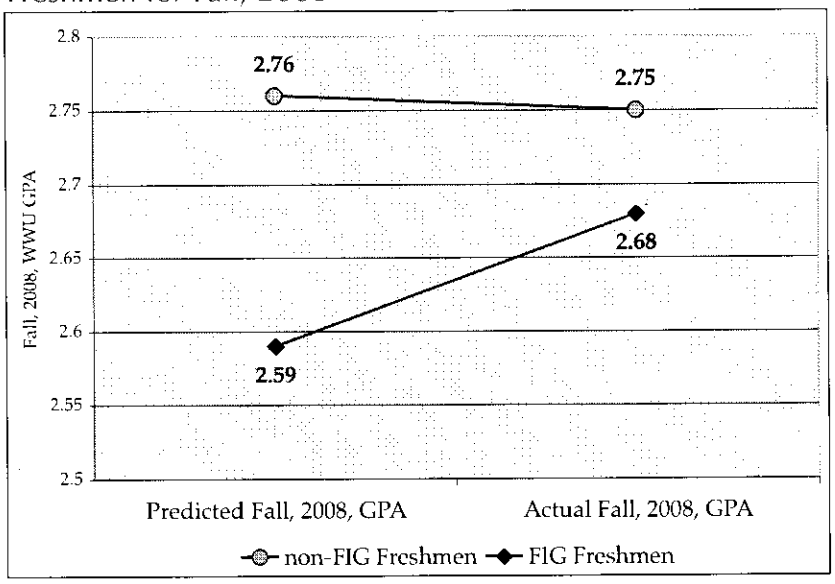
Figure 2: Admission Index (AI) of FIG and non-FIG students, 2001 through 2008



With 20/20 hindsight, it is now understandable that during the fall quarter, 2008, several FIG seminar instructors anecdotally reported that there appeared to be a substantive difference in the current FIGs cohort than in previous cohorts. There were some reports that some students seemed inadequately prepared for the academic rigor of college, particularly in regards to writing. Other reports noted that some students were struggling to pass not only one or more of their GUR courses, but also the FIG seminar itself. During the course of the quarter, some students who were not being successful began to withdraw from participation in the seminar, and instructors were hard-pressed to aid them. By the end of the quarter, when grades were given, many veteran FIG seminar instructors (though not all) found themselves giving students lower grades in the seminar, and others suggested that the FIG curricula were not meeting the needs of some of their students. As the numbers came in, the anecdotal story became real: for the first time in the history of the program, FIG students achieved a lower average Western GPA than non-FIG freshmen.

Notwithstanding this turn of events, correlation analysis of fall, 2008, freshmen gpa with AI scores indicated that the FIG program once again had a positive effect on participanting students overall. Using the AI as the independent variable and the fall, 2008, Western GPA for freshmen as the dependent variable, it was found that the predicted Western GPA for non-FIG students was 2.76, while the actual GPA was 2.75. In other words, nearly identical. On the other hand, the predicted Westerm GPA for FIG students was 2.59, while their actual GPA was 2.68, nearly a tenth of a point higher than predicted. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3: Predicted and Actual GPA's of FIG and non-FIG Freshmen for Fall, 2008



Yet FIG developers received one more disappointing finding: at 19.2%, the number of fall quarter, 2008, FIG freshmen who ended up on academic warning spiked 8.5% from previous years.[2] What was particularly distressing to FIG program developers was the sudden jump over a relatively short period of time. Only five short years ago, FIG students were half as likely as non-FIG students to be placed on academic warning. Even last year, with their AI falling further behind those of non-FIG students, it was still more likely for a non-FIG student to be on academic warning than a FIG student. (See Table 2 below.)

