

FYS Task Force Committee
Subcommittee: “Impact of FYS on the Rest of the JCU Curriculum”

Overview

Our sub-committee was charged with exploring the impact of First-Year Seminar (FYS) on the rest of the John Carroll University curriculum. The description of this subcommittee’s charge is a broad one, insofar as it includes reflection on the relationship between FYS and the broader liberal arts core *and* the relationship of FYS to the departmental and interdisciplinary curricula. As a result of the subcommittee’s work, we urge a serious rethinking of the relationship between FYS and the Core Curriculum, as well as between FYS and departmental and multi- and interdisciplinary programs. This rethinking should be a part of a revitalization of the structure and content of the liberal arts core and undergraduate academic programs in both breadth and depth.

The work of the subcommittee to date has focused on drafting a faculty survey and analyzing the results. The subcommittee received a total of 59 responses; we asked that colleagues not provide their names, but to include their departments. A copy of the survey questions submitted to the faculty is reproduced below. We have also provided a summary of representative responses for each question, an analysis of four major issues that arose from the survey, as well as some final thoughts.

The Survey

“The first-year seminar offers an interdisciplinary introduction to academic investigation. This seminar focuses upon common readings, thematically organized, on the perennial questions of human experience and is taught by faculty from all areas of the University. A graded course characterized by disciplined investigation of topics and consistently rigorous academic standards, the seminar will feature the following:

- An environment that promotes the early development of academic skills in first-year students and fosters a serious attitude toward academic activities and responsibilities.
- A pedagogy that emphasizes active learning and develops students’ skills in critical inquiry and problem solving
- A context that promotes collaborative and integrative learning
- An atmosphere in which faculty facilitate discussion while sharing a learning experience in which they are not necessarily ‘expert’
- A milieu in which students learn to question and clarify their values
- An emphasis on the development of written and oral skills.”

With these points in mind, please consider the following questions. The more detail you can offer us, the better able we will be to represent your thoughts or concerns. We will be happy to read as much as you can provide us—more is better in this case.

1. To what extent are the goals expressed for FYS reflected in the way your major has conceived of its course offerings? If you participate in a concentration or program, to what extent do they reflect the goals and offerings in this area as well?

2. Do you emphasize how different disciplines inform your own (or your concentration or program), or offer alternative perspectives from your own, as you address themes, problems, issues in your courses outside of FYS?
3. Whether or not you have taught FYS yourself, have you observed that students refer to methods, readings, or skills introduced in the seminar during or subsequent to their FYS experience?
4. If you have participated in FYS, do you feel that your discipline's methods have been reasonably well-represented in the seminar?
5. If you have participated in FYS, have faculty development efforts been beneficial to your experience as a seminar instructor? Why or why not? Have they been beneficial in your subsequent course development efforts or in re-thinking the way you approach existing courses, your concentration, or your discipline?
6. Whether or not you have taught FYS, are there types of skills (e.g. information seeking, critical thinking, writing, and oral communication) that you have observed need to be included or strengthened in the FYS experience?"

Major Issues Raised by the Survey

In addition to responses to the six questions, the survey also reveals a range of issues that might fall under more than one of the above prompts. We identified at least four major issues and categorized them accordingly. It would come as no surprise if the FYS Task Force subcommittee engaged in focus group research arrives at similar findings. What follows, then, is a bullet-list of the four major issues that arose in response to the survey we sent to FYS faculty. The distribution of faculty views in terms of overall satisfaction is worth noting when interpreting the survey findings, for they provide a helpful context through which we can understand the issues raised.

- One-third of respondents reacted positively to their FYS experience; one-third did not find the experience particularly rewarding but took the responsibility seriously; one-third reacted negatively, from ambivalence to outright hostility.
- Dissatisfaction among faculty of current recruitment practices and support resources for teaching FYS.
- Securing the type of faculty commitment that would ensure successful implementation of FYS goals and outcomes.
- Respondents raised the question of whether FYS, in its current format, is too ambitious and attempts to accomplish too much during one semester.

