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FYE Seminars: Summary Report

Western Washington University. Office of Survey Research

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**Selected Excerpts from Focus Groups
Conducted with FYE Seminar instructors
In Spring '06 by The Office of Survey Research**

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Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives of FYE seminars include:

- Introducing students to critical reading, critical thinking, critical writing
- Introducing students to academic research skills.
- Setting academic standards and intellectual modeling within a small group setting.
- Building relationships between faculty and students
- Introducing students to a specific academic discipline, which they might consider as a major.
- Showing relationships to ways of thinking in other disciplines, highlighting similarities

The following excerpts describe goals and objectives of each of the three instructors who taught FYE seminars in Fall 2005.

(HISTORY) My course was called The Idea of Utopia and it was basically a reading course in writing...We started with the Bible and Plato and ended with Inran and Milton Freedman But the goal wasn't to cover everything. It was to look at specific writers and talk about them...

The purpose of the class for me was simply to have students recognize that the purpose of being in college is to think about what is a good society. Not that any of these particular societies met any of their criteria, but the idea that this should be a question that we should ask ourselves and that's part of being a liberally educated adult. So that was my main goal, and then beyond that was to build relationships with students and give them an opportunity to know someone as well early on.

(LIBERAL STUDIES) We focused on Western's sculpture collection. The purposes were, in part, to get their attention on this local resource which they usually discover when they're seniors if at all and walk by for so long so it seemed like a good idea. And the other intention was to introduce them to academic research and writing skills, and to do class presentations.

(HISTORY) I taught the course Race and Identity in Modern America and there were several different reasons why I taught it as a first year experience course. I think that students and

currently in society there are many conversations about race and identity and their meaning, so I thought it would certainly be a way for students to engage that, to get some tools about how do we as liberally educated adults wrestle with these very difficult problems. I find that in public discourse...people operate on lots of assumptions but they don't really know what they're talking about. So that's the larger purpose for me offering that topic. Offering it as a first year seminar, I thought students would self-select to some degree and be willing to commit to the study of this issue, so I could give students who are interested in the issue a set of tools with which they could work. I also have found that entering students in their very first quarter are open to things in ways that second, even second quarter first year students aren't, and I think that is a very critical time to get access to students and to set a tone about what academic work might actually be about.

And then the opportunity to do that in a small setting. I once did a version of this same course (it was not a GUR then), and we had smaller enrollments of 12 to 15 each. The experience was really rewarding and I think it helped us see a possibility there.

In terms of setting academic standards for students, I wanted them to begin to work on reading for ideas...I don't think this is necessarily the case in many other disciplines, but people who gravitate to history have a tendency to want to read for details and content rather than larger philosophical issues, and I wanted to have them take on history but read for philosophy of history, philosophy of ideas really, and then their application and so I think that was an important setting.

We also worked a lot on writing, more on their ability to fairly concisely summarize and present their understandings of those interpretations.

Another reason why I was involved in this and we as a department, I think, were somewhat over represented in this, is that we wanted to offer incoming freshmen an opportunity to see history other than the standard survey of the US History or Western Civ. or whatever it may be. In part to let students know that history's not just stacking facts and if they're interested in something like that they might consider a major like this. History's the department I think that's taken some bad press, of course, saying that this is a place for recruitment of potential majors but I would argue that any class we offer should be a potential recruitment for majors and this would be just one more of those so I want to sort of confront that, at least rumor that's out there. It's true, but I want to do it unabashedly because whenever we teach a course we should be talking about what is the nature of history, historical inquiry, what is history as a discipline, what is this way of thinking? And when possible, show relationships to other ways of thinking in disciplines and highlight similarities to all the disciplines

Information Technology Literacy

One of the objectives of the GUR program is to introduce students to information technology literacy. FYE seminar instructors may include specific exercises to target this objective, while others integrate information technology into the academic context of the course.

My skills were, first exercises, find internet sites and try to critique...trying to get them to see how remarkably naive they are about the internet. We had a session at the library, how to find resources, not always a big success. But it was those very practical sorts of things...

