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Section I.

***DESIGNING* & *PLANNING* THE COURSE**:

Identification, Sequence, & Timing of Course Topics

**Identifying Course Topics**

Given the explosion of knowledge being generated during the current “information age” (Breivik, 1998) and the fact that over 80% of first-year seminars carry less than three units of credit (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008), attempting to “cover everything” in the FYS must give way an attempt to “uncover” the most important things that students must know and do to be successful on your campus. Thus, tough decisions have to be made about what topics to cover and what percentage of course time to devote to each topic that is covered. The following four questions are offered as possible criteria for making decisions about what high-priority material should be covered and how much time should be spent covering it.

\* How directly does the topic contribute to the realization of the course *purpose*, *objectives*, and intended *learning outcomes*?

\* Do new students need to be exposed to this material *immediately*—during their first term on campus—so that they make a successful *transition and adjustment* to college?

\* Does the topic cover information or skills that students are unlikely to be exposed to elsewhere in the college curriculum or co-curriculum? (In other words: Is the material *not* covered, or covered only superficially, elsewhere in the college experience?) The use of first-year seminars to “address important topics, content, and processes that do not fit logically into, or that transcend, existing disciplines has been in practice for some time” (Hunter & Linder, 2005, p. 289).

\* Does the topic cover information or skills that are:

(a) *foundational*—which first-year students can build on in their subsequent courses,

(b) *transferable*—which can be applied repeatedly or recursively across the curriculum and co-curriculum, or

(c) *durable*—which have the capacity for long-term use throughout the college experience and beyond?

Remember that only so much can be reasonably and meaningfully accomplished within the confines of a single course. If the foregoing content-selection criteria generate more content than what can be reasonably covered in the seminar, it might be useful to think about how some of the additional content could be delivered through other *academic-support* and co-curricular programming, or how it might possibly be infused into (embedded within) other courses that comprise the first-year curriculum. Addressing first-year student needs through multiple programs represents a more ambitious and comprehensive institutional initiative, which in effect, expands and transforms the first-year seminar (course) into a bona fide first-year experience (program).

Lastly, keep in mind that the topics selected for inclusion in the FYS should not be seen as perennially fixed or permanently set in stone. Since the seminar is not tightly tied to any one tradition-bound and politically guarded academic discipline, it has the *flexibility* to adopt diverse topics and adapt to emerging higher educational issues and contemporary student needs. It is refreshing to see how readily the seminar has been able to assimilate contemporary issues into its existing course structure (e.g., diversity, critical thinking, service-learning, technology). It appears that the first-year seminar is capable of accommodating different modules, whereby individual instructional units the course can be added, deleted, or rearranged in response to emerging trends. Consistent with this observation are national-survey findings on the content and form of first-year seminars which reveal that the course has assumed many different forms, leading the survey’s principal investigators to adopt the term, “flexible fixture” as a collective descriptor of the adaptability of already-established seminars (Barefoot, 1993b). Viewing the FYS as a fluid, flexible, and revisable in light of emerging student and institutional priorities, may empowers the seminar to become the course in an otherwise ossified undergraduate curriculum that is most sensitive and responsive to change in student needs and institutional concerns.

**Sequencing of Course Topics**

An effective course design requires some intentional ordering of course topics. The sequence of course topics (units) in the text was arranged with the intention of prompting students to ask and answer the following sequence of questions:

1) Why am I here? (The question of purpose)

2) Where do I want to go? (The question of direction)

3) How do I do to get there? (The question of action)

4) How do I know when I’ve arrived? (The question of reflection)

These questions may be used to guide decision about the sequencing of course topics in the FYS. Early units should be designed to help students get immediately situated and oriented to their new campus environment, clarify their reasons for being in college, and see where the college experience can take them. These early topics should provide students with a mental map for their trip through college and a blueprint for navigating their total college environment, including the curriculum (college courses) and the co-curriculum (out-of-class learning and student development programs). Following their completion of these early units, students should have a clearer sense of personal direction and purpose, and students should be able to see a clearer connection between where they are now and where students want to go.

Since motivation underlies and drives action, the earlier units serve to reinforce and validate new students’ decision to enroll in college, help them articulate where they intend to go, which, in turn, should enthuse and energize them to learn about and apply the success strategies that are offered in subsequent units, which focus more directly on the nitty-gritty of *how* to “do” college and how to “get the job done” academically. The final units should alert students that academic strategies alone are not going to ensure success unless they also attend to issues of self-management and personal development, which will continue beyond their academic experience in college and throughout their lifetime. Thus, the final units should serve to highlight the lifelong relevance of the FYS.

**Timing of Topic Coverage**

In addition to the issues of unit sequence, the *timing* of unit coverage during the first term is also a critical issue, because the effectiveness or impact of instruction depends not only on *what* is covered and in what *order*, but also on *when* it is covered (chronologically). Students should be more receptive to and influenced by information that is delivered at a time when it is most relevant to what they are currently experiencing, dwelling on, or “stressing” over. Simply stated, students are more willing and “ready” to learn information that is timely and immediately applicable to their current challenges and concerns, i.e., “just-in-time” information (AAC&U, 2007).

It is noteworthy that one of the reasons why “extended” orientation courses came into existence stemmed from the fact that traditional 1-2 day freshman orientation programs were overloading and overwhelming new students with information *before* the onset of their first term, with much of the information being received at a time when it was not immediately relevant or applicable (e.g., studying and test-taking skills). Since some of the information delivered during orientation would eventually become relevant at later points in the first-year experience, colleges began to “extend” coverage of orientation content into the first term and delivered that content to new students in the form of an “extended” orientation course (FYS). This underscores the importance of delivering information to new students in a time-sensitive manner and suggests that an effective first-year seminar should focus not only to *what* content is covered, but also on *when* that content is introduced to freshmen during their first term in college.

This suggests that vigorous attempts should be made to arrange the seminar’s units in a time-sensitive sequence that attempts to dovetail with the “rhythms” of the first semester, which would expose students to FYS topics at times during the term when students are most likely to encounter them experientially. To facilitate this timely arrangement of topic delivery, it might be useful to conceive of the first college term in terms of three general stages or “chunks” of time: (a) the *beginning* stage, (b) the *middle* stage, and (c) the *final* stage.

The *Beginning* Stage

The first stage of the course would include the all-important first day and first week of class. During this formative period, it may be useful to view the process of building class community as the first topic that needs to be “covered” in class. Allowing students early opportunity to interact with each other and with their instructor is a fundamental or foundational experience that should take place from the outset. Not only does such early interpersonal bonding enhance student retention by promoting social integration, it may also address a primary need of new students at the very beginning of their first semester—a time at which research indicates that many first-year students struggle with issues involving overcoming homesickness (Guignah, 1992), “fitting in” and establishing new relationships (Simpson, Baker & Mellinger, 1980; Brower, 1997). The ability to establish friendships plays an important role in students’ educational success (Billson & Terry, 1982), especially if such friendships are established ruing the first month on campus (Simpson, Baker, & Mellinger, 1980). Thus, it may be helpful to view the needs of first-semester freshmen in terms of Abraham Maslow’s classic “need hierarchy” model, in which human needs for social acceptance and self-esteem are more basic and must be met before higher needs for personal growth and self-actualization can be realized (Maslow, 1954).

The early weeks of the term may also be the time during which attempts should be made in the FYS to connect new students with social-support agents on campus. Keep in mind that connecting students with each other and with key student-support agents is a social integration *process* that can be established early in the semester while, at the same time, allowing you to cover course *content* that is not necessarily social in nature. For example, lecture note-taking strategies, textbook-reading strategies, and time management are academically related topics that can be covered through small-group work in class and through socially interactive or collaborative assignments that are completed outside the classroom. Thus, instructors should not feel they have to sacrifice or trade off course content for social interaction; it is possible to provide “double coverage” of social and academic topics simultaneously.

The *Middle* Stage

The middle stage of the course may be conceived as the time period just before and after midterms, i.e., the midpoint of the semester when students experience the first wave of exams, assignment deadlines, and evaluations of their academic performance. This stage may also mark the end of the "honeymoon period" for freshmen, when the thrill or novelty of simply being in college is replaced by their first encounter with academic demands and stresses associated with college life. The terms “midterm slump” and “midterm crunch” are also expressions that have used informally to capture the stresses associated with this stage of the semester. Research supporting these colloquialisms, is provided by Pennington, Zvonkovic, & Wilson (1989), who found that student satisfaction with college changes at different times during the semester and an appreciable “dip” in student satisfaction tends to occur at midterms.

Additional research suggests that there is a higher risk for attrition among students who experience academic problems during the first semester of college or who receive feedback about their academic performance that is well below their academic expectations (Guskey, 1988; Overwalle, 1989). Such negative feedback is most likely to be first experienced by at midterms, so addressing the issue of how to respond constructively to midterm grades, and how to use the results as feedback to improve future performance, might be a timely topic to introduce at the midpoint of the term.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the middle stage of the semester may be an opportune time to explicitly introduce discussion of such topics as (a) stress management, (b) self-esteem and self-efficacy, (c) how to deal constructively with performance feedback, and (d) how to use instructor feedback to improve academic performance. This may also be the point in the term when students will be most receptive to learning about key academic-support services on campus.

Discussion of test-taking strategies could be specifically scheduled to immediately precede midterm-exam week; these strategies could then be applied by students during midterms and follow-up feedback on their applicability could be generated after students receive their midterm test results. Thus, a learning cycle consisting of (a) teaching/modeling, (b) practice, and (c) feedback can be achieved when student-success skills are taught in the context of a full-semester course. Such a three-step, learning cycle or "loop" is consistent with the educational principle of “praxis” (reflection-action-feedback) which has been advocated by adult learning theorists (Kolb, 1984), and is supported by an extensive body of research at the precollege level (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). This was one decision-making criterion used to arrange the order FYS course topics chapter 2. The unit on Strategic Learning (studying, memory-improvement, and test-taking) was intentionally placed at about the mid-point of the content sequence in an attempt to have it coincide with midterm exams. The unit was placed at that juncture with the idea that students would be more likely to appreciate the value of these strategies and will more likely to put them when they are about to encounter their first major wave of college exams—at midterm.

The *Final* Stage

The last stage of the FYS may be conceived of as the interval between completion of midterm and the end of the term, culminating in the last week and last day of class. It may be useful to reserve the last week of class for integration and synthesis, which serves tying the course together and provide students with a “big picture” synthesis of where they have been and where they are going. Students may be receptive to this approach because research indicates that, by the end of their first term, new students’ concerns about “fitting in” give way to feelings of “settling in” and thinking about what is ahead of them (Brower, 1997).

Planning for Parallel (Simultaneous) Coverage of Course Topics

Conceiving the first term of college as a sequence of stages or rhythms is a useful way to guide decisions about the temporal sequence of topics in the FYS by ordering topics in a way that approximates the order in which students experience them during their first term of college. Such intentional sequencing should serve to increase the immediate relevance of each unit’s message, which in turn should increase student motivation to take that message seriously and put it into practice. However, the reality of college life is that new students do not experience college-adjustment “topics” (tasks or issues) in a one-at-a-time sequential mode; instead, they experience multiple issues simultaneously—in a parallel mode. For instance, while new students may be initially dealing with large, philosophical questions about why they are in college and where college is going to lead them, they are simultaneously confronted by multiple, practical tasks associated with the onset of college life—for example, taking notes in class, doing all the assigned readings, and trying to fit in socially). To accommodate this “multi-tasking” reality, early units dealing primarily with larger issues of meaning and purpose may need to be punctuated with periodic, pithy presentations of practical tips to students for dealing with the more mundane (but equally important) day-to-day tasks that are confronting them. For instance, even though note-taking may not be covered *in depth* until a later unit in the course (Strategic Learning), where it best fits into the overall conceptual flow of the seminar, immediate high-priority tips about note-taking can be *introduced* at a propitious juncture in Unit 1 because note-taking is a task that students must perform in the very first week of class. Similarly, succinct suggestions of top-priority strategies for reading, time-management, and studying in advance may be inserted within the first few units of the course—at times during the term when these strategies should be initiated.

This style of *parallel* coverage would represent a “paradigm shift” away from the timeworn tradition of opening and closing units one at a time, that is, one major topic is designated for coverage within a particular instructional unit; it is discussed exclusively and exhaustively covered within the confines of that unit, and never revisited again because the topic has been “covered.” It is recommended that the FYS move away from this traditional sequential approach to unit coverage, and move toward *simultaneous* coverage of a primary topic within an instructional unit (the major plot), accompanied by shorter, targeted coverage of timely secondary topics (subplots) within the same unit.

For example, when covering the primary topic of the power and opportunities associated with a college education during the first week of class, succinct summaries of effective strategies on active listening and note-taking strategies and textbook reading strategies may be provided because students will be required to take notes and complete readings in their classes at the very start of the term. Similarly, while covering a topic such as the meaning, purpose, and value of liberal (general) education during the third week of the term, succinct summaries may be provided on how to work independently and make productive use of “free time” outside the classroom because, after a few weeks into the term, students may begin to fall behind on their out-of-class assignments. Similarly, topics covered earlier in the term may need to be revisited to accommodate certain adjustments that peak later in the term. For instance, although social adjustment and integration may have been a primary topic of coverage early in the term, timely tips relating to coping with particular social issues involving family members and hometown friendships may need to be addressed later in the fall term when students return for the Thanksgiving holidays. As one first-year student reported in an interview:

Going home over Thanksgiving was a weird realization. Although it was

incredible to see my friends, I really missed it here. I missed the familiar faces that

I was used to seeing on a daily basis. I definitely have to meet some more great

friends to match the ones back home. I realized that I’m ready to keep growing as

a friend and meet other people (Ishler & Schreiber, 2002, p. 89).

This type of parallel and recursive coverage requires relinquishing the timeworn tradition of attending to covering topics one at a time with attention only to how the topics fit together in a logical chain or sequence. The FYS should be one course which should not mimic the tendency of many first-year “building block” courses that are designed to lay a sequential foundation of cumulative learning but, in the process, destroy student motivation by delaying coverage of topics that may be immediately relevant and imminently useful.

Section II.

**USING THE TEXTBOOK:**

**Ensuring that Students Complete Reading Assignments & Integrate Textbook Reading with Classroom Instruction**

Strategies for Increasing the Likelihood that Students will *Read the Textbook*

While college students do need to accept the challenge of independent reading, first-term college students also need *support* for meeting this challenge, because they may have neither engaged in, nor been held accountable for independent reading in high school. To support students’ capacity for independent reading and to maximize the instructional impact of the text, the following three key practices are recommended:

1. Set a tone for reading by sending an *early message* that regular reading is *clearly*

*expected*.

2. Integrate textbook reading with classroom learning by *bringing* the text to class,

*referring* to it in class, and having students *use* it in class.

3. Hold students *accountable* for their reading by creating clear connections between

textbook reading and course grades.

What follows is a detailed discussion of each of these three key strategies for encouraging students to read the textbook.

Set a Tone for Reading by Sending an *Early Message* to Students that Regular Reading is *Clearly Expected*

\* **Include an *explicit statement in the course syllabus* about why you chose the text**

**and why you think that reading it is critical for student success in the course, in**

**college, and in life beyond college.**

It’s noteworthy that one major characteristic of courses in which students do not complete assigned reading is failure of the instructor to explain or justify why reading is required in the course syllabus (Gruner, 1997). The Preface to the text provides a convenient summary of the text’s plan, purpose, core content areas, and key student-success features, which may be rephrases slightly or restated directly in your course syllabus.

\* **On thefirst day of class, make a statement *in person* to reinforce the statement**

**you made in print (in the syllabus) about your reasons for adopting the text.**

\* ***Assign a short reading on the first day of class* to be completed before the next class**

**meeting.**

This practice should serve to help establish early development of good *reading* habits; it should also help prevent students from beginning to develop the bad habit of procrastination.

Integrate Textbook Reading with Classroom Learning by Having Students *Bring* the Text to Class, *Refer* to the Text in Class, and *Use* the Text in Class

\* **When conducting a class session before a reading assignment is due, *remind***

**students of the assignment, *reinforce* its importance, and *preview its highlights***

**to pique student interest and curiosity.**

Studies suggest that students do not understand why college instructors place such great emphasis on independent reading, so they are likely to be curious about learning why instructors have assigned a particular reading, or why it is important or pertinent to the goals of the course (Hobson, 2004). While the traditional practice of having all reading assignments laid out in advance in the course syllabus may be a good way to provide students with an advanced overview of the reading workload for the entire term, research indicates that if these assignments are merely listed in the syllabus and not expressly articulated (or reiterated) near the date when they are to be completed, students are less likely to do the assigned reading (Davis, 1993; Lowman, 1995; Marshall, 1974).

\* **When covering specific points in class or introducing classroom activities,**

**explicitly indicate *how and where they relate to concepts covered in the text*.**

\* **If there is particular material in the text that is especially important for your**

**students to master, turn the *chapter* headings or subheadings into questions, and**

**use them as *class discussion questions* or *key lecture points*.**

\* **Integrate the text’s learning features into your teaching by using them as *teaching***

***tools*.** For example, the following features of the text may be used as focal points or

visual prompts to capture student attention and stimulate their engagement with the

day’s topic:

- Relevant *classic* *quotes*

- Insightful *student perspectives*

- Provocative *passages*

- Poignant *pictures of images*

- Content-relevant *cartoons*

- Pertinent *concept maps*.

These textbook features can serve as evocative stimuli to *captivate attention*, *generate interest*, and *elicit involvement*. They may be used at the *start*of class or a new unit of instruction to create a sense *of positive anticipation* (“anticipatory set”) that builds student curiosity and positive expectation with respect to the upcoming material. For example, a projected cartoon that is visible to students as they mill into the classroom can create a positive first impression of the class lesson, as well as induce a jovial mood and some sense of anticipatory interest. More importantly, these text-derived prompts remind and reinforce the idea that there is a clear connection between textbook reading and classroom learning.

\* **In class, ask students *non-threatening, open-ended questions* about the assigned**

**reading; for example: “What ideas in the chapter really ‘hit home’?” What**

**sections of the reading do you think were most interesting, useful, or worthy of**

**additional discussion?**

It may be better to call on individual students by name to answer these questions because a personal request provides a more powerful individual incentive for students to do the reading, and it may also help promote the involvement of students who may be too reticent to volunteer responses on their own. If a good base of rapport is established with the class early in the term, students should not feel “picked on” or threatened by answering open-ended questions about their assigned reading. Occasionally posing questions to individual students serves to transform instructor-posed questions from anonymous queries delivered to no one in particular and converts them into personal invitations addressed to unique individuals. Furthermore, if you rely exclusively on student volunteers to discuss readings, it may unintentionally reinforces students for not doing the reading because these non-readers can repeatedly sit back and not answer questions or participate in class discussions.

\* **Use a portion of class time as *reading time*.**

For example, you could:

a) Preview the chapter with the class and point out any terminology that you think your students may not be familiar with, or that may not match the language used on your campus (e.g., your academic support center or the academic divisions of your general education program may go by different names than those used in the text). When the instructor does some talking about the assigned reading *before* students embark on the reading , it serves to provide them with an orientation to the reading. It also provides a welcome change of pace from the usual routine of leaving new students entirely to their own devices to do the reading before it’s discussed in class, then expecting them to effectively transfer whatever knowledge may have acquired from the reading and apply it to class discussions.

b) Ask students to survey the topics and subtopics to be covered in reading assignments and have them share their prior knowledge about the topics (or what they think they already know), their prior experiences with the topics, or their attitudes and feelings about the topics. This strategy should also help students develop the effective reading habit of previewing the chapter’s organization before beginning to read its content.

c) If there are sections of an assigned chapter that you think contains particularly important or high-priority information for your students, devote several minutes of class time to allow them to begin reading that section. Students could also be asked to do some writing in response to this high-priority reading. (Any of the reading-to-write assignments discussed on pp. 75-66 could be used for this purpose.)

d) During class discussions and small-group work, explicitly point out to your students that they should borrow from and build on ideas found in the book.

Holding Students *Accountable* for Reading by Creating Clear Connections between Textbook Reading and Course Grades

College exams have been found to rarely include test questions based primarily or solely on assigned reading (Flippo & Caverly, 1991), and increasing numbers of college students are not buying required course textbooks (Gilbert, 1996). The latter finding is related to the former finding—i.e., since students are rarely or never tested exclusively on text material, they can still get a good grade without having to purchase (or read) the text.

This strongly suggests that students need to be held accountable for independent reading; they should not expect information contained in assigned reading to be covered for them in class. As Maryellen Weimer (1989) exhorts, “Give students reasons to read. This means do more in class than repeat what’s in the book. If everything that’s in the book gets repeated in class, that makes the reading boring if you come to class, and the class boring if you’ve done the reading. It’s a no-win proposition” (p. 1).

While college students do need to be *challenged* to read independently, new college students also need *support* for meeting this challenge because they may have neither engaged in, nor been held accountable for, independent reading of textbooks in high school. The following strategies may be used to ensure that this lack of student accountability for reading doesn’t become a characteristic of your FYE course.

\* **Explicitly articulate in your course syllabus and on the first day of class that *class***

***participation* counts toward students’ course grades and that participation doesn’t**

**mean simply “speaking up” or “winging it” in class.**

Instead, point out that meaningful class participation means *informed* speaking that incorporates information obtained from the assigned reading. Also, meaningful class participation can also include disagreeing or challenging ideas presented in the textbook.

\* **Supply students with *specific reading objectives* or *intended reading outcomes***

**related to the assigned reading, and hold students responsible for responding to**

**these objectives (e.g., by devising test questions that are tied directly to the**

**objectives or intended outcomes).**

One characteristic of courses in which there are low rates of reading compliance is little connection between student reading and course grades, and little distinction made between information in assigned reading that is central or essential, versus information that is peripheral or incidental (Hobson, 2004). Providing students with reading guides comprised of specific reading objectives (intended reading outcomes) serves to clearly indicate to students what ideas in their assigned reading should be most closely attended to and retained, and it differentiates central ideas (the “figure”) from supporting information (the “background”).

Students should not read with the idea of trying to *cover everything* in the text; instead, they should read to *uncover those things* in the text that are most important for them to know and understand. Reading objectives represent a highly effective way to help students uncover those ideas in the text that you feel are most critical for their success at your college or university. Research indicates that when students are given specific learning objectives before they process information, they display more intentional learning than do students who do not receive learning objectives (Bligh, 2000). There is also a solid body of empirical evidence demonstrating that when students are provided with specific *reading* objectives or questions to help guide their reading, their retention and comprehension of reading material read is significantly enhanced—compared to students who read the same material without them (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Pressley et al., 1988; Winograd & Hare, 1988). This advantage is particularly true when course readings are clearly connected to tests and graded assignments (Bischoping, 2003).

Providing new students with reading objectives also helps them learn what they are supposed to learn, helps reduce their anxiety about not being able to “figure out” what their instructor wants them to learn, and helps alleviate their fear of studying the “wrong things.” As Maryellen Weimer (1989) warns us, “If students must read, expect them to complain. They don't like to be held responsible for content in the book not covered in class [because] they don’t think they’ll be able to figure out what the professor considers important” (p. 1). Providing students with specific reading objectives is one way to minimize the frequency and intensity of these student complaints.

Lastly, providing specific reading objectives or intended reading outcomes serves to help students self-monitor their learning; if students are able to answer the questions related to the reading objectives, then they know they’re extracting and understanding the most important concepts from the reading and are learning what they are expected to learn. (Specific reading objectives relating to each chapter of the text, and test items directly linked with these reading objectives, are provided in this manual.)

\* **Use *“reading-to-write”* assignments that require students to write about specific**

**information or ideas contained in the reading, such as** **the following:**

- *One-minute papers*: for example, at the start of class, students could be asked to provide a written response to a question relating to some concept contained in the assigned reading that should have been read prior to that class session. If students are given these one-minute papers periodically throughout the term and receive points for accurately completing them that count toward their course grade, these one-minute papers could serve as “pop quizzes.” As such, they would provide students with an incentive to complete their assigned reading on a regular basis and to come to class prepared to engage in class discussions based on their assigned reading.

- *Prompted Freewriting*: for example, your students could respond to prompt you pose about the assigned reading by completing “seed sentences,” such as: “The examples cited in the reading that I could most relate to were . . .” “I can apply ideas contained in the reading to . . . .”

- *Reading Journals*: for example, after reading each textbook chapter, have your students

record their immediate thoughts and feelings about what they have read.

- *Reading Paraphrases*: for example, ask your students to summarize key points in an

assigned reading on one side of an index card, which can be submitted to you at the

start of class, or be kept by students and used during for group discussions and then

submitted to you the end of class—after students add ideas obtained from the

discussion on the reverse side of the card. You may return these index cards to

students so they can use them to prepare for upcoming quizzes or exams.

- *Word Journals*: ask your students to write a single word that best summarizes the

message contained in an assigned reading, and then elaborate on that word by writing

a paragraph explaining why it was chosen.

- *“Idea Synthesis” Sheets*: have your students construct written summaries or concept

maps that encapsulate the most important ideas contained in the assigned reading.

- *“Tip” Sheets*: students use information in the assigned reading to construct a list of

practical strategies or action plans.

*- “Focused Dialectical Notes”* (Cross & Angelo, 1988): students engage in a running

dialogue with the text by recording notes on the left half of a divided sheet of

notepaper, and use the right half to record their responses or reactions to their reading

notes (e.g., their agreements, disagreements, or questions).

- *Case-Based Writing*: for example, students could be asked to *apply* chapter information,

(in writing) to thecase studies described at the end of the chapters. Students might

also be asked to indicate the specific section or page number in the chapter where

they found information to apply to the case. Students could then use their individually

written responses to the case to prepare for group discussion of the case in class.

- *Reading Critiques*: students play the role of a literary *critic* and write a critique of what

they’ve read, using a set of specified criteria to evaluate their assigned reading, such as:

a) its degree of interest or usefulness,

b) its major strengths/weaknesses, and

c) its accuracy or comprehensiveness (e.g., what important topics were omitted or

should have been discussed more extensively).

Such critiques could help students develop the effective learning habit of engaging in meta-cognition while reading. Students could also be given a relevant “audience” to write their critiques for, by instructing them to write their critiques as if they were communicating to the authors of the textbook. In addition to having students submit their critiques to you (the instructor) for credit toward their course grade, students could also submit their critiques to a “real audience”—the authors of the text—who could this information as feedback to improve the quality of the textbook. (Student critiques may be sent electronically to the following website, which is also cited at the end of the textbook: [www.kendallhunt.com/cuseo](http://www.kendallhunt.com/cuseo))

Use *Specific Reading Objectives* to Guide Student Reading and to Serve as Study Guide for Reading-Based Quizzes or Exams

The textbook may also be used selectively by providing students with specific reading objectives (intended learning outcomes) that guide or direct them to read those portions of the text that are most relevant to your course goals.

For each chapter of the text, specific reading objectives are provided to help guide student reading and serve as study guides for exams. You do not have to assign all the reading objectives for each chapter, particularly if your course only carries one unit of credit, in which case you can select a portion of the objectives and use them to direct your students to the particular information in the chapters that you would like them to focus on and know well. Each reading objective indicates the page(s) on which information relating to that objective can be found. You can give your students the objectives with the page numbers listed, or you can simply supply them with the objectives without providing the page numbers. The advantage of withholding the page numbers for each reading objective is that it will increase the likelihood that students will read the entire chapter, and not just go directly to the page numbers by each objective to find information related to that objective. However, if you feel that your students’ level of reading preparedness is low and they may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information in the chapter, it may be better to provide students with the page numbers that contain information related to each reading objective.

Either way, the specific reading objectives help students focus on (a) *what* you expect them to know (key information and concepts), and (b) *how* you expect them to show that they know it (produce it on an essay or select it on a multiple-choice or true-false question). Thus, the specific reading objectives provided for each chapter of the text alert students not only what reading content will be tested; they also alert students to what testing method will be used to assess their knowledge of that content—i.e., written essays (requiring recall memory) or multiple-choice/true-false questions (requiring recognition memory).

See *Appendix* G for a more detailed rationale and research support for the educational value of specific reading objectives. See *Exhibit 9* for directions to students on how to use the reading objectives as study guides for course exams based on their assigned reading.

Covering Selected Textbook Content in Ways *Other than Traditional Reading Assignments*

\* **Cover some chapters (or sections thereof) *in class* via *mini lectures* or *short***

***instructional presentations*, rather than assigning them as required reading.**

For instance, if you think that some chapters are useful but too demanding for your students, consider rephrasing or simplifying content and presenting it yourself during class time.

\* **Allow different groups of students to *select* different chapters, or chapter sections,**

**and have them *present* that information to the entire class.**

This could be done in a variety of ways, such as the following:

- Have student teams (e.g. pairs, triads, or quartets) create tip sheets, checklists, or ads

for information contained in the assigned reading. The checklist at the end of the

first chapter could be used as a model for this assignment, or you could present a

model in class to illustrate this type of presentation, then let student teams take over

that role for subsequent presentations.

- Use the “jigsaw” format for team learning, whereby students in learning teams read

different chapters or chapter sections as members of “expert” groups, then they

reconvene in their “home team” to integrate the information they gathered

individually while working in their different expert groups.

- Hold a class review session for an upcoming exam, whereby student groups present

key ideas from the text, which you then include on course exams.

- Require a culminating group project in which student teams make presentations on

different chapters in the text. Students could also be asked to use the web resources

cited at the end of the chapter to locate additional information for inclusion in their

team presentations. This practice would encourage students to go beyond the textbook

and engage in some independent research.

Since final decisions about the nature and number of course topics covered in the FYE seminar should be influenced by student needs, it is reasonable to allow students to play a role in helping you determine what course topics will be covered.

SECTION III.

**IDENTIFYING & ARTICULATING**

***COURSE OBJECTIVES* & *LEARNING OUTCOMES***

**Construct course objectives that are *student-centered*, i.e., which focus on what**

**students will experience and learn as a result of participating in the course**. As Hunter and Linder (2005) note, the defining feature of a FYS is student-centeredness: “At its core, the first-year seminar is centered on and concerned with the individual needs of entering students” (p. 275). In the FYS, student-centeredness should pervade the entire course, such that its student-centered objectives are consistent or align with student-centered content, student-centered pedagogy, and student-centered assessment. Thus, course objectives cited in the syllabus should center on and be directed toward the student or learner, rather than being centered on course content, and should speak directly to students in a personal tone (e.g., “By then end of this course, you should be able to . . .). As Judith Grunert (1997) points out in her book, *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach*, “A learning-centered syllabus requires that you shift from what you, the instructor, are going to cover in your course to a concern for what information and tools you can provide for your student to promote learning and intellectual development” (p. xi).

The need to heed this advice is being intensified by recent accreditation standards that emphasize the need for including *student learning outcomes* on course syllabi. Traditional course objectives can be readily transformed into student-learning outcomes by shifting the phraseology from what the course is designed to cover to what students should be able to know, do, or value as a result of experiencing the course.

Phrasing course objectives in terms of intended learning outcomes can also provide a mental map for guiding instructional decisions about course content, the teaching process, student assessment, and course assessment. As Meyers and Jones recommend (1993), “Pose this simple question: ‘What do I want students to know and be able to do by the end of class?’ Focusing initially on course outcomes, or the ‘to do’ side of this question, often helps clarify content and appropriate learning strategies” (p. 35). This recommendation is consistent with the “backwards design model” proposed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), whose central premise is that the process of course planning and design should begin with identifying the intended outcomes and then “work backwards” to develop teaching and learning strategies.

The following typology may be used to identify and prioritize intended outcomes for the FYS.

**Intended *Academic* Outcomes**

\* Acquisition of knowledge (e.g., knowledge of the curriculum and student-support

resources).

\* Academic *skill development* (e.g., improvement of note-taking, reading, writing, test-

taking, and research skills).

\* Academic *performance/achievement*

🞄 Higher first-year GPA

🞄 Fewer Ds, Fs, or Ws in first-term or first-year courses

🞄 Lower percentage of first-year students placed on academic probation

🞄 Higher percentage of first-year students qualifying for the Dean’s List

\* Student *Retention*:

🞄 Persistence to completion of *first term*

🞄 Persistence to completion of *first year*

🞄 Re-enrollment for the sophomore year

🞄 Persistence to *completion* of degree or program completion

**Intended *Holistic (Whole-Person) Development* Outcomes**

Since the intended outcomes of first-year seminars often involves development of the whole person, the following elements of holistic-development “wheel” may serve as a useful guide to personal development outcomes of the FYS that include, but go beyond strictly academic outcomes.

🞄 *Intellectual* Development: acquiring *knowledge*, learning *how to learn* and how to *think*

*deeply*.

