

LeaRNING Notes

#12: Synergy & FIGs: Learning Communities on Campus



If you're an instructor or an advisor, chances are you've encountered a student in one of our Learning Communities. What is a FIG? Who are Synergy students? How do learning communities contribute to the University of Wyoming? This LeaRNING Notes will provide some background and assessment of two of UW's Learning Communities. The April 23rd Brown Bag will address even more questions, concerns, and suggestions, so be sure to join us!

Synergy Program Overview

Synergy is a first-year learning community similar to Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), the Honors Program, and Engineering Power Groups. The Synergy Program serves students who are admitted with conditions to UW based on high school GPA, ACT scores, and prerequisite course fulfillment. The program includes 144-150 students each year and features four courses in the first year: ENGL 1010, POLS 1000, UWYO 1450 (a reading and research-focused course), and COJO 1010. Thirteen Synergy instructors from multiple disciplines plan during the summer for thematic and text-based course connections in an effort to increase students' ability to draw meaningful connections among ideas and disciplines.



Student Characteristics

According to University statistics, conditionally admitted students are at increased risk for failure or departure in their first year of college. At-risk students at UW follow national trends in comprising higher numbers of males, minorities, and first-generation college students than regularly admitted students. Some conditionally-admitted students enter college underprepared for academic writing and reading, areas the program addresses through lower student-teacher ratios, increased conferencing, and supplemental instruction. While assumptions about at-risk students' fitness for college work spark debate across the nation, faculty in the Synergy program consistently report higher levels of critical thinking, sensitivity to marginalized perspectives, and intellectual risk-taking among Synergy students. Rather than planning for remediation (an approach that undermines many students' high intelligence and abilities), the program's courses strive to engage students in challenging coursework while addressing key habits including time management and goal-setting skills.

University Impact

Since the program's inception, students participating in Synergy have earned on average 0.35 higher GPAs and 20% lower academic probation rates than students admitted with conditions during the four years before the program began. In addition, program features such as peer mentors, interdisciplinary approaches to courses, and pre-semester transition programming have bolstered similar features in other learning communities on campus. The program has received two major national awards for undergraduate teaching and curriculum design.

For more information about Synergy, please visit www.uwyo.edu/synergy.

Student Comments from fall 2008

[Synergy is] a good program that allows students to get more one on one experience with their professors and allows them to have smaller class sizes.

I would describe [Synergy] as very helpful. It helped me to succeed in my first semester of college and I feel very fortunate for being placed in this program.

Synergy is a program that helps students transition into the college atmosphere and use information in different and critical ways.

[FIGs were] a great chance to get to meet people of the same field, without a lot of outside work, and it was just nice to have other people to study with.

[FIGs were] a positive experience with opportunities to meet new people, helpful staff, and attend interesting field trips!

[My FIG] was really helpful and gave a sense of community and belonging through getting to know other people with common interests.



What are FIGs?

A FIG is a living and learning community, organized around a theme or major, of about twenty first-year students who enroll in the same set of three or four courses (classes which first-year students are likely to take) and live on the same floor of the residence halls. Students self-select a FIG based on their major or general interest.

Who can be in a FIG?

FIGs are intended for brand new freshmen; transfer students and non-traditional students are not eligible for Freshman Interest Groups. Some FIGs have math or major prerequisites, which determine at what level students may enroll in the FIG. Some programs on campus have determined that their students may NOT participate in FIGs; majors include Music, ROTC, and Engineering. The core set of classes in these programs often conflict with the core set of classes in the FIGs.

What are the benefits of FIGs?

Faculty Benefits—According to a national study of learning communities conducted by Lenning and Ebbers in 1999, faculty who work in learning communities report “diminished isolation, a shared purpose and cooperation among faculty colleagues, increased curricular integration, a fresh approach to one’s discipline, and increased satisfaction with their students’ learning” (iv). In this way, instructors work collaboratively to create stronger courses.

Student Benefits—FIGs offer students increased opportunities to make new friends and get to know faculty and staff. Statistics at UW show a higher retention rate for students in FIGs and a slightly higher first semester grade point average. Surveys of our FIG students are very positive; students appreciate the ways in which their FIG made the transition to college life easier. According to the National Learning Commons at Washington Center, students involved in learning communities become more intellectually mature and responsible for their own learning and better engage with the learning of their peers.

Over the last 10 years, the Office of Institutional Analysis has consistently reported a higher fall-to-fall retention rate for students in FIGs. In a report created by the Office of Institutional Analysis in Fall 2008, statistics show that students enrolled in FIGs had an overall retention rate 14% higher than non-FIG students.

Starting Cohort Fall	Wyoming High School Graduates			Out-of-State Graduates			Overall	
	N	% of Total	Retention %	N	% of Total	Retention %	N	Retention %
2000 FIGS	72	45.00%	88.90%	88	55.00%	75.00%	160	81.30%
2000 Others	815	68.40%	74.70%	377	31.60%	71.90%	1,192	73.80%
2007 FIGS	77	36.20%	92.20%	136	63.80%	77.90%	213	83.10%
2007 Others	768	53.80%	74.50%	660	46.20%	66.40%	1,428	70.70%

How do I start my own FIG?

In September LeaRN distributes a Request for Proposals for FIGs. We are always looking for new major- and theme-based FIGs! For more information on how to create your own FIG, please visit www.uwyo.edu/lrn/FIGs.asp. To see a list of Fall 2009’s FIGs, please visit www.uwyo.edu/figs.

Resources

Lenning, Oscar & Larry Ebbers. “The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future.” ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report. 26. 6, (1999).

Lunch With LeaRN: Brown Bag Discussions
Thursday, February 26th from 12:00-1:00 in EN 1062
Please register at www.uwyo.edu/lrn