Table 2: Students placed on academic warning, FIG and non-FIG, at the end of fall quarter, 2003 to 2008

Year	FIG	non-FIG
2003	6.4%	14.8%
2004	6.5%	13.4%
2005	5.4%	12.1%
2006	9.7%	15.2%
2007	10.7%	14.4%
2008	19.2%	14.8%

[2]Academic warning is an official Western policy and issued to a first-quarter freshman whose grade average is below 2.0 and to any continuing student whose quarterly grade average is below 2.0 but whose cumulative grade average is 2.0 or higher.

Again, the obvious question was asked: why? Yes, in the fall, 2008, the gap in average AI between FIG and non-FIG students was 8%, a statistically significant figure. But was this enough to explain an 8.5% increase in the number of FIG students placed on academic warning? It turns out that to some extent it does. When histograms of AI scores of fall, 2008, FIG and non-FIG freshmen are compared, something jumps out. While the AI scores for non-FIG freshmen create a relatively smooth and expected bell curve, the shape of the curve for FIG freshmen indicates a considerable number of outliers—students whose AI scores are quite low in comparison to the average. (See Figures 4 and 5 below.)

Figure 4: Distribution of Admissions Index (AI) Scores for non-FIG Freshmen, Fall Quarter, 2008

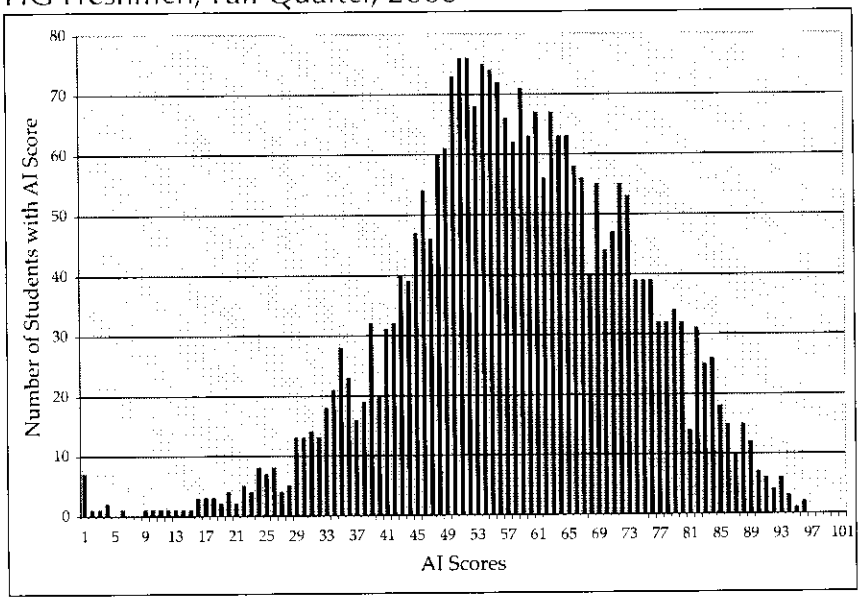
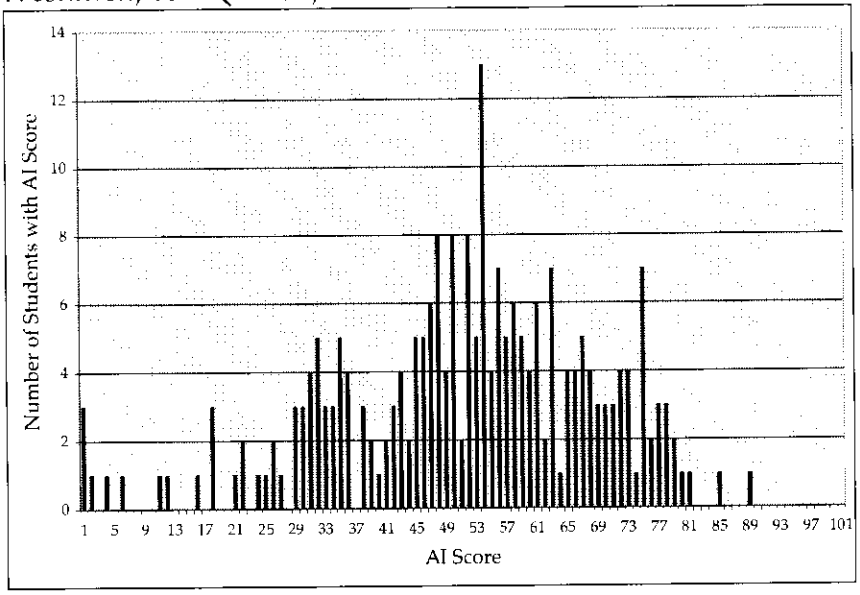