🞄 *Emotional* Development: strengthening skills for *coping* with, *controlling* and

*expressing* emotions.

🞄 *Social* Development: enhancing the quality and depth of *interpersonal relationships*.

🞄 *Ethical* Development: formulating a clear value system for guiding life choices and

decisions; developing *consistency* between moral *convictions* (beliefs) and moral

*commitments* (actions).

🞄 *Physical* Development: applyingknowledge about how the *human body* functions to

*prevent disease*, *maintain wellness*, and *promote peak performance* (physical and

mental)

🞄 *Vocational (Occupational)* Development: exploring *career* *options*, making *career*

*choices* wisely, and developing skills needed for lifelong *career success*.

🞄 *Personal* Development: developing positive self-*beliefs*, personal *attitudes*, and

practical *life skills*.

🞄 *Spiritual* Development:engaging in a meaningful for the *purpose* of *life* and

*death*, and exploring ideas that *transcend* human life and the physical or material

world.

(More specific outcomes related to each of these areas or zones of development are provided in Exhibit 2)

Focusing on holistic or whole-person outcomes may be an effective way to build support for the FYS because it can link the seminar’s objectives with the college’s mission and goals statement. Research indicates that most college mission statements tend to embrace institutional goals that go well beyond the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge acquisition and thinking to and include holistic development outcomes that are affective, social, and experiential in nature. In his book, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, Dee Fink (2003) calls for a new taxonomy for categorizing course goals that embraces these holistic outcomes of a college education:

Individuals and organizations involved in higher education are expressing a need

for important kinds of learning that do not emerge easily from the Bloom

taxonomy, for example: learning how to learn, leadership and interpersonal skills,

ethics, communication skills, character, tolerance, and the ability to change. They

are expressing a need for new kinds of learning, kinds that go well beyond the

cognitive domain of Bloom’s taxonomy and even beyond cognitive learning itself.

This suggests that the time may have arrived when we need a new and broader

taxonomy of significant learning (pp. 29-30)

Since the student-centered outcomes that typify the FYS are likely to be strikingly compatible with the majority of holistic development goals cited in college mission statements, this compatibility can be capitalized on when formulating intended student outcomes to increase institutional recognition and support for the seminar. For example, at Marymount College (CA), all FYS instructors list the college mission statement on their course syllabi in order to visibly demonstrate to students, and others who may review course syllabi, that the course’s goals are clearly aligned with the college’s goals (Cuseo, 2009).

**There is emerging scholarly support for the importance of “emotional intelligence, ” which embraces the following competencies: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-motivation, (c) capacity to understand emotions and manage emotions in oneself and others, i.e., empathy and social skills, and (d) ability to take emotion into account when reasoning (Gardner, 1983, 1993; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Pizarro, 2003).** Research points to emotional intelligence as being critical for success in college, careers, and multiple life roles (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Pizarro, 2003; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997; Schutte et al., 1998). Studies conducted at the University of New England (Australia) demonstrate that first-term students who enroll in sections of a FYS that includes an emotional skill-development component persist to completion of the first year at a higher rate than students enrolled in an FYS without this component (Schutte & Malouff, 2002).

Moreover, as previously-cited research indicates, pursuit of course objectives that reflect a balanced or integrated pursuit of both academic and personal development outcomes is more likely to result in FYS course that has more comprehensive impact on student success.

**Specify how students are expected to *change* as a result of participating in the**

**course.** The following “ABC” mnemonic may be used to help identify and assess what particular ways in which student changes are intended to take place with respect to any of the seven aforementioned outcomes of holistic development:

**A** = *Affective* (feelings and attitudes)—for example, changes in attitudes toward

diversity or general education. (See Exhibit 3 for a typology of attitudinal

outcomes.)

**B** = *Behavioral*—for example, increased frequency of participation in co-curricular

programs and academic support programs.

**C** = *Cognitive*—for example, more proficient use of higher-level thinking skills.

(See Exhibit 4 for a typology of cognitive outcomes, and related questions

that may be used to formulate outcomes relating to each of these forms of

cognition.)

**State course objectives *positively—*phrasing them in terms of how students will achieve desirable outcomes—rather than negatively—as in the diminution of undesirable or unproductive student behaviors.**

This recommendation is particularly pertinent for the FYS because the course often focuses on issues relating to students taking personal responsibility for their behavior and making productive personal changes in behavior to accommodate the challenges of college-level learning. Care should be taken to state these intended outcomes in a non-accusatory fashion that does not put students on the defensive. As Forsyth and McMillan recommend: “You should try to help students develop goals that are positive. Students should be encouraged to study more, rather than procrastinate less; take clearer notes, rather than not daydream during lectures” (1991, pp. 60-61). Similarly, students should be reminded about the ethical value of giving full credit to others’ ideas, rather than being prematurely chastised about the dangers and penalties associated with plagiarism.

SECTION IV.

**Constructing the Course Syllabus**

Research suggests that an effective course syllabus is essential to successful teaching and learning. In a survey of 125 faculty from 15 different institutions in the California State University system that asked them for ideas concerning what specific, concrete teaching behaviors or practices they found to be most effective in the college classroom, the most frequently-cited practice was “providing a comprehensive, detailed syllabus and following it throughout the course” (Cooper & Cuseo, 1992). Similar results emerged from informal interviews conducted with first-year students at the end of their first year of college (Erickson & Strommer, 1991, p. 81). When these students were asked what instructors might have been done differently to help them, one of the three most frequent responses was: “Provide a better syllabus” Erickson and Strommer (2005) argue that “it is almost impossible to give first-year students too much structure, [as] in the form of a detailed course syllabus” (p. 255).

The need for a clear, well structured, comprehensive syllabus is even more imperative for the FYS because it is a nontraditional course that is likely to undergo careful and continual scrutiny by the academic community, both before and after its formal approval. Since the syllabus is often the centerpiece of this course-evaluation process, the quality of its construction may determine the fate of the FYS. The design and presentation of a comprehensive, well-constructed course syllabus may go a long way in promoting the course’s initial approval and subsequent support. (See Exhibit 1for a specific, itemized “checklist” that may be used as a blueprint for constructing a comprehensive course syllabus.)

This section focuses on the design and development of an effective course syllabus for the FYS, which includes (a) prioritizing course topics, (b) sequencing and timing of course topics, (c) identifying and articulating of course objectives and intended learning outcomes, and (d) using the course syllabus to promote course organization, active student involvement, and student motivation.

Using the Syllabus to Improve the *Organizational Coherence* of the Course

The etymological origin of the word syllabus derives from the Latin, “syllaba,” which means to pull together; this suggests that one important function of the syllabus is to serve as a linchpin or blueprint for organizing the curricular content of the course. The following strategies are recommended for enhancing this function of the syllabus.

**Provide a detailed outline of course content, listing general topics to allow students to perceive both the general structure and infra-structure of the course.**

This outline of course content might be depicted in diagrammatic form, as in a flow chart, or concept map. Research supporting this strategy comes from the University of Michigan, where it has been discovered that instructor-student "match" in how course content and concepts are mapped, tends to correlate strongly with student learning and achievement in the course (Naveh-Benjamin et al., 1986).

**Use the syllabus to identify the overall course structure and interrelationships among individual course topics.** As Svinicki suggests, “In the overall course structure, organization means relating logical units of content to one another and building in a regular pattern toward the ultimate goal of the course. The pattern can be chronological, comparative, hierarchical, or representative of any other relationship. Whatever pattern is chosen, it should be made explicit to students” (1991, p. 31).

This pattern may be organized narratively or graphically—by means of an “overview map,” which diagrammatically depicts the central organization of course information and the key relationships among the major topics that comprise the course (O'Donnell, 1994). Such diagrammatic representations of course content are consistent with research on the human brain which indicates that it functions as a pattern detector. This suggests that one effective way to promote learning is to enable students to perceive visual patterns of connections among course concepts (Bateson, 1980).

**Include a statement in the syllabus which points out how the course other fields of study and how it fits into the overall picture of a liberal arts education.** Use the syllabus throughout the course. Bring it to class and show students that what they are doing in individual class sessions relates to the overall course plan and course objectives that are outlined in the syllabus.

**In addition to using the syllabus to organize course content, use it to *organize course time* by giving students a timeframe or time range for (a) coverage of course topics in class and completion of corresponding reading assignments (e.g., chapters and page numbers), (b) quiz and test dates, and (c) dates that assignments, reports, and**

**projects are due.**  New students’ time-management skills are often inadequate for meeting the academic demands of college, including the time-management skills of academically well-prepared students (Eison & Holtschlag, 1989). By providing explicit temporal guidelines in the course syllabus students receive at the very outset of the term, FYS instructors can provide new students with the opportunity to engage in effective long-range planning and goal-directed behavior. As Erickson and Strommer remind us in their book, *Teaching College Freshmen*, “We sometimes forget that students are taking several courses and that exams fall at similar periods. Students need this information at the outset if they are to manage their time and be able to meet four or five sets of requirements” (1991, p. 85).

**Take some time in the first week of class to illustrate how the syllabus provides**

**students a *preview and overview*, which equips them with a mental map for the**

**“whole trip.”** Just as students are encouraged to preview a chapter to get a sense of its overall structure before they read it, instructors should provide a preview of classroom-delivered information that gives students a sense of its overall structure before they hear it. Research indicates that learning of verbally presented information is enhanced by means of an “*advance organizer*”, i.e., preparatory material delivered in advance of learning which is at a higher level of generality or inclusiveness than more specific and detailed information that follows it (Ausubel, 1960).

**When conducting class sessions during the term, point out how the material you’ll be presenting *relates to the syllabus or overall course plan*, i.e., how this particular informational piece fits into the “big picture.”** For example, when covering specific points in class or introducing classroom activities, explicitly indicate *how and where they relate to the syllabus*, and indicate how the material currently being discussed *connects with what was just previously covered*, i.e., build a conceptual bridge between where the course has been and where it is going.

Using the Syllabus to Promote Students’ *Active Involvement* in the Course

**Encourage student involvement proactively by including a written statement in**

**the course syllabus that explicitly indicates what “active involvement” in the classroom actually means (e.g., active listening, note-taking, and classroom participation via questions and informed comments), and that such involvement is welcomed.** In addition to writing this statement on the syllabus, it can be reinforce orally on the first day of class. Your “live” statement should serve to translate the formal, printed policy into a personal invitation for student involvement. Since first impressions can often be lasting impressions, the early delivery of a welcoming statement on the very first day of class to set an invitational tone that is likely to promote student involvement throughout the term.

Make it clear that *class participation* will benefit students’ course grades; however, point out that participation does not simply mean “speaking up” (or “winging it”). Underscore the fact that meaningful class participation means *informed* speaking that incorporates information acquired in class and through assigned readings.

**Make an explicit statement in the syllabus indicating that different v*iewpoints will be respected and valued*.** Since the syllabus may be the student’s first impression of the course and the instructor, it can represent a golden opportunity to set an early positive tone for the course by sending students the message that the instructor is open to hearing diverse perspectives. Also, mention that class participation can include disagreeing with or challenging ideas the instructor’s ideas or those presented in the assigned reading.

**Incorporate a statement in the syllabus that indicates instructor availability and willingness to meet with students *outside of class*.** On the first day of class, direct student attention to the *office hours* listed in the syllabus, and mention that individual appointments can be arranged at other times if the listed hours conflict with a student's work or family responsibilities

This strategy can be taken one step further by asking students to provide the instructor with times during the week when they would be most available for an office visit. Instructors can use this information to establish or modify your office hours to better accommodate students’ schedules. Even if the instructor makes just a slight modification in planned office hours, this effort is likely to be perceived favorably by students and should strengthen instructor-student rapport.

Using the Syllabus to Strengthen Student *Motivation and Interest* in the Course

The syllabus could be said to be the first message that instructors send their students about the course. Since first impressions can carry great weight, the content and tone of the syllabus may have a significant impact on students’ perceptions of the course and the instructor. As such, the syllabus may represent a unique opportunity for you to shape students’ first impression of the FYS in a way that stimulates initial interest and motivation. As Erickson and Strommer (1991) argue, “A good syllabus is more than a list of topics to be covered and assignments to be completed. At its best, a syllabus introduces the subject matter, gives a rationale for learning what is to be taught, and motivates students to do their best work” (p. 86).

***Entitle course topics* in a way that highlights their *relevance* and stimulates student *interest*.** Consider listing topics in your course syllabus in the form of questions, issues, dilemmas, or problems to be solved. You can also use the colon as a syntactical strategy for adding descriptive interest to topic titles (e.g., “Memory: How We Remember, Why We Forget, and What We Can Do About It”). All chapters in the text have been titled in this descriptive fashion, so you can conveniently adopt or adapt these chapter headings and use them as course topic headings in your syllabus. Lest we fear that this smacks of salesmanship or gimmickry, keep in mind that research on “outstanding” or “high impact” college instructors indicates that one of their common teaching characteristics is that they “strive to make courses interesting” (Davis, Wood, & Wilson, 1983).

**Take some time on the first day of class to create a positive motivational “first impression” of the course by providing a *sneak previ*ew of the course’s most relevant and stimulating topics**. For instance, it is likely that students’ initial interest in the course will be piqued when they hear that they will be learning about such topics as majors, careers, interpersonal relationships, and stress management (more so than study skills and time management).

**Highlight the *relevance* of course goals to students’ *current* and *future* life.**

Remind students of the personal benefits they’re likely to experience in the seminar because of its applied, student-centered content. Specify the *skills* students should expect to acquire or develop by course completion—for example, learning more effectively and efficiently, thinking more deeply, and developing strategies for connecting their current college experience with their future life goals.

**Use the syllabus to articulate the *reasons for* your choice of course content, teaching methods, course assignments, and grading procedures.** For instance, include a statement in the syllabus that explains the reasoning behind the selection and sequencing of *course topics*. If the course is following the textbook’s organization and order of topics, you may be able to quickly construct this statement by adapting or adopting it from the textbook’s Preface. As Morrill & Spees (1982) point out: “Students are ready to learn when they receive good reasons to learn. Sound college teaching attempts to demonstrate these reasons” (p. 46).

**Ask *students* for their *input* on course topics they feel would most interest or**

**benefit them, and use this input to shape and finalize the course syllabus.**For example, ask students to rank their interest in, or need for, potential course topics. You can first construct a “skeleton syllabus” before the class begins, which identifies important, but general content areas; then let students flesh it out by ranking specific topics and subtopics. Instructors at the University of South Carolina who use this practice report that the final syllabus does not differ dramatically across course sections. Thus, course uniformity or standardization should not be unduly compromised by allowing students the opportunity to select topics best matches their interests and needs (Hunter, 1996).

Using the Syllabus to Enhance *Clarity of Communication* about the Course

**Articulate the course objectives and intended learning outcomes on the syllabus, and explain how the course’s content, assignments and pedagogy contribute to their realization.** Student should see clear connections between what’s being covered, how it’s being covered, and where it’s all leading to.

**Include a statement in the syllabus which shares with students your rationale underlying the course’s organization and topic sequence.** The syllabus should not only identify *what* will be covered in the course, but also *why* it will be covered.

**Use the syllabus to clarify the mutual roles and responsibilities of the instructor and students in the learning process.** The syllabus may be viewed as a written "contract" between student and instructor, serving to clarify the responsibilities of both parties. As such, it should include a statement explaining your role as a teacher and the students' role as learners--i.e., what you will do to help students succeed and what they are expected to do on their own (e.g., expected out-of-class time to be committed to the course).

If expectations are clearly spelled out at the onset of the course, then instructors are more likely to get from students what they expect to get, or hope to get, in terms of behavior and performance. Also, clear expectations serve to reduce the likelihood of student complaints about favoritism or discrimination, and formal student grievances.

To underscore the contractual function of the syllabus, consider having students sign the syllabus after they have read and understood it. Tell your students that any changes in course plans during the term that deviate from the signed syllabus will be put in writing and re-submitted to them for their approval.

**Clearly communicate your expectations of students' in-class behavior and out-of-class responsibilities.** Use the syllabus to lay out the "ground rules" for (a) class attendance, (b) punctuality, and (c) what constitutes effective class "preparation," class "participation," and "active involvement." This recommendation is particularly relevant for courses in which active learning methods are to be used in class. The learner's role with respect to these methods may need careful clarification because students often have had little or no prior experience with them. As Meyers and Jones suggest in Promoting Active Learning, "The change of expectations from the traditional to the active-learning classroom demands a first-rate syllabus. A syllabus that will stand up to the demands of active learning needs to be more comprehensive . . . that clearly spells out your expectations for students and their responsibilities in the class" (1993, p. 38). Erickson and Strommer (1991) point out another advantage of a clear, detailed syllabus for promoting active learning:

A good syllabus is an important prop in the first class meeting because it

communicates details about course requirements and policies that otherwise might

take an entire class period to convey--a practice to be avoided because it assigns

students to relatively passive roles and does not leave time for other actions and

interactions (p. 92).

**State course policies and procedures in the syllabus as *requests* rather than as**

**commands or demands (e.g., “I would like . . .” versus “You must . . .”).** As Erickson and Strommer note, “A syllabus that talks about what students *should* do, *must* do, and *will* do—and what will happen if they do not do it—sets a different tone than one that talks about what students *may* do or *might want* to do” (1991, pp. 85-86).

**Use the syllabus to identify not only what is to be done in the course but also your rationale for why it is being done this way, so that students do not perceive your course policies and procedures as being either arbitrary or autocratic.** For example, share with students your rationale for:

(a) selection and sequencing of course content,

(b) classroom teaching techniques,

(c) methods for evaluating student performance, and

(d) course policies and procedures.

**Increase the clarity of your syllabus by verbally reviewing it at some point during the first week of class, allowing students the opportunity to ask questions and seek further clarification.**

SECTION V.

***TEACHING* THE COURSE**:

*STRATEGIES FOR CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION, COURSE ASSIGNMENTS, & STUDENT GRADING*

The effectiveness of a first-year seminar depends not only on its content, but also on its pedagogy—the instructional methods used to deliver the course. As much thought should be given to *how* the course will be taught as to what material will be covered; in other words, *process* is as important as content.

In the mid-1990s, clarion calls were sounded for a “paradigm shift” to a “new learning paradigm” that moves the focus of attention from the teacher and the content being taught to the *learner* and the process of *learning* (American College Personnel Association, 1994; Angelo, 1997; Barr & Tagg, 1995). The new learning paradigm shifts the starting point for improving undergraduate education, which *centers on the learner* and *what the learner is doing*, rather than focusing on what the instructor is doing (and covering) in the class. In this learner-centered paradigm, the definition and goal of effective teaching is to *facilitate student learning* and, ultimately, to achieve positive *student-learning outcomes*.

Naturally, implementation of a learning-based approach to instruction begs the question: What are the principles or processes that mediate and promote positive student- learning outcomes? The following five learning processes are well-supported, research-based principles that have been empirically and consistently associated with student learning, student motivation, and student retention (Cuseo, 2007b).

**1.** **Active Involvement**: student success increases commensurately with the degree or

depth of student *engagement* in the learning process, i.e., the amount of *time* and

*energy* that students invest in the college experience—both *inside* and *outside* the

classroom (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2001; Kuh, et al., 2005; McKeachie et al., 1986;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

**2. Social Integration**: student success is augmented by *human interaction,*

*collaboration,* and formation of *interpersonal connections* between the student and

other members of the college community—peers, faculty, staff, and administrators

(Astin, 1993; Bruffee, 1993; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Slavin, 1996; Tinto,

1993).

**3. Personal Reflection**: student success is strengthened when students engage in

reflective thinking about what they’re learning and *elaborate* on it, *transforming* it

into a form that relates it to what they already know or have previously experienced

(Ewell, 1997; Flavell, 1985; Mezirow, 2000;Vygotsky, 1978).

**4. Personal Meaning**: student success is more likely to take place when students find

*meaning or purpose* in their college experience—i.e., when students perceive

*relevant connections* between what they’re learning in college and their current life

or future goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wlodkowski, 1998).

**5. Personal Validation**: student success is more likely to be achieved when students

feel personally *significant*—i.e., when students feel recognized as *individuals* and

that they *matter* to the institution (Rendón, 1994; Schlossberg, Lynch, &

Chickering, 1989).

For an instructional strategy to be deemed effective or a “best practice,” it should implement one or more of the foregoing five principles. If the practice implements more than one of these principles simultaneously, it can be expected to exert synergistic effects on student learning, student motivation, and student retention.

One way to transform the five learner-centered theoretical principles into a practical and manageable action plan for teaching the FYS is to implement them in terms of three key, learner-centered connections:

(1) the student-*instructor* connection

(2) the student-*course* connection

(3) the student-*student* (peer) connection.

These key connection points will be used as an organization framework for guiding effective instruction of the FYS. Organizing instructional strategies around this triad of connections is consistent with the framework adopted by the architects of the national surveys of student engagement, which is “grounded in a large body of research about what works in strengthening student learning and persistence. Research shows that the more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter they study—the more likely they are to learn, to stick with studies, and to attain their academic goals” (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008, p. 7).

What follows are practical strategies for infusing the aforementioned five principles of effective learning into each of the three key “connection” points throughout the FYS.

**The First Days of Class**

The first few class sessions represent a critical period that can shape students’ first impression of the course, which, in turn, can shape their subsequent course perceptions and behavior in class. As the old saying goes, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” One way to differentiate the FYS course from other courses in the curriculum is to move away from the common teaching practice of using the first class session to deliver a perfunctory review of the syllabus, which include a laundry list of course requirements, policies, and expectations (that can immediately instill “syllabus anxiety” among new students). Adding insult to injury, this common first-day practice of syllabus review is sometimes followed by early class dismissal, which sends students the tacit message that the first day of class is not important or, worse yet, that class time is not important and can be readily sacrificed. This traditional opening-class practice is often followed by the instructor launching into full-blown coverage of course content during the next class session. Instead of replicating this uninspiring routine during the first days of class, FYS instructors should take the approach that building class community and course enthusiasm are the most important “topics” to address first in class. Allowing students early opportunity to get to know their instructor, to know the purpose and value of the course, and to know their classmates serve to lay the foundational cornerstones for a successful learning experience in any course, particularly the FYS. Said in another way, before beginning to dive into coverage of course content, instructors should establish the student-instructor connection.

#### I.

#### MAKING THE STUDENT-*INSTRUCTOR* CONNECTION:

#### Building Rapport with Your Class

Instructor-student rapport may be viewed as a precondition or prerequisite for student engagement in the learning process and for meaningful student-instructor interaction. If students feel comfortable relating to their instructor, they will be more responsive to the instructor’s attempts to interact with them and to actively involve them in the learning process. Unfortunately, despite the documented importance of student-faculty interaction (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), national surveys of student engagement, interaction between students an faculty ranks the lowest of all assessment benchmarks (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2000). Angelo (1993) succinctly states how developing rapport with students is a necessary precondition for student-faculty interaction: “Most students have to believe teachers know and care about them before they can benefit from interactions—or even interact” (p. 13).

An extensive body of research reviewed by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicates that instructors’ concern for students, and their availability to students, have positive, have statistically significant effects on student persistence. Furthermore, as Kuh, et al. (2005) note: “Faculty members who forge authentic relationships with students often are able to connect with student at deeper level and challenge them to previously unrealized levels of achievement and personal performance” (p. 281). Described below are some strategies for connecting with students and establishing early rapport with your class.

**On the *first day* of class, make an intentional effort to *learn students’ names*** **and *something personal about them*.** Taking time to get to know your students, and allowing them time to get them to know you should precede review of the syllabus and coverage of course content (people before paper). Terenzini, et al. (1996) contend that college instructors can “humanize” their relationships with students by learning and using their names. College research indicates that “addressing students by name” is a classroom teaching behavior that correlates positively and significantly with students’ overall evaluation of the instructor (Murray, 1985). In contrast, research on “uncomfortable courses,” i.e., courses most likely to cause “classroom communication apprehension” among students, reveals that they are more likely to be taught by instructors who are perceived by their students as being unfriendly and who do not address students by name (Bowers, 1986). Learning the names of students as quickly as possible is the most effective way to create a positive first impression of the course and establish early rapport with your class. This can lay the foundation for a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable interacting with their instructor and begin to become actively involved in the course. As Forsyth and McMillan point out: “High expectations are communicated as instructors learn students’ names and call on them by name” (1991, p. 58). (See *Appendix B* for a “top-ten” list of strategies for learning student names effectively and expeditiously.)

***Personalize* the classroom experience by learning and remembering *information***

***about your individual students*.** Instructors who make a genuine effort to know their students by name and learn something about each of them as individuals, demonstrates that they care about students as unique human beings. Carl Rogers, renowned humanistic psychologist, artfully expresses the value of knowing your students: “I think of it as prizing the learner, prizing his [her] feelings, his opinions, his person. It is a caring for the learner. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, a respect for him as having worth in his own right” (Rogers, 1975, p. 107).

An effective way to learn relevant personal information about students, as well as to help learn students’ names, is by means of a *student-information sheet*. In short, this practice involves having students respond to questions about themselves on a sheet of paper in class while the teacher responds to the same questions by recording information about herself on the board. (See *Exhibit 2* for specific, step-by-step directions on how to conveniently construct and make use of a student-information sheet.)

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In addition to learning students’ names and personal information, additional strategies for establishing early rapport with your class include the following practices.

**If you can access the e-mail addresses of student who have registered for your**

**class, send them a *personal welcome note* before the course begins.** One FYS instructor sends personal letters to all his students before the course begins, welcoming them to his class and sharing some of the exciting things they will be experiencing in the course (Paul Lorton, University of San Francisco, personal communication).

**When previewing the course, *expressly* *emphasize your availability* outside of class and *encourage* students make office visits.**

Student-faculty contact outside the classroom has been strongly linked to such positive outcomes as student retention, academic achievement, and educational aspirations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). One strategy for promoting such contact is to make specific mention of your office hours and make it clear that individual appointments can be arranged if listed office hours conflict with a student’s out-of-class responsibilities (e.g., work or child care). Taking time early in the term to clearly state that you welcome interaction with students outside of class may send an explicit signal to them that you genuinely value these interactions. This sends a much stronger and more sincere message than simply listing office hours on the syllabus, which students may interpret merely as a perfunctory fulfillment of departmental or institutional requirements. Furthermore, it makes it clear to new students that interacting with instructors outside the classroom is a desirable practice in college, perhaps unlike high school, where this contact might have only occurred if students had to stay after school because they were in dire need of help (or were in trouble).

**During the early stages of the course, *make appointments with* students for an**

***office visit or personal conference*.** Inviting students to make an office visit is one thing, but formally scheduling office an office visit with them is a more intrusive form of outreach to promote out-of-class contact with students. Scheduling such office visits or personal conferences can serve as an early icebreaker that “warms up” students to you and allows them to feel more comfortable about interacting with you outside of class. (It is also an effective way to learn student names.) At the very minimum, requiring this initial conference ensures that each student in class will discover where your office is located, and guarantees that all students—not only the most socially assertive ones—will make at least one office visit during the term.

John Gardner has noted that new students may need to be given a reason to make office visits and explicitly learn how to use faculty office hours because, in high school, teachers usually do not have office hours, if they are available to students outside of class time, they generally have less time and privacy to confer with students on a one-to-one basis. Moreover, in high school, visits to an “office” are often associated with disciplinary action, rather than as an opportunity for positive out-of-class interaction with faculty (Gardner, 1994). This observation suggests that college instructors may need to implement highly intrusive strategies that are intentionally designed to bring students to their offices. (Rather than waiting and hoping that new students will initiate these important out-of-class contacts on their own.)

**On the course syllabus, consider sharing your *home phone number* and home *e- mail address* with students.**

This sends a strong signal to students that you are genuinely interested in being available and accessible to them. It also conveys the message that you are willing to share something personal with your students. It has been my experience, and the experience of virtuallyall other instructors I have spoken with who share their home phone number, that students do not abuse this privilege. However, to further minimize the risk of student abuse or overuse of this privilege, you can suggest specific parameters or boundaries (e.g., “No calls after 11 PM, please.”). I have found that less then 10% of students in class will actually call me at home, yet 100% of them know that I have offered them the opportunity to do so. Thus, this appears to be a strategy that has a low cost/high benefit ratio; it does not cost you much time, yet its benefits are offered to all students.

**EXTENDING THE STUDENT-*INSTRUCTOR* CONNECTION:**

**Sustaining Rapport with Your Class Throughout the Term**

Once the student-instructor connection has been initiated during the formative stage of the course, the next challenge is to sustain these connections throughout subsequent stages of the academic term. The following strategies are designed to extend and maintain these early connections throughout the course term. (See *Appendix C* for additional ideas on timing and tailoring your teaching strategies to the “rhythms” of the academic term.)

Student perceptions of instructional effectiveness depend not only on technical teaching skills, such as organization and communication, but also on personal characteristics of the instructor that serve to humanize the classroom environment and promote student feelings of self-worth (Jones, 1989). Instructors are more likely to become role models whose thinking, attitudes and motivation are emulated by students when students perceive them as a “persons” rather than just a subject matter “experts” (McKeachie, et al., 1978). Although organization and communication skills are the two teacher qualities most highly correlated with overall ratings of teaching effectiveness, instructor rapport is also positively associated with student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, and it is the most frequently-cited characteristic of instructors whom students describe as their “ideal” or “best” teacher (Feldman, 1976, 1988).

Said in another way, effective instructors are not only well organized and effective communicators, they also provide students with personal validation. When students feel personally validated, they feel valued as a human being, are recognized as a unique individual, and sense their instructor cares about them and their success (Rendón, 1994). Students feel validated when the instructor knows them by name and remembers personal information about them, such as their educational plans or personal interests. When students feel validated, they relate more easily and openly to the instructor, feel more comfortable about asking questions, and are more likely to be honest about seeking advice or assistance from the instructor on personal issues relating to the college experience.

The following practices are suggested as teaching practices for validating your students and promoting rapport with them inside and outside the classroom.

**Once you have learned your students’ names, *continue to refer to them by name***. It is important to learn your students’ names, but it may be even more important to show them that you know them by regularly using their names. In a comprehensive review of the research literature on active learning, Bonwell and Eison (1991) reached the following conclusion: “Perhaps the single most important act that faculty can do to improve the climate in the classroom is to learn students’ names. Among many other benefits, doing so acknowledges the decentralization of authority in the classroom and recognizes the increased responsibility of students for their learning and the learning of others” (pp. 22-23).

**Create *in-class* opportunities to interactpersonally with students *before* and *after***

**class.** These are times at which students may be most likely to seek you out for professional and personal advice because these are the times they are most likely to be on campus and not in class. This is particularly true for commuter students who are more likely to be on campus only at times when their classes are scheduled. One instructor we know consistently comes to class early, stands by the classroom door, and greets all of his students individually as they enter class (Michael Semenoff, personal communication, 2006). Another professor reports, he goes to class early “to chat with a few individuals about basketball, their weekend etc. It allows me to make contact with a few individuals and as the other students come into the classroom, they see that I am human and interested in them” (Shea, 1988, p. 9). Empirical support for this recommendation is provided by a case study involving classroom observations of five faculty who had histories of high student-retention rates in their courses. It was found that one common characteristic shared by all of these instructors was that “they talked to students before, during, and after class” (Coad, 1995, p. 8). Student-faculty interaction after class may be especially valuable because it is at this time that students are likely to seek clarification on concepts covered in class, or want to engage in extended discussion of some provocative issue raised during class. To take advantage of this “teachable moment” instructors should attempt to make themselves available to students immediately after class and regularly remind students of their after-class availability at the end of class sessions (e.g., by saying: “If you have any question or if you would like more information on what was discussed in class today, I would be happy to meet with you right after class.”).

Research indicates that instructors who have frequent out-of-class contact with students often give signals about their out-of-class accessibility and approachability through their in-class behaviors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Thus, being open to student interaction with you before and after class may lead to greater student willingness to seek additional contact with you outside the classroom (e.g., office visits).

**Provide students with personal *recognition and reinforcement* for their efforts and achievements.** Be on the lookout for opportunities to recognize or compliment students’ efforts, achievements, or improvements (e.g., thank students for their questions and participation in class, Such recognition and reinforcement serves to provide students, particularly underrepresented students, with a strong sense of personal validation (Rendón & Garza, 1996).

**Provide *personalized* feedback to students.** Feedback is more likely to be attended to and responded to in a non-defensive manner if it is delivered in a personalized fashion. Personalized feedback may be delivered by such practices as (a) addressing the student by name in your written remarks, (b) comparing students’ present performance with their previous work and noting areas of personal improvement, and (c) signing your name at the end of your comments so your feedback approximates the form of a personal letter.