If I did things like that, they were more of a byproduct of some other things that we were doing rather than isolated out —this is an exercise in an exercise. But if they were there, they were built in as an integral part of things. There was a laundry list of goals we could meet. And that wasn't one I identified as an absolute high priority in what I was doing. Again if it was a by-product of something it got appropriated in. I highlighted other goals, above that.

Instructors tend to overlap information technology with the other objectives.

I built the course to address a cluster of those objectives that were listed. I can't tell you what those were, introduction to it was critical thinking, critical writing, analytical whatever it may be. I think that those are the key elements that I was shooting for and the others if they have them is part of the fun... I can't remember what number or percentage of the list I tried to get ...

If faculty are thinking about freshmen it's probably going to overlap in that category, so, I think it's ok for the university to make sure that there is that overlap. I doubt anybody is sitting with that list and trying to generate a course to fit it because, it wouldn't be a course, it would be a range of courses.

In short, information technology is not one of the primary objectives. It works better if it's integrated into the academic context of the course.

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Students may view information technology for what it is, not necessarily has an objective of the course.

I think that students are going to recognize it for what it is...they'll just see it as...an aerobic exercise that they're doing rather than something that is pointed toward helping them develop, you know, focused...

Engagement and Intellectual Modeling

One of the primary goals is to engage new students in academics, and to set a standard about what college ought to be about.

Longitudinally, I have some evidence from the three or four years that we offered the first sort of experimental seminar. I had students returning to me sometimes as majors. In fact one of our students who is a current graduating senior ended up back in some of my classes as a major and just won a best paper award at a student conference. I think that it charts out for them a pattern

of engaging academics that I firmly believe can only happen when you have them right away and set a certain standard for them to have an expectation of what college ought to be.

Students are introduced to the concept of disciplines, and how disciplines are a window to a larger whole—showing students what a college education is all about.

Whenever we teach a course we should be talking about what is the nature of history, historical inquiry, what is history as a discipline, what is this way of thinking? And when possible, show relationships to other ways of thinking in disciplines and highlight similarities to all the disciplines.

I think that it was nice in some ways to have the opportunity to try and engage with people who don't have predetermined ideas of what college education is like. Or they don't even know what a discipline is. In some ways, the discipline is the window into the larger whole. And so the nice thing about teaching this class for me was that I got reminded of that in a sense. The class was arranged historically in sort of a conversation between utopian writers or dystopian right. And in the other sense, why did these people write? Well it's because they had great ambitions for the world and dreams and, or fears, and those fears, and dreams, and ambitions remain relevant so that the conversation is not dead. So the discipline is this lens. It's a way of disciplining yourself to think about these things that are very much alive. And it was refreshing for me to have an opportunity to do that. It was also I think, what I want students to think college is always about, no matter what discipline they ultimately do.

Intellectual modeling is the fundamental goal.

When I said one of things about being a liberally educated adult is to think about what's a good society, translated that means you learn and use knowledge to change the world to make a better world...and to do that you need to be a good intellectual because you need to know how to generate knowledge, how to think about what you're reading. In my case, it was mostly ideas, but how to think about ideas and evaluate them, test them, and criticize them and then perhaps do whatever you want with them. So being an intellectual is, in a sense, the fundamental goal.

I'm going insist that they all have to at least confront the prospect that they might be intellectuals—that that's what collegiate life really should be about, is coming into one's own as an intellectual...Once you start to reflect upon what college is about, or at least ought to be about, it ought to be that somewhere in there the admission that it's ok to be an intellectual and that I might actually be one and I think that was one of the fundamental goals. That's why I think giving them specific tools to work with so they can approach situations analytically rather than some sort of gut reaction, you know, emotive fashion is really important.

I told them that an important part of being an intellectual is sharing your ideas, contesting ideas, contributing to a larger discussion. And so I rewarded them for it by listening and by being able to modify what they had originally thought and not count that against them if they somehow missed a part of an argument or missed some connection so they could also see that. So I built the group work in that way which seems to work and it also requires them to be prepared to come in, instead have something in writing when they walk in the classroom.

Another goal is to educate students about how the university operates and why—that there's a much larger process involved beyond their experience in the classroom.

