Fall 2011 First-Year Seminar Assessment Overview

The Fall 2011 course evaluation completed by Wayne Jacobson, Director of Assessment, was not an evaluation of individual courses but of the FYS program as a whole. There were 116 FYS courses offered in Fall 2011, with over 1600 students enrolled. Faculty in 84 sections, with nearly 1200 students, sent out the survey (which was completed online). Responses were received from 608 students (50% of those who received the survey from faculty, or 37% of all FYS students).

Students’ responses indicated that they were very pleased with their FYS as well as their first-year experience as a whole. Two very distinct things they valued about their FYS was the ability to learn more about instructors’ area of expertise or field of research and the genuine interest that instructors showed in helping their students learn. Many students also highly valued the opportunity to meet other students who shared their interest in the FYS topic.

Writing Assignments

Instructors attending the meeting discussed their writing assignments, which in the past have ranged from small daily assignments to a final paper.

Ideas from FYS instructors for appropriate writing assignments

- Simple, regular writing assignments are preferred. Not all writing needs to be graded, although regular instructor feedback is important
- Simple small writings due at the end of each class (not more than 1-2 paragraphs) that establish attendance and show what was learned or discussed that day
- Small-group oral presentations that are equivalent to a final exam
- Short (1-2 page) papers that are due every-other-week; regular and immediate feedback from instructors to students
- In-class writings (approximately 1-2 paragraphs) that are passed from one student- or group of students- to another, who add to the piece; these writings can then be shared with the class.
- Cartooning or drawing simple figures with dialogue boxes; can be observations, analyses, critiques, reflections
- Assignments that help students to develop analytical skills, which can then be used during an in-class mock board meeting or committee meeting
- Teams of students prepare an issues list (possibly with annotated resources) or brief proposals related to community issues; students submit to community or governmental group
- Create an ethical flow chart or similar writing that can be used by a mock organ donor selection committee (idea can formatted to fit different course topics)
- Writings that are similar to a lab report, showing observations, hypothesis identification
• Some topics and disciplines lend themselves more to other forms of communication, such as student presentations. Regardless of the form, communication is an important skill to be developed through First-Year Seminars.
• Concept maps may be effective options to help students organize and communicate their critical thinking. [http://www.centeach.uiowa.edu/materials/Concept%20Maps%20as%20Learning%20Tools.pdf](http://www.centeach.uiowa.edu/materials/Concept%20Maps%20as%20Learning%20Tools.pdf)

**How much writing should students be asked to complete outside of class?**

• Approximately 1 page/week  
• Keep in mind the 2:1 ratio- two hours of work out-of-class for each hour in class.  
• Although they can be assigned, students tend to become more frustrated with longer high-stakes writing assignments; shorter low-stakes writing with feedback (not necessarily graded) is valued more by students

**Reading Assignments**

Reading assignments should be appropriate for students who are new to the academic study of the topic. Readings generally do not include articles from academic journals, unless there is additional guidance and coaching on how to work with this type of material (see below).

**Ideas from FYS instructors for appropriate reading assignments**

• Assign a few journal articles but keep in mind that most students will not have previous experience with this type of reading material; focus mainly on the overview and summary sections.  
• Assign short readings or articles with a progressive level of difficulty; help students learn how to manage challenging reading assignments.  
• Assign books or articles written by leading authors in the field, but written for lay audiences.  
• See the Center for Teaching web site for ideas about how to help students read more effectively. [http://www.centeach.uiowa.edu/readingstrategies.shtml](http://www.centeach.uiowa.edu/readingstrategies.shtml)

**Honors First-Year Seminars**

How does a FYS become an Honors course?

• The instructor’s level of experience in teaching honors students or highly capable students is assessed.  
• How does the subject matter contribute to the distribution of topics in already planned courses?  
• The amount of assignments does not factor into the decision.  
• Material in honors sections is covered more in-depth and discussions are more in-depth.