

## **First-Year Seminar Task Force Report 10-30-2019**

### **Background**

The First-Year Seminar Task Force was assembled by the Provost in March 2019. The task force, detailed below, was composed of faculty representatives from each of the eight degree granting colleges, nominated by their respective Dean, a member of Enrollment Services, and a Chair, appointed by the Provost.

#### Task Force Members:

Christian Gonzales, College of Arts and Sciences  
Seray Ergene, College of Business  
Shane Tutweiler, College of Education and Professional Studies  
Andy Cary, College of the Environment and Life Sciences  
Natalie Sabik, College of Health Sciences  
Chris Hunter, College of Engineering  
Meg Bourbonniere, College of Nursing  
Patrick Kelly, College of Pharmacy  
Corinne Kulesh, Enrollment Services  
Chair, Rachel DiCioccio, College of Arts and Sciences

The task force was charged with exploring different First-Year Seminar (FYS) models in both content and delivery and determining a set of recommendations for designing the University's seminar. In doing so, the following issues were addressed:

- Examining FYS literature
- Defining the purpose and outcomes of a FYS for URI
- Outlining the general design of a FYS
- Determining how a FYS will be managed, who should deliver it, and the number of credits associated the course

### **Approach & Timeline**

The group met seven times between April 4<sup>th</sup> and August 26<sup>th</sup> to consider these central issues and outline the framework and main features for a new proposed FYS model. Underlying this work, the task force did not focus on reviewing or evaluating the structure and delivery of the University' current FYS, URI 101.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

The task force concluded that a FYS should provide a unique learning experience that joins clearly articulated disciplinary content with best practices in assisting students as they transition from high school to college life. Learners at the

University of Rhode Island should be introduced to prototypical study skills and social experiences early in their academic career in order to establish the necessary skill and mind-set that will foster academic and personal success at URI and beyond. A FYS sets the stage for learning –it is an opportunity to initiate valuable community connections and to provide a catalyst for intellectual curiosity.

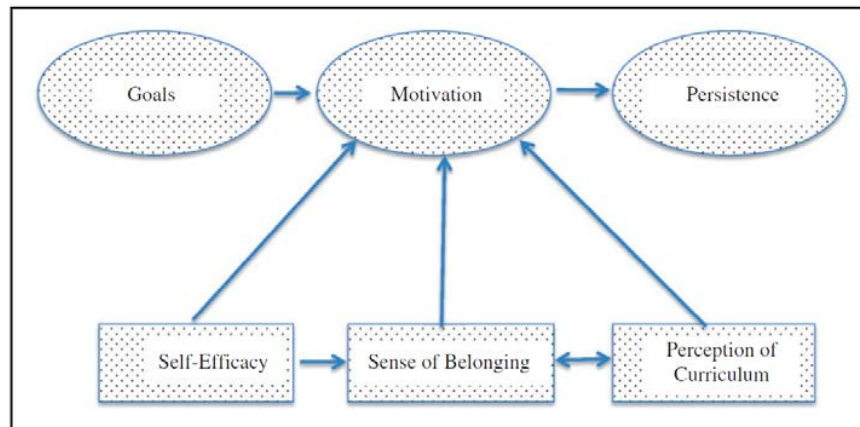
The task force envisions a FYS as an introduction to the University, the rigors of academic inquiry, and the experience and benefits of self-reflection. A FYS should be a safe space where students can have an academically challenging experience that introduces and establishes study skills but also supports intellectual and emotional growth and self-reflection. A FYS should provide a “focus” that grounds students as they explore interests, develop and test learning strategies, navigate decision points, and begin to chart their academic and personal trajectory. Ultimately, the aim is to provide students with an integrated experience that seamlessly incorporates disciplinary content and study skills with community building, self-awareness, and identity development.

### **Proposed Model**

Examination of the retention literature served as a useful starting point for designing a model and highlighted the value of a FYS. The notion of a first-year experience is not new –they have been in existence in various forms for over 100 years (Gordon, 1989). And, by last measure, they are being offered at almost 90% of institutions (Padgett & Keup, 2011). In a meta-analysis on FYS, Permzadian & Crede (2016) recognize several key moderators linked to higher retention including:

1. An orientation to college focus that helps students adjust academically and socially while fostering an attachment to the University;
2. Courses lead and taught by faculty and staff;
3. Inclusion of all first-year students as opposed to sub-populations deemed “at risk” of not retaining.

An institutional view of retention is only one aspect, however. Taking a student perspective is also essential. Students’ focus is on motivation – are they motivated to persist and succeed at an institution? Understanding how to tap into that motivation is key to strengthening retention efforts. Tinto’s (2017) model of retention is from the perspective of the student. The model underscores the importance of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of curriculum as collectively driving a student’s motivation toward goal attainment (see model below). The taskforce believes these three tenants are critical in guiding our efforts in supporting students to persist at URI.



Understanding our student population allows us to think critically about our assumptions of what our first-year students know about transitioning to college, such as college nomenclature, culture, and expectations (Chatelain, 2018). We have an opportunity to strengthen their sense of belonging and their perception of our curriculum. We also have an opportunity to leverage our incoming students' strengths and learning styles by involving them in low-stakes critical thinking experiences that fortify their academic self-efficacy as a college student (Twenge, 2017). In doing so, we can provide a FYS that supports our students' motivation to persist at URI.

