The First-Year Seminar:  
A Linchpin for Connecting Students to Campus Support Services  

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The first-year seminar has the potential for promoting partnerships with other first-year student programs to create a more integrated first-year experience with the capacity to exert synergistic (multiplicative) effects on student success. When the seminar is intentionally connected to other first-year initiatives, it can serve as serve as an “anchor” to stabilize and sustain a comprehensive first-year experience program (Natalicio & Smith, 2005). As Barefoot (2000) notes: “First-year seminar effects can be multiplied through connection with other structures and programs” (p. 1).

Bringing Campus Services to Class with Guest Speakers  
Guest speakers may be brought to class individually or as members of a guest panels. This strategy serves to bring social and instructional variety to the class, allows students to meet other members of the college community, and takes some of the teaching load off you—particularly on topics that may not be your strong suit or your area of expertise. Academic-support professionals could also be invited to class to prepare students for assignments that require them to use certain academic skills. For example, a library-science professional may be invited to class to conduct a micro-session on information search-and-retrieval strategies, or a speech professor may be invited to help students prepare for upcoming oral presentations they will be making in class.

To actively involve and prepare students for guest speakers, ask each student in class to construct at least one question in advance of the speaker’s presentation. For instance, students could construct questions on interpersonal relationships to be addressed by the college counselor, health-related questions for the student nurse, or questions about student rights and restrictions for the Dean of Student Affairs. These questions could be submitted to the guest speaker before the visit and used by the speaker to make the presentation more relevant to students’ needs and interests. Speakers might also construct their presentations around the students’ questions, or students may be given class time at the end of the presentation to pose their questions.

To ensure that the speaker’s presentation is interactive, students could ask their questions during the visit, either individually or in groups—for example, a panel of students could collate and prioritize the interview questions and pose them to the guest speaker. Also, to encourage subsequent interaction between students and invited speakers from key campus-support services, have an appointment sign-up sheet available in case the support professional touches on an issue that relates to students’ current need for support.

Consider having guest speakers videotaped by an audio-visual specialist or a student in your class. These videos may be posted on YouTube and used to enable students in other sections of the seminar to “see” and hear the guest speaker without burdening that person with the redundant task of making multiple visits to different class sections.

Lastly, having students write a reflective “one-minute paper” at the end of guest presentation can help ensure that they process the speaker’s message deeply. (For example: “What was the most useful idea you took away from the speaker’s presentation?” [and] “What question still remains in your mind about the topic addressed by this speaker?) These written reflections may
also be used to provide feedback to the instructor (and guest speaker) on the impact or effectiveness of the presentation.

**Bringing Students to Campus Services via Course Assignments**

An old rule of thumb for college students is that they should spend 2-3 hours working on the course outside of class for every one hour they spend in class. If this rule is followed, in the first-year seminar, it means instructors actually have at least twice as much time to promote student learning outside of class than in class. It is noteworthy that research comparing new students’ expectations about how much time they will spend engaged in the college experience falls short of the actual time they spend engaged during their first year (Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005). This suggests that more can be expected of new students than is currently being asked of them. Some of this extra engagement time might be spent on out-of class assignments related to the FYS. The remainder of this section is devoted to identifying and planning out-of-class assignments that may particularly powerful for promoting the success of first-term students.

**Assignments for Connecting Students with Student-Support Services**

The first-year seminar has the capacity to serve as a linchpin for linking new students with key campus-support agents, thereby promoting students’ social integration into the college community. Traditionally, this is done by inviting professional and paraprofessional support agents to class as guest speakers. An alternative strategy for promoting these important connections is to bring students to the support agents via course assignments. Requiring this contact as a course assignment provides students with a strong incentive to connect with key student-support agents on campus who can play a pivotal and proactive role in promoting their success.