Though it may be may be too time-consuming to write a personal note to all students on every returned assignment or exam, personal notes may be written to a smaller subset of students (e.g., students with last names A-M in your grade book). On the next assignment or exam, a different subgroup of students may be selected to receive personal notes.

**For students who are struggling in class, write a *personal note on returned assignments or exams* that invites, requests, or requires them to see you outside of**

**class.** This written note could be reinforced by a private verbal comment before or after class. The importance of taking an intrusive (assertive outreach) approach to promoting out-of-lass interaction with low-achieving students is underscored by research indicating these students are often the least likely to initiate or seek extra help their own (Knapp & Karabenick, 1988).

**Consider *refraining* from the ritualistic use of *red ink* to correct student errors on**

**exams and assignments.** No empirical support can be provided for this suggestion; it is based on the intuitive feeling that that students may associate this color with fear and apprehension (“red flag” or “red alert”), or embarrassment and humiliation (“red-faced”). These are the very feelings that FYS instructor do not want new students to experience while they process performance evaluation because it may cause them to react emotionally and defensively to feedback, rather than rationally and constructively. Perhaps delivering written feedback to students in a color that has a less inflammatory history than the corrective color, red, may partially reduce the risk that feedback will be perceived as self-threatening.

**Communicate personally with students via *e-mail*.** Electronic communication may provide an outlet for students who lack the confidence to speak up during classroom discussions (where they are in full view of a large number of people), or students who lack the assertiveness to walk into your office for a face-to-face conversation. Furthermore, students who experience positive “virtual” interactions with their instructor may then feel more comfortable seeking actual (in-person) interaction.

**Invite students to *help you research answers* to questions they have raised in**

**class or after class.** This practice not only provides an opportunity for student-faculty contact outside the classroom, it also enhances the quality of such contact because it involves interaction that is focused on course-related issues and contributes to the development of an important student skill—learning how to locate and evaluate information.

**Engage in some *self-disclosure* by sharing your personal experiences to the material being covered.** Sharing *personal anecdotes* to illustrate a course concept is an instructional practice that demonstrates that their instructor is human, and a person with whom they can identify. Concepts covered in the first-year seminar lend themselves naturally to sharing of our college personal experiences, both as former first-year students and as current professionals working with first-year students. Strong empirical support for this assertion is provided by Wilson (1975) who conducted a four-year longitudinal study involving eight different types of higher educational institutions, 4815 students, and 1472 faculty. One classroom behavior typical of “outstanding” teachers (as nominated by both students and faculty colleagues) was that they were more likely to *share examples from their own experience* than teachers who were not so highly rated.

Furthermore, by sharing our experiences, we are modeling the very behavior that we hope students will engage in during class. This should serve to increase the likelihood that students will emulate and reciprocate by engaging in the same honest self-disclosure that the instructor has modeled. Lastly, personal anecdotes effectively promote student *learning* because they provide students with real, “human” examples that concretely illustrate course concepts and bring them to life (literally). The late Kenneth Eble (1976), a highly-regarded faculty development scholar, eloquently captures the educational value of the anecdote:

The personal anecdote that illuminates an idea or clarifies a concept is neither ego-

indulgence nor more wandering from truth. The personal is a way of gaining the

kind of interest absolutely necessary to learning. Moreover, an anecdotal account

of how some aspect of the subject matter itself came to have value for the teacher

exerts a powerful force upon the student to grant that subject matter personal

worth (p. 13).

Another element of self-disclosure is being honest and forthright in sharing our instructional self-doubts, shortcomings and mistakes. For instance, do not hold back sharing your enthusiasm and your uncertainties about any new teaching techniques you may be implementing for the first time in the seminar, and admit to any errors you may make in the teaching process. Peter Elbow (1986) eloquently articulates the advantages of such practices, “We should reveal our own position, particularly our doubts, ambivalences, and biases. We should show we are still learning, still willing to look at things in new ways, still sometimes uncertain or even stuck . . . We can increase the chances of our students being willing to undergo the necessary anxiety involved in change if they see we are willing to undergo it” (p. 150).

**Maintain and share your *sense of humor*.** Fear of being perceived as “unprofessional” or “losing control” of the class may inhibit some instructors from incorporating content-relevant and socially-appropriate humor in the classroom. Something funny is not necessarily something frivolous. If the instructors have a humorous *personal anecdote* that relates to, or is illustrative of, the concept under discussion, they should not hesitate to share it. Since humor is so rarely found in the serious context of formal classroom learning, the sheer element of incongruity or surprise alone is often enough to ensure at least a modicum of student laughter. In a study that found student-instructor interaction in the FYS to be higher than it was in other first-year and upper-level classes, students were asked to identify specific instructor behaviors that contributed to the higher level of interaction in the seminar. Students identified “use of humor” as one instructor characteristic that contributed to the higher level of interaction (Reynolds & Nunn, 1998).

Using content-relevant *cartoons* is an effective way to command immediate student attention to the concept being taught and provides students with an effective (and emotionally stimulating) visual illustration of the concept that serves to enhance its retention. Numerous cartoons about the college experience in general and the first-year experience, in particular, can be found in the text. They can be easily transformed into visible, overhead projections or Power-point slides. Projected cartoons may be an effective way to:

(a) “punctuate” lectures or class presentations with concept-relevant humor that

maintains or regains student attention, and

(b) provide an attention-grabbing prompt as students enter the classroom, which can

create a positive first impression of the class session, inducing a pleasant

mood and anticipatory interest.

Instructors should be ready to use their favorite cartoons in class to reinforce course concepts and to reduce student anxiety on tests or exams. These small gestures serve to build rapport with the class, promote retention of course concepts illustrated by the cartoons and, most importantly, show students that the instructor is human. Adorning an office door with educationally relevant cartoons and witty saying may also reduce student trepidation about seeking instructor-student contact with outside the classroom.

**Interact with students in a *personable* and *empathic* manner.** Specific recommendations for behaving personably toward students include the following practices:

- *Greet* students when you enter class and when you see them on campus.

- *Welcome back* students back after a weekend or semester break.

- *Acknowledge the return* of an absent student (e.g., “Glad to see you’re back, we missed

you last class”).

- Wish students *good luck* on a *forthcoming exam*.

- *Express concern* to students who are not doing well or to those students who have been

excessively absent (e.g., “Everything okay?” “Anything I can do to help?”).

- *Acknowledge emotions* expressed by students in class (e.g., “You seem excited about

this topic.” “I sense that you’re feeling tired, so let’s take a short break.”).

These practices are supported by an observational study of 25 professors who were identified as “superb” classroom instructors. These instructors were found to: (a) express interest in students as individuals, (b) be highly sensitive to subtle messages from students about the way they feel, (c) acknowledge student feelings about matters relating to class assignments or course policies, and (d) encourage students to express their feelings about the course (Lowman, 1984).

**Reserve some class time for *open forums*—class sessions devoted to free**

**and open discussion of any college life or college-adjustment issue that students**

**would like to discuss.** This practice allows students an opportunity to set their own agenda by raising any questions or concerns they have about their first experiences in college. Allowing students the opportunity to do so in the FYS may be the only time a representative of the institution will ever encourages new students to openly express their feelings about the college experience and the college the college they chosen to attend. Naturally, parameters or ground rules should be established for such sessions (e.g., focusing on issues that involve college processes, practices, or policies rather than citing and criticizing particular individuals; complaints cited must be followed by suggested solutions or remedies before another complaint is raised). Student anonymity may be secured by having students anonymously use a *suggestion box* to submit college-adjustment issues for subsequent, open-forum discussion.

Reserving at least one class period for an open forum not only serves to validate students by showing respect for their viewpoints by allowing them the rare opportunity to set the own agenda for a class session, it can also serve as an assessment tool for identifying recurrent patterns or pockets of student dissatisfaction. When students are encouraged to openly express a source of dissatisfaction, discuss it and suggest potential strategies for dealing with them, this may be used as feedback and qualitative data that may be used to diagnose institutional weaknesses and promote institutional improvement. For example, if numerous students cite a particular experience as dissatisfying, this might be viewed as a “critical incident” and used as a focal point to stimulate institution-wide discussion and intervention. Also, the issues that students raise in open-forum discussions may be used to design relevant questions for inclusion on student-satisfaction surveys administered by the college.

Lastly, if the open forum is conducted in a fashion akin to a “town meeting,” whereby student “citizens” come together to discuss collective concerns and ideas for community improvement, it creates a context in which students can practice skills that will prepare them for active citizenship in a democratic society—an oft-cited the goal of liberal education (Miller, 1988).

**Occasionally, visit with students *on their “turf” or territory* (e.g., student cafeteria, union, or lounge).** Instructors’ willingness to go where students go sends a message that it is not below their professorial dignity to associate with first-year students. In fact, it may suggest to students that instructors genuinely enjoy spending time with them, above and beyond the time they have to must spend with them in class.

***Participate* in *co-curricular* experiences with students (e.g., campus workshops,**

**intramural sports, student elections, campus pep rallies), and if you intend to**

**attend an event, announce to your class that you will be there.** This practice should serve to stimulate student participation in co-curricular experiences, and it enables students to see you in a different light. Participating with students in such informal, non-threatening activities allows them so see you as a “regular person.” Seeing you in this light may make students feel less intimidated about interacting with you outside of class on issues that are course-related or personal in nature.

**Consider inviting students to *your home* (e.g., for a class session or group**

**conferences).** This is an effective strategy for promoting instructor-student contact with students outside the classroom, and perhaps more importantly, it can be a powerful way in which to provide new students with a sense of personal importance and validation. As a first-year student, the noted author, E. B. White, was once invited to an instructor’s home and eloquently recalls the powerful impact it had on him: “When I was an undergraduate, there were a few professors who went out of their way to befriend students. At the house of one of these men I felt more at home than I did in my own home with my own father and mother. I felt excited, instructed, accepted, [and] influential” (quoted in Bailey, 1994, p. 72). Just as the syllabus can be used to initiate interest and spark motivation, it can also serve a humanizing function by establishing an initial foundation for developing instructor-student rapport.

II.

#### MAKING THE STUDENT-*COURSE (SUBJECT)* CONNECTION: Building Student Interest and Involvement in the Course

The first week of class may also be the time to motivate students by providing them with a preview of some of the more exciting and interesting issues to be covered in the course. This preview can create a *positive first impression* that can generate motivational momentum and build a foundation of enthusiasm for the course. Listed below is a series of specific strategies for initiating student interest in the subject matter of the FYS.

**Point out *features of the textbook* that are likely to capture student attention and**

**stimulate interest,** such as:

\* powerful *classic* *quotes*

\* insightful *student perspectives*

\* authors’ personal stories

\* poignant *pictures or images*, and

\*content-relevant *cartoons***.**

These textbook features can serve as evocative stimuli that spark *student motivation* and promote a sense of *positive anticipation* for upcoming topics.

**Highlight the fact that the course has emerged from an *international movement***

**(the “first-year experience”) that has been intentionally designed to promote**

**the success of first-year students *around the world*.**  Point out the fact that there are many *research* studies supporting the value of first-year seminars or student-success courses. Mention that there is empirical evidence indicates that the course has a positive impact on *student retention* (persistence to college graduation) and *academic performance* (college GPA). In particular, note that this is *not* a “remedial” course; students attending selective colleges also take courses similar to like this, and research shows that the seminar benefits students all students, regardless of their level of academic success prior to college (Cuseo, Fecas, & Thompson, 2007).

**Remind students that the seminar is much more than a student-success course: it is a *life-success* course.** Indicate that virtually all of the topics covered in the course are relevant to life after college. To confirm this argument, suggest to them that if they browse through the self-improvement section of any popular bookstore they will find best-selling books (e.g., *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People)* that deal with the very same topics as those in the first-year seminar. Also, point out that the course focuses on the development of *skills, strategies, habits, and attitudes*, which are: (a) *transferable*—that have the versatility and flexibility to be applied to different academic subjects and professional careers, and (b) *durable*—that are likely to be relevant and retained long after the course ends—unlike courses that emphasize memorization of factual information.

**Inform students that the seminar is unique because it is likely to be the only course they will ever take whose subject matter focuses directly on the very *persons* sitting in class—them.** Other college courses draw their ideas from an external body of knowledge that reflects the academic interests and priorities of researcher scholars in a particular field of study. In contrast, the FYS is based on the student experience and research on the student experience. As one former student anonymously wrote in an evaluation of the seminar, “This is the only course that I’ve ever taken that was about me” (Cuseo, 1991).

**Share *comments* that former students made on their *course evaluations in previous classes*, which serve as testimony to the course’s value.**Or better yet, invite former students to class who you know enjoyed the seminar and profited from the course experience (e.g., a course alumni panel).

**EXTENDING THE STUDENT-*COURSE* CONNECTION:**

**Sustaining Student Interest & Involvement in the Course**

**Throughout the Term**

Promoting Students’ *Active Involvement* in the Course

Optimal learning occurs when learners become psychologically *involved* or *engaged* in the learning process, i.e., when students invest time, energy, and effort in their learning experiences (Astin, 1984; 1993). Active involvement probably qualifies as the most fundamental and powerful principle of human learning. The bottom line is this: For deep learning to occur, the learner needs to be an *active agent* in the learning process, not a passive sponge or spectator.

The lecture method still remains the dominant pedagogical strategy used in higher education, and there has been remarkably little change in the frequency of its use over several decades (Bligh, 2000; Bowles, 1982; Costin, 1972; Marris, 1964; Nance & Nance, 1990). Arguably, the major force propelling the movement toward learner-centered pedagogy in higher education is the well-documented ineffectiveness of the lecture method for promoting higher learning outcomes. Bligh (2000) concluded his extensive research review with this recommendation: *“Use lectures to teach information. Do not rely on them to promote thought, change attitudes, or develop behavioral skills if you can help it”* (p. 20).

In studies of student behavior during lectures, it has been found that students spend about half of their class time thinking about things unrelated to the lecture content, with up to 15% of their class time is spent “fantasizing” (Milton, Polio, & Eison, 1986). Student *attention and concentration* tend to drop off dramatically after 10-15 minutes of continuous instructor discourse (McKeachie, 2002; Penner, 1984; Verner and Dickinson, 1967). It is important to note that this attention “drift” during lectures also occurs among students in graduate and professional school (Stuart and Rutheford, 1978) and among learning-oriented (vs. grade-oriented) undergraduate students (Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986). Thus, attention loss during lectures cannot be simply dismissed as a student problem, such as lack of motivation, lack of effort, or a recent outbreak of attention deficit disorder among today’s youth; instead, the problem seems to lie with the lecture method itself.

The purpose of citing this research is not to suggest that lecturing (instructor-delivered information) should be totally or completely abandoned. There will always be a place in higher education for knowledgeable, learned professionals to share their knowledge and to model thinking processes that their students can emulate, including the FYS. (See *Appendix A* for strategies for determining when to lecture and how to deliver lectures effectively.) However, research strongly indicates that lectures need to be alternated with and augmented by learner-centered strategies that empower students to take a more active and responsible role in the learning process.

The need for instructors to make greater use of pedagogical practices that are more engaging than the straight lecture is reinforced further by findings that students are entering college with substantially higher self-reported levels of *academic disengagement* in high school—for example, they more frequently report “feeling bored” in class, missing class, and spending less time on their studies outside of class (Sax, Astin, Korn & Mahoney, 2007; Sax, et al., 2005). Indeed, research indicates that boredom with courses is a major reason why students miss classes (Van Blerkom, 1990) and withdraw from college (Astin, 1975).

A national survey of nearly 25,000 first-year students at 110 institutions conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, pedagogical practices that were found to be most strongly associated with first-year students’ satisfaction with the overall quality of college instruction were those that emphasized student involvement with peers, faculty, and the course itself (Keup & Sax, 2002). These results are consistent with data collected by the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Based on a national survey of over 30,000 students attending more than 60 postsecondary institutions and over 30,000 students, it was found that use of “engaging pedagogy” in FYS courses (e.g., class discussions and group work) was strongly associated with student satisfaction and positive student-learning outcomes (Swing, 2002).

When selecting instructional methods for the FYS, it may be useful to conceive of classroom teaching options as ranging along a continuum from *instructor*-centered to *learner*-centered. Extreme, instructor-centered teaching is best illustrated by the uninterrupted, formal lecture whereby the instructor does all the talking and is in complete control of the class agenda. In contrast, student-centered or learner-centered instruction involves less instructor domination and shifts more communication, control, and responsibility to the students. “Learner-centered” education means instructional practices that place students at the *center* of the learning process (as opposed to content-driven, teacher-centered lecturing).

As the foregoing research results suggest, probably the best general rule to follow when planning the teaching process for the FYS is to maximize the use of *student-centered* learning strategies as much as possible. This type of pedagogy is consistent with the student-centered goals of the FYS. It is also a pedagogy that is most consistent with goals of liberal learning and general education. Gary Miller (1988) makes this point in his book, *The Meaning of General Education*: “General education is intimately concerned with democratic processes and with the needs of a democratic society and always has been . . . . [It] is designed to enable individuals to perform the basic democratic function within their communities. An education for and by democracy is, by definition, student-centered” (1988, pp. 188, 189). *Student-centered* pedagogy takes the instructor (the authority figure) off “center stage,” liberating the students (the people) to “share the stage” and share the power. We must keep in mind that general education is more than just exposing students to a liberal arts curriculum (a collection of courses covering particular content), it is also involves a process (pedagogy) of liberal learning (AAC&U, 2002, 2007).

Listed below is a series of instructional alternatives to the lecture method, which are designed to increase students’ level of active involvement (engagement) in the FYS.

***“Modified* Lecture” Formats**

When you need to lecture or make instructional presentations to students, you can modify them in ways that transform them from “straight” lectures into more active, student-centered learning experiences by using the following instructional strategies.

1. **The “*Interactive* Lecture”:** Embedding periodic questions into class presentations that

elicit student reaction to the information presented and student interaction with the

instructor.

Effective questions serve to create temporary states of doubt that can motivate interest to resolve the doubt and obtain closure. Infusing thought-provoking questions into instructional presentations also serves to create a climate of intellectual inquiry that models and encourages students to ask their own questions in class. However, research shows that college instructors do not create all questions equally and not all are equally effective in eliciting student involvement. Careful forethought should be given to the process of posing questions because how a question is framed or phrased affects whether it will successfully stimulate student involvement. As one instructional development specialist suggests: “You must highlight them [questions] in your outline. You should know *exactly* what questions, word for word, you are going to ask” (Welty, 1989, p. 42).

Research indicates that the types of questions that are most likely to elicit student involvement are *open-ended* questions, which call for more than one correct or acceptable answer. Such questions invite multiple responses welcomes a diversity of perspectives and encourage *divergent* thinking, i.e., expansive thinking that does not “converge” on one (and only one) correct answer (Cuseo, 2005). Other features of instructor-posed questions that are more likely to trigger student involvement include the following:

\* *Higher-Order* questions that ask for thinking at a level that is higher than rote recall

of factual information (e.g., questions that call for application or evaluation)

*\* Focused* questions that are tied to, or focus on, a specific concept or issue. For

example, “What do you think might account for these male-female differences in

communication style?” is a focused question. In contrast to an unfocused query,

such as: “Does anybody have any questions or comments?”).

\* *Personalized* questions that situate students in a relevant, real-life context and

ask them how they would respond in this situation, thereby inviting them to *apply*

the concept under discussion to their personal lives. Such questions implement

the effective principle of “situated learning,” i.e., learning that situates or places

in a relevant and meaningful context (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). For

instance, in an FYS course, if the topic under discussion is test-taking skills,

students could be asked the following question: “Suppose you were just about to

take a major exam and you started to experience symptoms of test anxiety. What

could you do right then and there to reduce your tension and regain self-control?”

\* *Conditionally- phrased* questions (e.g., “What *might* be . . . .” “What *could* be . . . ?”

“What *may* be . . . ?”). Such conditional phrasing sends students a clear verbal

signal that a diversity of answers is possible and acceptable, which encourages

creativity and reduces fear or embarrassment about failing to provide “the”

correct answer that the instructor (authority figure) is “looking for.” This is a

very reasonable student fear because the odds are clearly against the student

responding with an acceptable answer; there is an almost limitless number of

unacceptable responses, but one (and only one) correct answer.

\* Questions that invite *all* students in class by posing questions that call for a

*nonverbal response.*

All students can have an equal and simultaneous opportunity to become actively

involved by occasionally asking questions that call for a nonverbal responses, such

as a simple show of hands; for example: “How many of you agree with the

following statement . . . ?” or “How many of you had an experience similar to . . .

?” Other ways in which students can become involved nonverbally in class are by

(a) having students *vote with their feet* by taking a position represented by one *of*

*four corners* in the room—with each corner representing one of four choices:

strongly agree,agree, disagree, strongly disagree; or (b) asking students to *move*

*to either side of the room*, depending on their position with respect to an issue or

debate, using the center aisle as a dividing line—for example: Where do you

stand (literally) on the issue of whether or not colleges should abolishing student

grades?

Such nonverbal exercises serve to involve all students in class at the same

time; not just the most verbally assertive or impulsive thinkers who raise their

hand first out an answer faster than any of their classmates. Nonverbal exercises

can also serve as a prelude to provoke subsequent verbal discussion. For

instance, students could be asked *why* they ended up occupying a particular

place or space, or students could be allowed to change their places after a class

discussion, then asked why they decided to change.

2. **The “*Punctuated* Lecture”** (Angelo & Cross, 1993): Interspersing active learning

exercises before, during, and after lectures. Straight lectures can be punctuated or

infused with short bursts of student involvement at three key times during a lecture:

before, during, and after the presentation of information.

\* *Pre-Lecture* Strategies: students become actively involved *before* a lecture by

*activating their pre-existing knowledge, feelings, and/or misconceptions* about

the to-be-presented information. Any of the following practices may be used

for this purpose.

*> Pre-Tests*: giving students a short, non-graded assessment of their knowledge

or skills with respect to the upcoming topic (e.g., a short series of true-false

questions).

*> Verbal “Whips”*: in rapid succession, students take turns verbalizing the first

thought that comes to mind in response to the topic to be covered in class.

*>“Flashbacks”*: students are asked how they think the upcoming topic relates

to, or connects with, previous unit(s) of instruction.

*> Background Interest Probes*: students are asked what they would like to

know, or what questions they would like answered, about the upcoming

topic (Cross & Angelo, 1989).

*> Background Knowledge Probes*: students jot down what they already know—

or think they know—about an upcoming topic, and how they got to know it

(i.e., the source of their knowledge).

> “*Shared* Lecture”: students first share what they think they know about the

day’s topic and record their ideas on the board. After students have shared

their ideas, share your ideas by first noting those that your students have

already mentioned—e.g., by underlining (and validating) them on the

board; then add any unmentioned ideas from your lecture notes to create a

jointly-produced composite or “master list,” which represents the *shared*

efforts of both students and their instructor.

This practice may be particularly effective in the FYS because

students often do have some familiarity or prior experience with many of

the topics covered in the course. Students’ familiarity with many of the

course concepts can be capitalized on; students’ prior experiences can be

used to draw them into the learning process by drawing out their prior

knowledge and misconceptions about the topic to be covered (e.g., their

knowledge and misconceptions about learning, remembering, managing time

or managing money).

\* *Within (During)-Lecture* Strategies: During a lecture, the instructor can pause to have

students engage in an active-learning exercise with respect to the information that

has been presented thus far. This strategy serves to punctuate and attenuate the

mounting “attention drift,” which normally occurs among learners after

listening to a lecture for about 10 consecutive minutes (Bligh, 2000). Research

indicates that if there are periodic pauses in lectures during which students are

given a minute or two to discuss and rework their notes, their performance on

recall quizzes and comprehension tests is significantly enhanced—to the

degree that their test performance would be improved by one or two letter

grades, depending on the grading scale used (Ruhl, Hughes, & Schloss, 1987).

Any of the following strategies may be used to punctuate a lecture with active

learning experiences.

> *Pause for Reflection*: students write a short, reflective response to a focused

question intended to promote higher-level thinking about the material

presented. (Note: Any of the higher-level thinking questions contained in

chapter 6, pp. 201- 202, may be used adapted for this purpose.)

> “*Writing-to-Discuss” Exercises*: students engage in a short, thought-provoking

writing exercise, and use their responses as a springboard for class discussion.

This strategy not only punctuates the lecture, it can also enhance the quality

of class discussions because asking students to write before they discuss

serves to slow down and focus their thinking, allowing them time to

formulate and organize their heir ideas prior to expressing them orally.

Writing before discussing in especially effective for promoting the

involvement of verbally reticent or shy students because research indicates

that students who are apprehensive about speaking in class prefer to know

what they are going to say in advance of group discussion (Neer, 1987).

*> Problem-Solving “Lecturettes”*: students listen to a series of short lecture

presentations (e.g., 5-10 minutes) that them to a succession of focused

problems, each of which is followed by student discussion of possible

solutions to the problem presented (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). This strategy

can be repeated throughout the entire class period, alternating between

instructor delivery of “mini-lectures” that present a though-provoking

problem or issue, followed by class discussion on how best to solve or

resolve them. (For example, the case studies found at the end of each chapter

of the text could be used as a series of problems or dilemmas to be discussed

in this fashion.)

3. ***Post-Lecture* Strategies**: following the completion of a lecture, students engage in

activities designed to involve them in *retrospection* *(reflective review)* and

*consolidation* (“locking in”)of information received during the lecture.

The *one*-*minute paper* is, by far, the most popular post-lecture strategy for

promoting student reflection. The one-minute paper may be defined as a short,

writing activity (taking one minute or less to complete) designed to encourage

students to reflect on the meaning or personal significance of the day’s lesson. For

example, any of the following questions may serve as prompts of a one-minute

paper at the end of a lecture.

- What do you think was the major *purpose or objective* of today’s presentation?

- What do you think was the most *important* point discussed in class today?

- Without looking at your highlighting or notes, what *stands out* *in your mind* or

what do you *recall most vividly* about today’s class?

- Looking back at your notes, what would you say was the *most interesting* idea or

*most useful* strategy discussed in today’s class?

- Could you relate *personally* to anything discussed in today’s class?

- Did you see any *connections* between what was discussed in today’s class and

what is being covered in any of your *other course(s)*?

- What was the most *surprising* and/or *unexpected* idea expressed in today’s class

session?

- What do you think was the most *puzzling, confusing, or disturbing* idea that

surfaced in today’s class?

- What *helped* and/or *hindered* your understanding of today’s presentation?

- What *questions remain unanswered* about the content of covered in today’s

class?

- What was the most *enlightening example* or most *powerful image* used in

today’s class?

- What was the most *convincing argument* (or counterargument) that you heard in

today’s class?

- During today’s class, what idea(s) struck you as things you could or should

immediately *put into practice*?

- In what way(s) you see how the material covered in class today relates to your

future?

(See *Appendix D* for additional questions that may be used for one-minute papers,

plus a detailed discussion of the multiple ways in which these short papers may be

used.)

If students are awarded points for completing a one-minute paper, it may serve as an incentive for students to attend class. Furthermore, students are rewarded for actually doing something in class, rather than merely “showing up.” Thus, students are rewarded for their participation, and since attendance is a precondition or prerequisite for this participation, they are also indirectly rewarded for attending class. In contrast, most class-attendance policies do not positively reinforce student attendance; instead, they use negative reinforcement by penalizing students for missing class—i.e., points are taken away (subtracted) from their grade (Cuseo, 2005).

In sum, whenever a lecture is used in class, it may be best to divide it into a *learning sequence* that has an identifiable *beginning, middle, and end*. This sequence may be created by intentionally planning to actively involve students at three key junctures:

(1) at the *start* of class—to *activate* students’ pre-existing ideas about the topic;

(2) *during* class—to *punctuate* instructor-delivered information with activities that

intercept attention loss or “drift” after students are presented with information for a

continuous stretch of time; and

(3) *after* class—to *consolidate* the information presented and promote closure by having

students reflect on it and connect with it (i.e., relate it to their personal life).

***Using Reality-Based* Learning Tasks to Promote Active Student Involvement**

Reality-based learning tasks involve “real-life” or life-like problems that actively engage students in decision-making with respect to their solution or resolution. These learning tasks include realistic (a) *problems* with a variety of possible solutions, (b) *issues or dilemmas* that are not easily resolved, and (c) *decisions* to be made among a number of equally appealing alternatives. What all types of reality-based learning tasks also have in common is that they contain some degree of *ambiguity or uncertainty*, which requires *divergent thinking and diverse perspectives*.

Listed below are four key reality-based learning tasks for increasing active student involvement in the FYS.

***Cases* (*Case Method*)**: stories, actual events, or fictitious events approximating reality

that require decision-making and encourage critical thinking with respect to an

ambiguous situation or problem, for which there is no single correct answer or

solution (Christensen & Hansen, 1987). Cases demonstrate to students that real-life problems and problem-solving is often ambiguous, and one right answer or correct solution is rarely apparent. The case method is an active-learning strategy because it requires students to take action—to make a decision with respect to a real-life dilemma. Cases are typically presented in narrative form, whereby students read them individually and typically join teams to react to, and work through, the dilemma that comprises the case. Or, if class size is small enough, cases may be discussed in a seminar-like fashion.

You will find a case at the end of each chapter of the text, and additional cases are provided in some of the chapter-specific sections of this manual. Additional cases relevant to the FYS can be drawn from a wide variety of sources, including the following:

(a) real-life incidents experienced by yourself or your professional colleagues—for example, a student submitting a paper after its due date, but asking the instructor to accept it because of extenuating circumstances.);

(b) experiences solicited from students in class—for example, roommate conflicts, ethical issues involved in sexual relations, or substance use/abuse;

(c) incidents drawn from popular media—for example, TV, movies, or newspaper articles);

(d) case histories relating to controversial events that have taken place on campus in the past—for example, drawn from current or past issue of the campus newspaper; and

(e) educational videos that poignantly capture the personal experience of first-year students.

Student involvement with cases can be stimulated by posing open-ended questions to them about the case that focus on:

(a) possible cause(s) of the incident,

(b) if and how the incident could have been prevented,

(c) whether students can identify with the characters in the incident, or

(d) whether students have had personal experiences similar to those being depicted in

the case.

As Erickson and Strommer (2005) note: “Good case studies promote empathy with the central characters; students can see themselves in the situation or story” (p. 252) Meyers & Jones (1993) suggest that the following types of questions, based on approaches taken by prominent case-study teachers, can be used to promote higher-level thinking in response to problem-based or issue-centered tasks.

(a) *Discussion Starters* (e.g., “What dilemma does the situation pose?")

(b) *Implication* Questions (e.g., “What does the problem in this situation imply for the

career you are considering?”)

(c) *Predictive/Hypothetical* Questions (e.g., “If the roles of the main characters were

switched, what would have happened?”)

(d) *Analytical/Evaluative* Questions (e.g., “What particular action is at the root of this

problem? Which action played the most pivotal role?”)

(e) *Summary/Synthesis* Questions (e.g., “What are the main points that have emerged

in our discussion of the case?”).

***Role Plays***: promoting active involvement by use of *dramatic enactments* of scenarios involving characters with whom students can identify. Role plays relevant to the first-year experience may involve roommate conflicts, peer pressure at a college party, student behavior or misbehavior in the classroom (active, passive, and “rude”), or student-faculty scenarios outside the classroom (e.g., student-faculty interaction during an office visit). Drama can be used as a stimulus to provoke active student involvement in class by having students serve as actors in the skit, or as reactors to the skit. Students can play the role of themselves, or they can assumer the role of other people to gain an alternative perspective (e.g., student plays the role of professor or parent, or a majority student plays the role of an under-represented student). Student actors could also reverse roles during the skit.

One strategy for getting the entire class involved in the role play is to have all students assume the same role—that of an advisory committee or group of experts who interact with the instructor—who adopts the role of novice (Erickson & Strommer, 1991). For example, the instructor could play the role of a shy first-year student who has just arrived on campus and the class serves as a social advisory committee whose role is to suggest specific strategies for meeting new people and getting involved in campus life. In many ways, the classroom and classroom teaching approximate a dramatic performance. The instructor is writer of the script (lesson plan), a performer (on center stage, which can be shared with students), and director (orchestrating the performance of other actors—students). Also, the classroom environment itself can be modified to simulate a theatrical set by arranging the seating and by adding props that relate to the particular topic under study (e.g., posters, artifacts, background music). Caine and Caine (1991) articulate the power of learning through and from drama:

Effective learning always involves the alternation of several states of arousal. The

comparative importance of states of arousal can be seen in the power of

entertainment and the arts. The power of great theater lies to a large extent in the

way in which it uses this tension. Intelligent orchestration in teaching includes an

understanding of these states of arousal and borrows from the theater such

elements as timing and the ability to create anticipation, drama, and excitement

(Caine & Caine, 1991, pp. 31-32).