I took every opportunity to let them know what I do. And why I do what I do. I can talk about something related to the university and how the university operates so that they can see that that exists. The university isn't just their experience in the classroom. And that would be things like, why do we evaluate faculty? What's the nature of the faculty evaluation? And how is it used? How are those things that they're going to fill out at the end of the quarter part of a much larger process? And so I did take those opportunities to bring that out for them and educate them about that. And so in a way, that's helped me remember how little students know about how this institution operates and why it operates in the way they do. I have to remember that sort of, well that ignorance on their part when I deal with students who walk in and sit in my office. Personally I have 18 years old who'll start college next year. I learned a lot about what her peers think. Gave me more insight into my family life. And then as an increasingly senior professor...the other thing that this reminded me of is not to be cynical about students. That there was a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of willingness to tackle difficult issues, and I need to be reminded of that periodically.

With intellectual modeling as a primary goal, FYE seminars do not include instruction on basic college survival skills. However, the small group setting provides first-year students the opportunity to help each other with transition into the social aspect of college life, and some talk with the instructor one-on-one.

I explicitly told them that I was not going to do this as college survival skills 101. And in fact, I've come to learn very quickly, students don't want that. Now they may need it, but they don't want it.

I did very little of the social aspect of college life in part because I thought that happened de-facto by having a group of first years who had time to reflect and who got to know each other. So they could do a better job of that, in some ways than me, by just having an environment that made it possible for them. Some of them came and talked to me so one on one I could do that, but it wasn't built into the class.

The Seminar Setting

The small group setting is ideal for engaging students. The process involves in-depth investigation of the subject matter.

A small group helps with the engagement factor. No matter what, they engage each other.

One of the nice things about a small class is that everybody is obliged to participate and be engaged, and I remember one day we spent an hour and a half on two sentences in Marx. They came in thinking they understood it and by the end of the class, they couldn't believe they spent an hour and a half on two sentences and that kind of analysis. When you have the time to really stop and take the time and get them to read and look below the surface and what seems very obvious...

A lot of my students were in a 200 level anthropology course, a GUR, and a lot of the issues we talked about were similar and some of the interpretations were similar but they liked the opportunity to think about those in that small group setting too. And I think they were much better prepared to engage in discussion. So a lot of them report back, "well when we talked about his in my other class, I was able to bring these things up...we had read very carefully... and I really feel that I was able to apply those tools." That was part of my goal, and so I see that as an ongoing contribution.

I had quarter long group projects so they had to pick one of two projects. One of which was to design their own utopia, but self consciously reflecting on the various writings and otherwise to do an edited collection where they take a theme or a particular author and themes within that author and they write a joint introduction and then each write their own chapter and in either case I made time in class for them to meet in groups and also expected that they would meet outside of class. It was the opportunity for them to implement the processes of both reading these people closely and also thinking about it in connection to some questions that they posed for themselves. And that worked well. About two groups did the edited collection and three groups did the final, the sort of design your own utopia. I think for the design your own utopia I need more structure if I'm going to do that again, but I think it was successful...so they could take what they were learning and make some use out of it and think about it on their own terms and then come back to some sort of academic conclusions that were meaningful at the same time.

Small group interactions and student presentations help to get students actively engaged.

I asked them to keep their writing to look over, and I'm not sure how much they did. The only thing that really got them engaged in my class is when I started having them do student presentations. I expect if I did something like that again I would do it much earlier. I thought, I need to give them a good solid background so they can...start earlier.

I said these are the aspects that will be covered and you can divide them up among yourselves. It sort of depended on how many people wanted to work on a particular work, and a few people moved around to balance it out a little bit. A few individuals worked together and I think they enjoyed that, more than I would have thought...but it was not because it was assigned as a group project. A couple of groups got each other fired up.

The seminar is also successful in helping students to learn civil discourse.

Not everyone is friends with everyone, but there were definitely people who became friends, and there were also people who learned in the course of discussion to interrogate each other in a friendly way and to actually, when someone said something challenge it, and so that was nice.

Teaching in a small group setting translates into the challenge of getting students to engage at the same level in bigger classes.

