

Creating a Seamless Learning Environment: Linking the First-Year Seminar to Educationally Purposeful Cocurricular Programs

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Extensive research on the first year of college provides evidence that the “best retaining campuses have created tight webs of academic and student support services that assist students in successfully accomplishing his or her objectives” (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985, p. xviii). In addition to the critical retention issue, there is increasing recognition that student learning and personal development occurs both in and outside the classroom.

Various out-of-class experiences have the potential to contribute to valued learning outcomes in college. For example, interviews of seniors attending twelve institutions found that most viewed their life outside the classroom as the “real-world laboratory” (Kuh, 1995, p. 145). In other words, cocurricular involvement provides students with opportunities to apply academic theories and knowledge in real-life situations. In addition, out-of-class experiences present students with personal and social challenges; encourage them to develop more complex views on personal, academic, and other matters; and provide opportunities for synthesizing and integrating material presented in the formal academic program (Kuh, p. 146). Using reflective essays written by 522 students from 30 first-year seminar sections, Donahue (2004) confirmed that positive learning environments include peers who are personable and approachable, courses that encourage connections and community, and co-curricular activities that create common bonds and out-of-class learning.

The student affairs community has long recognized the benefits of the cocurricular experience. Nonetheless, efforts must be made to document learning that occurs outside the classroom and to develop strategies for creating a transparent relationship between in-class and out-of-class experiences. These efforts must be undertaken to legitimize the cocurriculum for the entire academic community.

A plethora of classroom assessment techniques has been developed for the purpose of improving teaching and learning in the classroom (Cross & Angelo, 1988). It is incumbent upon the student affairs community to develop cocurricular assessment techniques to improve program delivery and learning outside the classroom. Similar to classroom assessment, carefully designed cocurricular assessment tools can provide valuable information on how students learn and how they respond to particular programming approaches (Cross & Angelo).

There are several advantages associated with student centered cocurricular assessment. First, student evaluation of cocurricular programming may be viewed as a

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learning-centered process. When students reflect on an experience in order for assessment to occur, they come to understand the meaning of an experience (Donahue, 2004). Second, input from students on evaluations gives them an opportunity to gain a greater sense of involvement in or ownership of their college experience—in other words, it has the potential to engage and empower students. Third, inclusion of open-ended questions allows for a range of responses which can provide useful information about students' overall reaction to a program, as well as practical suggestions for program improvement. Finally, student ratings have been shown to have high reliability and validity (Cuseo, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to explore first-year student perceptions of cocurricular programs that are required by faculty teaching the First-Year Seminar (FYS) classes. Two questions guided the research. First, did the FYS cocurricular program provide students with helpful information needed for retention and success? Second, did the FYS cocurricular program provide students with positive learning experiences outside the classroom?

The First-Year Seminar Cocurricular Connection

Penn State Schuylkill Campus (PSS) is a small institution (enrollment averages about 1,000 students—80% are full-time) in a nonmetropolitan county linked to the resources of a larger institution (Penn State University) of over 80,000 students. The majority of PSS students are commuters (73%); there is a resident population of approximately 250. The median age is 20, and 18.2% are minorities. The campus offers a mix of academic programs, including associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees, and a master's degree.

All enrolled first-year baccalaureate degree students take a one-credit first-year seminar. This course aims to facilitate the successful transition of new students through their engagement with other members of the campus community and through their introduction to university and campus resources. Although five major goals define the curriculum, one focuses specifically on encouraging student involvement in educationally purposeful out-of-class activities (See Appendix A for FYS goals).

As part of the involvement goal, the FYS curriculum requires that students attend an array of cocurricular programs. This necessitates deliberate collaboration and purposeful planning between the FYS Coordinator, faculty teaching the FYS, and student affairs staff. The collaboration and planning resulted in the development of a First-Year Student Resources and Support Program that includes five major groups of programs—library and literacy skills programs, wellness programs, learning center programs, cultural events, and campus policy and resources workshops. Students in all sections of the FYS attend ten of these cocurricular programs. Students are encouraged to take ownership of the cocurricular experience at the beginning of the semester when students are asked to complete a Personal Plan for First-Year Student Resource and Support Program attendance sheet (See Appendix B for a sample plan).