Research clearly supports the fact that role plays are more effective than lectures for promoting attitudinal change, particularly with respect to diversity-related issues. As Bligh (2000) notes, “Sermons rarely convince agnostics, but they give solidarity to the faithful. Similarly, lectures are ineffective in changing people’s values, but they may reinforce those that are already accepted” (p. 12).

***Scripts***: similar to role plays, with the only difference being that characters’ read their parts, rather than enact them from memory. Students take on different characters in a script, or they may be asked to improvise and complete an unfinished script as if they were one of characters.

***Simulations***: reality-based learning exercises that immerse students in an environment that simulates or approximates the reality a real-life experience. For instance, *BaFa’-BaFa’* is a popular intercultural simulation, whereby students assume membership in either the Alpha or Beta culture, each which has its own set of cultural values, expectations, customs and language). Members of each “culture” visit, observe, and interact with the other “foreign” culture, thereby simulating the experience of what it is like to function effectively in a culture that differs radically from one’s own. The key intended learning outcomes of the simulation is to reduce ethnocentrism and increase empathy for those who must adapt to, and become assimilated into, an unfamiliar culture.

Strategies for Stimulating Students’ Intrinsic *Motivation & Interest* in the Subject Matter of the Course

Effective teachers strive to make their classes interesting because they realize that student attention is a necessary pre-condition for learning. As Ericksen states in *The Essence of Good Teaching*, “In whatever instructional setting, the first charge of the teacher is to get and to hold the attention of students because interest (motivation) is a prerequisite condition for effective learning” (1984, p. 39). Research also indicates that lack of student interest and boredom with courses are key reasons why students miss classes (Van Blerkom, 1990) and withdraw from college (Astin, 1975).

Studies first-year students in particular indicate show that and that the percentage of high school graduates students entering college reporting that were frequently “bored in class” has reached an all-time high (Sax, et al., 1997), and after college entry, a large majority of them report that they wish their classes were more interesting (Aldridge & DeLucia, 1989). In a national survey of first-year educators who were asked to rank 18 different factors in terms of their “level of impact” on first-year students’ academic performance. These educators ranked “lack of [student] motivation” as the most influential factor (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2003).

Taken together, these findings point strongly to the conclusion that stimulating student interest and motivation is an essential element of effective college teaching. The following practices are offered as instructional strategies for generating student interest in the FYS.

**Maintain instructional *flexibility* and a willingness to “go with the flow” when**

**students appear to be captured by or excited about a course issue.** For instance, if an animated class discussion happens to emerge on an unplanned topic that still relates to the goals of the course, capitalize on this motivational moment rather than short-circuiting it to cover everything that was formally scheduled for that day.

**Whenever possible, allow students the opportunity to make *personal choices* about**

**what they will learn.** The following strategies may be used to implement this recommendation:

\* During the first week of class, ask students to *rank topics* in terms of personal interest or relevance, and attempt to spend more class time on students’ highly-ranked

topics.

\* When course topics are about to be covered during the term, ask students rate or rank their interest in different *subtopics* and attempt to accommodate their preferences.

\* When assigning projects or papers, try to provide students with a *topic “menu”*

from which they may choose a topic that most interests or excites them. Students who opt for the same topic could be grouped together to complete a team project on their topic of common interest.

**At the start of class sessions, intentionally present a *prompt* that grabs student attention and stimulates their anticipatory interest in the day’s topic.** An in-depth study of effective college instructors teaching multiple disciplines at multiple institutions reveal that one of their common characteristic is that they “consciously try to get students’ attention with some provocative act, question, or statement” (Bain, 2004, p. 109). Student retention of course material is contingent on student attention to the course material.

An evocative visual stimulus may be particularly effective for “setting the stage,” sparking studentmotivation, and engaging student attention. Visual prompts may be especially effective if used at the *start*of class or a new unit of instruction to create a sense *of positive anticipation* or a positive “anticipatory set”—a state of heightened curiosity or favorable expectation about an upcoming learning experience. The following prompts may be used for this purpose:

\* a thought-provoking *quote* (e.g., a “classic quote” chosen from the text)

\* a provocative *passage* (e.g., paragraph, short poem)

\* a poignant *picture* or *image* (e.g., successful people)

\* an engaging *video vignette* (e.g., from a popular movie)

\* an intriguing *artifact* (e.g., relevant historical, cultural, or biological object—such as a

model of the human brain when discussing learning strategies)

\* a topic-relevant *cartoon* (e.g., one that visually depicts an element of college life that

relates to the topic being covered).

There is strong research support for the memory-promoting power of a visual image (Paivio, 1990). This may be due to the fact that is older form of memory that predated the evolution of human language verbal memory, and was more critical role to the early survival of the human species—e.g., visually recalling where food and shelter were located (Mildner and Goodale, 1998). Thus, the human brain may be naturally wired for visual memory.

The *student perspectives* and the authors’ *personal stories* cited throughout the text may also serve as effective prompts for stimulating student interest and involvement because they are the voices of “real” people whose words are profound or provocative.

**Build student anticipation with respect to upcoming class sessions by *ending* class with an *unresolved issue, dilemma, or unanswered* question that will be addressed in the next class session**. This strategy may serve to whet student interest in the same way that a TV sequel ends an episode with an uncertain outcome that viewers will see resolved only if they witness the next episode.

**When conducting a class session before a reading assignment is due, *remind***

**students of the assignment, *reinforce* its importance, and *preview its highlights***

**to pique student interest and curiosity.** Studies suggest that students do not understand why college instructors place such great emphasis on independent reading, so they are likely to be curious about learning why instructors have assigned a particular reading, or why it is important or pertinent to the goals of the course (Hobson, 2004). While the traditional practice of having all reading assignments laid out in advance in the course syllabus may be a good way to provide students with an advanced overview of the reading workload for the entire term, research indicates that if these assignments are merely listed in the syllabus and not expressly articulated (or reiterated) near the date when they are to be completed, students are less likely to do the assigned reading (Davis, 1993; Lowman, 1995; Marshall, 1974).

**Make intentional attempts to increase the personal and practical *relevance* of course material.** Perceived irrelevance of the college curriculum is one major source of student attrition (Noel, 1985; Levitz & Noel, 1989). In contrast, positive associations have been found between students’ perceived usefulness of the material they are learning and their level of academic achievement with respect to that material (Jones, cited in Jones & Watson, 1990). It has also been found that the more relevant the academic content is to students, the more likely they are to engage in higher-level thinking with respect to it (Roueche & Comstock, 1981).

The following practices are suggested for enhancing the personal and practical relevance of information presented and discussed in the FYS.

\* Refer to your *course syllabus* *throughout the term*.Bring it to class and show students that what they are doing in individual class sessions relates to your overall course plan and is relevant to the positive learning outcomes that you have identified in the syllabus.

\* When introducing a topic, share with students *why* you thought they would find it

interesting and relevant to their lives.

\* Use examples from your own *life experiences* or *personal research*. In a large-scale study of faculty rated as “outstanding” by both students and colleagues, these faculty received significantly higher ratings on items referring to whether the instructor makes connections with events and realities outside the classroom, such as: “using examples from their own experience or research” (Wilson, et al., 1975).

\* To help guide your selection of course examples and illustrations, use ideas, comments, and questions that *students* *bring up in class* or elect to *write about* in papers and journals. Consider keeping a “teaching journal” and review it to identify trends or patterns in course topics that trigger the most student interest. For example, if instructors find there are certain questions that students frequently ask, these questions can be incorporated into the instructor’s notes and used them in future class presentations, or as focus points for future class discussions.

\* Ask students to *provide their own examples* of course concepts, based on experiences drawn from their lives.

\* Have students *apply* course concepts by placing them in a situation or context that is relevant to their life (e.g., “How would you apply these stress-management strategies to a stressful college situation that you are currently experiencing?”).

\* Seek student *feedback* from students on how relevant or useful they find particular

course topics and experiences (e.g., by asking for a one-minute paper at the end of

class).

**Highlight the contemporary relevance of course concepts by relating them to**

***current events*.** The following practices are offered strategies for implementing this recommendation.

\* Illustrate course concepts and principles by using examples from *popular media* (TV, movies, etc.). Students might be asked at the beginning of the course about what they read regularly, and what programs or movies are their favorites. This can provide the instructor with insight into students’ particular interests and provide additional ideas for illustrating course concepts in ways that are relevant to students’ current experiences.

Also, a quick tour of any major bookstore in your geographical area should reveal

many best-selling books dealing with the same life-adjustment issues that are being

covered in the FYS. These popular books may be referred to in class to build

student interest in course topics.

\* Be alert to newsworthy events occurring *on campus* and in the *local community* (e.g. events reported in the college and local newspaper).Using late-breaking, news-making information in class not only serves to highlight the contemporary relevance of course material, it also models for students the value of keeping up with current events and relating classroom learning to “real life.”

\* Use *recent research developments in your academic or professional field* that may

relate to or illustrate course concepts. Many of the ideas and concepts discussed in the FYS are truly cross-disciplinary in nature, so there may be times when something you are talking about in the seminar connects closely with concepts in the instructor’s academic discipline or area of professional expertise.

**Accompany all exercises and assignments with a clear *rationale* indicating *why***

**students are being required to complete them.** By taking just a little time to justify assignments and articulate their value, students will be less likely to perceive them as mere “busy work.” Relevant to this recommendation is research indicating that writer’s block is more likely to occur on tasks that writers perceive to be trivial or insignificant (Rennie & Brewer, 1987).

**Attempt to induce *surprise or incredulity* among your students by confronting them with paradoxes, incongruities, counterintuitive findings, or controversial ideas.**  Class may be started with a statement that contradicts logic or common belief; for example:: (a) Women have lower average SAT scores than men, but higher college grades. (b) Women are the “stronger sex.” (c) Memorizing information is not the best way to remember it. (d) Humans don’t work better under pressure! As Erickson and Strommer (1991) point out: “More interesting lectures open with a problem, question, quandary, or dilemma. Or they start with something students take for granted and confront them with information or observations indicating things are not so obvious or certain as they initially appear. Or they present a list of incongruous facts or statistics and ask, ‘How can this be’?” (p. 98).

**Expose students to a variety of instructional methods and classroom learning experiences.** Instructional delivery may be varied using:

(a) different instructional *formats* (e.g., lectures, large-group discussions, small-

group discussions, paired peer interactions, self-reflection exercises, cases, role

plays, simulations, panels, guest speakers); and

(b) different instructional *media* (e.g., overhead projections, slide presentations,

CDs, DVDs, youtube).

The changes in routine produced by such variations in learning formats serve to sustain attention and maintain interest by providing novel sources of sensory and psychomotor stimulation. Such variations in stimuli and movements generate novelty and a heightened state of arousal, which can combat the attention loss that normally occurs when we are exposed repeatedly to the same stimulus (McGuinness & Pribram, 1980).

Furthermore, in addition to increasing student attention and motivation, diversifying instructional methods helps the instructor accommodate the diverse learning styles that are likely to exist among students in class. It may be an impossible task to accommodate all students’ learning styles simultaneously, but employing diverse instructional formats and a variety of learning activities gives students with different learning styles periodic opportunities to learn in ways that best matches their learning preferences (Erickson & Strommer, 2005).

**Vary the *social environment* in the classroom by periodically bringing in new faces as *guest speakers*.** Guest speakers may be brought to class individually or as members of a guest panels. This strategy serves to bring social and instructional variety to the class, allows students to meet other members of the college community, and takes some of the teaching load off you—particularly on topics that may not be your strong suit or your area of expertise. Academic-support professionals could also be invited to class to prepare students for assignments that require them to use certain academic skills. For example, a library-science professional may be invited to class to conduct a micro-session on information search-and-retrieval strategies, or a speech professor may be invited to help students prepare for upcoming oral presentations they will be making in class.

To actively involve and prepare students for guest speakers, ask each student in class to construct at least one question in advance of the speaker’s presentation. For instance, students could construct questions on interpersonal relationships to be addressed by the college counselor, health-related questions for the student nurse, or questions about student rights and restrictions for the Dean of Student Affairs. These questions could be submitted to the guest speaker before the visit and used by the speaker to make the presentation more relevant to students’ needs and interests. Speakers might also construct their presentations around the students’ questions, or students may be given class time at the end of the presentation to pose their questions.

To ensure that the speaker’s presentation is interactive, students could ask their questions during the visit, either individually or in groups—for example, a panel of students could collate and prioritize the interview questions and pose them to the guest speaker. Also, to encourage subsequent interaction between students and invited speakers from key campus-support services, have an appointment sign-up sheet available in case the support professional touches on an issue that relates to students’ current need for support.

Consider having guest speakers videotaped by an audio-visual specialist or a student in your class. This may enable students in other sections of the seminar to “see” and hear the guest speaker without burdening that person with the redundant task of making multiple visits to different class sections.

**Use popular *games* to stimulate student interest and motivation for learning**

**factual material.**

Games can be an engaging method for delivering factual information to students in a way that is more engaging and exciting than stand-and-deliver presentations (lectures). Students could learn course-related information via formats similar to those used in TV game shows—such as “Jeopardy”; or board games—such as “Trivial Pursuits” or “Scrupples.” Learning teams could be created to add further excitement through inter-group competition and intra-group collaboration.

The “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” game format is ideal for delivering factual information in a way that involves the entire class. Students may volunteer to be a contestant, or they may compete by being the first to respond accurately a “toss up” question. Incentives to be a contestant can be created by awarding a prize to participating students that vary in value, depending on the number or nature of the questions they answer correctly (gift certificates of varying value for the campus bookstore). The participating student can use the game’s “lifeline” supports to involve other members of the class, such as “poll the audience” (show of hands) or “phone a friend” (ask another student in class). As game-show moderator, the instructor can play an educational role by quickly adding a few informative comments after a contestant provides a correct or incorrect answer, thus enabling some collateral learning to take place as the game proceeds.

Questions for the game show may deal with knowledge of *academic* issues, such as: (a) classroom expectations (e.g., questions about what professors really like and dislike); (b) academic strategies (e.g., questions relating to note-taking and test-taking strategies); (c) academic planning (e.g., questions about majors, minors, and the relationship between majors and careers); or (d) academic awards and honors (e.g., questions about what it takes to get on the Dean’s List).

Game-show questions may also be created that ask for knowledge of (a) *campus life*, including co-curricular opportunities on campus, college clubs and organizations, student support services, and leadership opportunities; (b) the college curriculum, or (c) college history and traditions). Questions might be obtained by polling key offices on campus for information they think every new student should know. Similarly, college faculty and student support professionals may be solicited for information they think new students should know early in their first term of college in order to be successful.

**III.**

**BUILDING STUDENT-*STUDENT* (*PEER*) CONNECTIONS:**

#### Developing a Sense of Community among Classmates

Erickson and Strommer (1991) point out that students come to the first sessions of a class with a “hidden agenda,” which includes determining “what the professor is like, who the other students are, how instructors and students will behave, and what climate will prevail” (p. 87). Creating a warm social climate in the FYS can foster the formation of interpersonal bonds that promote student retention by enhancing students’ social integration. A socially supportive class can also help meet a basic student need at start of their first term—a time when new students are most concerned about “fitting in” and establishing social ties (Simpson, Baker & Mellinger, 1980; Brower, 1997).

*Icebreaker* activities that may be used to “warm up” students to each other and foster an early sense of class *community*. One such activity is the “*Classmate Scavenger Hunt,”* which involves using information gathered from a student-information sheet (completed on the first day of class) to construct a list of statements, each of which relates to a particular student in class. Students are asked to mill around the room and find the person in class who “matches” (is associated with) each statement. A key advantage of this exercise it that it enables *each student to meet and interact with every other student* in class, and it does so in a non-threatening fashion. (See *Exhibit 3* for specific, step-by-step directions on how to use the Classmate Scavenger Hunt.)

The following strategies may be used to promote early connections among classmates in the FYS.

**Schedule students to make an office-hour visit in *small groups*.** Scheduling office visits with students is a way to interact with them on a more personal basis. Scheduling office visits by small groups (e.g., 3-4 students) is more time efficient than scheduling individual appointments, while simultaneously creating an opportunity for students to interact with some of their classmates outside of class time. This strategy may also increase the likelihood that individual students will become comfortable coming to you in the future for personal advice or assistance, because they have broken the ice and made the first visit to the authority figure’s office with the “safety of numbers”—a small group of peers.

**Intentionally *facilitate* the *formation* of student-learning teams.** This recommendation may be implemented by the following practices:

\* Construct a “class directory” consisting of the e-mail addresses of students who are interested in working with other students, or in forming learning groups outside of class. To implement this strategy, circulate a sign-up sheet early in the term, asking for any students who are willing to be contacted by other classmates to work together on course assignments or projects.

\* Ask students for their class schedule and group students enrolled in the same course(s) in the same groups when creating discussion groups in class or when assigning group projects. This practice should increase the comfort level among students in class, which, in turn, should increase the likelihood that these same students will collaborate outside of class to work on the FYS and other courses they have in common.

**EXTENDING THE STUDENT-*STUDENT* CONNECTION:**

**Sustaining Peer Interaction Throughout the Term**

Although first-year seminars may vary with regard to what specific content is covered, “they share the common goal of creating close interactions between students and faculty and between students themselves during the critical freshman year” (Barefoot & Fidler 1992, p. 54). As one instructional development specialist puts it: “In terms of content, there is little a lecturer can say [that] she or he cannot write more concisely. What makes a course more than the sum of the readings on which it is based is the social experience: the sets of relationships between teacher and students and students with one another” (Eisenberg, 1987, p. 18).

Allowing opportunities for student-student interaction in the FYS serves to foster peer networking, bonding, and social integration, which are known to play a potent role in promoting student retention and academic achievement (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Opportunities for regular peer interaction *in class* may be especially critical to the retention of commuter and re-entry students who often have little time or opportunity for social interaction and integration outside the classroom. In fact, the term “PCPs” (*P*arking lot-*C*lassroom-*P*arking lot) has been coined to characterize commuter students’ lack of campus involvement outside the classroom (Gardner, 1993). Consequently, instructors may need to intentionally offset this lack of campus involvement among commuters with instructional practices that promote peer interaction and social integration *inside the classroom*. Such “intra-curricular” experiences may serve as an antidote to commuter and part-time students’ lack of involvement in “extra-curricular” involvement outside the classroom. Intra-curricular experiences may now also be necessary for today’s first-year residential students who have become accustomed to using the Internet and cellular technology to communicate and stay in close contact with friends from high school. The availability to this communication technology enables them to maintain or create connections with others outside of campus and can militate against socially integration into the college community (Junco, 2005).

Keep in mind that student-student interaction is a process that can take place at the same time course contentis covered that is not necessarily social in nature. For example, note-taking strategies, textbook-reading strategies, and time management are academically related topics that can be covered through small-group work in class and through interactive or collaborative assignments completed outside of class. Thus, instructors should not feel that there is an inevitable trade-off between covering academic content and promoting peer interaction. As Seidman (2005) notes: “Social activities that contain academic and intellectual components can simultaneously promote academic and social integration” (p. 229).

**Engaging Students in *Small-Group* Work**

Students can become actively involved in the learning process by working either individually or collaboratively with peers. Group work may be viewed as a natural, “brain compatible” form of learning; the human brain is because social interaction and collaboration have played a key evolutionary role in the survival of the human species (Jensen, 1998). In fact, brain-imaging studies reveal that more activity occurs in thinking parts of the brain when people learn through social interaction than when they learn alone (Carter, 1998). Thus, the human brain may be biologically wired for interpersonal interaction and collaboration.

Peer interaction can occur in large groups (e.g., class discussions) or in groups (e.g., 2-4 students). Strategies for promoting class discussions have been previously covered in the section on active involvement. This section will focus on small-group work.

The importance of augmenting whole-class discussions with small-group discussion is strongly supported by research indicating that typically less than 10% of students in class account for more than 75% of all class discussions. Students themselves are acutely aware of this phenomenon because when they are surveyed, 94% of them agreed with the statement: “In most of my classes, there are a small number of students who do most of the talking” (Karp and Yoels (1976). These findings are consistent with those obtained from a survey of more than 1,000 students in over 50 classes from a wide range of disciplines, which revealed that students perceive themselves as less involved in the classroom than faculty perceive them to be Fassinger (1996).

Small-group work may provide an antidote to these disturbing findings by enabling all students—not just the most assertive or most verbal—to become more involved with the course material and with each other. Small discussion groups also provide opportunities for the development of students’ oral communication skills, which are rarely developed in introductory, general education courses taken by first-year students (Gardner, 1993).

***When* to Use Small Group Work**

Small group work may be most effectively implemented in the FYS by introducing it at the following key times during a class period.

**At the *start* of class: to activate students’ interest and prior knowledge.** For example, a class session can begin by using a group activity known as “*active knowledge sharing.”* This involves providing students with a *list of questions* relating to the subject matter to be covered (e.g., words to define, people to identify, or a pretest). Students then pair-up to answer the questions as best as they can, after which they dialogue with other pairs who may have answers to questions they were unable to answer.

Small-group group may also be introduced *before* beginning a class discussion. For example, students may formulate questions in small groups that they would like to see addressed in the upcoming class discussion

**At points *during* class to intercept attention drift and interject active involvement.** For example, small-group work may be introduced at some point during a class session, such as stopping at a critical point during a lecture to ask small groups to compare notes or generate specific examples of concepts that have been covered in class.

Group work may also take place *after* a class discussion—for example, group members identify positions or issue that they think were overlooked in the discussion, or to discuss whether their viewpoints were changed or strengthened as a result of the class discussion.

**At the *end* of class, to create closure and consolidate retention of key information covered in the day’s lesson.** For example, a class can be ended by having students work in pairs to “share and compare” their class notes to check for accuracy and completeness.

Strategies for Improving the Quality of Small-Group Work

The quality of small-group work may be strengthened by use of the following strategies.

**Allow students some time to gather their thoughts individually, *prior to* discussing them in small groups.** For example, *think-pair-share* groups may be formed, whereby each student pairs up with a partner to share their initial ideas on the topic for 2-3 minutes before discussion in 4-member groups.

Providing students with personal reflection time prior to interpersonal interaction can enrich the quality and depth of the ideas exchanged. It may also increase the likelihood that shy or verbally apprehensive students contribute their ideas because research suggests that such students are more likely to participate in class discussion if they have thought about the topic in advance (Neer, 1987).

**Have groups keep a *visible record* of the ideas they generate.** If possible, provide each group with a flip chart or transparency on which their ideas can be recorded and displayed. This serves to help keep group members “on task” by holding them accountable for creating a concrete, final product.

**Notify students that *any member* of the group may be called on to *report* their group’s ideas.** This serves as an incentive for all members to listen actively to the ideas shared by their teammates.

**Have small groups to come to the *front of class* to report their work (e.g., as a**

**student panel).** This practice holds students more accountable for the quality of their group work because they may be asked to present it to the entire class. It may also reduce students’ fear of public speaking by allowing them to speak within the context of a small, supportive group. This may serve as a baby step or “scaffold” to help desensitize their fear of speaking on their own.

**At an early point in the course, take a moment to emphasize the value of *peer***

***learning*, and remind students of the many ways they can form *learning***

***teams*.** Many students are not aware of the power of peer learning and may think that it consists only of forming late-night study groups before major exams. Point out to your class how they may collaborate with their peers more consistently by working on academic tasks other than test-review sessions. Information may be selected from chapter 1 of the text (pp. 19-24) to make a strong case for the power of peer learning and to provide students with a variety of academic tasks they can complete collaboratively, rather than individually.

***Facilitate* the *formation* of student learning teams that work together *outside***

***the classroom*.** This recommendation may be implemented by assigning *group projects/reports* that require students to work together *outside of class*. The group’s final project may be a written report, oral report (e.g., panel presentation), or some combination thereof. Allow students some time in-class time to work together on their report. This can serve as a “warm up” for out-of-class collaboration; at the same time, it provides the instructor with an opportunity to observe how well they work together and to provide them with constructive feedback.

**Occasionally structure small-group work so that it moves beyond discussion to**

***collaboration*.** The key feature that differentiates a discussion group from a collaborative group is that the latter does not simply generate ideas; instead, they attempt to reach *consensus* or a *unified group decision* with respect to the ideas that they generate. The key to converting a discussion group into a collaborative group is to choose an action verb for the group task that signals to students that they are to make a *group decision* with respect the ideas they generated, rather than just list them. For example, rather than simply listing or aggregating their ideas, a collaborative group will take it further by attempting to reach agreement on how best to *categorize or prioritize* their ideas.

**Implement the key features of *cooperative learning* to transform group work into *teamwork*.** *Cooperative learning* (*CL*) may be defined as a structured form of collaborative learning that consists of specific, well-defined procedures for converting group work into teamwork. Succinctly described, CL is a collaborative learning process in which small, *intentionally selected* groups of students work *interdependently* on a focused, well-defined learning task and are held *individually accountable* for their own performance. During the learning process, the instructor typically serves as an in obtrusive *facilitator*, *coach*, or *consultant* to the learning groups (Cuseo, 1992).

More specifically, CL attempts to strengthen the effectiveness of small-group work by means of the following seven procedural features, which when implemented together, distinguish it from other forms of group work:

###### 1) Positive Interdependence *among Group Members* (Collective Responsibility)

2) *Individual Accountability* (Personal Responsibility)

3) *Intentional* Group Formation

4) Intentional *Team Building*

5) Explicit Attention Paid to the Development of Students’ *Social Intelligence* &

*Interpersonal Skills*

6) Instructor Assumes the Role as *Facilitator and Consultant during the Group*

*Learning Process*

7) Attention to *Inter-Group* Interaction and the Integration of Work Generated by

Separate Groups

8) Reflecting on (Processing) the Quality of Group Interaction following Completion of

Group Work

(Detailed description of the seven key features of cooperative learning, accompanied by strategies for implementing each of them, is provided in *Appendix E*. For a taxonomy of multiple cooperative-learning structures or formats, see *Appendix F*.)

When small-group work is conducted with the majority of these seven procedural elements in place, there is substantial empirical evidence that CL has significant cognitive, social, and affective benefits for students (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990) at the pre-college level. There is less research on CL in higher education than at the pre-college level, but college-level results are consistent with those found in pre-college settings (Cooper & Mueck, 1990; Cuseo, 1996; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1992; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999). For example, a meta-analysis of the effects of CL on college students’ academic performance in science, math, engineering and technology conducted by the National Institute for Science Education revealed that CL had a “robust” positive effect on multiple educational outcomes, such as: (a) academic achievement, (b) student retention, and (c) attitude (liking) of the subject matter (Cooper, 1997). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that application of the key features of CL to small-group work in the FYS should promote multiple, positive outcomes.

One particular outcome that CL has great potential to realize is appreciation of diversity. Higher education efforts with respect to diversity have focused heavily on *access*, i.e., effective *recruitment* of underrepresented students to college. A tacit assumption of this recruitment strategy is that the mere presence of underrepresented students on campus will result in positive interaction between minority- and majority-group members and promote positive inter-group relationships. However, research strongly suggests that simply increasing minority students’ access to college and increasing their exposure to majority students is not a sufficient condition for promoting interracial interaction and intercultural education. Something more than mere exposure to minority-group members must occur in order to stimulate intercultural contact and multicultural appreciation. As Hill (1991) puts it, “Meaningful multi-culturalism transforms the curriculum. While the presence of persons of other cultures and subcultures is a virtual prerequisite to that transformation, their ‘mere presence’ is primarily a political achievement, not an intellectual or educational achievement. Real educational progress will be made when multi-culturalism becomes *interculturalism*” (p. 41) (italics added). This type of “*inter*-culturalism” may be realized in the FYS through learning experiences inside and outside the classroom that promote meaningful collaboration via interdependent roles and culminate in the creation of a unified work product (i.e., cooperative learning). There is evidence that students of color, in particular, benefit from cooperative learning methods (Posner & Markstein, 1994).

**To facilitate student-student connections in the first-year seminar, intentionally**

**choose a *classroom space* and a class *timeframe* that are logistically conducive**

**to peer interaction and sustained group work.** Two key logistical factor to consider when conducting group work are classroom space and class time. The physical layout of the *classroom* itself is a contextual factor that may either stimulate or sabotage peer interaction. A classroom setting that approximates a large lecture hall, with riveted seats arranged in rigid rows, will make group work difficult or impossible to implement, no matter how well the instructor defines and designs the learning task. “Such rooms have been designed for the pronouncements of experts, not for the conversations of learners. They discourage students from looking at one another, let alone learning from one another. In fact, they pressure professors to deliver lectures, because they clearly signal who is to do all the talking” (McCauley, 1984, p. 58).

Another contextual factor to consider when planning group work in the FYS is the *length of time* per class session. If the instructor has any choice with respect to this scheduling issue, it may be advantageous to select a class period that is longer than the typical 50-minute session. A longer class period may allow you more time and greater flexibility for accommodating the logistical demands of small-group work, such as preparing students for group tasks, rearranging seats and students to form groups, and reconvening the whole class following completion of small-group tasks. Naturally, selecting longer class periods carries with it the disadvantages of less frequent class meetings per week and longer time gaps between successive class sessions. However, if you are planning to devote a significant amount of class time to small-group learning, then the benefits of a longer session may outweigh its costs.

#### MAKING THE STUDENT-*CAMPUS* CONNECTION:

**Designing *Out-of-Class* Assignments for the FYS**

An old rule of thumb for college students is that they should spend 2-3 hours working on the course outside of class for every one hour they spend in class. If this rule is followed, in the FYS, it means instructors actually have at least twice as much time to promote student learning outside of class than in class. It is noteworthy that research comparing new students’ expectations about how much time they will spend engaged in the college experience falls short of the actual time they spend engaged during their first year (Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005). This suggests that more can be expected of new students than is currently being asked of them. Some of this extra engagement time might be spent on out-of class assignments related to the FYS. The remainder of this section is devoted to identifying and planning out-of-class assignments that may particularly powerful for promoting the success of first-term students.

**Assignments to Promote *Immediate Application of Academic-Success Strategies***

Course assignments in the FYS may be intentionally designed in a manner that encourages students to immediately apply the strategies they have discussed in the seminar to their current college experiences. For example, students may be given an assignment that requires them to implement a *time-management plan* for the first term, such as constructing a schedule for the term that includes due dates for tests and assignments in all courses, as well as designated times for study, recreation, and employment.

Students may also be asked to immediately apply effective learning strategies to other courses they are taking in their first term. For instance, they could be assigned to keep a “learning log” of academic-success strategies discussed in the seminar that they are using in their other first-term courses; or, students could construct a strategic learning plan for their most difficult first-term course.

Think about what the most important things that students need to do during their first college term in order to be successful and implement the principle of *intrusive* support by *requiring* them to do it as a course assignment.

**Assignments that Promote *Self-Assessment* and *Self-Awareness***

Student assignments that could be used for this purpose include the following: (a) completing self-awareness instruments designed to increase self-knowledge and self-insight with respect to personal values, traits, or wellness; (b) completing checklists and inventories designed to promote self-diagnosis and self-evaluation of academic skills, career interests, learning styles or study habits; and (c) keeping time diaries or activity logs in which students estimate the number of hours per week spent on different activities.

Assignments designed to promote self-assessment and self-awareness are highly consistent with the student-centered focus of the first-year seminar and provide students with information about themselves that they can use proactively to guide decisions they will make with respect to their education, profession, and other life choices they will make in college and beyond. These types of assignments also encourage students to *engage* students in two important lifelong learning habits: *personal reflection* and *self*-*examination*.

**Provide students with a *comparative reference point* to help them interpret the results of their individual self-assessments.** Self-assessment becomes more meaningful when students are able to view their individual results in relation to national norms (if available), class averages, or the averages of student subgroups in class (e.g., males and females; adults and traditional-age students). Having students compare their self-assessments, such as the results of learning-style or career-interest inventories, may also be an effective way to expose students to diverse perspectives and gain comparative reference points that can further sharpen their self-awareness and self-insight.

To make the comparative-assessment process more involving and interactive, you can employ *score lines*, whereby students line up in the order of their scores on a self-assessment instrument or inventory. Instructors should also complete the same self-assessment inventories that students complete. It has been the author’s experience that completing these exercises with students tends to increase their interest and motivation in the exercise. Perhaps by seeing their instructor doing what they are being asked to do serves to validate their participation and conveys the message that the task is important enough for their illustrious instructor to complete as well. (Furthermore, students are often extremely curious to see how your results compare with theirs.)

**As a *final, cumulative self-assessment assignment*, students may be asked to write a personal essay or autobiography that contains a synthesis of, and personal reaction to, the results of all individual self-assessments completed throughout the term.**

To lend some definition and structure to this assignment, you could include questions that ask student to reflect on the results of previous self-assessments in terms of: (a) what they reveal about their personal *strengths and weakness*, (b) *consistencies* and *discrepancies* between their stated or espoused values and their enacted values, (c) their intentions and goals, (d) assets and resources they have for realizing their goals, and (e) potential *blocks* and *barriers* that must be avoided or overcome to achieve their goals.

