

**Preliminary Report of John Carroll University FYS Study Group  
Points for Faculty Conversation  
February 21, 2007**

**Background**

The FYS Study Group was formed in the Fall of 2005 in response to Dean Linda Eisenmann's call for an assessment of how well our First Year Seminar was meeting its goals at its tenth anniversary. The Study Group consists of approximately 20 faculty volunteers from across the University, representing very diverse interests and a broad range of opinion about our FYS. Notably, from the start the group agreed unanimously that JCU should continue its FYS program in some form, and that the course should be academic and interdisciplinary in nature, rather than the "introduction to university life" common at many institutions.

However, we were very far from any consensus about what model our FYS should follow, how it should be staffed, etc. It soon became clear that to make more progress, we needed information on models used at other universities and on how our current FYS is perceived here at JCU. For the first issue, a subgroup looked at survey information on First Year Experiences at universities across the country. In addition, our entire Study Group later looked closely at academic FYS courses at 18 universities. As a result, we feel that we have a very clear picture of what alternatives are available for FYS courses.

**Creation of subgroups**

Three subgroups were formed to gather information on our current FYS: one convened 11 focus groups (three for faculty and two each for freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors) to gather *feedback on the strengths and weakness of our current FYS*; a second formulated and administered a questionnaire to all faculty, to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of *faculty sentiment on our FYS*; and a third looked at the results of *past assessments of our FYS* and engaged in discussions with many sectors of the university community, focusing mainly on Student Affairs. The full results of this research can be found at ([www.jcu.edu/forum/reports/FYS2007](http://www.jcu.edu/forum/reports/FYS2007)).

Our data showed that two issues of concern about the current FYS appeared to be almost universal among our *students*. First, students were quite bothered about perceived inequities in course requirements from section to section. Second, students' perception of the FYS experience seemed to depend to a great extent on the degree of enthusiasm displayed by the instructor – in particular, complaints about disengaged faculty were common. In general, *faculty concerns* mirror those voiced by the students. Faculty often cited how demanding a course the FYS is to teach, and that the task is made all the harder by students' perception of unfairness in course expectations and placement into sections. Further, we found that recruiting sufficient faculty to teach all the sections of FYS has become increasingly difficult in recent years, due to increased departmental workload and a perception of a lack of recognition and/or incentives for FYS instructors.

Some of these findings are somewhat at odds with the mainly positive results of past FYS assessments, ([www.jcu.edu/forum/reports/FYSpast](http://www.jcu.edu/forum/reports/FYSpast)) so one may be tempted to dismiss some of these issues as the grouching of vocal minorities of students and faculty. However, the consistency with which we heard these complaints points to at least a widespread perception of some fairly serious problems with our current FYS.

### **Effect of the FYS model**

These problems are not necessarily innate to our current FYS model, where all freshmen take a course with a single topic and several common readings. Indeed, when our FYS has worked best it has brought great benefits to both faculty and students. Those faculty who participated in the early cycles reminisce fondly about the experience of 40 faculty from across the university working closely together in developing and teaching a truly interdisciplinary course. The students in those early FYS classes often spoke in glowing terms about the common learning experience and how it generated discussion outside the classroom. However, the general consensus seems to be that more recent FYS cycles have not generated the same level of enthusiasm among faculty or students, and the complaints outlined above have become more frequent and more loudly expressed. In short, our current FYS seems to have acquired a great deal of “baggage.”

The main task set to this Study Group is to develop recommendations on how to “reinvigorate” our FYS. Given the growth of negative perceptions concerning our current course, it appears that at least some changes are necessary to recapture the enthusiasm of our early FYS. However, we are very mindful that it would be easy to lose many of the positive attributes of our current FYS by poorly-considered changes. Our study group felt that any modifications to our FYS must adhere to the original conception: a common, truly interdisciplinary introduction to academic life that addresses the goals of the core. Further, no degree of change in the course can be successful without the strong support of the faculty and administration. With these concerns firmly in mind, we wish to suggest some ideas for significant changes in our FYS course, with the goals of sparking discussion among faculty and eliciting feedback that will help us focus and refine our recommendations.

### **Recommendations for a new FYS approach**

Our vision for a renewed FYS is centered on the use of *faculty learning communities* as the primary vehicle for support, for faculty development and for ensuring commonality from section to section. We suggest that FYS faculty work together in 5 learning communities, each organized around a common interest, to plan the course and its requirements. Further, each learning community will have available its own liaisons from Grasselli Library, the the university writing programs and Student Affairs to support the faculty in both curricular and cocurricular aspects of the course..

One particular implementation of these ideas is sketched here, although there are many different ways in which these ideas could be worked into our FYS. The model/process which has gained the most support in our Study Group is the following.

For the FYS cycle beginning in the Fall semester of year N, the process will begin in the Spring of year N-1. Early in the Spring semester, the FYS Committee (consisting initially of the Director of the Core and three elected faculty) consults with the faculty in order to formulate a broad theme for all 40 or so sections of the course. The theme must be centered in the core values of JCU as expressed in the Mission Statement and be sufficiently broad so as to allow exploration from the perspectives of many disciplines from across the university. The FYS Committee then announces the theme and sends out a call for proposals for learning communities (and “mini-themes”) within that theme.

It is expected that each faculty member submitting a proposal would agree to act as coordinator for his/her group, if the proposal is accepted. By midSpring, the FYS Committee reviews the proposals submitted and chooses 5 or so learning communities for the FYS of fall year N. The Committee then sends out a call for faculty to participate in the learning communities and teach the FYS. (Some faculty may have already decided to participate, based on their involvement with the persons crafting the learning community theme.) Faculty would apply for acceptance in a particular learning community/mini-theme, specifying a ranked set of three choices. The FYS Committee and Dean then choose among the applicants to form the learning communities and staff the course, keeping in mind the need for appropriate disciplinary diversity in the composition of the learning communities. Once the learning communities are formed, the FYS Committee is expanded by adding the coordinator from each learning community, to ensure adequate communication between the groups and the oversight body. (In general, the learning communities are expected to continue for all three years of the theme, and the groups may choose to rotate the coordinator position .)