In terms of what I would take away and translate to other classes is the opportunity to really learn how to teach in that sort of seminar setting. It translates into how I try to teach the bigger

classes, and obviously they can't replicate the seminar setting which is one of the reasons why you want small classes—because you can't do the same kind of close reading, you can't expect the same level of engagement from everyone. But on the other hand students will be prepared for that when they go off from the seminar to the bigger classes—to know how to get more from those moments in the bigger classes where they can do that. And I think that it was nice in some ways to have the opportunity to try and engage with people who don't have predetermined ideas of what college education's like.

Instructors want to teach small group seminars because they are ideal for intellectual modeling, and also because they get to know the students.

What I got more than anything is I got to know some students. When I went into teaching the idea wasn't to lecture to 60 people, five of whom I might get to know a little bit... but, you know, teaching is a moral profession and you can't create character, whatever that character you're trying to create looks like, without really getting to know someone. So it was an opportunity where I got to have a small number of students several times a week. It's pretty intense, and so they do get to know you in ways that other students don't. And I get to know them, and that also enhances what I'm trying to do by being an intellectual—by modeling intellectual, because they realize it's a personal endeavor, it's a moral commitment as well as an academic commitment, and they get to see that. And I get to try to actually do what I thought teaching was supposed to do. So for me that's quite rewarding, to know the students themselves.

Small group settings are successful in building personal and lasting relationships.

One of my goals was just to build relationships with students and give them an opportunity to know someone. You know, education is a personal endeavor, so to have someone they can know early on.

I think in a class of 25 they felt an obligation to certain of their neighbors where they habitually sat but not always to the whole class; whereas I think in a group of 15 they did feel a responsibility. There's a level of intimacy, personal. And still, those people now four years later still know about each other—still say oh yeah I saw so and so, she's doing this, he's doing that. They really track each other in ways that I think that a larger group does not.

In order to achieve the kinds of things FYE seminar instructors want to achieve, 15 to 20 students would be the ideal number.

My class was 15 and it was a luxury...but I'd say that number works very well. 20 may be the number. I've had sections of 25 in fact, and it didn't replicate what happened in 15—because it's just enough that 7 people can disappear and can hide away a little bit. It's not intimate. You can't sit around the same table anymore. So I would say 15 is the magic number. Obviously it's expensive but that depends on what the institution wants to do with it's students and what they want them to look like and be like and think like afterwards.

I think a step curve. There are things you can do with 15, and 20, 25, 30. After 30 well there's not a break until 50. What can't be done can't be done. I've always thought in terms of 20 to 30

is enough for me, but it depends how much writing you're going to do.

If writing is involved, 25 would be the maximum.

Writing would be a factor. You can't have the feedback to do much good...25 is probably...the upper limit.

My class was 25 and I had to do a number of things with a group that size that I wouldn't have to do with a smaller group. I think that it takes a lot more, a different kind of planning and a different kind of series of exercises about engagement that aren't necessary with 15.

Still, with 25 as the number, they have to break into smaller groups and the strategy is different in order to achieve certain objectives.

I taught two versions of this class, one at about 15, and one at 25. The one at 15 was everybody together, we always kept together. Only every once in a while would we break apart into smaller groups and usually I would have them sort of take responsibility for something. In this group of 25, I almost every time had to break them in smaller groups. I think it was successful but it took a different kind of strategy.

Why Students Register for FYE seminars

Some students choose to participate in a seminar because they want the small class experience—even if they aren't particularly interested in the subject matter.

They said, the sort of social environment of working together in a small class and the way it was presented to them at orientation convinced a lot of them that this would be a good way to get started.

About a third I would say came in because they were interested by the subject matter, or maybe the other two thirds were interested by the subject matter but they in fact were sold on it by what they got at orientation—that this is a small class oriented around certain goals—and more than anything they said they wanted to have that experience...but their preparation was all over the place so some were very well prepared some were not. So it wasn't self selecting that way, but there was a range of abilities.

Some students register for a seminar simply because it fits their schedule—even if they don't know what the course is about.

Most of my students were in there because it fit their schedule, because they had no idea what this class was about. It turned out not to be a topic to offer. By the end maybe five of them were actually engaged with it and felt like this is kind of exciting stuff, wanting to do more. But for the most part it didn't work. And that's partly me and partly the topic, and partly the students. I had to chase out a couple sophomores because they were in there because it fit their schedule. And the other people didn't have very clear reasons for being in there other than they needed a three credit class and it fit their schedule, so it's kind of strange.