***Experiential* Learning Assignments**

Rather than learning vicariously through classroom-based instruction or assigned reading, experiential assignments enable students to learn through direct, *first-hand* and personal experience and self-discovery. Experiential learning is valuable for all students, but particularly for the 20% of students who have a kinesthetic (“hands on”) learning style (King, 1995). Listed below are assignments that can be used to promote experiential learning in the FYS.

**Assign students to conduct an *interview* with any of the following members of the campus or local community:**

\* a *faculty member* in their intended major or in a field they are considering as a

possible major;

\* *upper-division students* in the their intendedmajor or field of possible interest;

\* a *professional* in a career that they may be interested in pursuing;

\* g*raduate students* in the same or similar academic specialization they may pursue;

\* *students from diverse backgrounds* (e.g., international students or students from

under-represented ethnic and racial groups).

**Assign students to engage in *campus research*.** Two ways in which this recommendation may be implemented is by having students:

a) become “participant observers” who conduct observational “field studies” of

student behavior on campus (e.g., in student residences, classrooms, or the library).

b) conduct “historical research” on the college by interviewing administrators, or by

searching campus archives for information the college’s origin and traditions.

At Ohio University, first-year students participate in “historical research projects” whereby they interview alumni and search campus archives for biographical information on persons for whom campus buildings have been named (Freshman Seminar Resource Seminar, 1993). Likewise, Wheelock College (Boston) involves FYS students in qualitative research on its campus organizations (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

If students conduct these campus-research assignments with the added stipulation that their completed will be submitted to those in charge of the campus organizations or functions being researched, then students can write for a “real world” client or audience. One college instructor, identified as an outstanding professor by both students and administrators at his college, does this by having his students meet with top-level administrators to ask them about current evaluation or information needs on campus. Students then conduct a small-scale evaluation project that they submit as a research report to the course instructor and the administrator (client) for whom it was intended. An instructor who has adopted this assignment reports that “you get better results from students if they feel there is a real audience for their ideas” (Davis, Wood, & Wilson, 1983, p. 215).

**Assignments for Connecting Students with *Student-Support Services***

The first-year seminar has the capacity to serve as a linchpin for linking new students with key campus-support agents, thereby promoting students’ social integration into the college community. Traditionally, this is done by inviting professional and paraprofessional support agents to class as guest speakers. An alternative strategy for promoting these important connections is to bring students to the support agents via course assignments. Requiring this contact as a course assignment provides students with a strong incentive to connect with key student-support agents on campus who can play a pivotal and proactive role in promoting their success.

One characteristic of effective student-support programs is intrusive delivery—i.e., the college initiates supportive action by *reaching out* to students and bringing support *to* them, rather than passively waiting and hoping that students take advantages of these services on their own. Research shows that college students *under-utilize* academic support services (Friedlander, 1980; Walter & Smith, 1990). The vast majority of students entering college report that they will at least “occasionally” use campus academic-support services, but by the end of at their first year, less than half of them have actually done so (Kuh, 2005). At community colleges, 62% of students identify academic advising as being a “very important” service, yet 35% of them report that they “rarely” or “never” use this service (Community College of Student Engagement, 2008). These findings are also particularly disturbing when viewed in light of meta-analysis research, which reveals that academic-support programs designed for underprepared students exert a statistically significant effect on their retention and grades when they are utilized, particularly if these programs are experienced by students during their first year (Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb, 1983). Subsequent research findings support the findings of this meta-analysis (Pascarella & Terenzinin, 1991; 2005)

Ender, Winston, & Miller (1984) capture the gist of the principle of intrusive program delivery: “It is totally unrealistic to expect students to take full advantage of the intellectual and personal development opportunities [on campus] without some assistance from the institution” (p. 12). Their words are even more relevant today because of the growing number of under-prepared, under-represented, and first-generation students attending college. Research indicates that the retention and academic success of underrepresented and first-generation students, in particular, is seriously undercut by institutional over-reliance on student-initiated involvement in campus-support programs (Rendón & Garza, 1996).

Schuh (2005) argues that the challenge to getting first-year students to make more effective use of support services is to have them view these services as a normal component of their college education and integral to their success, rather than as a something supplemental to their college experience and an admission of weakness. “Colleges can address this challenge by making engagement strategies and support services inescapable, either by integrating them into the classroom experience, making them mandatory, or otherwise bringing them to students” (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). One way to accomplish this is by integrating student use of campus support services into the FYS as a credit-earning course assignment. Thought should be given to what particular campus support services or student support professionals would be most important for new students to connect with, and assignments should be intentionally designed to ensure that that these connections are made. Assignments may connect all students in class to the same services, or assignments might be individualized so that particular students are connected with particular services that best meet their personal needs.

A menu of support services that students could be connected to via course assignments in the FYS would include the following:

\* Academic *Advisement*— to develop a tentative, long-range educational plan;

\* *Learning Assistance* (learning resource) professionals—to assess learning styles;

\* *Career* Counseling—to explore career interests;

*\* Personal* Counseling—to gain self-insight or develop personal adjustment strategies;

\* *Financial Aid* Counseling—for long-range financial planning and money management;

\* *Technology Services—*for orientation to campus-technology tools and programs;

*\* Student Activities—*to explore campus-involvement and student-leadership options;

\* *Health Services—*to develop a personal wellness plan;

\* Campus *Ministry—*to explore spiritual issues and social justice opportunities;

*\* Service-Learning* & *Volunteer Experiences*—to identify opportunities in the local

community for civic engagement and experiential learning.

**Assignments Designed to Stimulate Student *Involvement in the Co-Curriculum***.

Higher education research indicates that the connection between co-curricular experiences and classroom learning is very weak (Heller, 1988). This is a particularly disturbing finding when viewed in light of the wealth of research indicating that student involvement in campus life has a powerful impact on student retention, interpersonal skills, and leadership development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). e Reporting on the first national survey of first-year seminars, Barefoot and Fidler (1992) note the role that first-year seminars play in reducing the schism between in-class and out-of-class learning: “Many freshman seminars exist to bridge the gap between the curriculum and co-curriculum and to facilitate student involvement in all aspects of campus life” (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992, p. 8). One way that first-year seminars can bridge this gap is by engaging students in co-curricular experiences via course assignments. For example, students may be given the assignment of participating in a designated number of co-curricular events during their first term on campus (e.g., two per month) and be provided with a monthly calendar of co-curricular activities for planning and choosing what particular events they would like to attend. (See *Exhibit 4* for a sample.) To ensure that co-curricular experiences are deeply processed, students can complete written assignments (e.g., reaction or reflection papers in response to the events they attend).

Such writing assignments also serve to enhance the academic credibility of co-curricular experiences. When students are asked to write about their co-curricular experiences, they are more likely to reflect upon and internalize them, serving to transform them from “extra-curricular” activities into bona fide co-curricular learning experiences. (See *Exhibit 6* for a sample of a co-curricular reflection paper.)

**Assignments Designed to Encourage Students’ Off-Campus Involvement and Service in the *Local Community***

Provide students with a menu of possible volunteer opportunities, and encourage their participation via extra credit, or require participation as a course assignment. Students should be especially encouraged to engage in service experiences that relate to careers they are considering. This would enable new students can gain career-relevant experience or engage in an “exploratory internship” while simultaneously contributing to the local community.

If students reflect deeply about their service via reflection papers and focused discussions, their volunteer experience can be transformed into a bona fide service-learning experience. (See *Exhibit 5* for a sample reflection paper that students could be asked to may write in response to a service-learning experience.) Research strongly supports the positive impact of service learning on multiple outcomes, including leadership skills, diversity appreciation, achievement motivation and deep learning (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002).

***Future-Planning* Assignments**

Students can be given assignments in the FYS that engage them in the process of designing *tentative log-range plans*, which connect their current college experience with their future educational and life goals. National surveys of first-year seminars indicate “that academic planning and goal setting” is one of the seminar’s major course objectives (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). One way to realize this objective is to craft assignments that actively involve first-year students in planning their future, such as those listed below.

*Educational* Planning Assignments

Students may be assigned to create a tentative *undergraduate* plan that includes courses in general education and the student’s major, or exploration of a potential major. Two-year students could be assigned to create a tentative *transfer* plan. Norwich University (Vermont) uses its FYS to engage students in long-range educational planning and promote student dialogue with their academic advisors about their educational plans. The first-year seminar syllabus at Norwich calls for students to meet with their advisor on three occasions during the first term, in addition to their meeting for course scheduling. The second meeting occurs at about the midpoint in the term, at which time students bring a self-assessment report that they have completed as a first-year seminar assignment. Advisors use this report to focus discussion with students about their present academic progress and future educational plans (Catone, 1996).

*Career*-Planning Assignments

Students may be asked to develop a tentative *career* plan that encourages them students to identify potential careers and to construct a model (or skeletal) resume that would prepare them for entry into these careers. Students could also be asked to initiate the development of a professional *portfolio*—a collection of materials that would best illustrate their skills or achievements, and demonstrate their educational or personal development (e.g., best written work, art work, research projects, letters of recommendation, co-curricular accomplishments, personal awards, or certificates of achievement). This may be particularly a particularly relevant assignment for today’s first-year students because they frequently cite career success as their major reason for attending college (Sax, 1998). If contemporary students begin to see the relationship between their current college experience and their future career plans, they are more likely to persist to degree completion. may see no reason to stay in college. One strategy for enabling first-year students to see this relationship is to connect them with college alumni in the field they intend to pursue or explore. At DePaul University (Chicago), all first-year students are assigned an alum with whom they conduct informational interviews that include questions such as the relevance of the alum’s academic major to their eventual career, career development, and advancement (Schroeder, 2005).

Research also suggests that the college persistence of under-represented students, in particular, is strengthened by institutional efforts to connect their current academic experience with future career goals. Richardson (1989) conducted on-site investigations of predominantly white institutions with impressive minority graduation rates. He found that one common element present in all these institutions was early provision of “career guidance to translate nonspecific educational goals into programs of study where coursework and desired outcomes are clearly linked” (p. A48).

*Life*-Planning Assignments

Students can devise long-range plans that move beyond educational and vocational goals to include goals involving *personal development*, which embrace social, emotional, ethical, physical, and/or spiritual dimensions of the self. For example, students can use self-assessment exercises they complete in the seminar to develop a long-range “personal growth plan” or a future “life-success portfolio.” Or, they can explore potential future careers by reading the newspaper, as is done at Kutztown University (PA) (Hartman, 2007). Although these assignments may appear to be a bit premature for first-term students to undertake, they still serve the important purpose of getting students to think ahead and to look for connections between their present academic experiences with their future life plans. This serves to increase their goal awareness and promotes goal-orientated behavior, which is important for promoting student persistence to program and degree completion (Noel & Levitz, 1989).

***Writing-To-Learn* Assignments**

The first-year seminar is an ideal course for students to engage in *short* writing assignments designed to *actively* involve them in the learning process and to promote *reflective* thinking. The importance of writing for promoting learning is emphasized by many discipline-based faculty (Smit, 1991), and its importance as a tool for nurturing higher-level thinking has been underscored by writing scholars (Connolly, 1989). Having students write in the FYS is strongly recommended as a vehicle for elevating their level of thinking with respect to course material, as well as for promoting the academic credibility of the FYS in the eyes of discipline-based faculty.

However, requiring student writing is not synonymous with requiring a term paper. Writing can also take the form of a variety of “writing-to-learn” assignments. In contrast to traditional writing assignments, such as essays or term papers, writing-to-learn assignments are different in three major ways: (a) they are shorter, requiring less amount of student time to complete. (b) they are written primarily for the benefit of the writer—as an aid to thinking and learning; and (c) they do not require extensive instructor commentary, correction, or grading (Tchudi, 1986). These characteristics of writing-to-learn exercises allow them to be used not only as out-of-class assignments, but also as in-class activities. For example, a small portion of class time can be allotted for students to write a one-minute paper in response to a class presentation or group discussion.

Writing-to-learn assignments are particularly well-suited for beginning college students because, unlike formal term papers or research reports, they require less writing experience and facility with the use of scholarly information resources. Relevant writing-to-learn assignments for the first-seminar are described below.

***Freewriting*:** students quickly record their thoughts, feelings, or free associations

on a topic or subject which are generated with little regard for mechanics. For example, students quickly record their initial thoughts or feelings about an upcoming course topic.

***Microthemes***: students write brief, focused writing assignments (short enough to fit on a 5X8 card), which require them to take a *personal position* on a debatable issue or controversial topic. For example, students may be assigned “thesis-support”

microthemes that require them choose between one of two opposing positions or theses and write a short (micro) theme defending that position.

***Learning Logs*:** extended reflective-writing assignments that have students record their *personal learning experiences* *over an* *extended period of time*. For instance, students write ongoing entries in learning logs about (a) what they believe they’re learning, (b) how they’re learning (the process), and (c) how they feel about the learning experience.

***Journals***: written reflections on, or reactions to, personal experiences *over an extended period of time*, which provide students with a *chronological record of thoughts and feelings* that can be later reviewed to detect patterns of personal continuity or change over time. Journals may be assigned as: (a) *“free” journals*, in which students have complete freedom to write about any personal issue they would like, or (b) *“prompted” journals*, which ask students to write in response to a specific, instructor-posed prompt (e.g., “My first impression of this topic is . . .). Students may also be given a prompt that asks them to review their previous journal entries to detect patterns of personal consistency or variation that may have occurred across time.

(For samples of journal prompt tied to the “rhythms” or stages of the academic term, see *Exhibit 7*.)

At the Coast Guard Academy, a primary goal of the first-year seminar is to teach students how to effectively monitor their study skills, and the major vehicle used to achieve this goals is a course assignment that requires students to keep journals in which they respond to instructor-questions, make written comments on their course progress, and construct a plan for academic success (“Academy Teaches Students to Monitor Their Own Study Habits,” 1995).

Journals can also be used as an incentive to stimulate student use of effective learning strategies. For example, weekly journals may be kept by students in which they describe how they have applied learning strategies discussed in the seminar. One learning skills specialist who uses journals in this fashion reports that “when the students know they have to write about how they used the strategies, they are more motivated to use them” (Van Blerkom, 1995, p. 3).

If instructors respond regularly or even periodically respond to student journals, they can carry on a written dialogue or conversation with students on an individual basis, which can help build instructor rapport with the class. This student-instructor dialogue may take place on paper or online—in the form of an *electronic journal*.

***Transactional* Writing Assignments**:

In addition to writing-to-learn exercises whose audience is the writer, FYS students may engage in “transactional writing,” which is aimed at an audience beyond the writer (Britton, et al., 1975; Tchudi, 1986). Listed below is a sample of transactional writing assignments that are relevant for the first-year seminar.

*\* Summaries* (e.g., students summarize a lecture for a student who missed it and wants to

know what was covered).

*\* Questions* (e.g., students write questions that are submitted to guest speakers).

*\* Explanations* (e.g., students explain the thought process used while solving a problem,

or explaining why a statement is true or false).

\* *Persuasive Letters* (e.g., students write letters to a newspaper editor, elected official,

college administrator, or high school seniors—offering persuasive advice about what

to do, and what not to do in order to have a successful first-year experience.

\* *Critical Reviews* (e.g., students reviews of books, films, TV programs, or theatrical

productions)

*\* Editorials* or *Feature Articles* (e.g., students write editorials or articles written for the

college newspaper)

\* *Scripts* (e.g., students write dialogue that could be used in role plays enacted in class, or

in dramatic vignettes videotaped outside of class that are presented in class as part of

a group project).

\* *Directions* or *“How to” Guides* (e.g., students write college-survival manuals, or how-

to-guides to improve academic performance during the first term of college).

***EVALUATING* & GRADING STUDENT PERFORMANCE**

Course examinations and course grades are ways to ensure the seminar’s academic *legitimacy and credibility* by requiring performance evaluation comparable to that of any other college course. Course grades also serve as motivational *incentives* for students to take the course seriously, which, in turn, is likely to increase their *level of effort and depth of involvement* in the course. Furthermore, testing and grading serve to increase *instructors’ expectations* of the amount of time and effort that students should devote to the seminar, thereby increasing the course’s potential power for producing positive effects on student learning and student success.

The following practices are offered as strategies for improving the reliability, validity, and equity of student-evaluation and grading practices in the first-year seminar.

**Use Multiple Methods of Student Evaluation**

Evaluating student performance with multiple methods results in more balanced assessment that has greater *validity—*because the weaknesses of one evaluation format are offset by the strengths of others, and greater *equity*—because a multiplicity of evaluation formats represents a more inclusive approach to performance assessment, which does not subject all students to a single style of evaluation that may not reflect diversity of learning styles and academic skill sets possessed by different students in class. For example, students whose writing skills are not yet well developed may be unduly penalized by a course in which all exams are comprised entirely of essay questions. Assessment scholars argue that a particular student-evaluation method (e.g., written essays) will appeal to and favor one particular style over others; thus, instructors should attempt to use different evaluations methods so that students will have at least one opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a way that may be most compatible with their particular style (Sedlacek, 1993; Suskie, 2000). Research indicates that students vary appreciably in terms of what evaluation procedures they feel most comfortable with (Lowman, 1984; McKeachie, 1986), so by using multiple evaluation methods, instructors are more likely to effectively accommodate the diversity of student learning styles found in the college classroom.

The following practices are recommended for providing *multiple and varied* evaluations of student performance in the first-year seminar.

**Use evaluation methods that assess students’ performance *in class* (e.g., quizzes or exams) and *out of class* (e.g., take-home tests, assignments, or projects).** Timed classroom-based tests may not be one student’s meat, but another student’s poison.

**Include assignments that require students to work both *independently* (individually) and *interdependently* (in groups or teams).** Independence and interdependence are important vectors of personal development (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993); therefore, student performance in both of these contexts should be part of the grading scheme for the FYS.

**Include assignments that require students to *express or communicate* their**

**knowledge in *different modes or modalities* (e.g., written reports, oral reports,**

**multi-media presentations).** One English professor, identified as “outstanding” by both students and faculty colleagues, requires every student in class to write two essays on assigned topics. However, the third assignment allows five or six options from which students choose the one that most interests them, or the one on which they feel they will perform the best. Examples of the options he offers include a creative writing piece, a dramatic act to be performed in front of class (alone or as part of a team project), an original video shown in class (developed individually or in teams), or a third written essay. Students are also allowed to create and submit additional options for instructor approval (Wilson, 1987).

**Draw test questions from a *variety of informational sources* (class lectures, discussions, assigned readings, etc.).** Studies of college exams indicate that instructors rely excessively or exclusively on test questions drawn from the lecture notes (Brown, 1988; Kierwa, 2000). This practice may reward dutiful note-takers, but fail to reward reliable readers and active class participants. Inclusive evaluation recognizes knowledge acquired from multiple settings and contexts.

**Construct exams that include “subjective” and “*objective*” test questions (e.g., essay and multiple-choice questions).** Using both types of questions results in a more balanced assessment of different cognitive skills. For instance, essays require students to *recall* information by producing or supplying answers on their own, while multiple-choice items require students to *recognize* information by making important distinctions selecting discriminately from already-supplied answers.

Multiple-choice questions place more emphasis on critical reading and analysis, whereas essay questions more effectively promote the development of writing skills and synthesis. The position taken here is that essay questions are not necessarily superior to, or more “authentic” than multiple-choice questions. Both in college and life beyond college, students are required to make careful choices from among already-available alternatives, and the process involved in making these informed and discriminating choices that involve analytical thinking, critical thinking, and other forms of higher-level reasoning. As one educational measurement scholar put it: “Producing an answer is not necessarily a more complex or difficult task, or one more indicative of achievement than choosing the best of the available alternatives” (Ebel, 1972, pp. 124-125).

Anyone who has reviewed or taken standardized tests for admission to college, graduate school or professional school can attest to how multiple-choice questions are capable of assessing higher-level cognitive skills. If multiple-choice questions test only factual knowledge or rote memory, it is, as Clegg and Cashin point out, “the result of poor test craftsmanship and not an inherent limitation of the item type; a well-designed multiple-choice item can test higher levels of student learning” (1986, p. 1). Conversely, as Erickson and Strommer observe, “Many essay questions masquerade as tests of complex thinking skills when, in fact, they can be answered on the basis of memorization” (1991, p. 137).

Thus, we recommend that test construction in the first-year seminar should not automatically exclude any particular types of test question. In fact, tests are more likely to inclusive and equitable if it they include a variety of test-preparation and test-question formats. Such variety also encourages students to exercise and develop different types of test-taking skills that they will need to use throughout their college experience and beyond.

Moreover, it may be possible to combine both formats in a single test question. For example, writing can be incorporated into multiple-choice questions by giving students the option of clarifying their choices in writing, or by requiring them to write a justification for their answer to certain multiple-choice or true-false questions. One college instructor has adopted the practice of awarding students full credit on several multiple-choice questions only if they choose the correct answer and provide a written explanation why it is correct (Zinsser, 1988).

**Use Frequent Assessment**

Rely on more *frequent* assessment than at midterm and finals. More frequent assessments of student learning tend to result in an overall evaluation (e.g., final course grade), that is more reliable. As Erickson and Strommer argue in *Teaching College Freshmen*, “How often should I evaluate student performance? Our answer to faculty who teach freshmen is: ‘The more, the better.’ Grades based on several observations will generally be more reliable than grades based on fewer observations” (1991, p. 153).

Each assessment of student performance represents only an *estimate* of what that student has learned or achieved. Thus, it can be expected that some assessments will overestimate student learning or achievement while others will underestimate it. These positive or negative errors in measurement tend to be distributed randomly across different assessments given at different times. Thus, the best way to reduce the magnitude of measurement errors associated with assessing student performance is to base that student’s final grade on multiple measures of achievement because this will allow random errors of measurement to balance out or cancel each other out (Gage & Berliner, 1984; Gronlund, 1985).

In addition to improving reliability of measurement by providing a larger sample of student performances on which to base grades, there are three other key advantages associated with frequent assessment:

\* Frequent assessment encourages students to “stay on top things” and work more

*consistently*. More frequent assessment typically requires students to distribute their study time evenly throughout the term—rather than cramming the bulk of their work into two large sessions—one before the midterm and one before the final. As Erickson and Strommer (1991) suggest, “Frequent evaluations provide the structure many freshmen need to keep up with their work [and are] more likely to get students to attend class and do their homework than is counting attendance and homework in the grading scheme” (p. 153).

\* Frequent assessments tend to result in lesser amounts of material to be learned and

retained for each exam, thus enabling students to focus on *depth rather than breadth*.

It is probably safe to say that students are likely to learn small amounts of material more deeply and large amounts of material more superficially. Some college instructors equate length or size of exams and assignments with more rigorous academic standards. However, as Loehr reminds us, “Length doesn’t ensure quality. Focus work processes and products on quality, rather than arbitrary length. Seek total quality, rather than products that ‘look long’” (1993, p. 6).

\* More frequent assessment is likely to result in students receiving *earlier feedback* in the course, which they can use to improve their subsequent performance. If assessments are given more frequently, it is more likely that assessments will distributed more evenly or regularly throughout the term, including assessments given earlier in the term from which students can receive *earlier feedback* about their course performance. Early assessment enables students to use the results as early feedback *proactively* to improve their subsequent performance throughout the term. Furthermore, when students receive earlier feedback, they are more *motivated* to attend to it and use it for performance-

improvement purposes because they know there will be an ample number of future opportunities to improve their first performance and raise their course grade.

Having acknowledged that there are multiple advantages of frequent assessment, it

must also be acknowledged that frequent assessment has one major drawback: loss of

class time on assessment that might otherwise be spent on content coverage or class

discussion. To minimize this disadvantage of frequent assessment, keep the assessments

short (e.g., 5-10 minutes to complete) and do not rely on in-class quizzes or

exams as your only source of frequent assessment; instead, complement them with

other forms of student assessment that can be completed outside the classroom (e.g.,

take-home tests, short assignments, or mini-projects).

**Supply students with *specific learning objectives* to serve as *study guides* for course exams.** Providing students with learning objectives prior to exams can help them focus their study time on what you expect them to know (key content areas or concepts) and how you expect them to know it, i.e., how they are expected to demonstrate their knowledge (e.g., generate it on an essay or recognize it on a multiple-choice question). Just as reading objectives have been developed for each chapter of the text, the same strategy may be adopted for information presented you cover in class for information covered in the text. (See *Appendix G*.“Specific Reading Objectives: A Strategy for Focusing Student Reading & Preparing Students for Reading-Based Exams.”)

Providing students with specific learning objective prior to exams can also help instructors develop rapport with their class by reducing the risk that students will perceive the instructor as an adversary who is deliberately withholding information about the test. Pertinent to this point are the results of a large-scale survey of students, which asked them to list teacher behaviors that inhibit positive teacher-student relationships. The survey results revealed the following three rapport-damaging teacher behaviors among the top ten cited: (a) “Are not specific on what the test will cover,” (b) “Create ‘trick’ questions,” and (c) “Give tests that don't correspond to lectures” (Ludweig, 1993).

**Provide students with *models* of excellent (grade “A”) work.** Save and showcase high-quality work submitted by students in your previous classes and use it to illustrate high-quality work for students in your current course. Sometimes it can be difficult to articulate verbally what constitutes “excellence” or “A” work (as in the expression, “I can’t tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it.”) Thus, excellence may be more effectively illustrated or demonstrated by allowing students access to selected samples of excellent student work. This should reduce the likelihood that your students will express the same frustration expressed by the following first-year student: “I’m not really sure how my essay answers can be improved to give her what she wants” (Erickson & Strommer, 1991, p. 49).

**Use exams or quizzes as an opportunity for students to practice their *test-taking skills* and manage their *test anxiety*.** The following practices are offered as intentional strategies for elevating students’ test-taking skills and lowering their levels of test anxiety.

\* Before exams, *share successful test-taking* strategies with your students, or *invite a*

*specialist from academic support services* to provide a timely session on test-preparation and test-taking strategies.

\* Consider using part of a class session to allows your students to take a non-graded

*sample test or pre-test* so that they can become familiar with your testing style,

and reduce some of their test anxiety.

\* Prior to distributing exams, particularly the first exam of the term, suggest to

students how they could most effectively *budget or distribute their test time* on

different test sections, thereby alleviating test anxiety associated with “running out of

time.”

***During* exams, invite *feedback from students* regarding the clarity or ambiguity of test questions.** Students could write this feedback on the test itself, or deliver it to you verbally during the exam. The latter strategy has the advantage of providing you with feedback in time to correct errors on your exam and clarify ambiguities *before* students

turn in their exam and leave the room feeling confused, frustrated, or resentful.

**Use tests to help students learn how to use *test results as feedback* for improving**

**future test performance.** After you return exams or quizzes, invite students to discuss the study strategies they used and the test results they received, as well as their perceptions of the fairness of the exam. One way to obtain such feedback is to have students complete a brief, post-exam evaluation form that could include such questions as:

\* Was the amount of time and effort you put into studying for this test reflected on the grade you earned?

\* Now that you have experienced the test, would you have studied for it any differently? \* Was the content of the exam what you expected it to be?

\* Did you learn anything during the process of taking the exam?

\* Which parts of the exam were most and least challenging?

\* Did you do as well on this exam as you thought you did after turning in the exam?

\* How would you grade the overall quality of this exam—e.g., A, B, C, etc.? Such

feedback can be used as a springboard for launching students’ discussion of their test-

preparation and test-taking strategies (and it may also be used to help instructors

improve the clarity and quality of their exams).

**Invite students make an *office visit to discuss exam results* and how they may improve their future performance.** For example, one instructor reports that writing “please see my during office hours” on returned exams typically results in a 75% office-visitation rate (Unruh, 1990, reported in Davis, 1993). Another instructor uses a more intrusive version of this procedure, whereby students must come to his office to find out their test grade, at which time he verbally praises them if they did well; if they performed poorly, he discusses study strategies and inviting them to seek his help prior to the next exam (Fink, 1989). In an extensive study designed to identify the characteristics of institutions that have significantly higher graduates rates than would be predicted by their student and institutional characteristics, one of their distinguishing characteristics is that their instructors provide timely and extensive feedback on students’ work (Kuh, et al., 2005).

**Use *long-range* assignments or projects (due toward the end of the term) as a**

**vehicle for developing students’ time-management and task-management skills.**

Giving an assignment that’s due at the end of the term can help student develop long-range work plans. However, instead of leaving students entirely to their own devices to complete the assignment and deliver it as a final product on its due date, have them submit early, graded installments of their work at interim points during the term. This practice can help students to develop habits of working proactively and incrementally. For instance, if the long-range assignment involves a group project that is to be presented at the end of the term, students could submit early installments of their work in the following sequence: (a) Topic selection and a tentative list of research sources within the first month, (b) outline at the second month, (c) first draft by the third month, and (d) final draft by the week before the presentation is due.

Such stepwise submissions encourage and reinforce students for working consistently and making steady progress toward completion of a long-term goal. It can also help students learn how to combat procrastination and avert the anxiety associated with it.

**For course assignments, provide students with a *checklist of criteria* that will be used to evaluate the quality of their work, and clarify the meaning of each criterion with a specific description or illustration.** For instance, the following criteria and illustrative descriptions might be used for writing assignments.

*\* Organization*: Does the paper have (a) an introduction, (b) conclusion, (c) clear

transitions between paragraphs, and (d) section headings?

\* *Documentation*: Does the paper include (a) a number of different sources cited that

are used in a balanced fashion (as opposed to over-reliance on one or two), (b)

use of some primary sources been included (as opposed to relying exclusively on

secondary references such as textbooks), and (c) a balanced blend of historical

sources and current publications?

\* *Presentation*: Is the paper presented in a manner that is consistent with specific

guidelines given for such formatting features as (a) margins (b) spacing, (c)

length, and (d) referencing of sources in the text and reference section?

**Instruct students how to *keep track of their course grade* while the course is *in progress*.** When students are uncertain about “where they stand” in the course, it can produce grade anxiety, which can interfere with their intrinsic interest in learning and their course performance. One way to combat grade anxiety is to empower students with skills self-monitor their personal progress by encouraging them to save and track their grades for completed tests and assignments. After successive assignments or exams, have students add the points to their cumulative total, so that they can readily determine their overall course grade at all times throughout the term. Modeling this strategy for students in the FYS, encouraging new students to use this strategy in their other courses, may help new students to develop the capacity for *self-monitoring*, which research indicates is a distinguishing characteristic of successful students (Pintrich, 1995; Weinstein, 1994).

**For *group projects*, do not assign the same “group grade” to all group members.**

Grades for group projects should include reflect and recognize the quality of *individual* performance. For example, students could receive separate grades for their individual performance and their group’s performance by combining or averaging these two grades to generate the student’s final grade for a group project. Giving all group members the same “group grade” should be avoided because research clearly indicates that high-achieving students report great dissatisfaction with group projects in which all members of their group receive the same, undifferentiated grade (Fiechtner & Davis, 1991) regardless of how much they contribute to the group’s final product or performance. High-achieving students often report that their individual effort and contribution to the group’s final product far exceeded the efforts of less motivated teammates, yet these “free riders” or “sandbaggers” inequitably received the same grade.

These findings suggest that instructors should build assessment of *individual accountability* or *personal responsibility* into the evaluation of students’ group work. One way to ensure that the individual responsibility of each group member can be readily identified and evaluated is by having each member assume responsibility for contributing a distinct or unique component to the group’s final product (e.g., a particular content area, cultural perspective, or dimension of holistic development). To ensure that each member also assumes *collective* responsibility, hold each member responsible for integrating his or her individual contribution with the contributions made by other group members.

(For grading criteria that may be used to evaluate group-project presentations, see *Exhibit 8*.)

**Use students’ test-performancepatterns as feedback for assessing *the quality of***

***your exams* and the *clarity of your teaching*.**

This recommendation can be most effectively implemented by performing an *item analysis* on student answers to tests questions, i.e., by computing the percentage of students missed each multiple-choice question on an exam, or by calculating students’ average grade on each essay question. Instructors can check to see if some test items are answered incorrectly by a *large majority* of students. Such a result may indicate that the test item is ambiguous or your instruction pertaining to the tested concept was unclear.

In addition to using item analysis to improve the clarity of future exams, it can be used to adjust students’ scores on just-completed exams for any test questions that the item analysis indicates may have been ambiguous or unfair. This allows adjustments to be made *before grades are assigned* to students’ tests and returned to them in class.