One characteristic of effective student-support programs is intrusive delivery—i.e., the college initiates supportive action by reaching out to students and bringing support to them, rather than passively waiting and hoping that students take advantages of these services on their own. Research shows that college students under-utilize academic support services (Friedlander, 1980; Walter & Smith, 1990). The vast majority of students entering college report that they will at least “occasionally” use campus academic-support services, but by the end of at their first year, less than half of them have actually done so (Kuh, 2005). At community colleges, 62% of students identify academic advising as being a “very important” service, yet 35% of them report that they “rarely” or “never” use this service (Community College of Student Engagement, 2008). These findings are also particularly disturbing when viewed in light of meta-analysis research, which reveals that academic-support programs designed for underprepared students exert a statistically significant effect on their retention and grades when they are utilized, particularly if these programs are experienced by students during their first year (Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb, 1983). Subsequent research findings support the findings of this meta-analysis (Pascarella & Terenzinin, 1991; 2005)

Ender, Winston, & Miller (1984) capture the gist of the principle of intrusive program delivery: “It is totally unrealistic to expect students to take full advantage of the intellectual and personal development opportunities [on campus] without some assistance from the institution” (p. 12). Their words are even more relevant today because of the growing number of under-prepared, under-represented, and first-generation students attending college. Research indicates that the retention and academic success of underrepresented and first-generation students, in
particular, is seriously undercut by institutional over-reliance on student-initiated involvement in campus-support programs (Rendón & Garza, 1996).

Schuh (2005) argues that the challenge to getting first-year students to make more effective use of support services is to have them view these services as a normal component of their college education and integral to their success, rather than as something supplemental to their college experience and an admission of weakness. “Colleges can address this challenge by making engagement strategies and support services inescapable, either by integrating them into the classroom experience, making them mandatory, or otherwise bringing them to students” (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). One way to accomplish this is by integrating student use of campus support services into the FYS as a credit-earning course assignment. Thought should be given to what particular campus support services or student support professionals would be most important for new students to connect with, and assignments should be intentionally designed to ensure that these connections are made. Assignments may connect all students in class to the same services, or assignments might be individualized so that particular students are connected with particular services that best meet their personal needs.

A menu of support services that students could be connected to via course assignments in the FYS would include the following:

* **Academic Advisement**—to develop a tentative, long-range educational plan;
* **Learning Assistance** (learning resource) professionals—to assess learning styles;
* **Career Counseling**—to explore career interests;
* **Personal Counseling**—to gain self-insight or develop personal adjustment strategies;
* **Financial Aid Counseling**—for long-range financial planning and money management;
* **Technology Services**—for orientation to campus-technology tools and programs;
* **Student Activities**—to explore campus-involvement and student-leadership options;
* **Health Services**—to develop a personal wellness plan;
* **Campus Ministry**—to explore spiritual issues and social justice opportunities;
* **Service-Learning & Volunteer Experiences**—to identify opportunities in the local community for civic engagement and experiential learning.

Assignments Designed to Stimulate Student Involvement in the Co-Curriculum.

Higher education research indicates that the connection between co-curricular experiences and classroom learning is very weak (Heller, 1988). This is a particularly disturbing finding when viewed in light of the wealth of research indicating that student involvement in campus life has a powerful impact on student retention, interpersonal skills, and leadership development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Reporting on the first national survey of first-year seminars, Barefoot and Fidler (1992) note the role that first-year seminars play in reducing the schism between in-class and out-of-class learning: “Many freshman seminars exist to bridge the gap between the curriculum and co-curriculum and to facilitate student involvement in all aspects of campus life” (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992, p. 8). One way that first-year seminars can bridge this gap is by engaging students in co-curricular experiences via course assignments. For example, students may be given the assignment of participating in a designated number of co-curricular events during their first term on campus (e.g., two per month) and be provided with a monthly calendar of co-curricular activities for planning and choosing what particular events they would like to attend. To ensure that co-curricular experiences are deeply processed, students
can complete written assignments (e.g., reaction or reflection papers in response to the events they attend).

Such writing assignments also serve to enhance the academic credibility of co-curricular experiences. When students are asked to write about their co-curricular experiences, they are more likely to reflect upon and internalize them, serving to transform them from “extra-curricular” activities into bona fide co-curricular learning experiences.

**Assignments Designed to Encourage Students’ Off-Campus Involvement and Service in the Local Community**

Provide students with a menu of possible volunteer opportunities, and encourage their participation via extra credit, or require participation as a course assignment. Students should be especially encouraged to engage in service experiences that relate to careers they are considering. This would enable new students can gain career-relevant experience or engage in an “exploratory internship” while simultaneously contributing to the local community.