Figure 5: Distribution of Admissions Index (AI) Scores for FIG Freshmen, Fall Quarter, 2008



Visually the distribution for FIG students was striking, with what appeared to be a large proportion of strikingly low AI scores. So a chi-square analysis was run to see whether a significantly higher proportion of FIG students entered Western with exceptionally low AI scores. And, indeed, this test found that 25% of FIG students entered Western with an AI of less than 40, while only 12% of non-FIG students had an AI score of less than 40. Also, for non-FIG students the standard deviation was 15.0, while for FIG students the standard deviation was 17.4, higher by 2.35. Keeping in mind that the correlation of AI scores to Western GPA is strong, it is not only predictable, but expected that there would be a higher number of FIG than non-FIG students on academic warning. Unfortunately, why so many more students with low AIs signed up for a FIG cluster is conjecture on the part of researchers. Maybe these students, knowing their AIs were somewhat lower, were apprehensive about their ability to compete at Western, and hoped that signing up for FIG would help them. And, according to findings presented earlier in this report, it did. However, as helpful as the FIG program can be, and has been proven to be, it is not capable of working miracles. On the other hand, the program is small and flexible, and in the next section of the report the response to these findings will be presented.

LOOKING AHEAD TO FALL, 2009

Once the entire set of findings were accumulated, FIG administrators, instructors, and reseachers met to consider how to address the unanticipated results from fall, 2008. Ultimately, based on the findings from quantitative and qualitative data sources, it was decided that the basic design of the FIG program, as well as its core student learning outcomes, remained solid, and did not need any sort of radical change at this time. However, based on those same findings, it was decided to implement the following policies:

- AI findings will be shared with the FIG seminar instructors. Especially if the pattern of lower AIs continues, this should help instructors tweak their syllabi and activities accordingly.
- Institutute an early quarter (first week) class visit from a Tutoring Center representative, and pay particular attention to the following:
    1. Encourage students not only to form study groups, but also to visit the Tutoring Center as a group and take advantage of their Tutor-assisted study group program, which offers tips on how to get a study group to work as productively as possible.
    2. Encourage students to use the program in the Tutoring Center on how to prepare for and take a multiple choice test. (Simiarly, since some large lecture course instructors include test-taking strategies in their syllabi and/or blackboard offerings, point these out to students early in the quarter.)
- Have a mid-quarter class visit from an Academic Advising Office representative, and encourage students to hook up with an academic advisor.

- Have the FIG Faculty Development Day include a session on this issue. Faculty who have taught courses that target students with lower AIs (for instance, English 100) will be invited to give a presentation on instructional techiques that have proven to work for this population.
- Encourage FIG instructors to administer a mid-term class evaluation, maybe as early as the fourth week. This might bring to light student concerns and issues that may be addressed in any number of ways: by a one-on-one sit down, a reference to a help program (like the Tutoring Center or Math Center), or counseling of either the academic or personal kind.

Appendix A:

FIG Program Mission, Course Criteria, and Student Learning OUtcomes

Mission Statement

The FIG program is a learning community for first-year students providing opportunities to practice the habits of mind needed for a successful academic career.