**Adopt a *learning-for-mastery* model of assessment whereby students are given the opportunity to *retake exams or re-submit assignments* in order to *improve* the quality of their work and their course grade.** College students are usually not permitted to repeat an exam or assignment to demonstrate that they have used the results as feedback and learned from their mistakes. However, research indicates that allowing students to repeat and improve their performance promotes significant gains in learning and concept mastery (Bloom, 1984; Fitzgerald, 1987). In two independent studies of this practice, college instructors were asked to list brief references to the textbook pages and/or class notes after every test question when they returned exams to students. On test questions that were answered incorrectly, students were required to write a short paragraph that identified the correct answer and to explain why it was correct. The results of both studies revealed that, relative to students in other sections of the same course who did not receive such feedback, students who received and responded to the feedback: (a) scored higher on the same final exam, (b) liked the course more, and (c) felt more confident of their abilities in the course subject (Clark, Guskey, & Benninga, 1983; Guskey, Benninga, & Clark, 1984).

These findings strongly suggest that a good instructional practice would be to provide students with an incentive for reviewing their exams and correcting their mistakes. For instance, students who elect to correct and resubmit their answers could be allowed to redeem some of their lost points and improve their grade. Allowing students with such opportunities to repeat and improve is consistent with the “mastery” model of human learning, which takes the position that initial differences in levels of subject-level mastery displayed by students do not reflect immutable differences in student aptitude or learning potential, but reflect differences in the time needed for learning to occur. In other words, some students take longer and require more performance feedback before becoming proficient learners; if they are given this extended opportunity, they will eventually display a high level of mastery with respect to the content or skill being learned (Carroll, 1963; Bloom, 1968, 1978).

Naturally, this practice is likely to result in an upward shift in the distribution of course grades. If instructors are fearful that giving students an extra opportunity to improve their performance will result in “grade inflation,” rather than replacing their first score with their improved, second score, the student’s first and second grades may simply be averaged. Since the ultimate purpose of the FYS is to promote student success, it is reasonable to expect that instructional practices that promote better learning are more likely to shift grade distribution in the course toward the higher end of the A-F spectrum. As long as students still need to work for good grades and expend extra effort to correct their mistakes, then FYS instructors should not feel guilty about having “watering down” academic standards. Instructors should not let traditional concerns about creating a “normal” grade distribution (a bell-shaped curve) distract then from using student-evaluation methods that most effectively promote student learning. FYS instructors should remain mindful de facto grading practices used by the preponderance of college instructors’ have been sharply and repeatedly criticized for: (a) exams that test for knowledge of factual information, which can be expeditiously scored and used to conveniently distribute students into grade categories (Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1988), and (b) using “curve” grading that ensure a bell-shaped grade distribution, which evaluate individual students’ achievement relative to their peers, rather than to their achievement of course outcomes (Tobias, 1990). Such grading practices make it inevitable that at least some students in class will receive low grades, which some instructors (mis)interpret as evidence that they are “rigorous graders” with “high academic standards” (Ewell, 1991). Grades should reflect how much students actually learn and should be criterion-referenced, i.e., based on absolute standards or criteria (e.g., percentage of questions answered correctly), rather than being determined by how many of their fellow students they happen to beat out. Grading according to absolute standards is also more likely to result in greater student collaboration with respect to course work and less invidious social comparisons (Boyer, 1987).

Grading according to absolute standards is also more likely to promote improvement in the quality of instructor’s teaching and test construction. As Erickson and Strommer (1991) point out in *Teaching College Freshmen*:

Grading according to standards is more likely to point up problems and lead to

improvements in teaching and test-taking practices. If several students do poorly

on an exam, the low grades usually prompt some serious soul searching. Was

instruction adequate? Was the exam poorly constructed? Or did students simply

not study enough? We can correct such problems, but only if we detect them.

Grading on a curve too often hides ineffective teaching, poor testing, and

inadequate learning. So long as we give a reasonable number of A’s and B’s and

not too many D’s or F’s, no one makes a fuss (pp. 154-55).

Let the FYS be the course in the college curriculum where sound, assessment-for-learning practices drives the distribution of grades, not vice-versa. Rather than duplicating evaluation practices that focus less on student learning and more on sorting students into grade categories, let the seminar serve as a model for effective, student-centered assessment that’s intentionally designed to help students achieve the course’s student-learning outcomes and, in so doing, promotes higher levels of academic achievement among all students in class.

Section VI.

***ASSESSMENT* OF THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR:**

**Strategies for Evaluating the Quality of Teaching & Learning**

The major objective of this chapter is to provide a detailed and comprehensive plan for assessing the effectiveness of FYS instruction and the impact of the FYS course. The chapter begins with a short discussion of the foundational principles of effective assessment and then turns to the development of a comprehensive assessment plan that embraces multiple sources and methods, namely:

(1) student evaluations,

(2) instructor self-assessment,

(3) peer assessment,

(4) assessment by the course director,

(5) pre/post course assessment,

(6) qualitative assessment,

(7) course-embedded assessment, and

(8) research methods designed to assess overall course impact on student success.

**Foundational Principles of Effective Assessment**

If the defining characteristic of effective assessment were to be summarized in a single word, that word would be “multiplicity.” Effective assessment serves multiple *purposes*, measures multiple *outcomes*, draws from multiple *data sources*, and utilizes *multiple methods of measurement*.

Effective program assessment serves multiple *purposes*, the two most important of which are: (a) *summative* evaluation—assessment that “sums up” and *proves* the program’s overall impact or value, providing data that can be used in bottom-line decisions about whether the program should be adopted, continued, or expanded and (b) *formative* evaluation—assessment that “shapes up,” fine tunes, and *improves* program quality on an ongoing or continuous basis (Scriven, 1967).

Assessment becomes more comprehensive and more complete when it measures multiple *outcomes*. These outcomes may be summarized and remembered via an “ABC” mnemonic:

*A* = *Affective* outcomes—e.g., student perceptions of course quality or instructional effectiveness),

*B* = *Behavioral* outcomes—e.g., student use of campus resources, participation in co-curricular experiences, out of-class contact with faculty, re-enrollment (retention), or academic performance (GPA), and

*C* = *Cognitive* outcomes—e.g., student knowledge of themselves (self-awareness) and knowledge of course material).

Comprehensive assessment also relies on multiple *sources*, which include: (a) students (b) self, (c) peers, and (d) the course or program director. Lastly, effective assessment utilizes multiple *methods of measurement*, including quantitative methods that generate numerical data (e.g., ratings) and qualitative methods that generate “human” data (e.g., spoken or written words). It is an assessment axiom that multiple measurement methods yield more reliable and valid results than exclusive reliance on a single method or data source (Wergin, 1988). Use of multiple measurement methods implements a powerful cross-validation procedure, known as “triangulation” (Fetterman, 1991) or *convergent validity* (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Cross-validation allows for examination and detection of consistent patterns of results across different methods. It also serves as a crosscheck to ensure that the results obtained by any one method are not merely an artifact of the single method used to obtain them. In the case of the FYS, cross-validation provides stronger empirical evidence for the course and magnifies the persuasive power of the results.

**Student Assessment of Course Instruction**

Student-ratings evaluation is the most widely used method of college-teaching effectiveness (Seldin, 1993), and it is the method that received the most extensive amount of research (Cashin, 1995). The substantial body of research on student evaluations of college teaching can be capitalized on to guide development of effective assessment of FYS instruction.

More than 1300 articles and books have been published that contain research on student ratings (Cashin, 1988, 1995), and their reliability and validity have received more empirical support than any other method of instructional assessment. Despite perennial criticisms of student evaluations by some faculty and the publication of isolated studies that purport to refute their validity, when the results of all studies are viewed collectively and synthesized, they provide strong support for the reliability, validity, and utility of student evaluations for assessing and improving college instruction (Sixbury & Cashin, 1995; Theall, Abrami, & Mets, 2001). Moreover, a large body research consistently refutes commonly-held myths about student evaluations, such as the following:

1) Student evaluations do *not* vary significantly with respect to the age of the evaluator (Centra, 1993) or the evaluator’s level of college experience. For example, lower-division students do not provide ratings that differ systematically from upper-division students (McKeachie, 1979). First-year students’ judgments correlate positively (i.e., are in agreement with) the judgments of more experienced observers (e.g., alumni, teaching assistants, faculty peers, administrators, and trained external observers (Aleamoni & Hexner, 1980; Feldman, 1988, 1989; Marsh, 1984).

2) Students distinguish or discriminate among specific dimensions and components of course instruction. For example, students give independent ratings to such instructional dimensions as course organization, instructor-student rapport, and the quality of course assignments (Marsh, 1984). As Aleamoni (1987) illustrates, “If a teacher tells great jokes, he or she will receive high ratings in humor . . . but these ratings do not influence students’ assessments of other teaching skills” (p. 27).

3) Students’ overall ratings of course quality and teaching effectiveness correlate positively with course learning—as measured by student performance on standardized final exams. In other words, students rate most highly those courses in which they learn the most and they rate most highly those instructors from whom they learn the most (Abrami, d’Apollonia, & Rosenfield, 1997; Centra, 1977; Cohen, 1981, 1986; McCallum, 1984).

4) Students who receive higher course grades do not routinely give higher course ratings (Theall, Franklin, & Ludlow, 1990; Howard & Maxwell, 1980, 1982).

5) Students do not routinely give lower ratings to difficult or challenging courses which require a heavy work load (Marsh & Dunkin, 1992; Sixbury & Cashin, 1995).

6) Student assessments are not unduly influenced by the instructor’s personality and popularity; for example, entertaining teachers do not necessarily receive higher overall student ratings (Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971; McKeachie, et al., 1978; Marsh & Ware, 1982).

Bill McKeachie, a scholar who has engaged in multi-institutional research on student ratings for three decades, provides a succinct summary of why we should take student assessments seriously.

Decades of research have related student ratings to measures of student learning,

student motivation for further learning, instructors’ own judgments of which of two

classes they had taught more effectively, alumni judgments, peer and administrator

assessments, and ratings by trained observers. All of these criteria attest to the

validity of student ratings well beyond that of other sources of evidence about

teaching (McKeachie & Kaplan, 1996, p. 7).

Following a comprehensive review of the research literature on students’ course ratings, Cashin (1995) concluded:

There are probably more studies of student ratings than of all of the other data

used to evaluate college teaching combined. Although one can find individual

studies that support almost any conclusion for a number of variables, there are

enough studies to discern trends. In general, student ratings tend to be

statistically reliable, valid, and relatively free from bias or the need for control;

probably more so than any other data used for evaluation (p. 6).

The conclusions reached by McKeachie and Cashin echo Michael Scriven’s observation that “student ratings are not only *a* valid, but often *the only* valid, way to get much of the information needed for most evaluations” (1988, p. 16). Students are in a uniquely advantageous position to evaluate the quality of a course in the following ways: (a) Students witness all elements of the course, from the syllabus to the final exam, including all intervening in-class learning experiences and out-of-class assignments. Thus, they have a *comprehensive* perspective of the totality of instructional elements that comprise the course. (b) Students experience multiple courses and multiple instructors, which enable them to provide course assessment from a *comparative* perspective. (c) Multiple students experience and evaluate a given course, thus they comprise a *large sample of observers*, particularly if course assessments are amalgamated across semesters or across different course sections. It is an assessment axiom that a large, representative sample is a necessary precondition for drawing accurate inferences and reaching valid conclusions from empirical data (Hays, 1973; Robinson & Foster, 1979).

Another major advantage of course-satisfaction surveys or questionnaires is that they are capable of generating an extensive amount of data on a large sample of respondents in a relatively short period of time. If the survey or questionnaire is well constructed and properly administered, it can be an effective and efficient vehicle for assessing student experiences, attitudes, perspectives, and self-reported learning outcomes—whether they may be in the affective, behavioral, or cognitive domain. Moreover, careful collection of student perceptions of instructional effectiveness may be viewed as a form of learner-centered assessment that demonstrates institutional interest in the experiences of its most valued constituents: students.

**Developing an Effective Student-Evaluation Instrument**

Creating an effective student-evaluation instrument includes making informed decisions about (a) the instrument’s content, design, and administration, (b) how to analyze, summarize, and (c) how to “close the loop”—i.e., how to make use of the results to improve the quality of instruction. Strategies for effective decision-making with respect to each of these key features of a student-assessment instrument will be discussed in the ensuing sections of this chapter.

**Determining the *Content* of a Student-Assessment Instrument**

A student-assessment instrument may be “home grown”—created *internally* at and by the institution, or it may be “store bought”—imported externally from an assessment service or evaluation center. An external, commercially-developed instrument has the following advantages: (a) Its reliability and validity are usually well established. (b) It is efficient because it saves time that the course director would otherwise have to devote to instrument construction, scoring and reporting results. (c) National norms are typically provided by the testing services, allowing comparison (“benchmarking”) of campus-specific findings with peer institutions across the country. For example, the *First-Year Initiative (FYI) Survey* is such an instrument; it assesses learning gains reported by students in a FYS and provides comparative data from other campuses with similar course goals and institutional characteristics.

One disadvantage of externally developed instruments is that the questions asked and results generated may be less relevant to the course’s unique, campus-specific objectives than those provided by internally constructed instruments. Some testing services attempt to minimize this disadvantage by allowing the college the option of adding a certain number of their own questions to the standardized instrument. (The availability of this option is a major factor to consider when deciding whether or not to purchase an external instrument.)

Peter Ewell, a nationally recognized assessment scholar, warns about another subtle disadvantage associated with what he calls “off the shelf” (externally developed) instruments:

Off-the-shelf instruments are easy. Although they cost money, it’s a lot less than

the effort it takes to develop your own. But buying something off-the-shelf means

not really engaging the issues that we should—for example, What are we really

assessing? and What assumptions are we making about the nature of learning”

(Mentkowski et al., 1991, p. 7).

In short, standardized instruments come with the advantage of having already-established reliability and validity, and the availability of norms that allow for cross-institutional comparisons. On the other hand, home-grown or locally developed instruments have the advantage of providing a more sensitive measure of campus-specific objectives, issues, and challenges.

**Recommendations for Developing the Content of a Campus-Specific Assessment Instrument**

The following recommendations are offered for developing the content (questions) that make up a campus-specific (home-grown) assessment instrument.

**Include items that align directly with course objectives and intended learning outcomes.** AsTrudy Banta (1996), nationally-recognized assessment scholar, notes: “Assessment is most effective when it is based on clear and focused goals and objectives. It is from these goals that educators fashion the coherent frameworks around which they can carry out inquiry” (p. 22).

Banta’s recommendation implies that assessment of whether the course’s objectives and intended learning outcomes have been achieved should be an integral element or component of an assessment instrument. A student learning-outcome approach can be infused into student evaluation instruments by assessing student perceptions of how effectively the instructor or course contributed to the realization of intended learning outcomes for the FYS; for example, student perceptions whether the seminar achieved such intended outcomes as: (a) self-knowledge or self-awareness, (b) understanding or appreciation of general education, and (c) ability to think critically about educational choices, and (d) integration of academic and career plans.

Student surveys or questionnaires are commonly labeled as measures of student “satisfaction.” This label can carry the negative connotation that student evaluations are open to customer-satisfaction or customer-opinion surveys administered in corporate settings. This connotation may diminish the validity and utility of student perceptions of the effectiveness of educational programs has realized its intended learning outcomes. However, student perceptions can provide much more information than user *satisfaction*; they also provide meaningful information on student *learning* outcomes that come from the “inside out”—from the internal perspective of the very person for whom those learning outcomes are intended—the learner.

Admittedly, these are self-reported (subjectively experienced) learning outcomes rather than performance-based (objectively observed) outcomes. However, systematic collection of a large, representative sample of students’ self-reported learning outcomes qualifies as a legitimate form of assessment, and the results warrant serious consideration. As the wave of accountability continues to flood postsecondary institutions with demands for “results” and documentation of learning outcomes, student evaluations should not be dismissed as mere measures of psychological or emotional “satisfaction;” instead, they represent an effective measure of students’ self-reported learning outcomes, which can effectively complement or augment “objective” performance-based measures.

**Items should be grounded in systematic research on instructor characteristics that are indicative of *high-quality* teaching.** Research repeatedly points to the conclusion that students value most highly instructors with the following skills or attributes: (1) organization, (2) communication, (3) rapport (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). These “core” characteristics of effective teaching may be used to organize the creation of specific content (rating items) for an evaluation instrument designed to assess student perceptions of teaching effectiveness in the FYS. (See Appendix for a sample instrument designed to assess FYS instructor effectiveness.)

**Include items that ask students to report their *behavior*.** Traditionally, student evaluations of instructors have focused almost exclusively on psychological data (student perceptions or opinions). However, given that one of the major goals of FYS instruction is to promote change in student *behavior*, assessment items should be conducted on the instrument that generate behavioral data, such as student use of campus services, or frequency of student participation in co-curricular activities.

Soliciting information on the *incidence or frequency* of student behavior (e.g., “How often have you seen your advisor this semester?”) by listing response options in the form of numbers or frequency counts (e.g., 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5 or more times). Avoid response options that require high levels of inference on the part of the reader (e.g., “rarely”-”occasionally”-frequently”) because the actual number of instances associated with these words may be interpreted by different students in different ways.

**Include at least two *global* items on the instrument to assess *summative (overall)* effectiveness of both the course and course instructor.** Although they are inextricably intertwined, it is important to attempt to distinguish between student perceptions of the effectiveness of the *course* and the effectiveness of the course *instructor*. The following sets of statements illustrate global items that may be juxtaposed for obtain summative (overall) evaluation of the course and instructor:

\* I would rate the overall effectivenessof this *course* as: (poor ⭰ ⭲ excellent).

Reason for this rating:

\* I would rate the overall effectivenessof this *instructor* as: (poor ⭰ ⭲ excellent).

Reason for this rating:

\* I would recommend this *course* to other students: (strongly agree ⭰ ⭲ strongly

disagree).

Reason for this rating:

\* I would recommend this *instructor* to other students: (strongly agree ⭰ ⭲ strongly

disagree).

Reason for this rating:

Responses to such global items provide an effective summary or “summative” snapshot of students’ overall assessment of the instructor, thereby functioning like a final course “grade” that can be used to summarize the overall effectiveness of an instructor. Research on students’ course evaluations has repeatedly shown that global ratings are more predictive of student learning than student ratings given to specific aspects or dimensions of instruction (Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Centra, 1993; Cohen, 1986). As Abrami (1989) notes: “It makes conceptual and empirical sense to make summative decisions about teaching using a unidimensional [global] rating. This choice then frees us to recognize that the particular characteristics of effective teaching vary across instructors” (p. 227). Global items may also allow for examination of relationships between students’ overall instructor rating and their ratings on individual items pertaining to specific instructor characteristics. For example, comparisons of instructors who receive very high global ratings with those receiving very low overall ratings may provide an answer to the following question: What particular items on the assessment instrument best discriminate between generally effective and ineffective instructors? The particular (non-global) items on which these two groups show the largest discrepancies may reveal specific instructor characteristics or qualities that are most important to students because they seem to carry the *most weight* in influencing students’ overall perception of instructor effectiveness. Once identified, these particular dimensions or characteristics of teaching may then be targeted for instructor-development workshops and new-instructor orientation programs.

**Include an *open-ended question* asking for students’ *general comments* about the strengths of the course and instructor, as well as suggestions for improvement.** Open-ended questions that are not tied to any particular instructional characteristic allow students the freedom to provide a divergent range of responses to any aspect of the teacher-student relationship they choose to address, thereby giving students the chance to “set their own agenda.” If students are free to pursue any topic they wish, they may provide distinctive information about the course and the teaching-learning process that would have been missed by items that delimit student responses to pre-selected instructor characteristics.

**Include items that request demographic information from students so that results may later be analyzed for different student subpopulations.** It is not uncommon for subpopulations of students to vary in terms of their experiences, perceptions, and levels of satisfaction with the same educational program or service (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Including a short section on the instrument for students to report their demographic characteristics provides an opportunity for later analysis of results across different subpopulations. Any of the following student characteristics may be solicited in the demographic section of the evaluation instrument and later used for differential analysis of results: (1) gender, (2) race/ethnicity, (3) age (traditional vs. re-entry), (4) residential status (campus resident vs. commuter), (5) national citizenship (domestic vs. international), (6) admissions status (admission from high school or transfer student), (7) enrollment status (full-time vs. part-time), (8) academic standing (probation, good standing, or honors), (9) academic intentions (e.g., levels of educational aspiration), (10) academic-decision status (declared major, undecided, or in transition), and (11) work status (not working; working part-time or full-time; working on or off campus).

**Include items that ask *students* to *self-assess* their effort and effectiveness as students.** Including such items serves to (a) raise students’ awareness that they have a shared responsibility in the learning process, and (b)assure instructors that their performance evaluations will include assessment of the conscientiousness and commitment of their student assessors. This practice should reduce feelings personal threat or defensiveness that often accompanies performance evaluation.

**Ask students if and how they have *changed* as a result of their participation in the course.** Include items on the assessment instrument that encourage students to identify and describe positive describe positive changes (if any) in their attitude or approach to the college experience that was influenced by or resulted from the course, or by including a rating item that asks students the following question:

Compared to the beginning of the term, my understanding of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has increased as a result of my experience in this course. (strongly agree ⭰ ⭲ strongly disagree).

Reason for this rating:

Or, include an open-ended that asks students to describe a major change (if any) in their approach to the college experience that resulted from their participation in the first-year seminar. For example, include a question that asks students to describe a major change (if any) in their approach to the college experience that resulted from their participation in the first-year seminar.

**Recommendations Regarding the *Wording (Phrasing*) of Individual Items**

**Use the *singular, first-person* pronoun (“I” or “me”), rather than the third-person plural (“students”).** For instance, “The instructor gave me effective feedback on how I could improve my academic performance” should be used rather than, “The instructor gave students effective feedback on how they could improve their performance.” The rationale underlying this recommendation is that an individual student can make a valid personal judgment with respect to her own course experiences but she is not in a position to judge and report how other students, or students in general, perceive the course.

**Avoid *compound sentences* that ask students to rate two different aspects of the course simultaneously (e.g., “Assignments were challenging and fair.”)** Using compound sentences forces respondents to give the same rating to both components of the statement, even if they are more satisfied with one component than the other. For example, a student may feel the assignments were very “fair,” but not very “challenging.”

**Avoid *vague or ambiguous descriptors* that may be difficult for students to interpret, or whose meaning may be interpreted by different students in different ways.** For example, an item such as, “Pacing of class presentations was appropriate,” is likely to widely different interpretations of what the descriptor “appropriate” means.

**Include some *negatively worded* items that require students to reverse the rating scale (e.g., “I did *not* receive effective feedback on how I could improve my performance.”).** Such items serve two purposes: (a) Negatively worded items encourage students to read and rate each item carefully, reducing the frequency of “positive-response-set” mistakes (Arreola & Aleamoni, 1990), i.e., the student going straight down a rating column and fills in a uniformly high rating for all items. (b) Negatively worded items can be used to identify items on the evaluation form that have not been completed carefully and may need to be deleted from the data analysis. For example, students who responded thoughtlessly by filling in all positive or all negative ratings may be identified by their failure to reverse their response bias on the negative-worded item(s).

***Design* and *Format* of the Assessment Instrument**

The reliability, validity, and utility of an assessment instrument depend on the instrument’s design, as well as its content. The following recommendations are offered as strategies for the effective design and format of a student-evaluation instrument.

**Cluster individual items into categories that represent important *components of effective course instruction.***  Include items pertaining to each of the three core components of the course experience: (a) *course planning and design* (e.g., questions relating to overall course organization and clarity of course objectives); (b) *classroom instruction*(e.g., items referring to the quality of classroom teaching, such as clarity and organization of lectures or instructional presentations); and (c) *assessment of student performance* (e.g., items pertaining to the fairness of course exams, assignments, and grading practices. There are three major advantages of this clustering or categorizing strategy:

1) The categories can serve as signposts or retrieval cues for the designers of the survey, ensuring that the items selected for inclusion in the instrument reflect a well-balanced sample of the major course dimensions that affect the quality of the students’ learning experience.

2) The grouped items stimulate student awareness of the fact that there are different dimensions of course instruction, which should help them distinguish among these different dimensions and assess them independently.

3) Partitioning the instrument into separate sections that reflect separate course dimensions should help to reduce the risk of a general “halo effect,” i.e., the tendency for a student to complete the assessment instrument by going right down the same column and filling in all “1s” or “5s” on all items, depending on whether they generally liked or disliked the course.

**Use a rating scale that includes *five-to-seven response options.*** Research on student evaluations of course instructors indicates that a rating scale with fewer than five choices tends to reduce the instrument’s ability to discriminate between satisfied and dissatisfied respondents, while a rating scale with more than seven choices does not add to the instrument’s discriminability (Cashin, 1990). Furthermore, a rating scale containing 5-7 options is likely to result in mean differences for individual items that are large enough in absolute value to be distinguishable and amenable to discriminative analysis (Cuseo, 2001).

**In addition to having students evaluate the effectiveness of different aspect of course instruction, have them report how *important* these different aspects of instruction are to them*.*** Students could be asked to give two ratings for each item on the instrument: (a) a rating of how *satisfied* they are with that particular aspect of instruction, and (b) a rating of how *important* that aspect of is to them. This double-rating strategy allows the instrument to co-function function as a student satisfactionsurvey and a student *needs* survey.

The instrument can be formatted to efficiently obtain both student-satisfaction and student-importance ratings by centering the item statements in the middle of the page, with a “satisfaction” scale positioned to the left of the items and a corresponding “importance” scale to the right of the items. Noel and Levitz (1996) have used this double-rating practice to identify institutional areas with large “performance gaps”—items for which students give low ratings on satisfaction but high ratings on importance (i.e., items for which a large negative score is obtained when its satisfaction rating is subtracted from its importance rating). Items on the instrument that students rate high in importance but low in satisfaction can provide particularly useful information for instructional improvement. These performance-gap items reflect students’ highest-priority needs that are not being met; as such, they represent key target areas for instructional training and development programs.

**Allow space for students to record their written comments with respect to each item.** Research on student evaluations indicate that instructors frequently report that students’ written comments are more useful than numerical ratings for improving instructional performance, especially if the comments are specific (Seldin, 1992). To increase the probability that students will supply written responses, the phrase, “*reason/explanation for rating*: . . .” could be placed under each item on the instrument. Cuseo (2001) found that such writing prompts increased the number of written comments students provide, and the nature of the written comments provided were more focused, specific, and useful than those provided to the single generic prompt that is commonly included at the very end an assessment instrument (e.g., “Additional Comments: . . ”). Jacobi (1991) identifies a key advantage of allowing students multiple opportunities for written comments: “The typical survey consists of a majority of closed-ended items, with limited

opportunities for open-ended responses. This format does not encourage students to

explore their attitudes, feelings, or experiences in depth and therefore may provide

incomplete information about *why* students think, feel, or behave in a particular manner”

(p. 196).

When students have the opportunity to provide a written response to individual items, they can *justify* their ratings. Narrative information that accompanies a quantitative rating can provide a window into *why* the rating was given and helps clarify or identify the reasoning behind the rating. This may be especially important for gaining insight into students’ numerical ratings on items that relate to specific learning outcomes. If students have the opportunity to explain why (or why not) the course contributed to their achievement of a particular learning outcome, insight may be gained into the particular processes or practices that lead to (or failed to lead to) the realization of that outcome. Student comments about the particular instructional processes or learning experiences that contributed, or failed to contribute to, the achievement of student learning outcomes represents a powerful source of data that strictly performance-based measures miss because the latter focus exclusively on a behavioral result or outcome; no information is generated that sheds light on or insight into the particular processes or experiences which accounted for the achievement of that outcome. This is a major advantage of students’ self-reported learning outcomes because, if an intended learning outcome is achieved, information is provided about how this outcome may be replicated; in contrast, if students report the reason why an intended learning outcome was not realized, then the reason may addressed and redressed.

**Leave space at the end of the assessment instrument for *individual instructors to add their own questions.*** This practice allows instructors to assess specific instructional practices and learning activities that are unique to their particular course section. Giving instructors this option also gives them some sense of personal control or ownership of the assessment instrument, which, in turn, should increase their motivation to use the results in a constructive fashion.

**Keep the instrument *short*; include no more than 20 items or questions.** There is likely to be an inverse relationship between the length of the instrument and the depth of student responses to it. Generally, response rates decline as the length and complexity of the data-collection method increases (Swing & Upcraft, 2005). The longer the instrument, the more reading time is required to complete it, and the less time and effort students will spend supplying the type of rich, detailed written comments that are most useful for course improvement.

*Administering* the Assessment Instrument

The effectiveness of an assessment instrument depends not only on its content and design, but also on its *process of administration*. The following recommendations are offered for administering a student-evaluation instrument in a manner that improves the reliability and validity of results generated by it.

**Obtain preliminary feedback from *students* and *instructors* on the proposed assessment instrument before administering it.** This could be accomplished by conducting a pilot study, whereby a sample of students and its instructors complete the instrument and offersuggestions about itemsthat should be added, deleted, or modified. As Fidler (1992) notes, “Seasoned researchers recommend pilot studies before every research project in order to identify and quickly alter procedures, thereby alleviating problems before they can invalidate an entire study” (p. 16).

Student focus groups may also be used to obtain feedback on the instrument’s strengths and aspects of the instrument need improvement. Soliciting student feedback prior to full-scale implementation of the assessment instrument can serves two other purposes: (a) it helps identify student issues, needs, or priorities that the instrument may have failed to address, and (b) it demonstrates respect for student input.

Soliciting early feedback about the instrument from *instructors* also demonstrates respect for their input into the evaluation process, giving them some ownership or control of it. If key constituents are aware of and have the opportunity to provide input into the assessment process, they are more likely to take its results seriously (Upcraft, 2005). When course instructors are allowed opportunity for input, they are more likely to perceive assessment as something being done *with* or *for* them, rather than *to* them. Defusing the threat of performance evaluation is something that should be given careful consideration at each major step in the assessment process, including the early phase of instrument construction and adoption. Obtaining broad-based feedback from the party doing the assessing (students) and the party being assessed (instructors) ensures that the perspectives of both key stakeholders in the assessment process are considered, which should result in the creation of a well-balanced instrument that embraces the perspectives and needs of both parties.

**Deliver instructions to students prior to administering the assessment instrument that *prepares or primes* them for the important role they play in evaluating college programs andprovides them with a *positive “mental set”* toward the assessment process.** To increase student motivation for completing the assessment instrument and to improve the validity of the results obtained, it is recommended that the following information be included in the instructions delivered to students prior to the instrument’s administration.

\* Assure students that their evaluations will be *read carefully* and *taken seriously* by the program director as well as the instructor.

\* Inform students that assessment is an opportunity for them to provide input that can improve the quality of course instruction received by future first-year classes for years to come.

\* Explain *why* assessment is conducted (e.g., to help improve the quality of course instruction and overall impact of the FYS). If assessment items relating to specific instructor characteristics are to be used for instructional-improvement purposes, and global items for course-evaluation purposes, then this distinction should be mentioned in the instructions.

\* Remind students that they should avoid the temptation to give uniformly high or low ratings on every item, depending on whether they generally liked or disliked their instructor; instead, they should respond to each item *independently*.

\* Encourage students to provide *written comments* to clarify or justify their numerical ratings. Emphasize that *specific* comments are especially welcome because they provide instructors with the best feedback on what aspects of the course are working well and what needs to be improved. \* Let students know *what will be done with their evaluations* after they have been submitted. Assure them that their written comments will be converted into typewritten form before they are returned to the instructor; or, if the instrument is to be completed electronically, ensure them that their comments will remain anonymous. This assurance can alleviate student fears that their instructor will be able to recognize their comments; without this assurance, students may be inhibited about reporting negative comments on the instrument.

Providing students with specific guidelines to prepare them for FYS evaluation may enable them to use this information to improve the validity and quality of their course evaluations. First-term college students have no prior experience and typically receive no formal preparation for their role as evaluators of college courses and course instructors. The need to prepare students for their role as evaluators their role as evaluators, and the role that the FYS may plan in providing students with this preparatory experience, are underscored by Ernest Boyer (1991), former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching:

We urge that student assessment be used, but for this to work, procedures must be

well designed and students must be well prepared. It’s a mistake to ask students to

fill out a form at the end of a class without serious consideration of the process.

Specifically, we urge that a session on faculty assessment be part of first-year

orientation. All incoming students should discuss the importance of the process,

and the procedures used (p. 40).

**Instructions delivered to students prior to administering the assessment instrument should be *standardized*.** Research indicates that the wording of instructions can affect the nature of student responses to an assessment instrument (Pasen et al., 1978). For instance, if the instructions suggest to students that the assessment results are to be used for decisions about the instructor’s “retention and promotion,” more favorable or lenient ratings are obtained than when instructions suggest that the results will be used for the purpose of “course improvement” or “instructional improvement” (Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Feldman, 1979). These findings underscore the importance of providing students with a uniform or standard set of instructions before they begin responding to the assessment instrument.