The proposed FYS design being put forward by the task force is a "shell" model that defines standardized core objectives delivered through college and/or discipline specific content. Each degree granting college would be responsible for delivering the FYS to their majors and UCAS would be responsible for delivering the course to undeclared students. Disciplinary content would be determined by each college, recognizing the need for a FYS specifically tailored to meet the needs of our undeclared students who are still exploring possible majors.

The content would reflect the college/disciplinary interests of their respective students –introducing key vocabulary and concepts, as well as establishing a foundation for study skills development. A FYS would deliver this content in the context of community building, by exposing students to research/scholarship and critical thinking exercises, and allowing for and encouraging a self-reflective experience. The task force believes this design creates an integrated and invaluable experience for our first-year students.

Emanating from our discussions and review of best practices recognized nationally, the task force recommends three core objectives that define the overarching principles required for all nine colleges delivering the first-year seminar.

**OBJECTIVE 1: PROMOTE AND FOSTER STUDENT CONNECTION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH DEPARTMENT/MAJOR AND UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY.**

**PURPOSE**

A FYS is an opportunity for students to form meaningful relationships with peers and faculty as they explore topics of mutual interest. Objective 1 underscores the importance of close and early interaction with faculty and real engagement with a student's college community. We want students to feel grounded and to experience a sense of belonging from the very beginning, with their major and with URI at large.

**STUDENTS WILL:**

- A. Work with faculty/college member to learn about major and the University.
- B. Participate in departmental/college events or activities.
- C. Define their academic goals and identify the expectations of the college/discipline.

**INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY SUGGESTIONS**

- Require meetings with faculty outside of class.
- Require student attendance/volunteering at community events.
- Bring in guest speakers/faculty from the discipline.

**OBJECTIVE 2: PREPARE STUDENTS FOR RIGORS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDY.**

**PURPOSE**

A FYS should create the ideal intellectual experience –one that is stimulating, demanding, and sparks curiosity. We want to prepare URI students for success in their chosen major. Therefore, a FYS needs to be a safe space where students can question, falter, and regroup as they explore potential concentrations and interests. Students need early exposure to foundational knowledge and skills and the challenging and enlightening aspects of conducting research and engaging in scholarly endeavors. Objective 2 centers on creating a research experience for students in order to develop the necessary skills to work independently and collaboratively across a variety of contexts and engage in creative problem-solving of major challenges.

**STUDENTS WILL:**

- A. Acquaint themselves with the language and vocabulary of the discipline and college community.
- B. Engage in collaborative research-based or scholarly exploration that introduces the inquiry process.
- C. Examine disciplinary specific issues and propose solutions.
- D. Develop awareness of critical tools and methods utilized in their chosen discipline.

**INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY SUGGESTIONS**

- Engage students in low stakes but rigorous research/scholarly work.
- Introduce problem/solution-centered projects.
- Conduct applied learning activities.

**OBJECTIVE 3: SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT SELF-AWARENESS.**

**PURPOSE**

Central to developing the skills to think critically, is recognizing the importance of self-reflection and understanding how to incorporate this practice into your arsenal of study skills. Reflecting on one's experience encourages the generation and sharing of opinions and allows students to reset expectations and reevaluate goals. Objective 3 aims to foster self-examination designed to increase self-awareness of one's role within their respective majors, the URI community, and the greater society.

**STUDENTS WILL:**

- A. Explore their character and aspirations.
- B. Identify intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for their course of study.
- C. Engage in self-reflection to better understand their purpose and position on campus.
- D. Reflect on learning strategies and their progress toward success to guide future learning.

**INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY SUGGESTIONS**

- Use metacognitive prompts and worksheets.
- Engage students in ethics-based case studies.
- Conduct reflective writing over the course of the semester.

**Notable Features**

The task force identified several aspirational considerations in delivering the proposed FYS model that recognize pedagogical and student development concerns. These are, however, ideal features and may not translate into a deliverable model. The task force is aware that there are college restrictions and demands, as well as accreditation requirements that would impact or prohibit implementing some features. We expect that these features will be considered and modified appropriately when necessary, in order to execute A FYS across all nine colleges.

- Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory  
It is important that a FYS serves as a safe space where students can focus on learning and the experience rather than the grade earned.

- Two semester experience delivered in the first year (1 credit per semester)  
A FYS should serve as an anchor that tethers students to a college community and/or instructor, creating consistency and stability for the entirety of their first year.
- Recommended class size: 25-35  
Limiting the class size to a maximum of 35 students would allow for more teacher-student interaction and promote more communication and cohesion between peers.
- Delivered by full time faculty and staff recruited from each college  
A FYS should provide a unique opportunity for students to engage with and be mentored by those who are directly connected to the disciplinary content of their respective college.

### References

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- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy-- and completely unprepared for adulthood (and what this means for the rest of us)* (First Atria Books hardcover edition.). New York, NY: Atria Books.