Faculty Responses

Below are detailed summaries of how faculty responded to each survey question.

1. To what extent are the goals expressed for FYS reflected in the way your major has conceived of its course offerings? If you participate in a concentration or program, to what extent do they reflect the goals and offerings in this area as well?

Many respondents indicated that the nature or structures of their departmental programs do reflect the goals for FYS, but the overwhelming majority of such responses did not offer any elaboration as to how or why. A number of other respondents did elaborate,

indicating the following: that critical examination of propositions, assumptions, or concepts is central to their disciplines; that their disciplines emphasize critical reading, writing, and oral argumentation; that an introduction to disciplinary research methods and skills is reinforced in their programs. Some made a point of saying that the goals of FYS did not in any way influence their departments' goals—not that they are not compatible, rather that their departments did not build and modify their goals with FYS in mind. Still others contested that FYS is able to engage students sufficiently in the broad area of academic skills building (critical reading, writing, and oral argumentation, research/information gathering, etc.), and maintained that their departmental offerings do a better job in this respect.

2. Do you emphasize how different disciplines inform your own (or your concentration or program), or offer alternative perspectives from your own, as you address themes, problems, issues in your courses outside of FYS?

Responses varied here according to colleagues' perceptions of individual courses they may teach, whether they see that their discipline shares (in part) approaches with other disciplines, and perhaps whether a given respondent has been exposed to interdisciplinary perspectives during graduate school training or subsequently. Many colleagues volunteered that they explore influences and perspectives from other disciplines where either "appropriate" or "circumstances allow it." A significant number of respondents elected to ignore this question; several respondents noted that their departmental curricula are already interdisciplinary to a greater or lesser extent; some stated that they did not understand the question or contested that a department or concentration should understand itself as interdisciplinary in nature.

3. Whether or not you have taught FYS yourself, have you observed that students refer to methods, readings, or skills introduced in the seminar during or subsequent to their FYS experience?

The majority of responses make plain that students do not refer to FYS-related methods, readings, or skills in the courses that faculty respondents teach *unless* the faculty member prompts students. One colleague noted that Honors Program students seemed to be more inclined to think about the connections between disciplines and individual courses; thus, they tended to make more unsolicited references to work in FYS. In some cases, where readings were particularly influential or engaging (e.g., *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda* or *Fast Food Nation*), students have referred to texts where they are relevant for a theme explored in another course. This appears to be the exception, rather than the rule. A number of other faculty members offered that students have complained about FYS; however, the context for these complaints is not clear.

4. If you have participated in FYS, do you feel that your discipline's methods have been reasonably well-represented in the seminar?

Responses tended to vary depending on discipline represented, although there were exceptions. Colleagues in the physical sciences tended to feel that their discipline's methods were not reasonably well-represented; those in the life sciences tended to feel the same, but less adamantly. Those self-identified as business school faculty largely felt that their disciplines were not represented at all—or, if so, then dismissively and unfairly. Colleagues from humanities and the social sciences offered that their disciplines were represented, but not always faithfully by others insufficiently trained in them. For example, a number of responses pointed out that the life and physical science components are not taught accurately enough. Still others dismiss FYS as just another literature or philosophy course in disguise.

5. If you have participated in FYS, have faculty development efforts been beneficial to your experience as a seminar instructor? Why or why not? Have they been beneficial in your subsequent course development efforts or in re-thinking the way you approach existing courses, your concentration, or your discipline?

Responses to this question can be divided into roughly five equal groups.

- Those who have not yet taught FYS entered “n/a” here.
- Another group felt that the May workshop and follow-up sessions in August were a waste of time.
- A third group offered that development efforts were less valuable in helping them understand the readings or theme(s) than they were in structuring syllabi and assignments or integrating experiential learning—i.e., they were interested in pedagogy. Many respondents here were confident that they could come to terms with the readings on their own.
- The fourth group volunteered that faculty development efforts helped them to better understand material outside their fields of expertise and to learn how more experienced colleagues addressed the material (vis-à-vis readings, themes, or simply previous FYS experience)—i.e., they were more interested in greater comfort with FYS content. In this group most felt that the May workshop was more beneficial than the August workshop.
- A small number of respondents offered that the seminars were valuable in the areas of pedagogy and content. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that FYS theme, the chair of the FYS committee, and the year all played a role as variables in responses of those who had taught the seminar.