Method

The tool adopted for assessment of cocurricular programs was the First-Year Student Resources and Support Program One-Minute Reflection (See Appendix C for sample form). Students rated programs according to how interesting or helpful they found the information using the following scale: 1) not at all, 2) somewhat, 3) moderately, 4) very, or 5) extremely. The form also provided space for students to write a reflection to the statement “What do you think is the major point of this session, and how does it relate to you personally?” This tool served three major purposes. First, it provided a record of student attendance at all cocurricular events; second, the reflection allowed students the opportunity to understand the meaning of the experience; and, third, it provided a vehicle to assess student learning.

The data provided were of two types—a rating of the event and a qualitative statement of the benefit the program had for the student. Statistical analysis was performed to provide an average rating of the student’s benefit from the five program categories while qualitative responses were clustered to assess student learning.

Results

Results indicated that 52% of students attending the library and literacy skills programs—either the library open house and/or nine workshops—rated them as being very or extremely useful, 30% rated them as moderately useful, and 18% as somewhat or not at all useful. Overall results indicated that students found the subject-specific research database workshops to be the most useful learning experiences, although attendance at some was low (Table 1). Students’ qualitative responses verified that they understood the purpose of the workshops. For example, one student discussed her perspective that the university was interested in her success:

[The major point is] to let me know that there is help for me and my studies and they want me to succeed as a PSU student.

Another student reflected on the learning that occurred in the workshop:

Very informative. I used the web many times, but [this] raised new things.

Fully 70% of students attending the wellness programs (alcohol use, stress, sexually transmitted diseases) rated them as very or extremely useful, 24% rated them as moderately useful, and 7% as somewhat or not at all useful. All four of the Wellness Series workshops were found to be equally useful (Table 2). Students’ qualitative responses substantiated these results. One student offered his/her view on the innovative programming approach:

This has been an intelligent way of introducing ideas [about] sex, drinking, and relationships.

Results indicated that 59% of students attending any of the learning center programs (n=17) rated them to be very or extremely useful, 32% rated them as moderately useful, and 9% as somewhat or not at all useful. Overall results indicated that students found the computer based workshops to be the most useful learning experiences (Table 3). Some

students' thoughts on the workshop suggested a positive learning experience. One student wrote:

The major point is [to offer] tips on taking tests to help you gain a better grade. Provides new insight on taking tests I never thought of before and how to control anxiety before and during a test.

All three cultural events received high ratings—89% of students attending cultural programs rated them as very or extremely useful with only 9% rating them as moderately useful and 2% as somewhat or not at all useful (Table 4). One student reflected that one of the diversity events helped “to raise awareness about hate and let people express their opinion,” while another stated it helped “to have everyone of different [walks] of life get along.”

Finally, 67% of students attending the campus policy and resources workshops (n=3) rated them to be extremely or very useful, 26% as moderately useful, and 7% as somewhat or not at all useful (Table 5). One student commented that “the major point of this session was to introduce us to all the technology Penn State offers. This was a very informative session.” Awareness necessary for retention and success clearly occurs as illustrated in this comment by a student attending a resource program that focused on registration issues:

Great information for freshmen in the area of degree audits and how to register.

Conclusion

Based on overall results, the required First-Year Seminar cocurricular programs provided a positive learning experience for students. While attendance at some programs was low, many programs had an appreciative audience. Even with low attendance at some events, the students who attended benefited from information that was presented. Cultural programs in general were highly rated ($M=4.5$)—not surprising given that these types of programs are highly “interesting” and entertaining (Table 6). The Wellness Programs also received high overall rating ($M=3.9$)—also not surprising given that topics dealt with critical health concerns such as sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. The programs targeted at improving skills or introducing students to campus and university resources were not as highly ranked ($M=3.8$ for campus policy and resources; $M=3.6$ for learning center programs; $M=3.5$ for library and literacy skills), although the number of students who found the programs very or extremely helpful was robust (over 50% in all cases).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the cocurricular program is successful in achieving the goal of providing valuable information to first-year students. The quantitative ratings suggest that most students found the programs helpful and the qualitative responses suggest that those who attended understood the implications of each specific program.

