



Introduction

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Over the years, a number of interventions aimed at increasing student engagement and performance have been implemented in higher education. Some of these, labeled *high-impact practices* (HIPs), when done well, have led to documented evidence of student success. Two approaches that have been identified as HIPs—first-year seminars and learning communities—are often brought together into what we refer to here as *first-year seminar/learning community* (FYS/LC) programs. In this book, authors from both two- and four-year colleges and universities across the country explore the rationale for offering these combined programs, make suggestions for successfully implementing and supporting them, and provide snapshots of a variety of existing FYS/LC structures. Before examining programs that offer first-year seminars and learning communities *together*, each of these practices is considered separately.

What Are First-Year Seminars and Learning Communities?

First-year seminars have been recognized as “the most commonly implemented curricular invention designed specifically for first-year students” (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005, p. 56), and, according to the 2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (Young & Hopp, 2014), 89.7% of institutions reported having such a course. Similarly, the majority of colleges and universities report having learning community programs (Barefoot, 2002). Given the popularity of both first-year seminars and learning communities, it is not surprising that there is a great deal of variety in how these programs are conceptualized, structured, and implemented. As a result, the terms *learning community* and *first-year seminar* have each been used to refer to wide range of program types.

For example, Love (1999) noted an “explosion in the use of the term ‘learning community’” (p. 1), and, as of this writing, a simple Google search produces more than 1.6 million results, including uses in K-12 and higher education, the corporate and nonprofit sectors, and elsewhere. The disparity among these groups suggests the wide range of programs that are referred to as learning communities.

Likewise, first-year seminars are defined in a number of ways. Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner (2013) noted that variety exists not only among institutions, but also on individual campuses, which often offer more than one type of seminar. In fact, at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), “variation among individual sections is expected and even encouraged” (IUPUI, 2010, p. 3). Seminars may be offered in an online, hybrid, or face-to-face format; they may focus on themes, professional disciplines, or career exploration; and within any of the seminar designs, the activities and assignments may differ.

Given the variety that exists among programs referred to as either first-year seminars or learning communities, for the sake of clarity and ease of discussion, both terms, as they apply to this volume, are defined below. In restricting the definitions of these terms, however, we recognize that we are excluding a number of very effective programs that may be referred to as learning communities or first-year seminars, but which are not described here because they do not fit the definitions that follow.

As defined within this book, learning communities (LCs) enroll cohorts of students in purposefully linked courses designed to promote connections between and across disciplines and beyond the classroom. The inclusion of more than one course creates the opportunity for integration of content across disciplines; therefore, this definition presupposes that students are co-enrolled in at least two courses. LCs have been targeted toward a diverse group of students including those at various points in their college careers, belonging to a particular population (e.g., ESL, honors, or sharing a common residence), in certain academic majors (e.g., biology, math), or in career programs (e.g., nursing, criminal justice), among others. While structures and instructional teams vary by institutional context (e.g., may include a residential experience, peer mentoring, tutoring, discussion groups, and a variety of other features), LCs generally are aimed at (a) fostering close connections between and among students, faculty, and staff as active participants in the learning process and (b) providing students with an integrative learning experience. In this way, they go beyond simple block scheduling of courses. Further, while LCs may be referred to as *linked courses*, *clusters*, or *cohort models*, these terms lack the connotation of intentional integration central to true LCs. In fact, Lardner and Malnarich (2008) argued that, “learning-community work *done well* [emphasis added] ... requires a skillful balancing of two moves: one structural, the other pedagogical and cross-disciplinary. When a campus gets it right, enriched integrative learning is the result” (p. 29). And, as discussed below, the focus on integration is not only the hallmark of LCs done well; it is also a main impetus for implementing them.