Two points of interest: first, many who felt positively about the course indicated that they already came to FYS with experience in the Socratic method or in interdisciplinary courses (Honors Program, interdepartmental team-teaching, etc.); second, a small number of respondents indicated that FYS faculty development efforts had been beneficial for either subsequent course development or the way existing courses are re-thought.

6. Whether or not you have taught FYS, are there types of skills (e.g. information seeking, critical thinking, writing, and oral communication) that you have observed need to be included or strengthened in the FYS experience?

Responses here fell into two broad categories. On the one hand, a minority of colleagues urged that the FYS project should be abandoned altogether, the sooner the better. Some were more constructive in their criticism and less outraged than others, and offered that a responsible and well-conceived core should already be doing what FYS purports to do more effectively and in greater depth. Perhaps the majority urged that one or more elements in the catalogue of FYS goals be emphasized more deliberately and clearly if students are to better approach the Core and their major/minor programs more successfully. Many of these respondents questioned whether FYS was the appropriate venue to inculcate the skills which they regard particularly important, for the catalogue of goals is already extremely ambitious—even unrealistically large.

The break down among respondents to the importance of the skills taught in FYS is as follows:

- Fifteen respondents affirmed the list of skills in the question as being important.
- Thirteen mentioned research and information seeking skills as being something that should be emphasized more.
- Only one stated satisfaction with students' ability to find quality information.
- Several people said critical thinking and writing are most important, as did others who singled out writing as the most important, and still others that said critical thinking is the most important.
- In addition to research skills, other additional skills included introduction to college and adult life, note taking, time management, ability/disposition for peer evaluation, encouragement to study abroad, reading and listening comprehension, drawing connections across disciplines, study skills, and computer skills.
- A number of answers implied it is not the goals themselves that are the problem. Rather, it is the inconsistent emphasis on them on the part of faculty that is the problem.

Issues that Emerge from Survey Responses.

Examination of the survey responses reveals a range of concerns that might fall under more than one of the above prompts. Below is our analysis of the four major issues that arose from the surveys:

1. Types of responses can be broken down into three categories:

- Approximately one-third of respondents reacted positively to their experiences as FYS instructors, regardless of whether they might have constructive criticisms of the seminar or favor an alternative model.
- Another one-third can be characterized as dutiful colleagues who did not find that teaching FYS particularly invigorating and were critical of the structure or aspirations of the seminar, but were determined to take the responsibility seriously and try to make the best of it for their students and themselves.
- The final one-third view FYS negatively, with responses ranging from profound ambivalence to outright animosity.

Core directors and FYS module directors have approached the seminar in good faith and with earnest efforts to realize a positive learning experience for faculty and students alike. Quite apart from their professionalism and dedication we might seriously consider criticism raised in the survey responses, whether they are thoughtful individual remarks or representative of larger or smaller segments of opinion.

2. Dissatisfaction among faculty of current recruitment practices and support resources for teaching FYS.

How can we consistently secure the kind of faculty commitment across FYS section necessary to make the seminar work in terms of student perceptions and faculty perceptions? In the former instance, widely disparate workload, differing expectations for academic rigor, and faculty respect for the enterprise across sections appear to have created an undercurrent of student dissatisfaction in the eyes of many faculty respondents. In the latter case, faculty respondent criticisms—regardless of which third of sentiment to which they might be assigned—suggest that recruitment of faculty to work outside of areas of comfort and familiarity or difficulties inherent to faculty workshops with up to forty participants and the absence of follow-up workshops or brown bags during the fall semester can create dissatisfaction where it has not been transcended by the application of good will.