The model discussed in this paper is one example of an “institutionalized cooperative model” that brings together academic affairs and student affairs (Walters, 2003, p. 25). A well-designed, educationally-purposeful, cocurricular program—linked

to the academic curriculum—is necessary for students to grow, mature, and succeed. It is incumbent upon both faculty and student affairs to work together to create strategies that facilitate a transparent relationship between in-class and out-of-class experiences.

References

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TABLE 1

Library and Literacy Skills Programs

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely	Total
Library Open House (N = 2)	5 6.10%	13 15.85%	27 32.93%	26 31.71%	11 13.41%	82
Evaluating Websites	3 7.69%	5 12.82%	8 20.51%	18 46.15%	5 12.82%	39
Introduction to Behavioral Science & Education Databases	0 0.00%	4 36.36%	4 36.36%	3 27.27%	0 0.00%	11
Introduction to Humanities Databases	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 100.00%	0 0.00%	1
Introduction to Public Affairs Databases	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 66.67%	1 33.33%	3
Introduction to SET Databases	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	4 36.36%	2 18.18%	5 45.45%	11
Introduction to Business Databases	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 50.00%	1 50.00%	0 0.00%	2
Creative Use of Bibliography	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2
Introduction to APA and MLA Citation	1 3.03%	2 6.06%	9 27.27%	16 48.49%	5 15.15%	33
Total	9 4.89%	24 13.04%	55 29.89%	69 37.50%	27 14.67%	184

TABLE 2

Wellness Programs

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely	Total
Metamorphosis Theater: "What's Going On?"*	0 0.00%	3 3.66%	23 28.05%	36 43.90%	20 24.39%	82
Alcohol Awareness	4 4.55%	5 5.68%	24 27.27%	31 35.23%	24 27.27%	88
Stress: What It Is and How to Manage It	2 2.33%	2 2.33%	21 24.42%	41 47.67%	20 23.26%	86
STD Awareness	2 2.74%	2 2.74%	12 16.44%	34 46.58%	23 31.51%	73
Total	10 3.04%	12 3.65%	80 24.32%	142 43.16%	87 26.44%	329

*Note: This interactive performing group encourages student participation while acting out issues of self-esteem, STDs, pregnancy, and alcohol.

TABLE 3

Campus Learning Center Programs

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely	Total
Understanding Your Computer	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 15.38%	10 76.92%	1 7.69%	13
Time Management	1 2.63%	4 10.53%	14 36.84%	15 39.47%	4 10.53%	38
Math Anxiety	1 3.57%	1 3.57%	11 39.29%	11 39.29%	4 14.29%	28
Test-Taking Strategies	0 0.00%	2 4.65%	11 25.58%	18 41.86%	12 27.91%	43
Angel (Course Management System)	0 0.00%	2 8.33%	7 29.17%	10 41.67%	5 20.83%	24
Internet Searching— Part One	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 18.18%	8 72.73%	1 9.09%	11
Internet Searching— Part Two	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	4 26.67%	9 60.00%	2 13.33%	15

TABLE 3 (CONT.)

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely	Total
PowerPoint—Part One	0 0.00%	5 19.23%	10 38.46%	8 30.77%	3 11.54%	26
PowerPoint—Part Two	1 14.29%	1 14.29%	1 14.29%	3 42.86%	1 14.29%	7
PowerPoint—Part Three	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	7 43.75%	6 37.50%	3 18.75%	16
Using a Graphing Calculator	0 0.00%	1 10.00%	1 10.00%	4 40.00%	4 40.00%	10
Note Taking/Active Reading	1 1.85%	6 11.11%	15 27.78%	29 53.70%	3 5.56%	54
Microsoft Word 1	0 0.00%	1 14.29%	2 28.57%	4 57.14%	0 0.00%	7
Microsoft Word 2	2 15.38%	1 7.69%	3 23.08%	5 38.46%	2 15.38%	13
Collaborative Learning	1 5.00%	1 5.00%	11 55.00%	5 25.00%	2 10.00%	20
Plagiarism	1 2.94%	1 2.94%	16 47.06%	11 32.35%	5 14.71%	34
Finals Forum	0 0.00%	3 5.88%	16 31.37%	27 52.94%	5 9.80%	51
Total	8 1.95%	29 7.07%	133 32.44%	183 44.63%	57 13.90%	410