A seminar, by definition, is a small discussion-based course in which students and their instructors exchange ideas and information. In this volume, a first-year seminar (FYS) is defined as a course designed to “assist students in their academic and social development and in their transition to college. In most cases, there is a strong emphasis on creating community in the classroom” (Hunter & Linder, 2005, pp. 275-276), giving them something in common with LCs. Work by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (Greenfield et al., 2013; Young & Hopp, 2014) has identified six types of first-year seminars:

1. ***Extended orientation seminar*** (sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, college transition or student success course) where content often includes introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues;
2. ***Academic seminar with uniform content across sections*** may be interdisciplinary or theme-oriented, or part of a general education requirement where some attention is given to academic skills components, such as critical thinking and expository writing;
3. ***Academic seminar with variable content across sections*** is similar to that described in (2) above, but where topics, typically connected to the faculty member’s area of interest or expertise, differ from section to section;
4. ***Preprofessional or discipline-linked seminar*** designed to prepare students for the demands of the major or discipline and the profession and generally taught within professional schools or specific disciplines, such as engineering, health sciences, business, or education;
5. ***Basic study-skills seminar*** offered for academically underprepared students and focused on basic academic skills, such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts; and
6. ***Hybrid seminar***, which has elements of two or more types of seminars.

Regardless of type, however, FYSs *done well* foster academic engagement; supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff; and campus involvement. In other words, they are a holistic initiative helping new students make the transition to college.

The positive impact of seminars on first-year retention and graduation rates has been well documented (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, for an overview of research on first-year seminars). Similarly, participants in learning communities

often demonstrate higher retention rates and grade point averages than their peers who did not participate (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001; Johnson, 2000-2001; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003; Tinto, 2003). Given the success of FYSs and LCs individually, a number of institutions have chosen to bring these two practices together in combined FYS/LC programs. For the most part, combining FYSs and LCs means embedding seminars into LCs. According to the 2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, approximately one third of institutions offering a FYS connect it to an LC; this is true at both two-year (32.8%) and four-year (38.1%) institutions (Young & Hopp, 2014). The proportion of respondents reporting an FYS/LC structure has doubled over the last decade and continues to rise (Young & Hopp, 2014).

Why FYS/LC Combined Programs?

Why are so many institutions choosing to embed FYSs into LCs? The reasons range from increasing success *while* students are in college to increasing their success *beyond college*. The transformational effect these programs often have on campus culture provides additional impetus. Given the positive effects of participation in LCs, it makes sense to have them available to students in their very first semester—when they are also offered FYSs. In this way, the kind of integrative learning experiences and sense of belonging fostered in LCs can set the tone for a student's entire college career—encouraging students to make connections among all their courses and situate themselves in the college community. Also, the variety of FYS types noted above suggests a number of possibilities for connecting these to other courses in LCs. For example, in a FYS that focuses on skills, content from the linked course(s) can provide the context in which skills can be embedded and practiced; an academic FYS can focus on a theme relevant to the course cluster while a preprofessional seminar can offer students opportunities to apply theoretical and practical concepts to professional tasks when paired with courses required for the program and/or general education prerequisites. In addition, it can be cost-effective to combine programs, especially in times of economic downturn. Resources that might need to be duplicated in two separate programs can often be shared in combined programs, such as student advisement and professional development opportunities. Finally, students can be expected to reap increased benefits from combined programs; Kuh (2008) reported cumulative benefits when students participate in more than one HIP.

On our own campuses, we have seen the positive effects of combined programs. At Kingsborough Community College, the social policy research group, MDRC, randomly assigned 1,500 students to one of the Opening Doors FYS/LCs or to a control group. Six years of follow-up data show a 4.6 percentage point impact of FYS/LC participation on graduation rates, representing a 15% increase in degrees earned. The program also had a positive impact on total credits earned, student enrollment, and credit accumulation (Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, & Diamond, 2014). Similarly, at IUPUI, findings suggest that participation in a FYS/LC contributes to academic success. When compared to students who participate in first-year seminars, learning communities, or no special curricular program, students in FYS/LCs had higher first-year grade point averages and persistence rates, even when considering student background characteristics (Hansen & Schmidt, 2015).

But colleges are not only interested in how well students do *while* they are in college, they are also invested in how well students are prepared for life *after* college, especially when disciplinary boundaries have eroded. “Technology and globalization have transformed knowledge and practices in all the disciplines, professions, and arts... we are awash in information in all areas of life, ... and ‘flexibility’ and ‘mobility’ are the watchwords of the new economy” (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. 2). At such a time, drawing from multiple knowledge bases, perspectives, and experiences is necessary in order to fully participate and thrive as educated citizens. Based on input from both educators and employers, The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), in *College Learning for the New Global Century* (AAC&U, 2007), made recommendations regarding the kind of essential learning outcomes needed by today’s graduates. Key among these learning outcomes was integrative learning as “demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems” (p. 12). As a result, there has been a call, throughout higher education, for an emphasis on educating students to think in a more intentionally integrative way.