3. How do we secure the type of faculty commitment that would ensure successful implementation of FYS goals and outcomes?

It might be all too easy for us to dismiss dissatisfied faculty members as outright malingerers, but some critics may have reasonable points. For all of us who are willing and eager to work in an inter- or multidisciplinary setting, do we nonetheless experience an institutional academic culture that has long viewed departments as silos—recent joint appointments notwithstanding? When departments hire they naturally look to solidify existing or build new expertise as part of departmental programs, but do they do so at the expense of genuine interdisciplinary training in new hires? Have we engaged in sufficient, ongoing faculty learning community activity over the years that can nurture interdisciplinarity—and will we reap the fruits of such interdisciplinary cooperation each fall semester, given the existing FYS structure?

A number of respondents pointed out that significant preparation may be invested in a course that is only taught two consecutive years (at the expense of courses offered in one's major/program); this comment found its way into responses that were consistently

negative in tone, but also in responses where it is clear that faculty colleagues have taught the course in good faith. Related to the recruitment and resource allocation concern is the point raised in some responses that departmental commitments to FYS necessitated the hiring of part-time faculty to cover courses required for Core or for majors.

4. Respondents raised the question of whether FYS, in its current format, is too ambitious and attempts to accomplish too much during one semester.

The FYS goals stated in the core document are ambitious, and the Task Force members voiced agreement that they were all important. But does FYS, when taught in good faith, demand too much from students for their 3 credit hour commitment over 15 weeks?

Survey responses stressed the importance of FYS building study skills, critical reading and writing skills, oral argumentation skills, and the importance of students learning how to identify and assess the value of information found through library and internet resources. As vital as the FYS catalogue of goals is for a student's first-year experience and as an introduction to expectations for the Core and majors/minors, might we benefit from eliminating FYS and encouraging students to concentrate on the existing Core (as many steadfast opponents of FYS assert)? from rethinking and revitalizing the Core? from paring down our expectations for FYS after all? from revitalizing FYS within the existing Core?

Final Thoughts

Our sub-committee was charged with exploring the impact of first-year on the rest of the JCU curriculum. Significant issues about the relationship between FYS and the rest of the curriculum were raised by our survey and by our analysis of the respondents. Does FYS fit into the larger structure of the Core and of the curriculum as was intended when both were introduced? If it does not, is this a function of how FYS is structured, how the Core is structured? How majors, minors, and multi- or interdisciplinary programs are structured? A clearer understanding by faculty of how FYS fits within the goals of the Core Curriculum and how faculty can best teach across disciplines will help cultivate an appreciation of this type of cross-curricular inquiry among our students.

If one of our goals in the liberal arts core is to highlight the interconnectedness of knowledge—whether it is interdisciplinary in nature, or if adherents of certain methods take particular issue with proponents of others—then we might consider how we make clearer to ourselves within and across departments and University units how and why this is important. Only then can we begin to work towards cultivating this appreciation among our students and prepare better prepare them to face the challenges and accept the opportunities that such interconnectedness offers.

It is apparent that we would like FYS to have a positive effect on student attitudes towards inquiry at the college level and on the skills and dispositions necessary for embracing the challenges and demands of college work. Along these lines, we would prefer that students see the interconnectedness of knowledge—perhaps differently phrased, the potential for purposeful, curious exploration of paradigms, methods, and

skills in different contexts—and should seriously explore the reasons why (in the eyes of the faculty, based on these responses) most students do not seem to take this from FYS, and perhaps also not from the Core itself.

As an extension of this subcommittee's work and that of other FYS Task Force subcommittees, the Dean of Arts and Sciences together with the Academic Vice-President, the Dean of the Boler School of Business, the director of UCC and a larger group of faculty representative of the range of departments, may wish to begin an earnest rethinking the relationship between FYS as part of the core curriculum on the one hand, and departmental and multi- and interdisciplinary programs on the other as part of a revitalization of the structure and content of the liberal arts core and undergraduate academic programs in both breadth and depth.