

Overview of Wright State University Learning Communities and First Year Seminars

The *Summary of recommendations from Faculty Senate ad hoc committee on Student Success, January 2012*, names #11, Freshman seminars and learning communities, as the first of three initiatives recommended for further development.

Learning Communities enroll about 75% of entering Direct From High School first year students into cohort groups for their fall term at Wright State. More than 20,000 WSU students have participated in Learning Communities since 1999.

Most WSU Learning Communities (LCs) are cohorts groups consisting of a major-based first year seminar such as UVC 1010 or UH 1010 and one or more required Core Curriculum classes. Seminars often include the use of highly skilled peer instructors as a critical element to key outcomes.

Benefits of Learning Communities and First Year Seminar

The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, tracks research on first-year seminars.

- Research by Koch, 2001; Koch, Foote, Hinkle, Keup & Pistilli, 2007; Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005 establishes the first-year seminar as an effective means toward achieving learning and developmental objectives of undergraduate education.
- **Studies by Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, & Roberts, 1998; Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004; Cuseo, 1991; Fidler, 1991; Fidler & Moore, 1996; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-3; and Tinto, 1993 record positive impact on retention, academic performance, and persistence to graduation.**

The value of peer-to-peer interaction is also supported in the research:

- Success in college is impacted in large part by “the extent and content of one’s interactions with major agents of socialization on campus, namely, faculty members and student peers” (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, p. 620). Astin (1993) says quite explicitly that a student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence.
- Students who teach other students must know the material more thoroughly than if they were only studying it for themselves (Annis 1983; Bargh and Schul 1980; Pace 1990). Peer instructors then become more actively engaged with the material being taught, which in turn produces greater conceptual learning (Benware and Deci 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991).
- Overall, institutions with higher levels of student social interaction also have higher levels of student educational aspirations and goal attainment (Pascarella 1985).

Other research highlights positive outcomes of other areas of student learning associated with first-year seminars:

- Interaction with faculty (Hopkins, 1988; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Maisto & Tammi, 1991)
- Student engagement (Kuh, 2005)
- Improvement of student skills in problem solving, critical reading, writing and general study behaviors (Barefoot et al., 1998; Tobolowsky et al.)

Review of research on first-year seminar outcomes by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concludes:

“FYS participation has statistically significant and substantial, positive effects on a student’s successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college.” (p. 403).

Wright State's Office of Institutional Research reports:

Wright State Learning Communities are consistent with what the national data tell us. Students who participate in Learning Communities have higher GPAs, persist and graduate at a higher rate compared to those students who do not participate in Learning Communities.

GPA Data	Cum GPA (F10)		
Learning Community Students	2.63		
Non-Learning Community Students	2.36		

Retention (Term-to-Term)	F11, Retained W12	F12, Retained S13	
Learning Community Students	88.1%	88%	
Non-Learning Community Students	87.2%	82%	

Retention (Year-to-Year)	F10, Retained F11	F11->F12	
Learning Community Students	64%	58%	
Non-Learning Community Students	55%	53%	

Graduation Rates-F05 Cohort	4-Year Rate	5-Year Rate	6-Year Rate
Learning Community Students	19%	37%	43%
Non-Learning Community Students	16%	30%	35%

Wright State University Student Response to Learning Communities and First Year Seminar, fall 2011

First year seminar instructors administer two evaluations to students at the end of fall term, the standard WSU Student Evaluation of Instruction and also the First Year Seminar evaluation, created for the Learning Communities program by Computing and Telecommunications Services. The sum of “strongly agree” + “agree” for key questions on the FYS evaluation:

	fall 2011	fall 2012
• Overall, I am satisfied with my Learning Community experience.	71%	68%
• I would recommend my instructor to next year’s new students.	80%	76%
• Being in a LC my first term helped increase my awareness and understanding of the diversity of people at WSU and/or in the world.	78%	72%

For key questions on WSU Student Evaluation of Instruction:

• Class time was well spent.	84%	81%
• I learned a lot from the instructor.	79%	76%

WSU Learning Communities and First Year Seminar Goals

Wright State University Learning Communities goals, revised in accordance with the Wright State University Faculty Senate ad hoc committee on Student Success January 2012 report, are to help students:

- Connect with Professors
- Achieve Academic Success
- Transition and Connect to College
- Confirm Major & Connect with Degree-Granting College

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