First-Year Seminar Assessment

Wayne Jacobson, Assessment Coordinator, discussed student perceptions of the First-Year Seminar (FYS) experience, which can be found on the University College website at http://uc.uiowa.edu/first-year-seminars/tips-instructors. The report includes a summary of 2012 FYS Survey Responses as well as slides from a presentation on What Students Value Most in a First-Year Seminar.

Data show that most students who took a FYS agreed that the relationship they were able to build with the instructor was valued and important to the FYS experience. Students also appreciated the opportunity to work with a faculty member who showed great interest in the seminar topic.

Among the small amount of students who expressed dissatisfaction with their First-Year Seminar, many complained that the workload for the class was more appropriate for a 3-credit course. Often, however, the amount was less criticized if a student felt that the work was relevant to the course and actually provided an opportunity for learning (students did not appreciate “busy work” that was perceived as adding no value to the class). Students reported that relevance and value were found in a wide-variety of classroom activities including class discussions, writing assignments, readings, field trips, student-led presentations, etc.

Writing Assignments in a First-Year Seminar: A Few Examples

Russell Larsen, Lecturer, Chemistry
Topic: Molecular Gastronomy (food and chemistry)
A text was chosen for the class that had high science content but was focused on food. Russell has found that choosing the right reading for his FYS plays an important role in supporting class discussions. His course was scheduled to meet twice a week so that during the first session they could focus more on the reading and then spend the second session working on projects. Writing activities involved recording data derived from an activity and then completing a wrap-up conversation on the project.

Tanya Uden-Holman, Associate Dean, Public Health
Topic: What is Public Health and How Does it Impact Me?
The goal of this FYS is to increase awareness of what public health is. Writing assignments and readings provided the content for discussions. Examples of writing assignment topics include what is public health, reactions to bicycle helmet laws, environmental health, controversy in public health and a final assignment that asked students to reflect on what public health means to them and how the class caused them to think differently on it. Students were also asked to do a final presentation in which they presented about a career or profession in public health.
William Hedgcock, Assistant Professor, Marketing  
**Topic: Decision Making and the Brain**  
The goal of this seminar was to have good class discussions that were not necessarily led by the instructor. To accomplish this goal, he chose a popular text that was written by an academic. Students were asked to read the entire book but they each took turns writing a chapter summary, submitting the summary before class so that the instructor could review it and post it to ICON for others to read before class and then leading a class discussion that was based on their written summary. This course was more reading centered than writing focused.

Tom Lewis, Professor, Spanish and Portuguese  
**Topic: A World to Win**  
Writing assignments came from movies that students were asked to view in place of reading the corresponding book. Assignments started out has having more structure but moved to less structure as the semester progressed. In this seminar, students were challenged to improve their public speaking skills, become more comfortable with debate and engage with literacy. To do this, discussions were held before the writing assignment was due so that students could reflect on their own experiences, perceived ideas and values. When grading assignments (six 2-page assignments over a 10-week period), he looked for evidence of serious reflections that were precise and concrete.