First-year Experience Course Criteria

Scope

As part of the first-year experience of entering students, the First-year Interest Groups Program at WWU intends to:

- Give first-year students a small group experience to help them integrate into university life.
- Give first-year students the opportunity for more interaction with instructors.
- Communicate high academic expectations to students.
- Help students recognize and take advantage of the roles that various campus resources play in their academic lives.

Intentions

A proposal for a First Year Experience course should identify an existing course or propose a new course with the following features:

- First-year courses will have academic content and be offered for academic credit (either as GUR or elective credits
- First-year courses will be taught in small sections, with an expected maximum enrollment 30
- First-year courses will restrict enrollment to first-year students
- The course may be a stand alone course or offered as part of a link or sequence of courses
- The course may be letter-graded or pass/fail if it is not offered as a GUR course

Learning Outcomes

First-year courses should be designed to meet at least two of the following learning outcomes:

- Demonstrate an understanding of inquiry and creative processes from disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary perspective(s)
- Articulate individual learning goals in the context of a liberal arts education and identify means for achieving these goals.
- Enhance competency in academic skills including: framing questions/posing problems, critical literacy, evaluating information sources, writing, oral communication, and collaboration

Proposal Development

Courses in this group can be altogether new courses or special offerings of existing courses.

Additional learning outcomes are strongly encouraged in the first-year courses, and a comprehensive listing of the most common first-year learning outcomes and appropriate assessment methods will be available online to faculty as they design their first-year course.

Appendix B:

FIG Seminar Survey
Student Learning Outcomes Findings

Pre-Post FIGs Survey Comparisons: Fall, 2005, to Fall, 2008

		2005	Gap	2006	Gap	2007	Gap	2008	Gap
	Percents below are for "Completely" or "Somewhat" prepared								
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to understand what your instructors expect of you academically?	95%	-1%	96%	+3%	95%	+4%	95%	+4%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: understand what your instructors expect of you academically?	94%		99%		99%		99%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to utilize effective study skills?	93%	0%	92%	+4%	94%	+4%	95%	+1
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: utilize effective study skills?	93%		96%		98%		96%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to adjust to the academic demands of college?	95%	+2%	91%	+6%	94%	+5%	97%	-1%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: adjust to the academic demands of college?	97%		97%		99%		96%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to manage your time effectively?	93%	-1%	93%	+1%	95%	+2%	94%	-2%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: manage your time effectively?	92%		94%		97%		92%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to get to know faculty?	87%	0%	89%	+2%	85%	+7%	88%	+4%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: get to know faculty?	87%		91%		92%		92%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to develop a plan of study to achieve your academic goals?	92%	+1%	89%	+4%	93%	+2%	92%	0%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: develop a plan of study to achieve your academic goals?	93%		93%		95%		92%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to develop close friendships with other students?	97%	-2%	96%	+1%	97%	+1%	97%	-1%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: develop close friendships with other students?	95%		97%		98%		96%	
Pre	How well prepared do you feel to utilize campus services available to students?	93%	-1%	95%	+2%	93%	+5%	90%	+6%
Post	How well prepared do you feel to: utilize campus services available to students?	92%		97%		98%		96%	

FIGs Seminar Survey: Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) Questions

	2006	2007	2008
Thinking about your GUR courses this quarter, rate your ability to: Use the vocabulary accurately.			
Above average	43%	37%	42%
Average	56%	61%	55%
Below average	1%	2%	4%
Thinking about your GUR courses this quarter, rate your ability to: Ask relevant questions			
Above average	40%	41%	40%
Average	57%	55%	57%
Below average	2%	4%	3%
Thinking about your GUR courses this quarter, rate your ability to: State a point of view I can support			
Above average	50%	53%	53%
Average	49%	46%	45%
Below average	1%	1%	2%
Thinking about your GUR courses this quarter, rate your ability to: Talk about the main ideas or themes of the course			
Above average	60%	55%	55%
Average	39%	44%	44%
Below average	1%	1%	1%