In *A Statement on Integrative Learning*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2004) noted that integrative learning “comes in many varieties: connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences; applying theory to practice in various settings; utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view; and, understanding issues and positions contextually” (para. 2). They identified integrative learning experiences as those which often occur as students address real-world problems that require a broad knowledge base and

multiple modes of inquiry and that benefit from diverse perspectives. Such problems challenge the notion that a single solution is sufficient to resolve them.

Yet, in their statement, AAC&U and the Carnegie Foundation pointed out that cultivating this type of learning is one of the greatest challenges of higher education. Institutional structures, disciplinary divisions, hierarchies, and battles for resources stifle collaborative efforts and turn departments into silos. Antiquated methods of teaching linger, treating students as potential repositories of information—a role that often encourages student passivity—rather than active participants in the construction of knowledge.

FYSs and LCs directly support the aim of integrative learning and thinking; further, both do so by emphasizing community. In learning communities, cohorts naturally provide opportunities for building relationships with peers and instructors. FYSs, similarly, encourage students to forge academic and social connections by helping them situate themselves in the larger learning environment. But bringing these programs together means addressing the barriers noted above. It requires working across divisions—opening the door to the kind of cross-campus collaboration that often sparks a shift in institutional culture. This collaboration, if effective, not only supports the success of FYS/LC programs but also can serve as the impetus for institutional transformation. That is, as silos are dismantled and collaboration becomes the norm, how an institution “does business” (e.g., establishes goals, sets priorities, manages resources, assesses progress) becomes more inclusive. As a result, offering these two HIPs together in combined FYS/LC programs provides the institution with the opportunity to transform campus culture while helping students not only to see connections *in the world* but also to connect themselves *to the world*.

Implementing FYS/LC Programs

The positive effects of HIPs depend upon them being done well—so what does it mean to do FYSs and LCs well *together*? The aim of this book is to answer this question, and, to that end, it is organized into two parts. In Part I, contributing authors from a variety of institutional settings discuss core issues surrounding the implementation of combined FYS/LC programs. These concerns include providing a rationale for such programs, choosing from among a wide range of program models, making decisions regarding program administration, considering pedagogical implications, and assessing program outcomes. In Part II, seven FYS/LC case studies present an array of program models in a variety of settings. Cases range from an integrative general education program in the

rural cornfields of DeKalb, Illinois, to a social justice program thriving in an urban community college system in San Francisco, to a science metacognition program in suburban Atlanta.

Part I: Rationale and Implementation of Combined Programs

Combining FYSs and LCs seems a natural pairing as LCs can help entering students find their place and make a connection to the college or university, and provide a context in which students can apply traditional FYS topics, such as studying, note taking, and test-taking skills. But is there evidence that there are benefits to bringing these two HIPs together in a combined program? In Chapter 1, Ashley Finley and George D. Kuh argue that there is. They begin by tracing how FYSs and LCs came to be considered HIPs, exploring empirical evidence of the positive impacts that each of these practices has been shown to have on outcomes such as engagement, persistence, and grade point averages. The authors then go on to explore findings in regards to participation in multiple HIPs. Finley and Kuh draw attention to the need to ensure the features that contributed to the programs' designation as high impact are consistently maintained. Jean Henscheid, Tracy Skipper, and Dallin Young explore this last point in Chapter 2 where they consider the various roles seminars can play in LCs. They begin by acknowledging that the ways of embedding FYSs in LCs are as varied as the needs of the students these programs serve. They discuss the range of roles seminars can play in LCs—including serving as sites for activities where material and concepts from other courses in the link can be integrated, applied, and practiced—and how course goals, assignments, activities, assessment, and faculty roles vary with different models for embedding seminars in LCs. Ultimately, however, it is up to individual institutions to decide which model best fits their needs. To that end, the authors comment on the advantages and disadvantages of various models, as well as the issues to consider when choosing a model for implementation.