**The *behavior of instructors* should be *standardized* while students complete their assessments.** The importance of this practice is supported by research indicating that student ratings tend to be higher when the instructor remains in the room while students complete the course-assessment form (Centra, 1993; Feldman, 1989; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992). The simplest and most direct way to eliminate this potential bias is for the instructor to be out of the room while students complete their assessments (Seldin, 1993). This would require someone other than the instructor to administer the assessments, such as a student government representative or a staff member. Some instructors might resist this procedure, particularly if there is no precedent for it at the college. If this happens to be the case, the following alternatives might be considered: (a) The instructor asks a student to distribute the forms and then the instructor leaves the room while students complete their assessments. (b) The instructor stays in the room but does not circulate among the class while students complete their course assessments; instead the instructor remains seated at a distance from the students (e.g., at a desk in front of the class) until all assessments have been completed.

Whatever procedure is chosen, the bottom line is that variations in how instructors behave while students complete course assessments should be minimized. Instructor behavior during course assessment is a variable that needs to be held constant so it does not unduly influence or “contaminate” the validity of student evaluations of the FYS.

*Analyzing* and *Summarizing* the Results

**Instructors should receive assessment summaries that allow them to *compare* their own performance on each item of the instrument with the mean or average rating for all instructors.** By aggregating results across all instructors and calculating the *mean (average)* rating for each item on the instrument, individual instructors gain access to a collective reference point that can help them interpret their individual results. If certain instructors see that a negative deviation exists between their individual results and the group norm, this discrepancy may generate the type of cognitive dissonance or mental disequilibrium that stimulates productive change. On the other hand, if deviations occur in a positive direction, they can serve to validate exceptional performance and reinforce an instructor’s continued use of practices that are producing positive results. Better yet, these practices could be shared with other instructors during instructor training or development sessions.

**In addition to providing instructors with averages (central tendencies) for student ratings, provide them with information on the *variations* that exist among student evaluations.** Standard deviations are the most commonly used measure of response variance in student-rating evaluations of college instructors.A less technical measure of variation can be obtained by calculating and reporting *the* *percentages of students who choose each rating option*. The distribution of student response percentages across different rating options can provide a convenient and easy-to-interpret snapshot of the degree of consistency (consensus) or inconsistency (disagreement) among student ratings for each item on the evaluation instrument.

**Report results for different *subpopulations* of students.** The perceived effectiveness outcomes of any educational program can vary significantly across different student subpopulations or subgroups (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). For example, the effectiveness of a FYS may be perceived differently by commuter students vs. residents, males vs. females, minority vs. majority students, or traditional-age vs. re-entry students. Such comparative analyses across student subpopulations can be made if a section is included on the evaluation instrument, whereby students can report demographic information. It is advisable that this request for demographic information be accompanied by a short statement assuring the respondent that this information will be used only for subgroup analysis and that the individual’s anonymity or confidentiality will be preserved.

Interesting interactions can emerge from comparative analyses of different subgroup responses, which might otherwise be missed if the results were collapsed across all students and aggregated into one “average” profile. Important differences among student populations may be masked or canceled out in this averaging process, concealing the unique effects of the seminar on particular student subgroups.

The significance of this recommendation is illustrated by the results of a campus study which demonstrated conducted at the University of South Carolina, which revealed that first-year African-American students who participated in the FYS displayed a higher college-retention rate than did White students who took the course (Fidler & Godwin, 1994).

**To gain a *reference point* for interpreting the results of FYS assessment, compare student evaluations of the seminar with their evaluations of other first-term courses.** As Arreola and Aleamoni advise,

The use of comparative (normative) data in reporting results can result in a more

accurate and meaningful interpretation of ratings. For example, comparative data

gathered on first-year-level courses in a department allow instructors to determine

how they and their courses are perceived in relation to the rest of the courses in the

department. When such comparative data are not available, instructors will be

interpreting and using results in a void, with very little substantiation for their

conclusions and actions (1990, p. 51).

To ensure a fair basis of comparison and a good reference point, compare student evaluations of the FYS with other courses of *similar class size* (e.g., a first-year course in English composition). There is evidence that class size can influence student ratings, with smaller classes tending to receive slightly higher average ratings than larger classes (Cashin, 1988; Feldman, 1984). Also, depending on whether the seminar is a required or elective course, it should be compared with other first-term courses that have the same required or elective status. Research suggests that required courses tend to receive lower student ratings than elective courses (Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992). One college that employed this course-comparison procedure discovered that 75% or more of their first-year students placed a higher value on the FYS than they did for any other course in the college’s core curriculum (Hartel, 1993).

**To gain a retrospective on the FYS, compare the evaluations of first-term students who just completed the course with the evaluations students at later stages in their college experience.** It may prove illuminating is to compare the evaluations of students who just completed the course with the *retrospective* evaluations of sophomores or upper-division students. This comparison may be revealing because some of the intended outcomes of the FYS involve preparation for college experiences that students encounter after course completion (e.g., selection of a college major, career exploration and choice). It seems likely that some of the information and skills acquired in the FYS may be applied, and better appreciated by students at later times in their college experience. It is noteworthy that two studies of alumni perspectives on the first-year seminar have both revealed that retrospective assessments of the course are very positive (Hartman, et al., 1991; University of Prince Edward, cited in Barefoot, 1993).

One possible vehicle for collecting the retrospective assessments of course graduates is by means of a first-year seminar “class reunion.” One college has used this strategy to reunite first-year seminar classes during the sophomore and junior years for the purposes of re-establishing social networks among former classmates and to provide support for meeting the adjustments being experienced by these students at later junctures in the college experience (Anselmo, 1997).

Soliciting the evaluations of college graduates would take retrospective assessment one step further. Since the FYS emphasizes lifelong-learning and life-adjustment skills, it might be revealing to assess how alumni, looking back on the course from the perspective of a working professional or graduate student, would respond to the following questions posed to them via phone interviews or alumni surveys:

a) Do you view the seminar differently now than you did when you were a first-year student?

b) Do you still use any ideas or skills acquired during the first-year seminar in your professional or personal life?

c) What aspect of the seminar is most memorable or had the most long-lasting impact on you?

**Include an *open-ended* question that asks student for *written comments* about the course’s overall strengths and weaknesses, and how the latter may be improved.** For example, students could be asked: (a) “What aspects of the course were most effective in helping you achieve success during your first term?” (b) “What should you have learned about being a successful student that was not addressed in this course?” The written responses given to these questions by individual students in separate class sections could be aggregated and their content analyzed to identify recurrent themes.

**Evaluate whether student participation in the FYS influences students’ overall perceptions of satisfaction with the college experience.** One major purpose of the FYS is to connect students to the institution, i.e., to its key educational agents, support services, and co-curricular opportunities. Thus, it may be reasonable to hypothesize that these connections, if initially established via the first-year seminar, have a “ripple effect” on students’ level of engagement and satisfaction with college in general. A major argument for evaluating the first-year seminar’s impact on students’ overall satisfaction with the institution is the well-documented association between student satisfaction with an institution and student retention at that institution (Noel, 1985). It is noteworthy that at the University of South Carolina, whose FYS (University 101) now serves as a national model of best practice, originated the university president’s interest in develop a strategy to prevent additional student riots, which had occurred due to student feelings institutional dissatisfaction and alienation (Gardner, 1981). As Barefoot and Fidler (1992) argue: “Systematic assessments of the quality of first-year life should be part of the total assessment procedure. First-year students are often compliant and reluctant to complain about even the most egregious injustices. Institutions must take the initiative in determining the existing quality of life for first-year students both in and out of the classroom” (p. 63).

Another reason for assessing the impact of the FYS on student satisfaction with the college experience is simply because research indicates that it is the outcome which is least influenced by students’ college-entry characteristics. Astin (1991) points out an important implication of this research finding: “The practical significance of the weak association between student input [college-entry] characteristics and student satisfaction with college is that causal inferences based on correlations between environmental characteristics and student satisfaction entail fewer risks of error than do causal inferences involving most other kinds of outcome measures” (1991, p. 117).

*PRE/POST* ASSESSMENT

To gain a *longitudinal* perspective on *changes* in student attitudes, knowledge, or behavior that may have taken place as a result of student experience with the FYS, an assessment instrument could be administered before the learning process begins (e.g., during new-student orientation) and re-administered after students complete the course. This pre/post design creates an opportunity to more directly assess course impact by providing a baseline (pre-test) against which student outcomes can be compared, enabling the investigator to identify and identify outcomes exhibited by students at the end of the course (post-test) that were not already possessed prior to their participation in the course.

For attitudinal and cognitive outcomes, there are two major ways for assessing whether students experience positive change between course onset and course completion:

1) Issuing a *pre-test* before the course begins (e.g., diversity awareness test) and comparing the results to student responses on an identical or similar *post-test* at the end of the course.

The specific reading objectives included this manual may be viewed as intended cognitive-learning outcomes for each unit of the text. The objectives are primarily intended for use by students as reading guides and to hold students accountable for reading by tying the reading objectives directly to test questions included on course exams. However, these test questions may be used as a *pre/post assessment* of students' cognitive learning (gains in knowledge acquisition) between course onset and course completion.

2) Including a question on the end-of-course evaluation instrument that asks students if and they have changed with respect to some of the course’s key intended-learning outcomes—for example: “Did your \_\_\_\_\_ *increase*, *decrease*, or *remain the same* as a result of participating in this course?”

For *higher-level thinking* outcomes, students’ early-term and late-term work may be compared on learning activities or class assignments calling that called for reflective thinking. Although there are some standardized tests designed to assess student skills in logical thinking, higher-level thinking skills in FYS courses is likely to be more effectively measured by “course-embedded” assessment; for example, by examining students’ written responses to thought-provoking questions posed to them in class or in course assignments, and comparing the depth or quality of student thinking displayed in their answers at the end of the term relative to the start of the term. The taxonomy of higher-level thinking questions provided in chapter 6 of the text (pp. 201-202) may be used as prompts to generate thought-provoking questions. Students can respond to similar prompts at different times during the term; their responses may then be compared to detect patterns of positive change in the depth or quality of students’ thinking across their first term in college.

To increase the likelihood that pre-to-post changes can be attributed to students’ experiences in the course, rather than simply personal maturation or experience with college in general, students pre-to-post responses could be compared with the pre-to-post responses of students who did not participate in the FYS that are gathered at the same two points in time—immediately before and after the first term. The University of South Carolina used this strategy to assess the impact of the sexuality component of its FYS. Sexual awareness surveys were administered to students prior to their participation in the first-year seminar and these surveys were re-administered upon course completion. The same surveys were administered to first-semester students at the beginning of the term, and re-administered to them at the end of the term. Students who participated in the FYS reported higher rates of abstinence and greater use of condoms at the end of the course than they did at the start of the course, whereas first-semester students who did not take the seminar reported no decline in either their abstinence rates or condom use from beginning to end of their first term in college (Turner, et al., 1994).

*QUALITATIVE* ASSESSMENT METHODS

Quantitative data, such as survey ratings, provide evaluative information that can be readily summarized and manipulated numerically. In contrast, qualitative data take the form of human  *actions and words* (e.g., students’ written or oral comments) and they are analyzed by means of “human instruments” (Kuh, et al., 1991, p. 273).Generally, quantitative methods provide data on *what* is happening, while qualitative methods provide information on *why* it is happening (Upcraft, Ishler, & Swing, 2005). It may be true that “numbers don’t lie”—at the descriptive level, but may also be true that “actions and words don’t lie”—at the explanatory level. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) eloquently articulate the advantage of qualitative methods: “Although quantitative approaches provide a powerful set of tools for estimating the impact of college on students, these tools are probably most useful in painting the broad outlines of the portrait. Rendering tone, tine, texture, and nuance may require the finer brushstrokes characteristic of qualitative approaches” (pp. 636-637).

The validity and comprehensiveness of assessment results are strengthened when it includes a balanced blend of both quantitative and qualitative methods. As Dorothy Fidler notes in her primer for research on the first-year year experience, “All research designs have strengths and weaknesses; therefore, no single piece of research can fully answer a research question. Researchers can select between qualitative or quantitative designs, and ideally a body of literature contains both types of designs in order to balance the strengths and weaknesses of each” (1992, p. 11). Although quantitative and qualitative methodologies emerge from contrasting philosophical traditions and rest on very different epistemological assumptions (Smith & Heshusius, 1986), they can work in a mutually supportive manner to provide complementarysources of evidence, with the limitations of one method being counterbalanced by the strengths of the other. For instance, students’ written comments on surveys (qualitative data) can be used to help interpret the average scores computed for numerical ratings (quantitative data); and the average numerical ratings can be used to counterbalance the tendency to draw over-generalized conclusions from written comments that may be particularly poignant, but are not representative of students as a whole.

A comprehensive and well-balanced assessment of the first-year seminar should include not only quantitative methods, but also qualitative methods, such as those described below.

**Analysis of Students’ *Written Comments***

Historically, student-ratings instruments have not been considered to be a qualitative research method because they generate quantitative data (numerical ratings). However, students’ written comments made on the survey instrument represent a potential source of qualitative data that can provide in-depth information on the strengths and weaknesses of the course or course instructor. Although written comments are more difficult to summarize and manipulate statistically, their content may still be analyzed and classified systematically to discern trends or recurrent themes.

Even the sheer number of positive or negative written responses students make in response to different items on a rating survey can itself serve as a rough measure of the importance or intensity of student feelings about issues addressed by different items on the assessment instrument. The National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) recommends that surveys “request individual written comments and provide space on the evaluation for these remarks. Participants with strong opinions about certain activities will state them if adequate space is provided. Summarize written comments in detail; consider indicating the number of times the same negative or positive comments were made” (Mullendore & Abraham, 1992, pp. 39-40).

One particular qualitative-research method that may be used to ensure that students’ written comments are representative and meaningful is “category analysis”—a procedure in which the reader performs inductive data analysis by identifying common themes that emerge among the comments as they are read and then organizes these comments into categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A succinct procedural summary of the major steps involved in categorical analysis is provided by Bogdan & Biklen (1992):

You search through your data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics

your data cover, and then you write down words and phrases to represent these

topics and patterns. These words and phrases are *coding categories*. They are a

means of sorting the descriptive data you have collected so that the material

bearing on a given topic can be physically separated from other data. Some

coding categories will come to you while you are collecting data. These should be

jotted down for future use. Developing a list of coding categories after the data

have been collected is a crucial step in data analysis (p. 166).

A tally of the number of written comments per category may also be kept and reported along with the identified categories. These category-specific frequency counts can then be used as quantitative data to help summarize and determine how representative the written comments (qualitative data) are. Such a fusion of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess narrative comments is referred to as “content analysis” (Holsti, 1969), and it is a procedure that has already been applied to assess the FYS (Cuseo, 1993).

To maximize the validity of category analysis, have two or more independent readers categorize the comments so that inter-reader (inter-rater) agreement can be assessed. When data appear in the form of written comments, which are not amenable to objective and reliable machine-scored assessment, use of multiple assessors allows for the more subjective assessments of humans to be cross-checked and cross-validated. With qualitative research, evaluator bias is a major issue because the data are selectively filtered through, and analyzed by, humans rather than machines (Upcraft, Ishler, & Swing, 2005). To reduce the risk of such bias, the reading and categorizing of comments should be conducted by someone who has no vested interest in the outcome of the program.

***Focus-Group Interviews***

Succinctly defined, a focus group is a small (6-12 person) group that meets with a trained moderator in a relaxed environment to discuss a selected topic or issue, with the goal of eliciting participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and ideas (Bers, 1989). In contrast to surveys or questionnaires, which solicit individual students’ numerical ratings and written comments, focus-group interviews solicit students’ oral responses in a discussion-group setting. Students’ verbal responses to questions posed “live”(in person) can sometimes generate distinctive and more elaborate data than written responses to questions posed in print.

Focus-group interviews may also be used in conjunction with surveys. Interviews may be conducted as a follow-up to student surveys to acquire qualitative data that may be used to help interpret the survey’s quantitative results. For instance, questions may be posed to student focus groups, which ask them to offer their interpretation of, or explanation for, the numerical findings. The sequence can also be reversed, whereby focus groups are conducted first to collect student ideas and perceptions that may later be used to develop specific items for inclusion on a course-evaluation survey or questionnaire. Such combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods again reinforces the notion that these are complementary rather than contradictory assessment methods. As Suskie (2005) notes, “The selection of an assessment methodology may not be an either-or decision; in fact, there are many instances when the use of both methodologies is not only appropriate but also more powerful. These two methodologies tend to feed each other because the results from each can suggest promising work to the other” (p. 471).

Finally, a tacit advantage of focus groups is that they serve to validate students by sending them the message that someone at the institution is genuinely interested in their views and feelings about the quality of their FYS experience and how it may be improved. Qualitative researchers argue that engaging in dialogue with research participants, particularly those who have been marginalized in some way, serves to empower them and encourage them to gain control of their experience (Roman & Apple, 1990).

To enhance the validity of qualitative data obtained via focus-group interviews, the following practices are recommended.

**When forming focus groups, all key student *subpopulations* should be represented (e.g., males and females, ethnic/racial minority and majority students; commuter and residential students).** Although obtaining a “representative sample” is not a strict requirement for qualitative research, it is still important to approximate this it so that safe generalizations may be drawn from the results (Upcraft, Ishler, & Swing, 2005). A representative sample may be obtained or approximated in either of two ways: (a) *Heterogeneous* group formation, whereby members of different subpopulations are represented in each focus group. The advantage of this procedure is that a cross-section of different subgroups is present at the same time, which can enrich the diversity of the focus-group dialogue. (b) *Homogeneous* group formation, whereby members of the same subpopulations comprise separate focus groups (e.g., separate focus groups comprised entirely of minority students, commuter students, residential students, re-entry students, etc.). The primary advantage of this grouping procedure is that it allows students to share their perceptions and concerns with peers who may have common experiences and with whom they may feel more comfortable expressing their views.

**Select *interviewers* to conduct the focus groups that (a) reflect a demographic cross-section of the campus community (e.g., males and females, majority- and minority-group members) and (b) have no vested interest or conflict of interest with respect to the outcome of the interviews.** The latter caveat is particularly important because an interviewer with a favorable bias for or against the FUS may unwittingly signal this bias to the interviewees, perhaps leading them to provide socially appropriate comments that tend to support the interviewer’s bias. Experimental psychologists have coined the term “demand characteristics” to describe the tendencies of the researcher conducting a study to unwittingly influence research subjects to behave in a way that confirms the researcher’s hypothesis (Orne, 1962).

***Tape-record or videotape* the focus-group sessions so that students’ verbal comments can later be reviewed and transcribed into written protocols.**

Guidelines previously recommended for assessing students’ written comments on surveys via category analysis and for improving the validity of written comments’ assessment via inter-rater reliability, can also be applied to the assessment of written protocols obtained from focus groups.

**The *same questions* should be posed to all focus groups.** One essential attribute of qualitative research is its flexibility, which allows the researcher to respond to the flow of data as they are collected, and to change directions of the research as it proceeds (Delamont, 1992). This also is a cardinal feature of the focus-group interview, and one which serves to define it as a qualitative research method (Morgan, 1988). However, some initial standardization of questions across focus groups can serve to increase the reliability of the data obtained and their amenability to comparisons across different groups. The interviewer can still retain the freedom to create her own specific, follow-up questions to whatever student responses emerge from the initial, standardized general questions. In fact, this procedure is consistent with the qualitative research method of *open-ended interviews*, whereby “prior to beginning the set of interviews, the researcher develops a protocol of general questions that needs to be covered; however, the researcher is free to move in any direction that appears interesting and rich in data” (Tierney, 1991, p. 9).

**Interviewers should provide the *same instructions* to all focus groups.** In particular, instructions should be standardized with respect to (a) ensuring the participants’ confidentiality, (b) encouraging equal participation by all group members, and (c) describing the moderator’s role as an unobtrusive and non-judgmental facilitator, rather than an authoritative evaluator (Tierney, 1991).

*COURSE-EMBEDDED* ASSESSMENT

Assessment conducted by instructors for purposes of grading students may be another valuable source of information for assessing the FYS. As Warren (1987) points out, “The information faculty members routinely gather about student learning is too valid to be limited to the assignment of course grades. Even their intuitive sources, if examined closely, might be given a sufficiently systematic structure to provide documented judgments” (p. 6).

Pat Cross (1990) developed a number of course-embedded assessment procedures, which she refers to as “classroom research.” As she describes it, “The specific question for classroom research is: What are *my* students learning in *my* classroom as a result of *my* efforts? Classrooms have daily lessons for teachers as well as for students. We only have to observe systematically and sensitively” (1990, pp. 73-74).

Course-embedded assessment allows for more frequent and focused evaluation of particular units of instruction, pedagogical procedures, or course assignments.One college that uses course-component assessment in the FYS goes as far as having students assess each class session throughout the term (Zerger, 1993). Such frequent, focused forms of assessment can generate ongoing feedback with respect to specific course experiences that may otherwise be masked or “averaged out” when students report their perceptions of the entire course experience after its completion. Frequent assessments of specific course components that take place immediately after students experience them may yield assessment data of greater validity because details of these learning experiences are readily and accurately recalled by students. In contrast, the standard, end-of-course evaluation instrument tends requires students to recall learning experiences that may date back to the beginning of the term.

The *one-minute paper* (described in chapter 3) can be a effective and efficient form of course-embedded assessment that may be used to evaluate the impact of a specific FYS experiences—immediately after students experienced it. One-minute papers also encourage students to actively reflect upon and find personal meaning in their classroom-based experiences, which is an effective strategy for promoting deeper learning.

Another strategy for obtaining specific and frequent feedback is to ask small groups of students to provide verbal feedback on specific course components as they are experienced throughout the term. Haug (1992) uses this small-group strategy to obtain continuous course feedback by vesting the responsibility with a rotating group of students, typically referred to as “student managers” or a “student advisory committee,” whose role is to periodically solicit evaluative comments from their classmates and to meet regularly with their instructor throughout the term. These meetings between the instructor and student-management team members are designed to discuss students’ general satisfaction with the course and the effectiveness of specific instructional practices, while the course is still in progress. A variation of the student advisory committee is the “small group instructional diagnosis” (SGID), pioneered by Clark and Bekey (1979). In short, SGIDs are structured interviews with small groups of students conducted during the term by an outside facilitator, in the absence of the instructor, for purposes of generating feedback for course improvement. Small groups (4-6 students) select a recorder and try to reach consensus on two key questions: (a) What helps you learn in this course? and (b) What improvements would you like and how would you suggest they be made? Following about 10 minutes of discussion, the student groups report 2-3 ideas for each question to the entire class. The outside facilitator, typically a faculty peer or instructional development specialist, records the students’ ideas on the board and attempts to clarify and organize them into a coherent series of recommendations for the instructor (White, 1991).

All of these versions of frequent, classroom-centered assessment are also consistent with the concepts of classroom research (Cross, 1990; Cross & Steadman, 1996) and the scholarship of teaching—an expanded definition of scholarship that includes research on the teaching-and-learning process (Boyer, 1991; Weimer, 1992). Classroom-research efforts may be used as formative assessment to improve specific course components and as summative assessment to document the course’s overall value; at the same time, this course-embedded research can serve as a serving as legitimate scholarship opportunity for course instructors that may enhance their prospects for professional advancement.

INSTRUCTORSELF-ASSESSMENT

By engaging in reflective self-assessment, FYS instructors can become actively involved in the assessment process. Instructional self-assessment can take the form of a teaching portfolio, which may include any or all of the following materials: (a) personal statement of educational philosophy, (b) narrative summary of key of teaching practices or strategies, (c) classroom research on the FYS, (d) supplementary instructional materials created for use in the FYS, and (e) FYS-related professional development activities.

Instructor reflections on, and written responses, to their students’ course evaluations would be a key component of a teaching portfolio. For instance, instructors could devote a section of their portfolio to express their reactions to, interpretations of, or explanations for their students’ course evaluations, which might include their thoughts about why they received high evaluations with respect to certain teaching functions, and how they might address or redress areas in which they were perceived least favorably.  
 Another vehicle for promoting instructor self-assessment with respect to student evaluations is to have instructors complete the same assessment instrument as students, responding to it as they see themselves or as they think their students would respond. Discrepancies that emerge between how instructors and students respond to the same assessment instrument can create the type of cognitive dissonance needed to promote productive change.

#### PEERASSESSMENT

Research in the area of faculty development strongly supports the effectiveness of peer feedback and collegial dialogue for promoting instructional improvement (Eble & McKeachie, 1985); thus, it is reasonable to expect that peer assessment and feedback would improve the quality of FYS instruction as well.

An instructor-evaluation instrument that is designed primarily for student assessment of instructors may also be adopted or adapted for *peer* assessment.  For instance, teams of instructors could agree to review each other’s student evaluations for the mutually supportive purpose of improving their instructional performance. Peer assessment may be conducted in a confidential or anonymous manner by having instructors receive the student evaluations of an anonymous colleague and provide that colleague with constructive feedback; at the same time, the instructor who provides feedback anonymously to colleague also receives feedback anonymously from a colleague. Thus, each instructor receives feedback from, and provides feedback to, an instructional colleague.   
 Peer assessment has the potential to be a powerful performance-improvement tool because feedback from a colleague, which is likely to be perceived as less threatening and more credible than feedback delivered by a superior or outside consultant. Peer assessment provides feedback coming from a co-worker who is also “in the trenches,” performing the same work, facing the same challenges, and coping with the same constraints.

**ASSESSMENT BY THE COURSE COORDINATOR/DIRECTOR**

In addition to student, peer, and self-assessment, the *program director* also has a role to play in the assessment process. It is the program director who is uniquely positioned to review the assessments received by all instructors and see the collective “big picture.” For example, detecting trends or recurrent themes that emerge when student assessments are aggregated and viewed as a composite, the director can gain a panoramic perspective of the course’s overall effectiveness, moving student evaluations to a broader focus on *program* assessment.

The program director is also well positioned to identify “critical incidents” that, collectively, can provide qualitative data patterns of weaknesses in the FYS program (for example, common sources or causes of student complaints and grievances, or recurrent reasons given by students for seeking a change of instructors). Themes that emerge from careful cataloging these incidents may then be used as target zones for course-improvement efforts.

The following practices are recommended to FYS directors as strategies for “closing the loop,” i.e., taking the final step in the assessment process that involves actually using the data collected to effect change in the quality of FYS instruction.

**Use the assessment results to guide *professional development* programming for FYS instructors.** One way this can be done is by identifying items on the student-evaluation instrument that instructors tend to receive the lowest overall student ratings (aggregated across all instructors). These items could then be used to prioritize and energize discussion of performance-improvement strategies at professional development workshops for FYS instructors.

**Create opportunities for instructors who receive *exceptional* assessment results o *share* their effective practices with others.** Another way to equip instructors with specific strategies for improving the effectiveness of FYS instruction is to showcase the practices of instructors who receive exceptionally strong evaluations on certain items (dimensions) of teaching measured by the evaluation instrument. For example, a panel of outstanding instructors could share specific teaching strategies or practices that they think were responsible for the exceptional evaluations they received on certain dimensions of teaching. (In addition to helping close the assessment loop by supplying other instructors with specific performance-improvement strategies, this procedure serves to publicly recognize and personally validate a varietyof instructors for teaching excellence.)

**When instructors receive their assessment results, supply them with s*pecific performance-improvement strategies* for each characteristic or outcome that is being assessed.** Instructors should not only receive a *descriptive* summary of their assessment results; they should also receive a *prescriptive* summary of specific strategies, or a compendium of best practices, which they can use to improve their performance with respect to each dimension of instruction that was assessed. The importance of providing instructors with *specific* performance feedback is underscored by research on student evaluations, which indicates that specific feedback is more effective for helping instructors understand their evaluation results and improve their instructional performance (Brinko, 1993; Goldschmid, 1978;). Furthermore, instructors report that they prefer feedback that is specific and focused on concrete teaching behaviors (Brinko, 1993; Murray, 1987).

**Report assessment results in a manner that *minimizes defensiveness* and *maximizes development*.** One non-threatening way to provide course instructors with specific strategies for instructional improvement is to create opportunities for them to share concrete teaching practices that have worked for them. Strategies could be solicited specifically for each item on the assessment form and a compendium of item-specific strategies could then be sent to all instructors—ideally, at the same time they receive the results of their course assessments. In this fashion, instructors are not only provided with a descriptive summary of student-assessment results, but also with a prescriptive summary of specific strategies they could immediately implement to improve their instructional performance with respect to each item on the assessment instrument.

Another potentially effective procedure for decreasing instructor defensiveness and increasing instructor focus on performance improvement is to collapse data across all instructors and use the aggregated results as a focal point for discussion. This practice serves to steer group discussion toward the issue of how *w*e, as a *team*, could improve *our* course. When reviewing the results with all instructors, “we” messages tend to keep the focus on *us* (the total program or teaching team), whereas “you” messages place the focus on *them* (individual instructors). For instance, if attention is focused on items for which instructors received the least favorable evaluation—on average or as a total group; then, the question may be asked: “What could *we* do to improve student perceptions of or satisfaction with this particular aspect of *our* FYS instruction?” Focusing on *collective* rather than *individual* strengths and weaknesses serves to depersonalize the assessment process and reduce the defensiveness that often accompanies performance evaluation.

**Make intentional, strategic decisions about the *time and place* where the results of instructor assessment will be discussed.** When and where assessment results are to be discussed can affect how instructors respond to the results and how responsive they are to exploring strategies for self-improvement. For example, assessment data could be shared in the early evening following dinner in an informal venue, which can create an atmosphere in which participants may review data and discuss improvement strategies in a relaxed and reflective manner. If a high-level administrator funds and attends the dinner, a strong message is sent to the college community that assessment and improvement of FYS instruction is a top institutional priority.

**Allow instructors the opportunity to assess theFYS p*rogram or system* from their perspective.** Instructors should be given the opportunity to assess the FYS program from their perspective and suggest resources that would better enable them to transform their assessment results into improved teaching. For example, instructors could assess (a) the quality of administrative support they receive for teaching the FYS, (b) the effectiveness of instructor orientation, training, and development they received, (c) the usefulness of support materials or technological tools provided for them, (d) the viability of their class size, and (e) the effectiveness of course administration policies and procedures. (See Appendix \_\_ for a sample “Instructor Survey.”)

There are two key advantages associated with allowing instructors the opportunity to assess the quality of administrative support they receive to do their jobs effectively: (a) It provides feedback to the program director that may be used for program improvement (for example, what instructors think could be done to better support their quest for instructional quality), and (b) it actively involves instructors in the assessment process, sending them a clear message that their input is valued and that they are not being treated as passive pawns or disengaged “objects” of evaluation.

To obtain early student feedback and to maximize the opportunity for instructors to make instructional improvements *while the course is still in progress*, conduct course assessment at midterm. Cohen (1980) conducted a meta-analysis of 17 studies on the effectiveness of student-rating feedback for improving course instruction. He found that receiving feedback from student ratings during the first half of the term was positively associated with instructional improvement—as measured by the difference in student ratings received at midterms (before feedback was received), and ratings received at the end of the term (after midterm feedback had been received).

FYS instructors can capitalize on the advantages of early feedback by administering the student-evaluation form at midterm and compare these results with those obtained at the end of the course—after some instructional change was made in response to students’ midterm feedback. Thus, pre-midterm to post-midterm gain in students ratings could be attributed to the particular instructional change that was implemented during the second half of the course. This is the type of “classroom research” which has been strongly endorsed as a legitimate form of faculty scholarship (Boyer, 1991) and which integrates educational research with instructional practice (Cross & Angelo, 1988).

**Research Designs for *Evaluating* Course Impact on Student Success**

Thus far, the assessment strategies discussed in this chapter have focused on formative evaluation—to *improve* program quality on a continuous basis. Ongoing assessment not only promotes continuous quality improvement, it may also allow program directors to “accrue a record of accomplishment that gives added legitimacy to the program’s future” (Chaskes & Anttonen, 2005, p. 202). However, formative evaluations may need to be supplemented or augmented by summative-evaluation methods that are more directly designed to generate solid, “bottom-line” evidence of program benefits for students and the institution. Although there is a plethora of national (cross-institutional) research that can be cited to support the power of the FYS, it is almost inevitable that the question will still be raised about whether these findings really apply to “our students” or “our institution” (Upcraft, 2005).