We did have a few people coming in late into mine... You know, "This meets my time schedule... I didn't enroll and now there's nothing left." So I had a handful of those people. And some of those people ended up being the people who were not engaged in the project as we defined it in the course.

Students may not know the purpose of FYE seminars and how they fit into the GUR program.

If summerstart is the first time you've been on campus, then that's not what they're thinking about, so the class sort of filled up when there weren't other things to take. And in part it's this first year experience—we set out to simplify the GUR so we now have a category that's not a requirement, and they didn't know what to make of it.

Students may want to take recognizable academic subjects, as opposed to courses that sound unfamiliar.

I'm just wondering if it doesn't need to be academic to get them to sign up at Summerstart because they want to start an academic career. That's what they're here for. That's their interest at the very beginning. And yeah there are other courses that have titles like utopia and so that's a recognizable subject ... I get a much better draw in the humanities courses that were more the freshman section of a regular course. They knew what that meant. It meant something.

At the same time, students may want more of a challenge rather than studying familiar topics.

A lot of them didn't want to go into one more round of familiar territory. They didn't want one more round of Western Civ. or American History or, you know, AP Lit... They wanted a little more of a challenge. So I think that they were self selecting in that way, even if they weren't particularly well prepared. They were at least a little more adventurous.

Overall, seminars with an academic focus may be more successful, because students and parents want to know the course will apply toward the degree.

I think more obviously academic topics rather things that are sort of cute and trying to be engaging while entertaining (Western's sculpture collection)—which was just supposed to be the hook with the content in my course. Probably you'll do better with special sections of regular courses, which seems to be the direction we're going, so I think that may be good... The academic focus is always something you can fall back on... Both this and at Summerstart, both the students and their parents want to know how's this going to get me toward the degree?

Preparation and Growth

One of the challenges FYE seminar instructors face is the fact that students come in with different levels of preparation.

Certainly they come with such widely different preparation, yet they all come with the same grades. But what an A means in one high school is totally, you know what I mean ... some people

had written several twenty to thirty page papers in high school and some people had never written anything longer than two pages. They all made A's. So it's really important to structure courses that way so you don't kill them at first, but you ram along pretty quickly and get a sense of what they can do.

Seminars are structured so that students can make connections and apply what they're learning to their own experiences.

In terms of campus engagement there are ways I could build that into the class and did but that was largely through asking them what connections they see. They had the opportunity to bring in to the benefit of their work anything else happening on campus, so it's the discussion on hip hop and its meaning that came up during that time. I let them know that it existed, and said hey make sure you bring these things into your discussion, bring these things into your writing. In their little this I believe essays they all a lot of times told me about their conversations with their roommates about these issues and whether or not they were able to convince their roommate their certain new found positions as they went through things. And that helped me sort of discern the level of success they were having in applying these things in a campus community.

A critical piece is self-assessment along the way, in order for students to recognize how far they've come.

I tried to sequence my materials in a particular way that were not only sort of what would appeal to them and their assumptions about what history, we start at the beginning and work our way through. But also so that I felt that each of the readings provided some additional challenge to how they would understand these issues and how they would apply them. We gave a lot of attention to identifying what are the authors key arguments, what source of evidence, how does this relate to other things that you may know about from other readings or from your own experience? I was trying to continually pushing them to not only look at the sources closely but then step back and say can I connect this to anything else? Then I also have them... I think that there was too much repetition of it. But I had them, because of the nature of the course, follow the idea that I heard on the NPR station writing the this I believe essays periodically and so you know, have them sort of start and say here's my initial statement, here's my reassessment of my initial statement, here's my final reassessment of, you know, sort of a self examination. I wouldn't call that a rigorous academic exercise but building in that sort of self reflection along the way, I think was critical, I think I did it, and the number of times that they went about it. But that was very important for them to, sort of, recognize themselves and the distance that they've traveled.

A successful outcome is the level of growth that happens between the beginning of the quarter and the end—in terms of engaging with the text and ability to write analytically, as well as preparation for the level of discussion required in order to get to some critical issues.