If students reflect deeply about their service via reflection papers and focused discussions, their volunteer experience can be transformed into a bona fide service-learning experience. Research strongly supports the positive impact of service learning on multiple outcomes, including leadership skills, diversity appreciation, achievement motivation and deep learning (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002).

**Future-Planning Assignments**

Students can be given assignments in the FYS that engage them in the process of designing tentative log-range plans, which connect their current college experience with their future educational and life goals. National surveys of first-year seminars indicate “that academic planning and goal setting” is one of the seminar’s major course objectives (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). One way to realize this objective is to craft assignments that actively involve first-year students in planning their future, such as those listed below.

**Educational Planning Assignments**

Students may be assigned to create a tentative undergraduate plan that includes courses in general education and the student’s major, or exploration of a potential major. Two-year students could be assigned to create a tentative transfer plan. Norwich University (Vermont) uses its FYS to engage students in long-range educational planning and promote student dialogue with their academic advisors about their educational plans. The first-year seminar syllabus at Norwich calls for students to meet with their advisor on three occasions during the first term, in addition to their meeting for course scheduling. The second meeting occurs at about the midpoint in the term, at which time students bring a self-assessment report that they have completed as a first-year seminar assignment. Advisors use this report to focus discussion with students about their present academic progress and future educational plans (Catone, 1996).

**Career-Planning Assignments**

Students may be asked to develop a tentative career plan that encourages them students to identify potential careers and to construct a model (or skeletal) resume that would prepare them for entry into these careers. Students could also be asked to initiate the development of a
professional portfolio—a collection of materials that would best illustrate their skills or achievements, and demonstrate their educational or personal development (e.g., best written work, art work, research projects, letters of recommendation, co-curricular accomplishments, personal awards, or certificates of achievement). This may be particularly a particularly relevant assignment for today’s first-year students because they frequently cite career success as their major reason for attending college (Sax, 1998). If contemporary students begin to see the relationship between their current college experience and their future career plans, they are more likely to persist to degree completion. may see no reason to stay in college. One strategy for enabling first-year students to see this relationship is to connect them with college alumni in the field they intend to pursue or explore. At DePaul University (Chicago), all first-year students are assigned an alum with whom they conduct informational interviews that include questions such as the relevance of the alum’s academic major to their eventual career, career development, and advancement (Schroeder, 2005).

Research also suggests that the college persistence of under-represented students, in particular, is strengthened by institutional efforts to connect their current academic experience with future career goals. Richardson (1989) conducted on-site investigations of predominantly white institutions with impressive minority graduation rates. He found that one common element present in all these institutions was early provision of “career guidance to translate nonspecific educational goals into programs of study where coursework and desired outcomes are clearly linked” (p. A48).

Life-Planning Assignments

Students can devise long-range plans that move beyond educational and vocational goals to include goals involving personal development, which embrace social, emotional, ethical, physical, and/or spiritual dimensions of the self. For example, students can use self-assessment exercises they complete in the seminar to develop a long-range “personal growth plan” or a future “life-success portfolio.” Or, they can explore potential future careers by reading the newspaper, as is done at Kutztown University (PA) (Hartman, 2007). Although these assignments may appear to be a bit premature for first-term students to undertake, they still serve the important purpose of getting students to think ahead and to look for connections between their present academic experiences with their future life plans. This serves to increase their goal awareness and promotes goal-orientated behavior, which is important for promoting student persistence to program and degree completion (Noel & Levitz, 1989).

Conclusion

Connecting the first-year seminar with other student-support programs has the potential to promote cross-campus communication, collaboration, and community-building. As John Gardner noted in one of his earliest reports on the University 101 program at South Carolina: “The program integrates faculty and professional staff at the university in a joint undertaking [which] tends to reduce the barriers between the faculty and staff camps, reduces stereotyping, and has promoted better relationships between faculty and especially student affairs staff” (Gardner, 1980, pp. 6 & 7). The research and practice reviewed here strongly suggest that the first-year seminar has the potential to serve as the integrative for a comprehensive, coordinated first-year experience program whose connected parts can work together to exert a systemic and synergistic effect on student success.