TABLE 4

Cultural Programs

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely	Total
Metamorphosis Theater: "Strange Like Me"*	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 20.00%	2 40.00%	2 40.00%	5
Celebrate Latino Heritage Month	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 4.35%	6 26.09%	16 69.57%	23
Tribal Legacy	0 0.00%	1 5.56%	2 11.11%	6 33.33%	9 50.00%	18
Total	0 0.00%	1.00 2.17%	4 8.70%	14 30.43%	27 58.70%	46

*Note: This interactive performing group focuses on issues of diversity, civility, and respect for others.

TABLE 5

Campus Policy and Resources Programs

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely	Total
Are You Connected? Technology Resources	0 0.00%	1 5.56%	7 38.89%	6 33.33%	4 22.22%	18
Registrar Rules	1 0.93%	7 6.48%	24 22.22%	47 43.52%	29 26.85%	108
Sexual Harassment	1 3.57%	1 3.57%	9 32.14%	11 39.29%	6 21.43%	28
Total	2 1.30%	9 5.84%	40 25.97%	64 41.56%	39 25.32%	154

TABLE 6

Average Program Rating

PROGRAM	AVERAGE RATING
Library and Literacy Skills Programs	3.5
Wellness Programs	3.9
Learning Center Programs	3.6
Cultural Programs	4.5
Campus Policy and Resources Programs	3.8

FYS Goals and Objectives

The First-Year Seminar aims to facilitate the successful transition of new students to Penn State University-Schuylkill Campus through their engagement with other members of the campus community and through their introduction to the use of university and campus resources.

Goal 1: Enhance student understanding of the cultural expectations of the Penn State community

Objective 1.1 Students will have knowledge of the Penn State Principles *

Goal 2: Enhance student information literacy skills

Objective 2.1 Students will demonstrate library and electronic research skills

Objective 2.2 Students will evaluate information sources critically

Objective 2.3 Students will demonstrate electronic communication skills

Goal 3: Encourage student self-assessment and goal clarification

Objective 3.1 Students will participate in at least one activity that provides information about majors and academic programs

Goal 4: Enhance student skills needed to work collaboratively on both in-class and out-of-class assignments

Objective 4.1 Students will participate in a significant collaborative learning activity in the first year

Objective 4.2 Students will have knowledge of group roles and facilitation skills

Goal 5: Encourage student involvement in Penn State Schuylkill Campus activities and resources

Objective 5.1 Students will participate in social, cultural, and intellectual events

Objective 5.2 Students will have knowledge of selected academic and student support services

Objective 5.3 Students will make use of selected academic and student support services

Objective 5.4 Students will demonstrate knowledge of the relationship between wellness and academic success

*Penn State Principles

I will respect the dignity of all individuals within the Penn State Community.

I will practice academic integrity.

I will demonstrate social and personal responsibility.

I will be responsible for my own academic progress and agree to comply with all University policies.

APPENDIX B

Personal Plan for First-Year Student Resources and Support Program

NAME: _____ SECTION: _____

Upon review of the First-Year Student Resources and Support Program menu, I have chosen to attend the following ten (10) programs based on my personal interests and needs. I will complete the documentation form and present it to my FYS instructor as evidence of my attendance.

ACTIVITY	DATE	ATTENDED
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

Signature

Date

Note: We thank Dr. Barbara Lutz for the development of the personal plan.

Sample One-Minute Reflection Form

First-Year Student Resources and Support Program One-Minute Reflection

Please print the information requested below. The top copy of this form will be given to your FYS instructor. Keep the bottom copy for your records.

Student Name _____ Date _____

Today's Topic/Program Title _____

Today's event speaker(s) _____

Your FYS course (CAP 110S, 120S, etc.) _____ and Section _____

Course Instructor Name _____

Consider the following questions as you write your reflection: What do you think is the major point of this session, and how does it relate to you personally? What about this topic remains unanswered for you?

How interesting/helpful did you find the information presented in this session?

Please circle your number rating below:

1=Not at all 2=Somewhat 3=Moderately 4=Very
5=Extremely

I give permission for the information on this form to be used for research purposes.

1=Yes 2=No