

# Introduction

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Every three years since 1988, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has conducted a nationwide survey to collect data on first-year seminars. It has been our intention to understand a complex and diverse collection of curricular initiatives aimed at fostering active participation in learning and student development in the first college year. Through the administrations of the National Survey of First-Year Seminars (NSFYS), we have sought to explore, monitor, and provide information on the overall national landscape of first-year seminar programming. This effort has not been fruitless. Over the past quarter century, the results of the NSFYS have yielded the development of a definition and typology of first-year seminars and information about the prevalence of these courses and their characteristics in higher education institutions across the nation. The survey has led the way for an extensive body of research “establish[ing] the first-year seminar as one of the most important instructional vehicles for achieving the learning and developmental objectives of undergraduate education in the United States” (Padgett & Keup, 2011, p. 3).

## What Have We Learned From the NSFYS?

The 2012-2013 NSFYS is the ninth triennial administration of the survey, and represents the 25th anniversary of this data collection effort. So, what have we learned about the seminar over the past 25 years? In addition to defining the first-year seminar, the survey has focused broadly on the following aspects of the course: (a) types of seminars offered, (b) characteristics, (c) students in the seminar, (d) instructors, (e) course content, (f) educationally effective pedagogies, and assessment. What follows is a selection of topical areas providing a glimpse of the trends related to the components and features of first-year seminars at a national level over several administrations of the NSFYS.

### ***Defining the First-Year Seminar***

The first administrations of the NSFYS were exploratory. The 1988 NSFYS developed a baseline estimate of the prevalence of the seminar nationwide. Subsequent administrations have suggested a steady increase in the number of institutions offering some form of first-year seminar, from 68% in 1988 to 87% in 2009.

A standard and still widely used definition and typology for first-year seminars came out of the early data collection efforts connected to the NSFYS. Barefoot (1992), after reviewing descriptions for nearly 500 courses, defined the first-year seminar generally as “a course intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students” (p. 49). She also identified the following five basic types of seminars:

1. ***Extended orientation seminars.*** Oftentimes called freshman orientation, college survival, college transition, or student success course, these courses include an introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and to student development concerns.
2. ***Academic seminars with generally uniform academic content across sections.*** This type may be an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented course and sometimes is part of a general education requirement.

- The primary focus is an academic theme or discipline but will often include academic skills components, such as critical thinking and expository writing.
3. **Academic seminars on various topics.** This seminar's content is similar to the previously mentioned academic seminar except that specific topics vary from section to section.
  4. **Preprofessional seminars or discipline-linked seminar.** These seminars are designed to prepare students for the demands of the major or discipline and the profession and are oftentimes taught within specific disciplines, professional schools, or majors.
  5. **Basic study skills seminars.** Generally offered to academically underprepared students, these seminars focus on basic academic skills, such as grammar, note taking, test-taking strategies, and critical-reading techniques.

This typology has proven to be a valuable classification scheme for first-year seminars and continues to be the one most commonly used today. Some institutions offer hybrid seminars, or combinations of the types described above. To capture the prevalence of these courses, hybrid seminars were introduced as a sixth type in the 2006 administration of the survey.

### ***Types of First-Year Seminars***

Extended orientation seminars have been the most frequently reported type of first-year seminar since the typology was introduced in the 1991 administration. In more recent administrations, there have been changes in the prevalence of the types of seminars being offered based on institutional characteristics and needs. For example, in the 2000 NSFYS administration, Hunter and Linder (2005) identified a shift toward traditional academic content in the seminar based on a decrease in the percentage of extended orientation courses and an increase in seminars focused on academic content. Since then, while the overall percentage of institutions reporting extended orientation seminars as one type of seminar available on campus has remained relatively steady, the proportion of institutions offering academically focused first-year seminars has increased.

### ***Seminar Grading and Credit***

There has been variation over time in the academic status of the course, specifically in how the seminar has been graded and how academic credit has been applied. Findings from the NSFYS have indicated that the percentage of institutions offering a letter grade for the first-year seminars has gradually gone up from 62% in 1988 to 80% in 2009 (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Similarly, more institutions reported applying credits from the course toward major requirements in 2009 (9.7%) than in 1991 (2.4%), when the question was introduced on the survey (Padgett & Keup, 2011; Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). The application of seminar credit toward general education requirements has increased slightly (from 48.1% in 1991 to 53.1% in 2009) while credits offered as electives decreased (45.4% in 1991 to 39.8% in 2009).

### ***Students Required to Take the Seminar***

There has been a slight increase in the number of institutions requiring the seminar for all first-year students, from 43% in 1988 to 54% in 2009 (Padgett & Keup, 2011). In the 2009 administration, four-year institutions were significantly more likely to report requiring the entire first-year class to participate in a first-year seminar than two-year institutions (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Additionally, there has been some interest in which student groups are required to take a first-year seminar. The flexibility of content in seminars affords institutions the ability to address the specific needs of a wide range of students (Padgett & Keup, 2011). The most frequently identified group of students required to enroll in first-year seminars has been those who are academically underprepared or admitted on a provisional basis (Padgett & Keup, 2011; Tobolowsky, 2005; Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008).