I noticed from their first to their last writing projects, there was a noticeable difference in how they engaged with the text and how they used the evidence, and how they read below the surface—not what people were saying but what were the assumptions they were making when they said it.

I think that the students thought they knew something about this topic but they weren't prepared for the level of discussion that we needed to have in order to get to some critical issues. By the time I got to week eight or nine I could have them read a text that at the beginning they would have been so challenged by it that they wouldn't have really understood what was there, so they wouldn't have been able to do their two hours or two sentences type of thing. But they had come to understand that and I had to point that out to them and say look— if you had read this, what would your reaction have been if you had read this in the beginning of the quarter instead of the end? So one of the things I was trying to do when I built the course was structure it so that we could start with something that proposed some challenges to their thinking, but not so much that they would just shut down. So I think that that's a level of assumption that we have to have—to assume that they don't know anything...that they may have an interest , but they really don't want to think about the topic...I felt that in the class of 25 all but two or three were willing to recognize that they had made that kind of transition so that was a phenomenal... that I perceived as a success. And the two or three that tuned out were already so locked into particular visions and positions that they just weren't going to change.

One of the most successful outcomes is the fact that students share reading materials with their parents, in order to engage them in a discussion about the ideas.

A number of my students reported back to me that they purchased the books to give their parents for Christmas. Ok, so they think that this is a conversation worthwhile engaging their parents about. And I don't have a percentage but a pretty substantial group, you know, maybe a quarter to a third of them reported yeah, I'm excited by this reading and by these ideas.

Students also think about these issues while in other classes, and feel better prepared to engage in classroom discussions.

And dually, I can also tell you that a lot of students report back to me that they're thinking about these issues when they're in other classes— even in large survey classes. A lot of my students were in a large 200 level anthropology course that they had signed up for a GUR. A lot of the issues we talked about were similar and some of the interpretations were similar, but they liked the opportunity to think about those in that small group setting too. And I think they were much better prepared to engage in discussion so a lot of them report back—well when we talked about his in my other class, I was able to bring these things up we had read very carefully (enter that), and I really feel that I was able to apply those tools that I said was part of my goal. So I see that as an ongoing contribution.

Faculty Believe FYE Seminars Are Necessary

FYE seminar instructors believe in the idea of first year experience seminars. They also believe they are a necessary experience for first year students.

I'm a strong supporter of them. If we're going to advertise ourselves as a place geared toward undergraduates, and somehow different from the University of Washington, then I do think

they're important.

Particularly since so many of their other classes will be huge, it's their one chance of not getting lost. Also recognizing that, at worst case scenario, this is what they have to look forward to when they start taking upper division courses—best case scenario is that there will be more of these kinds of courses that they can take. But either way, at least give them a chance to experience what it's really all about.

If our faculty to student ratio is supposed to be one to 22 we ought to be replicating that right away for them somewhere. That's one key thing. And I can tell you that I think that as a department, the history department, is committed to doing this in part because we don't believe that sections of 75 or 100, or 60, or even 50 are really the way to teach people in an area that requires an immense amount of reading, an immense amount of thought, and an immense amount of writing. The more we can find those settings to do that, the more often we're going to do it. Not as a threat but as a commitment to a certain set of goals about what education ought to be.

Of course funding is an issue

More people would do it if there was financial support. It's important you know.

What's the key incentive? Have it be one of your courses?

Yeah, have it be one of your courses and have the provost and down through the deans recognize that. And absolute total SCH generation is not the measure of the quality of departmental contributions, because a lot of times we're held accountable for total SCH that are generated and you're not going to have a huge SCH that are generated that way.

Some believe that tenured or tenure-track faculty should teach FYE seminars.

I think the other I would add is that these need to be taught by tenured, or tenure-track faculty. You could make the argument that it should only be for senior faculty but I think we don't want to lose people who are excited about what they're doing, wanting to try it to find ways to think about what they're doing creatively and in their teaching. But I do think that these are best when they're tied to the research interests of the faculty...And the other thing is, if we're trying to build relationships with students you want faculty who are going to be around when they graduate four years down the road and be able to be intellectual, personal, whatever kind of mentors that those students need then after they build those relationships. And that's the only way to do that.

It's also a way of maintaining faculty probably.