

2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars: Ongoing Efforts to Support Students in Transition

by Ryan D. Padgett and Jennifer R. Keup

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The 2009 survey on first-year seminars is a great read for anyone looking for a resource to compare their first-year seminar to similar institution types, as well as enhance their current first-year seminar program. The book offers a comprehensive overview of the varying types of first-year seminars, the common components that are encompassed within first-year seminar programs, and how the seminars may differ based on factors such as the institution type or size of the incoming class. The book is divided into three main sections, which include a section on seminar types, characteristics, and administration; a section on the instruction and pedagogy of first-year seminars; and a section on assessing first-year seminars. A brief introduction precedes these sections, and the book closes with implications for practice, followed by helpful appendices and references.

The introduction begins with a brief history of first-year seminars and their progression and popularity throughout the years. Specifically, the authors note that first-year seminars date back to the 19th century, had a slight decline by the late 1930s, and increased in popularity again by the late 1970s into the early 1980s. The authors are also very clear on helpful definitions within the introductory chapter. A first-year seminar is defined as “a course intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students by introducing them (a) to a variety of specific topics, which vary by seminar type, (b) to essential skills for college success; and (c) to selected processes, the most common of which is the creation of a peer support group” (p.2). The five types of first-year seminars to be addressed, which emerged from the analyzed data, are also defined.

The five types include extended orientation, academic with uniform content across sections, academic on various topics, pre-professional or discipline linked, and basic study skills. *Extended orientations* concentrate on student survival and success, *academic with uniform content across sections* have an academic theme that is consistent across all sections, *academic on various topics* have content that varies based on the individual or group who might teach the course, *pre-professional or discipline-linked* seminars focus on the tools needed for a particular discipline or

major, and a *basic study skills* seminar concentrates on enhancing the academic skills of underdeveloped students. The authors conclude the introduction by emphasizing that it is their intent that the book serve as a resource for faculty and staff, in an effort to positively improve first-year seminar programs.

Following the introduction, the first section, "Seminar Types, Characteristics, and Administration," offers an explanation of types of seminars, student participation in the seminars, whether students are required to take seminars, class size of seminars, course objectives of the seminars, and course topics among the seminars. Of the institutions that participated in the study, 87.3% offer a first-year seminar, and that 87.3% was the focus of the results described in the book. The most common and most populated type of seminar offered was the extended orientation seminar, while pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars were the least common. When looking at whether seminars were required or voluntary, the authors found that four-year (vs. two-year) and private (vs. public) institutions were more likely to require all students to participate in a first-year seminar. There is also evidence of specific types of groups being required to take seminar courses. For example, academically underprepared students and students within specific majors at two-year institutions had a higher likelihood of a seminar requirement. Interesting data on seminars targeted at special populations emerged also. One example is the targeting of honors students for special seminar classes at four-year institutions.

Considering the size of seminar classes, institutions reported larger first-year seminar class sizes as the size of their incoming class increased. Two-year and public institutions were most likely to have the largest first-year seminar class sizes. As it relates to course objectives, developing academic skills, developing a connection with the institution, and providing an orientation to various campus resources and services were the top three course objectives. The most popular seminar topics across all institutions in the study were campus resources, study skills, and academic planning and advising. The final heading within the first section addressed administrative aspects of the first-year seminar. The authors reported that a little over 50% of the institutions in the study reported that academic affairs was most often the unit which oversaw the logistics of the first-year seminar course. Other units include an academic department, first-year program office, or student affairs office. For other administrative aspects, most institutions indicated that the first-year seminar was a semester course (67.8%) and that students were given a letter grade for their work in the course (80.5%).

The second major section in the book highlighted instruction and pedagogy for first-year seminar courses. The authors presented information supporting that most first-year seminars are taught by full-time faculty, with student affairs professional and adjunct faculty also serving in such positions. In terms of how these individuals are paid for their time with first-year seminars, a stipend is the most common form of payment. Other forms of payment included no payment, as instruction of a first-year seminar was part of individuals' job description or a form of volunteer work; release time; professional development funds; and graduate student support. Training for individuals to teach first-year seminars was offered

by over 70 % of the institutions in the study and required by at least half of the institutional participants.

Finally, within the “Instruction and Pedagogy” section, the authors reported on various course practices, specifically online components, service learning, linked courses or learning communities, and common reading. Results indicated that over 50 % of institutions in the study had an online component, 40.3 percent had a service learning component, 35.7 % had their first-year seminar linked to another course, and about 31 % report a common reading program component to the first-year seminar.

The third and final major section in the book addressed assessing the first-year seminar. The authors highlight that, prior to beginning assessment, it is important to understand the goals of a particular program or initiative. The goals most articulated by institutions in relation to their first-year seminar were as follows: developing academic skills, developing a connection with the institution, and providing an orientation to campus resources and services. In order to assess their first-year seminar, most institutions utilize quantitative methods, most often in the form of course evaluations. Focus groups and interviews were often used as qualitative methods of collecting data for first-year seminars. After collecting the data, institutions found that persistence to the second year was a top assessment outcome. Other outcomes include academic performance, use of campus services, connections with peers, and participation in campus activities.

Upon closing the final section, the authors left readers with some implications for practice. A few of those implications include the connection between assessment and funding. The authors articulate the importance of having the data to show the need for and effect of first-year seminars, especially in a time of budget cuts. Another implication included the potential to increase the use of technology in first-year seminars. Many institutions reported having an online component, but there were few reports of online-only sections or uses of technological tools such as Skype or Prezi for content delivery. Considering the technological savvy of students today, it is important to support them in ways that speak to their learning styles. The authors also discussed the disconnect between first-year seminar goals and assessment outcomes. While the outcomes reported were important and valuable, the authors suggest that the outcomes did not align with the initial goals set forth.

While I only offered a brief overview of the most common results reported, the authors offer additional break-downs of how first-year seminars may differ based on the size or type of institution. I also enjoyed how results were often placed in context, as the authors would highlight how the type or size of an institution might affect how a first-year seminar is approached. The charts made the book a quick read. Every section was supplemented with a visual chart, which also appeals to a variety of learners. One critique includes the statistical language used in some sections, as it might prevent understanding for individuals not well versed in statistics.

Orientation, retention, and transition professionals will find this book valuable in assessing their specific first-year seminar type. This is because the authors do an excellent job of not only providing an overview, but also sub-

components, which identify trends based on institutional components. This allows professionals to apply information accordingly as it relates to their institution type. Overall, the book offers insightful information for any institution looking for trends in first-year seminars. Whether the information will be used to start a new program or enhance an existing program, the book is a good choice for a comprehensive review of information on first-year seminars.