In Chapter 3, Nia Haydel and Liya Escalera address the nuts and bolts of implementing and sustaining FYS/LC programs. What structures and funding must be in place, what new collaborations must be forged, and what practical adjustments must be made to the way a college does business for FYS/LC programs to work? Changes that are made to support these programs often have a wide-ranging impact on an institution, transforming the culture in the process. Implementing FYS/LC programs requires reexamining an array of services, processes, and policies, including course scheduling and requirements, recruitment, orientation, advisement, and registration. And, since the benefits of program participation are not always immediately apparent, it is often necessary

to offer incentives. Of course, getting programs up and running is one task, sustaining them is another, so Haydel and Escalera also suggest strategies for keeping programs viable.

Good teaching stands at the heart of FYSs and LCs done well. In Chapter 4, Lisa Dresdner and Ruthanna Spiers discuss the process of shifting teaching practices to focus on integrative learning. They encourage educators to disrupt the cycle of disengaged teaching and learning in order to create opportunities for significant learning experiences, and offer practical strategies on how faculty can collaborate to synthesize content across disciplines and design integrative assignments.

While Chapters 1 through 4 focus on how to design, implement, and support FYS/LC programs, in Chapter 5, Michele Hansen and Maureen Pettitt explore how we can discover whether or not these programs are successful—information that is crucial in helping to document the importance of such programs in fulfilling an institution’s mission to support student success. They begin by discussing traditional approaches to researching and assessing FYSs and LCs, noting their limitations, followed by suggestions for alternative directions, including evaluating more varied outcomes at multiple levels and employing more rigorous research designs. However, echoing Finley and Kuh in Chapter 1, they recognize the need for new assessment techniques to investigate the possible synergistic effects when students participate in multiple HIPs simultaneously.

Part II: Contexts for Implementation: Models From Two- and Four-Year Institutions

With the flexibility inherent in both LCs and FYSs, it is difficult to provide a holistic picture of what combined FYS/LC programs look like in action. To be effective, the programs must be contextualized in the unique characteristics of each institution and cater to the dynamic student populations they are designed to serve. Accordingly, this publication intentionally includes examples from diverse institutions across the country: two- and four-year (and even a program uniting two- and four-year institutions); public and private; urban, suburban, and rural; institutions serving predominately majority or historically underrepresented students; and institutions with as few as 1,300 to as many as 32,000 undergraduate students. The variety extends beyond the programs and into an array of assessment methods employed to measure program outcomes. Examples include quantitative analyses investigating cost-effectiveness, exam scores, grade point average, persistence, graduation rates, pre- and post-surveys, qualitative interviews, analyses of meta-reflection papers, and open-ended

survey responses. Collectively, the cases provide a comprehensive picture of the diversity, flexibility, and value of combined FYS/LC programs, alongside examples for measuring outcomes and improving future practice.

Bronx Community College provides an intimate look at how combined FYS/LC programs can serve nonnative English speakers as they explore the cultural context of learning in U.S. higher education. Metro Academies of City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University offer a glimpse into measuring the cost-effectiveness of combined programs, which is paramount when institutions have increasingly limited resources and are asked to demonstrate return on investment. Kennesaw State University explores metacognition in students enrolled in a combined program including chemistry, which provides a nice contrast to the residentially based FYS/LC offered through the Common Courses program at the University of South Carolina. Northern Illinois University describes how MAP-Works data shed light on students' experiences in combined programs, while Cabrini College shares rubrics used to investigate direct measures of learning in social justice writing assignments. Finally, Mt. Hood Community College details a comprehensive program for students in developmental courses connected to various themes.

Conclusion

Just as teaching in FYS/LC programs defies the usual institutional culture of working in isolation, writing for this publication required authors to work in concert. The more than 30 authors contributing to this volume modeled the collaboration and partnerships essential to successful FYS/LC programs. Co-authors from distinctly different institutional backgrounds worked incredibly hard to join forces in crafting chapters combining research and practice. We thank all of the contributors for sharing their experiences, observations, and reflections, and invite readers to draw from these as they plan, implement, or further develop FYS/LCs at their institutions.

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