### ***Instruction in the Seminar***

Since 1988, the number of institutions involving faculty members in the instruction of first-year seminars has continued to increase (Hunter & Linder, 2005). The 2009 administration asked respondents to further delineate the professional role of faculty instructors of the course (i.e., tenure track, full-time nontenure track, adjunct). Most campus respondents marked multiple categories for this survey item, and the analysis showed that full-time faculty were most likely to have seminar teaching responsibilities (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

### ***Educationally Effective Practices in the Seminar***

First-year seminars serve as a curricular anchor for other first-year initiatives, as many seminars today are linked to other educationally effective practices on campus, such as common reading experiences, living-learning communities, and service-learning (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). The 1994 administration of the NSFYS was the first investigation into the linking of first-year seminars to other courses in a learning community (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Hunter & Linder, 2005). The proportion of institutions reporting that they offer first-year seminars linked with other courses doubled from 1994 (17.2%) to 2009 (35.7%). Over time, questions about seminars including a service-learning component and incorporating a first-year or summer reading program component were included in the NSFYS.

Since 1986, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has been providing scholarship, resources, and support to these programs as well as those professionals working to enhance the first-year student experience. It has been the Center's focus to explore the national landscape and examine the changes occurring within it. As social changes occur and new academic trends emerge, the first-year seminar is likely to continue to support students at this critical transition point. During times of financial hardship, budget cuts, and curricular change, it is especially important to prove the worth and value of first-year seminars in higher education. Research and assessment continue to be important for the future of first-year seminars, as these evidence-gathering activities can help set all types of seminars down the right path toward long-term success.

### **The 2012-2013 NSFYS**

This retrospective on the findings of the past 25 years of administering the survey leads to the following question: Why conduct the 2012-2013 NSFYS? The ongoing effort to provide a comprehensive and current national snapshot of the state of this initiative might be, in itself, enough of a rationale to continue administering the survey on a regular cycle. As the NSFYS has been administered since 1988, there is real value in our ability to identify trends related to the seminar. In this administration, as in previous efforts, we were concerned with learning more about the current state of the types of seminars, the instruction, the objectives, and other structural characteristics of the course. Yet, what did we hope to learn that we did not yet know? We changed the way we asked about the use of undergraduate peer leaders to find better information regarding their presence and role in the seminar. We were especially concerned with the connection and inclusion of certain educationally purposeful practices in the first-year seminar, such as service-learning, common reading programs, and learning communities. Much attention and discussion in the higher education community has focused on these and other approaches since the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) labeled them high-impact practices (AAC&U, 2007; Kuh, 2008). To that end, we included a specialized module that asked institutions to provide information about these high-impact practices and their roles in the first-year seminar. Finally, we were interested in hearing from institutions that do not currently offer a seminar. We asked respondents representing these campuses to identify why they did not currently offer such a course, whether they had ever offered one, and if they were considering implementing one in the future.

### **Reporting the Results of the 2012-2013 NSFYS**

Unlike the 2009 research report, which provided an overview of the results of the majority of items included in the NSFYS, the 2012-2013 report focuses its presentation on fewer items of interest. The decision to call out and discuss fewer items was influenced by several priorities. First, as we reviewed reports of previous administrations of the NSFYS, certain features of the seminar have changed little. Decisions about which

results to explore in greater depth were driven by identifying those aspects of the seminar that seemed to be in flux, allowing us to describe the current state of practice in seminars.

The first-year seminar has served as a curricular anchor for a number of educationally effective practices (Greenfield et al., 2013). This administration was designed to investigate high-impact educational practices, as defined by AAC&U (2007), associated with the first-year seminar. These high-impact practices included service-learning, learning communities, common intellectual experiences, writing-intensive experiences, and undergraduate research, among others. Reducing the emphasis on the analysis in other areas of the survey gave us the opportunity to explore this area in more depth.

The research report on the 2009 administration of the NSFYS (Padgett & Keup, 2011) expanded the section of implications for practice over previous reports. Here, we continued our commitment to expand the discussion of the results to provide more guidance for practice and research. In particular, this report explores the results as they relate to contingent faculty as instructors, the rigor of the first-year seminar, the use of undergraduate peer leaders, and the degree to which high-impact practices are intentionally incorporated into seminars.

To that end, the report is organized around the following sections: (a) an overview of the sample of the respondents to the 2012-2013 NSFYS; (b) a review of the results relating to selected characteristics of the first-year seminar, including the types of first-year seminars being offered, student enrollment in seminars, course structure, content, and instructional practices; (c) a description of high-impact practices incorporated in the course; and (d) a discussion of the results and their implications for practice and for future research.

Understanding that readers will bring their own questions and priorities to this volume, we have included the frequency distributions of responses to all questions on the NSFYS in the tables included in Appendix D. These distributions are disaggregated by institutional characteristics (i.e., type, control, entering first-year class size) and primary seminar type. The frequency tables presented in this report are useful tools. Institutions with established seminars can use them for benchmarking purposes, and campuses considering creating a course will find them helpful in exploring possibilities for structuring the seminar.