In late Spring N-1, the expanded FYS Committee will choose, with input from all faculty teaching the course, one common reading to be used in all sections. Each learning community will be assigned a liaison from Grasselli Library, the university writing programs and Student Affairs who will be available to support the faculty group in developing assignments as well as cocurricular activities.

The learning communities begin to meet in the late Spring and early Fall of year N-1 to develop the content and academic requirements for the course, eventually supplying more and more detailed course descriptions to the FYS Committee by deadlines specified in the course guidelines. During this development process, the FYS Committee will ensure that each mini-theme fits the common theme and the FYS course guidelines for student workload and interdisciplinarity, providing feedback as appropriate. Early in the Fall N-1 semester, all the FYS faculty meet in a workshop to learn more about the expectations for the course and students (with a focus, perhaps on writing goals and expectations for freshmen or a similar topic) and to compare plans. Each learning community continues to meet regularly in the Fall N-1 and Spring N semesters, with the goal of having each course well-planned by the beginning of the summer.

When registering during the summer of year N, incoming students will select a particular learning community/mini-theme (presenting a ranked set of three choices) and will be randomly assigned to one of the 8 sections in the appropriate area. During the course

itself (in Fall of year N), each learning community continues to meet so that the faculty may exchange ideas (in addition to any activities common to the 8 sections). The learning communities continue to meet appropriately over the subsequent years of the theme.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of the new approach**

This particular FYS implementation is favored by the majority of our Study Group for several reasons:

- This model should achieve a *high degree of commonality* for all 160 or so students in each LC/mini-theme, as opposed to the rather nominally common experience all our freshmen get from the current FYS.
- It is likely to *eliminate the most serious inequities in course expectations* because of the ongoing communication among the 8 members of each learning community. Further, working more closely with LC liaisons should allow faculty to have clear understanding of expectations and outcomes for research and writing assignments for freshmen and to plan course requirements accordingly.
- It allows each faculty member to choose a LC that fits his/her interest, allowing the instructor to *bring more enthusiasm and intellectual engagement* into the course development and into the classroom.
- This model affords *flexibility* in the logistics of the course, including, perhaps, meeting time.
- It allows the student to choose the mini-theme that fits his/her interests, *lessening the perception of conscription* students often express about our current system.
- Eventually, the faculty LC/mini-theme *could be expanded to student learning communities*, perhaps forming the basis for residential colleges.

However, this model for our FYS involves substantially more work for faculty and expenses for the university.

- The *budget* for speakers and extracurricular activities will be split 5 ways.
- Faculty acting as coordinators for LCs will need *reduced teaching loads* to compensate for their extra duties.
- All faculty teaching the FYS will need to be *appropriately compensated* for the extra time and energy spent in course development.

However, our Study Group believes that the long-range success of *any* FYS implementation requires a serious commitment on the part of the *entire* university, not just financial outlays. We hope for the following:

- An *unambiguous statement from our academic officers* that teaching the FYS is an important part of the teaching mission of the university and will be recognized as such in decisions on tenure and promotion.
- Commitments for *appropriate support/rewards* for faculty teaching FYS. (Our Study Group suggests a stipend of \$1000 each year for teaching the course, plus a course load reduction to be used at some point from the Spring before the first offering of the course through the year following the third year.)
- Commitments for *appropriate budgets* for events, speakers and appropriate extracurricular activities for all 5 LCs.

- *Increased prominence of FYS to the university's public.* (We envision our FYS as the signature portion of JCU's image, central in every admissions talk and every meeting with potential donors.)

### **Reactions so far**

So far, our Study Group has received expressions of great interest when presenting these ideas to parts of the university community. The Library, writing programs and Student Affairs have all tentatively agreed to providing LC liaisons, commenting on the likelihood of greater effectiveness in working with small groups of faculty. AVP David LaGuardia has commented very favorably on the potential for generating enthusiasm among faculty and students. President Bob Niehoff responded with great enthusiasm for the faculty learning community based FYS model, especially if the theme is centered around JCU's core values, agreeing that the ideas have the potential to evolve into a real selling point for the university for potential students and donors. He offered support, within reason, for faculty developing and teaching the FYS, suggesting hiring replacement faculty for departments that have a number of faculty teaching FYS, or using one or more of the hoped-for endowed positions to provide appropriate relief. Fr. Niehoff also suggested that there's a good possibility of getting donors to provide endowment funds to support such an FYS program in the long run.

### **Next steps**

These meetings are intended to update and inform faculty about the work of the FYS Study Group and to begin conversations about the possibilities of changes in model and implementation. Obviously, implementing the new approach would require modification or temporary suspension of the sections of the Core document that control FYS, and such change requires approval of the faculty. We hope to move forward by incorporating feedback from faculty into our report, presenting it to the CAS Dean and then offering recommendations to the faculty for its consideration.

### **FYS Study Group**

The First Year Seminar Study Group consists of Denise Ben Porath,, Matthew Berg, Lauren Bowen, LeRoy Brooks, Linda Eisenmann, Ruth Fenske, Penny Harris, Robert Kolesar (HS), Peter Kvidera, Nevin Mayer, Marian Morton, Mariana Ortega, Tom Pace, Gerald Sabo, Jackie Schmidt, Paul Shick, John Spencer, Paul Thomson and Sherri Young.