The following assessment methods are designed primarily for summative evaluation—to *prove* the program’s overall impact or value. The need for summative evaluation of the FYS is well articulated by Barefoot and Fidler (1996):

First-year seminars are generally held to higher expectations with respect to

outcomes than any other course in the curriculum. The absence of such outcomes

(or lack of research to demonstrate outcomes) may spell the demise of the course.

“Successful” seminars—those that enjoy strong broad-based institutional support

and long life—are courses [that] are evaluated on a regular basis, and results of

this assessment are made available to the entire campus community (pp. 5-6, 61).

In addition to ensuring course survival, a course-evaluation plan is important for securing institutional approval to *initiate* a first-year seminar program. As Kenny (1996) advises, “Assessment should be built into the proposal. Not only will this disarm opposition, but it will keep program designers focused and will enhance program credibility” (p. 71).

Decisions about what research methods should be used to evaluate the impact of a course or program should be made *before* data are collected and analyzed (Halpern, 1987). In the case of the FYS, decisions about the research design or method for evaluating the course should be made as part of the course-planning process. Listed below are descriptions of a variety of potential research designs for assessing the FYS, accompanied by a discussion of their relative advantages and disadvantages.

***Experimental* Design**

This research method involves comparing results (outcomes) for students who are *randomly assigned* to either: (a) an “experimental” group—students who participate in the first-year seminar, or (b) a “control” group—students who do not participate in the course. Historically, this method has been considered to be the scientifically ideal or “true” experimental design for evaluating educational programs because random assignment of students controls for the confounding influence of the *volunteer effect* or *self-selection bias*, i.e., students who volunteer to become involved in an educational program, selecting themselves for program participation, are more likely to be motivated and committed students than are students who elect not to participate. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) articulate the importance of random assignment when conducting research on the impact of educational programs:

It has been axiomatic in the educational research community that the most valid

approach for estimating the causal link between two variables and thus the net

effect of one on the other is through the random assignment of individual subjects

to experimental and control groups. Unfortunately, the necessary conditions for a

true or randomized experiment are extremely difficult to obtain in actual field

settings where self-selection rather than random assignment is the rule. Perhaps

*the* basic problem in assessing the unique influence of college on students is the

issue of student self-selection or recruitment (pp. 657-658).

In the case of the FYS, if the volunteer effect is not controlled for, any positive outcomes associated with course participation may be attributed to the more motivated nature of first-year students who choose to enroll themselves in the seminar, rather than to the actual effect or impact of the course itself (Fidler, 1992). For example, Schwitzer, Robbins, & McGovern (1993) who found that first-year students who enrolled voluntarily in a first-year orientation course had a better sense of goal directedness and were experiencing fewer adjustment problems than freshmen who chose not to take the course.

One strategy for circumventing the methodological problem of self-selection bias is to recruit more students who voluntarily choose to participate in the course than the number of course sections that can accommodate them. Half of the students who expressed interest in taking the course are then randomly selected to fill all the available course sections, thus serving as the experimental group. The course is then closed and the remaining half of students who wanted to enroll in the course cannot take it, and they serve as the control group. To ensure that students who comprise the control and experimental groups are representative of the total first-year population on campus, a *stratified random sampling* procedure may be used. In this procedure, before students are randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group, they are subdivided into strata (subgroups or subpopulations) that represent their approximate proportions in the first-year student population as a whole. For example, if 75% of the first-year population resides on campus and 25% commute, then these same percentages should comprise the experimental and control groups. Students are then randomly selected from each of the designated subpopulations and assigned to both the experimental and control groups.

The major disadvantage of the experimental design is an ethical one: Random selection of students to become course participants or non-participants (members of the control group) results in the arbitrary denial of course access to one-half of the students who want to participate in the program and who may not have benefited from experiencing the program (Pascarella, 1986). This parallels an ethical issue in medical research on promising drugs: Do you arbitrarily deny certain patients access to a promising drug that could significantly enhance the quality of their lives, or possibly save their lives, so they can conveniently serve as the “placebo” control group in an experiment designed to test the drug’s effectiveness? Analogously, do you arbitrarily deny certain students access to a promising educational program (FYS) that could significantly enhance the quality of their college experience, or enable them to persist to degree completion, so that they can serve as a control group in an experiment designed to assess the program’s effectiveness? This ethical disadvantage of the experimental design may be countered by the argument that it is a justifiable to conduct a *pilot study* that affects only one cohort of new students, because its short-term costs to one-half of the current first-year class may be outweighed by the potential long-term benefits associated with eventual institutional installation or expansion of the FYS so that it reaches larger numbers of future first-year cohorts. Thus, the experimental design could be viewed as ethically acceptable because it provides a methodologically rigorous research tool for marshalling solid empirical evidence for the FYS, which may enable the course to be “institutionalized” on a full-scale, long-term basis.

Some colleges have successfully employed this “true” *experimental* research design to demonstrate the positive impact of the FYS. One such student was conducted at the University of Maryland at College Park, where the results indicated that, relative to the control group, students who took the course displayed significantly higher rates of retention (with good academic standing) throughout their first four semesters on campus (Strumpf & Hunt, 1993). An experimental design was also used at Bloomsburg University (PA) to demonstrate that course participants experience higher levels of both academic and social integration—for example, more interactions with peers and with faculty outside the classroom, greater use of student services and participation in student clubs and organizations, and greater commitment to institutional and educational goals (Yale, 2000).

***Quasi-Experimental* (a.k.a., *Matched-Pair*) Design**

This research method involves comparing students who volunteer to participate in the FYS (experimental group) relative to a “*matched” control group*—i.e., a group of first-year students who elect not to participate in the course, but who are similar to (match) the experimental group with respect to personal characteristics that are known to influence educational outcomes. For example, students in experimental and control groups may be matched with respect to such influential characteristics as (a) high school grade-point average, (b) standardized college-admission test scores, (c) basic-skills placement test scores, (d) predicted GPA derived from weighted scores on college-preparation courses, (f) high school grades and SAT scores, (e) educational goals or objectives, (f) residential or commuter status, and (g) demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race or ethnicity. Matching course participants with non-participants in this fashion serves to control for the possibility that differences in outcomes between the two groups could simply be due to differences in the personal characteristics of students who chose to take the course.

North Dakota State University used a quasi-experimental design to conduct a longitudinal study of 1700 students was conducted on four classes of entering student cohorts. Entering students who participated in a first-year seminar were matched with non-participants with respect to a variety of pre-college characteristics that included ACT composite scores, high school rank, size of high school graduating class, and intended academic major. Students who experienced the FYS exhibited higher rates of retention at the end of each year of college enrollment, from first year to the year of graduation for seminar participants than did the matched group of non-participants (Schnell, Louis, & Doetkott, 2003), and course participants had higher 4- and 5-year graduation rates (Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003).

A major ethical advantage of this “matched pair” research design is that it allows all students who express interest in taking the first-year seminar to have access to the course, thus circumventing the ethical problem associated with an experimental design—which arbitrarily denies course access to some students so that they can serve as a control group.

However, one methodological disadvantage of the matched-pair design is that students are *not* randomly assigned to experimental and control groups as they are in a true experimental design (hence its name, “*quasi*-experimental”). Consequently, this design fails to control for the volunteer effect or self-selection bias, leaving open the possibility that any positive outcomes resulting from course participation may be due to the highly motivated nature of students who elect to enroll in the first-year seminar, rather than to the effects of the course itself.

One possible strategy for addressing this limitation of the quasi-experimental research design is to survey students in both the experimental group and matched-control group to assess whether there are differences in their level of college motivation. This strategy was implemented instance, at the University of South Carolina, where a short survey was designed to assess students’ motivation to stay in college and complete their degree. This survey was administered to both first-year seminar participants and non-participants. Comparisons of survey responses provided by course participants and non-participants revealed no differences between the two groups in their motivation to stay in college and complete their degree. Thus, the higher first-year-to-sophomore retention rate evidenced by students who participated in the university’s FYS could not be dismissed as an artifact of more motivated students being enrolled in the course (Fidler, 1991).

Similarly, the University of South Carolina has administered the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey to assess the “joining” behavior of freshmen prior to college entry. These survey results indicate that there are no differences between students who enroll in the first-year seminar and those who do not. Hence, the higher rate of participation in co-curricular activities found among FYS participants is unlikely to be due to the act that students with greater motivation for extracurricular involvement select themselves into the course (Gardner, 1994).

***Time-Series* Design**

In this research designs, outcomes assessed *after* implementation of the first-year seminar are compared with the same outcomes achieved *prior* to the seminar’s adoption. For example, first-year-to-sophomore retention rates at the college after adoption of the FYS are compared with first-year-to-sophomore retention rates preceding course adoption. The advantage of this design is that it provides a type of “historical” control group—against which the effects of FYS participation may be compared—without having to withhold the course from a portion of new students so that they can serve as a “real time” (contemporary) control group.

However, two caveats should be heeded when employing the time-series research design: (a) The personal characteristics of entering freshmen during years before and after implementation of the FYS should be similar or matched, thus assuring that positive changes in student outcomes subsequent to course implementation cannot simply be simply attributed to changes in the entry characteristics of the first-year class (e.g., admittance of more academically qualified students after the FYS was implemented). (b) At least two years of outcome data should be gathered before and after implementation of the FYS, because year-to-year changes in student outcomes (e.g., retention) may simply reflect random, short-term chance deviation (Pascarella, 1986). Gathering data for two or more years before and after program implementation serves to increase confidence that positive changes are due to FYS implementation, rather than random (chance) variation. Gathering data for a longer time period also results in a larger sample size, which can enhance the power or sensitivity of statistical tests (e.g., t-tests and chi square analyses) that may be used to detect pre- to post-implementation differences in student outcomes (Cohen, 1988).

Ramapo College (New Jersey) employed the time-series design to show that the average first-year-to-sophomore retention rate new students who participated in the FYS during a five-year period immediately after the course became a requirement was significantly higher than the average retention rate for students who had entered the college during the three-year period immediately before the course was required (Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001). Similarly, a time-series design was used at Averett College (VA) to demonstrate that after implementation of an FYS, there was a 26% reduction in first-year-to-sophomore attrition rate and a 24% drop in the percentage of new students who ended their first year in academic difficulty (Vinson, 1993). It is noteworthy that neither of these colleges made changes in their student-admission standards or initiated other student-success promoting interventions during the period when they employed the time-series design to demonstrate FYS impact.

***Multiple Regression Analysis* (a.k.a., *Multivariate Analysis*)**

This statistical procedure has been the one most commonly used by leading researchers to assess the impact of different college experience on student outcomes (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). In short, multiple regression analysis involves computing correlations between student-outcome variables—e.g., student retention or academic performance and two other types of variables—(a) student input variables—e.g., entering students’ SAT scores and (b) college experience variables—e.g., student participation in the first-year seminar. For a detailed explanation of multivariate analysis, consult the appendices in Astin (1991) or Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). The following synopsis of multivariate analysis has been adapted from Astin (1993) and applied to assessment of the first-year seminar.

The first step in multiple regression analysis is to compute correlations between all influential student-input characteristics and a single student outcome in order to obtain a “prediction score” or “estimated outcome” score for that particular outcome—for example, the predicted or estimated first-year retention rate for such student-input characteristics as their entering high-school GPA, SAT, and placement-test scores. This estimated outcome score, based on characteristics which students bring with them to the institution, serves as a type of “statistical” control group or baseline against which to compare the effects of later college experiences on that outcome. For instance, if students who participate in a first-year seminar go on to display a higher retention rate than would be expected or predicted from their college-entry characteristics, then this discrepancy (called the “residual score”) suggests that participating in the seminar (a college experience variable) is having a positive effect on retention (a student outcome variable).

The degree or amount of the seminar’s effect can be assessed by computing the correlation between the residual score it produces and the student outcome in question. This partial correlation (called the “beta” coefficient) represents the degree to which the educational experience and the student outcome are statistically related—after all other potentially biasing student characteristics have been controlled for. In other words, it represents what the first-year seminar experience adds to the predicted student outcome—above and beyond what would be predicted by the student’s input characteristics.

Thus, it could be said that multiple regression analysis attempts to control for confounding student variables *statistically*, i.e., by computing and comparing correlations between student input variables and student outcomes, whereas the aforementioned experimental and quasi-experimental research designs attempt to gain this control *procedurally*, i.e., by the procedures used to select and assign students to experimental and control groups.

Multiple regression analysis can also be adapted to assess whether the effect of the first-year seminar (or any other college-experience variable) on a student outcome is “direct” or “indirect.” A college-experience variable is considered to have a *direct* effect on a student outcome if its beta coefficient remains statistically significant even after correlations between that student outcome and all other college-experience variables have been included in the regression analysis. This suggests that a particular college-experience variable is making a unique or independent contribution to the student outcome that cannot be accounted for by other college-experience variables. A college-experience variable is deemed to have an *indirect* effect on a student outcome if its beta coefficient, which was significant after student input (entry) characteristics were controlled for, is later reduced to nonsignificance when other college-experience variables are added to the regression equation. This suggests that the effect of the particular college-experience variable is accounted for, or mediated by, other college-experience variables.

There are three key advantages associated with the use of multiple regression analysis: (a) It circumvents the disadvantage of a “true” experimental design in which first-year students are denied access to the course so they can be used as a control group.

(b) It provides information on whether the addition of separate college-experience variables results in any incremental change in the predicted score for a student outcome (Banta, 1988). For example, multiple regression analysis can answer the following question: Would adding student participation in the FYS result in a higher than predicted rate of student retention than student participation in the new-student orientation alone?

(c) It provides information on what proportion or percentage of an outcomes variance can be attributed to a particular student-input or college-experience variable (by squaring its beta coefficient). Thus, it can provide an estimate of each variable’s relative influence on the student outcome under investigation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). For example, multiple regression analysis the researcher to calculate the approximate percentage of total variance in new students’ first-year GPA that is attributable to their participation in the FYS, relative to the percentage of variance accounted for by students’ entering SAT, high-school GPA, or placement-test scores.

Two limitations of multiple regression analysis have been cited in the assessment literature: (a) The procedure does not allow assessment of how joint or common variance between college-experience variables and student-input variables may interact to influence outcomes (Hanson, 1988). (b) It assumes that any outcome variance that may be attributed to the joint influence of student-input and college-experience variables is attributed solely to the student-input variable. Thus, the influence of student-input variables on outcomes may be overestimated while the influence of college-experience variables may be underestimated (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

However, proponents of multiple regression analysis consider these to be minor limitations that do not adversely affect the procedure’s validity and the interpretability of the results generated by it (Astin, 1991; A.W. Astin, personal communication, October 21, 1992).

**Whatever research design is used to evaluate the FYS, the person evaluating the course should be an unbiased “external” (“third party”) evaluator who has no vested interest in the course.** This practice guards against evaluator bias—the tendency of the individual who designed or conducted a study, when involved in evaluating the resulting data, to unwittingly skew the findings in the direction of its intended outcome. Evaluator bias tends to occur because of (a) the “believing is seeing” trap (Weick, 1979), whereby the researcher sees what he expects to see and perceives ambiguous information in the direction of the expected or desired results (Arnoult, 1976), and (b) the *Rosenthal effect*, in which unrecognized behaviors on the part of the researcher may tacitly encourage or reinforce the study’s participants to respond in ways that support the intended results (Rosenthal, 1966, 1974).

For example, we would more likely be persuaded by research on the health effects of cigarette smoking that was designed, conducted, and analyzed by an external, university-affiliated research team, rather than by investigators employed by, or affiliated with, the American tobacco industry. When the FYS was originally piloted at the University of South Carolina, its evaluation was conducted by a “highly respected researcher who had no official relationship to or responsibility for the program being studied” (Gardner, 1986, p. 271).

Most campuses have faculty, professional staff, and even students who have the expertise and potential to serve as an outside evaluator for the FYS (Upcraft, 2005). Faculty in the departments of education or social and behavioral sciences may be a good source of faculty with the graduate training and professional expertise needed to conduct program assessment. Fidler (1992) suggests that faculty from the departments of computer science, mathematics and statistics may have valuable expertise they can lend to the study’s design or data analysis. As Altman (1988) urges, “Make use of ‘local talent’ among the faculty. There is often a great deal of faculty expertise which gets hired by other campuses by outside sources, but which is ignored on the home campus, where it is often available for free” ( p. 126).

Student development professionals not directly involved in the creation or implementation of the FYS may also serve as third-party evaluators because their graduate training often involves use of sophisticated methodologies for assessment the impact of programs designed to promote student development.

Another potential source of assistance in conducting assessment of the first-year seminar are *students*. For instance, graduate students from relevant academic departments or from student development programs could assist in program assessment. The potential for involving graduate students in FYS assessment is highlighted by the founder of the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience in a statement he made during the earlier stages of the first-year experience movement: “I could not have anticipated the flood of requests we would receive from graduate students, both at the masters and the doctoral level, who would be interested in doing empirical research measuring the effectiveness of programming for freshmen” (Gardner, 1992, p. 3). Trained, upper-division undergraduates might also assist in FYS assessment, perhaps as research assistants on graduate-undergraduate student research teams, or as members of faculty-student research teams.

***Cost/Benefit Analysis***

The results generated by the aforementioned research designs are typically analyzed in terms of their statistical significance. However, it is important to be mindful of the distinction between statistical significance and practical significance. The results of research on the FYS, or any other institutional intervention, may produce results that do not reach levels of statistical significance, but still have practical significance and value. For example, research on the impact of the FYS on student retention may not yield results that are statistically significant, but they may still be *fiscally* significant to the institution. Early cost-effectiveness research on the first-year seminar (University 101) offered at the University of South Carolina revealed that for every $1.00 used to support its FYS, the course generated $5.36 in return (Gardner, 1981).

A FYS that generates a very modest increase in student retention (e.g., 5%) may not produce an increase in the total number of re-enrolling students that reaches a level of statistical significance (e.g., p<.05 or p<.01). However, the revenue gained from this modest increase in additional tuition-paying and fee-generating students may contribute significantly to the institutional budget, particularly at private postsecondary institutions whose operational budgets are heavily tuition dependent, and even at public colleges and universities that are becoming increasingly more tuition-dependent because of cutbacks in state support (Schuh, 2005).

Thus, in addition to its statistical impact on student retention, the impact of the FYS evaluation should also be interpreted in light of the course’s fiscal impact on institutional revenue. Noel-Levitz (1998-2008) provides a free “retention revenue estimator” that can be used to conveniently convert increased student retention rates into increased institutional revenue. The calculator can be accessed at the following website: [www.noelleviz,com/Papers+and+Research/Retention+Calculator/](http://www.noelleviz,com/Papers+and+Research/Retention+Calculator/)

  A rigorous cost-effectiveness test of the fiscal impact of first-year programming was conducted by Seton Hall University. The cost/benefit ratio of its first-year studies program was evaluated by means of two statistical techniques that are commonly used in business to evaluate the economic benefits of alternative courses of action: (a) “break-even analysis” (Larimore, 1974), and (b) “elasticity coefficient” (Hoffman, 1986). Two faculty from the university’s department of economics used these procedures to assess whether the total revenue generated by its first-year studies program equaled or exceeded the total costs incurred by the program. They found that the break-even point for an entering class of approximately 1,000 students who participated in Seton Hall’s first-year studies program was an increase of 21 students, which represented an increased retention rate of only about two percent. Thus, if implementation of the program leads to the retention of 21 additional students who would otherwise have withdrawn from the college, the program will have paid for itself. The results of this campus-specific study led it investigators to conclude that Seton Hall’s first-year studies program was “cost efficient [and] will more than pay for itself in economic terms alone without taking into account the quality benefits that accrue to the university and the retained students” (Ketkar & Bennet, 1989, p. 43). These cost- effectiveness findings were replicated in a subsequent study at the same university (Murtuza & Ketkar, 1995).

More recently, the Colorado Community College System has created a cost-benefit analysis model to evaluate the cost effectiveness of newly implemented programs. Bucking the traditional practice of evaluating new programs solely in terms of short-term cost analysis (e.g., startup and ongoing costs), the cost-benefit model represents a different, more strategic analysis of productivity. Analyses conducted with this cost-benefit model have revealed that effective student- success interventions require additional investment of resources, but over time, the additional investment is offset by increased institutional revenue generated by increased retention (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008).

These findings strongly suggest is that comprehensive assessment of the first-year seminar’s overall impact should involve not only its statistical effect on student-related outcomes, but also its practical effect on institutional outcomes, such as institutional revenue. The results generated by this form of assessment may provide powerful, persuasive data that may be used to attain and sustain fiscal support for the FYS.

**Research Methods for Recording and Analyzing**

**Students’ Out-of-Class Behavior**

Data gathered on student activity outside the classroom can provide evidence on how the FYS may be affecting the incidence and frequency of productive student behaviors that are associated with college success. Listed below are examples of behavioral records that may be used for this purpose.

\* *Logs* documenting student use of campus-support programs (for example, student use of the academic advisement or career center).

\* *Trace audits*, a.k.a., “credit card measures” of student involvement (for example, using student-identification cards to measure the incidence and frequency of student use of academic support services).

\* *Transcript analysis* of students’ course-enrollment patterns to assess progress toward completion of academic programs and degrees (for example, number of students withdrawing from courses during the first year; percentage of first-year students placed on academic probation or qualifying for academic honors).

\* *Student development (co-curricular) transcripts* of student participation in on-campus

clubs, student organizations, campus activities, and college-sponsored community service.

Using these behavioral records, comparisons can be made between the behavior of students who have participated in the first-year seminar and students who have not experienced the course. “Tracking” student behavior in this fashion may also reveal patterns associated with different student subpopulations (e.g., underrepresented versus majority students). Such patterns may prove useful for identifying students who are under-utilizing campus services and who might profit from more “intrusive” FYS practices designed to promote their involvement (e.g., requiring involvement via course assignments).

Admittedly, colleges and universities typically have not kept careful records of the above-mentioned student behaviors, but if such record keeping is built into the first-year-seminar assessment plan, it may serve as a “spark plug” for igniting institutional commitment to the systematic collection and analysis of students’ behavioral records.

**Identify differences in outcomes across *different sections* of the course.** Any course that is offered in multiple sections has the potential for providing investigators with a very useful research design for gathering information about how differences in instruction can influence student outcomes. Between-section differences in student characteristics can be controlled for, either by random assignment or by checking the background characteristics of students after they have selected their course sections to ensure that they do not vary systematically across sections. If between-section differences are minimized further by use of (a) common course objectives, (b) a common syllabus, (c) a common textbook, (d) common class sizes, and (e) a common evaluation instrument designed to assess the same student outcomes, then a *multi-section research design* can be created to assess differences in outcomes across course sections that may be attributed to differences in the nature of instruction delivered in different course sections (Cohen, 1981; Abrami, d’Apollonia, & Cohen, 1990).

For instance, suppose one desired outcome of the first-year seminar is to increase student utilization of campus resources. If course assessments obtained in one particular section of the course indicate that students in this section report more frequent use of campus resources than the course average for all seminar sections combined, then this finding may suggest that a specific approach or method used by the instructor in this particular course section is especially effective for achieving the outcome of increased student use of campus resources. Such fine-grained analyses conducted across course sections may unearth other section-specific differences in outcomes. These differences are likely to emerge because of subtle variations in approaches to course content and instructional delivery that are likely to take place across different sections of the FYS when it is offered in a multiple-section format. (Detection of these subtle differences may be facilitated further if course-assessment instruments are intentionally designed to include items that ask students about the impact of specific course topics and specific instructional processes on specific outcomes.)

Multiple regression analysis might also be adapted and used as a strategy for teasing out the effects of different aspects of the course on different student outcomes. Different types of course experiences might be entered as variables in the multiple regression equation (e.g., number of writing assignments or number of student-faculty conferences outside of class) to assess whether these course-experience variables have any differential impact on student outcomes.

Behavioral records may also be used to assess differences between students’ out-of-class behavior in different sections of the course, which may indicate that certain instructors are having greater impact on promoting this student outcome. Instructors who are more effective in promoting student involvement in campus life could be encouraged to share strategies that are contributing to their effectiveness.

*Behavioral* outcomes may be measured by including questions on end-of-class surveys that ask students to report how *frequently* they engaged in certain behaviors during their first term; for example, “How frequently did you participate in co-curricular activities this term: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or more?” Or, instead of using students’ self-reports, behavioral logs may be kept by student development or student service professionals that track FYS students’ use of specific campus services and their participation in particular campus activities. Measuring behavioral outcomes of the seminar in this way can reap dividends in securing administrative support for the course, because behavioral outcomes demonstrate the impact the course is having on students’ actual behavior, which represents a very concrete outcome of the course that’s difficult to dispute or dismiss.

**Writing and Disseminating an Assessment Report**

An important final step in the course-evaluation process is the construction and distribution of an assessment report. A well-written report may spell the difference between continued program support and program elimination. As Trudy Banta notes, “Assessment information is often particularly useful in selling a decision once it has been taken. Because it is concrete, such information can be extremely effective in communicating needs and priorities to those responsible for making resource-allocation decisions” (1988, p. 24). Banta’s suggestion is particularly pertinent for FYS assessment because of its perennial struggle to gain and sustain institutional support.

In addition to securing resource support for the FYS, construction and dissemination of an assessment report can have positive impact on the morale of those involved with the program, enabling them to “see” tangible results for their efforts and to be recognized publicly for their contributions. This can serve to revitalize their interest in the program and reinforce their continuing commitment to and enthusiasm for the FYS, which in turn, should increase to the course’s prospects for long-term survival.

It is for these reasons that a well-written and strategically distributed FYS assessment report is strongly recommended. The following suggestions are offered as recommendations for enhancing the report’s quality and impact.

**Include discussion of how the assessment results can be put to *use*, i.e., what specific *action* steps could be taken in response to the assessment results.** Analyzing and summarizing the results are two important elements of an assessment report, but the report is not complete until it includes at least some discussion of practical implications and intended action strategies. The distinction between these components of a comprehensive is clearly articulated by Astin (1991): “Analysis refers primarily to the statistical or analytical procedures that are applied to the raw assessment data and to the manner in which the results of these analyses are displayed visually; utilization has to do with how the results of assessment analyses are actually used by educators and policy makers to improve the talent development process” (1991, p. 94).

A common complaint about assessment initiatives in higher education is that they frequently fail to “close the loop” (Johnson, 1993, p. 7), i.e., the results often sit in some office without any meaningful follow-up action. To ensure that FYS assessment efforts do not culminate in the same state of “permanent storage,” a well-defined plan for follow-up action should be incorporated into the assessment report. This plan should include answers to the following implementation questions: (a) What needs to be done? (b) Who will do it? (c) When will action be initiated and completed? and (d) What anticipated obstacles or roadblocks need to be overcome in order to initiate, execute, and complete the intended action plan? The ultimate power of an assessment report rests not in the sheer compilation of data, or even the knowledge gained from its analysis, but in the conversion of acquired data and knowledge into informed practice. As the influential empirical philosopher, Francis Bacon, states: “Knowledge is power; but mere knowledge is not power; it is only possibility. Action is power; and its highest manifestation is when it is directed by knowledge” (quoted in Nemko, 1988, p. 6).

The final, key step in a comprehensive and well-executed assessment plan is to “close the loop” by converting the results of assessment into actual program improvement. This completes the cycle of assessment, bringing it back full circle to fulfill its original purpose: improving the quality the FYS by improving the quality of teaching delivered by its instructors and the quality of learning experienced by its students.

**Relate the assessment results to the *college mission statement* and to specific *institutional goals*.** Ewell (1988) points out that a “critical task for institutional researchers is the transformation of data into useful information [and] the usefulness of information will be determined by its reasonable and demonstrable linkage to particular institutional goals” (p. 24). The ability of FYS assessment to accommodate this recommendation is promising because the course pursues student-centered outcomes and holistic-development goals that are often strikingly consistent with the majority of college mission statements. College and university mission statements tend to embrace educational institutional goals that go well beyond the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge to include learning outcomes that are more often psychosocial, experiential, and student-centered in nature (Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1987; Lenning, 1988). Consequently, the holistic and skill-oriented focus of the FYS is likely to include intended student outcomes that are quite congruent with those found in institutional mission statement. Capitalizing on this fortuitous congruency should serve to increase the persuasive scope and power of the FYS assessment report.

**Tailor the content and tone of the assessment report so that it targets the specific interests and needs of the *audience* receiving it.** Consider the different audiences who will review and how the data presented may need to be varied to meet their different interests or needs. For example, data that may be of great interest and use to faculty may not necessarily be the kind of data that administrators need or want (Hansen, 1982). In the case of the FYS, if the audience is faculty, assessment results pointing to the course’s impact on improving students’ academic skills and preparedness should be showcased. If budget-conscious administrators are the target audience for the assessment report, then the first-year seminar’s impact on enrollment management and institutional finances should be explicitly emphasized or highlighted. Administrators are also more likely to read a short, succinct summary (hence, the term “executive summary”), which contains practical implications related to effective use of institutional resources.

Some assessment scholars recommend that multiple research-report summaries should be prepared for multiple audiences (Marcus, Leone, & Goldberg, 1983; Suskie, 1992). “Probably the biggest mistake is to send the full report to all audiences and hope for the best” (Upcraft, Ishler, & Swing, 2005, p. 496).At first glance, constructing multiple report summaries may appear be onerous, but it could be accomplished expeditiously by simply merging and/or deleting certain sections of the total report to customize it for different audiences. In the time-conscious and information-overloaded world of academe, even research-minded faculty may be more inclined to read and react to shorter reports that relate specifically to their immediate professional concerns.

**Deliver the assessment report at a *time* when its intended audience will be most likely be receptive and responsive to it.** Some forethought should be given to the optimal timing for delivery of the assessment report. There may be natural rhythms or temporal junctures during the academic year when different campus constituents will be more or less receptive and responsive to assessment reports. For instance, reception of a report prior to Christmas or summer vacation may not generate the same timely response than if it were received at the beginning of an academic term—when members of the college community are more likely to be energized and when they will be working on campus for an extended period of time following reception of the report. As Krone and Hanson (1982) confess about an assessment report they once circulated:

The results were disseminated in the last weeks of the semester, and much of the

impact was lost. One of the most important things we learned from conducting

this study was that other factors played a significant role in how much attention is

given to the final results. When other competing activities—or bad timing—

interfere, it is very difficult to get people to pay attention to even very significant

findings (pp. 107 & 109).

**Conclusion**

A comprehensive FYS assessment plan should be built on and driven by sound foundational principles of effective program assessment, which may be encapsulated in one term: “multiplicity.” A comprehensive assessment plan accomplishes multiple *purposes* (formative and summative), measures multiple *outcomes* (affective, behavioral, and cognitive), embraces multiple *data sources* (students, peers, administrators, and self), and employs multiple *measurement methods* (subjective and objective, psychological and behavioral, qualitative and quantitative).

Comprehensive assessment also includes assessment across multiple points of time:

(a) *immediate* outcome goals associated with short-term effects of program participation (e.g., academic success during the first term), (b) *intermediate* outcome goals relating to mid-range effects of program participation (e.g., student retention to completion of the first-year year), and (c) *ultimate* outcome goals relating to impact of program participation (e.g., persistence to college graduation).

The assessment methodologies and procedures that FYS researchers have applied to assess the course’s impact on multiple outcomes are equally impressive. The non-traditional nature of the seminar’s intended outcomes and course content have often activated its home institution’s “organizational immune system,” triggering frequent and often hostile attacks on the seminar’s academic legitimacy as if it were a foreign virus. Consequently, the FYS has been one of higher education’s most repeatedly challenged and most thoroughly assessed programs. Necessity being the “mother of invention,” rigorous and innovative methodologies have been utilized to document the positive impact of first-year seminars in order to ensure their birth and survival. The effort and energy devoted to FYS assessment can serve as a stimulus for campus-wide awareness of and commitment to the pursuit of important educational outcomes. As Pat Hutchings observes,

Recognizing that the product of assessment will have certain inevitable

imperfections, however, one begins to attend to process—to new kinds and

levels of faculty discourse, greater attention to student learning, more explicit focus

on teaching strategies, a stronger sense of institutional identity. In this way,

assessment may have less to do with measurement than with on-going institutional

self-assessment and improvement (1987, p. 47).

The multiple methodologies and variety of student-centered outcomes associated with FYS assessment have the potential to serve as models that other campus-based assessment efforts may emulate. To increase the likelihood that other campus assessment initiatives are conducted with the same degree of rigor and quality as FYS assessment, John Gardner offers the following exhortation for those involved in successful first-year programs: “There is a real obligation for people like [those] who are committed to changing the first year, to educate the whole institution to everything you’ve learned so that they are moving in the same direction you are” (1991, p. 8). Thus, assessment of the FYS may acquire the capacity to function as a lightning rod for attracting and harnessing campus-wide interest in engaging in well-conducted assessment of other educational programs.