

## **Perspective on Liberal Arts Learning: First Year Seminar**

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The first year at college is often the time of greatest attrition (Noel, et al., 1985; Tinto, 1987). As a result, most retention programs focus on the first year student. "Virtually all students come with two objectives: to achieve academically and to succeed socially" (Erickson & Strommer, 1991). It is precisely these two objectives (academic achievement and social connection to a friend(s) and the institution) that shape a student's decision whether or not he or she will remain in college (Astin, 1972)

Over the past few years, colleges and universities throughout the country have created First Year Seminars to address these objectives as well as wide variety of needs including:

- helping students from all ability levels succeed by explicitly teaching them skills necessary for academic success (reading, writing, time management, study skills, bibliographic instruction, etc.);
- orienting students to the culture of the academy - its special vocabulary and concepts, the nature of the disciplines, etc.;
- helping students form relationships with one another and with a supportive faculty member around a common intellectual challenge; and
- providing a forum for information essential to student success but absent from the explicit curricular requirements of the institution.

While the retention literature in higher education considers students with particular characteristics to be "high risk" students, reality suggests that ALL first year students are, to some extent, "high risk." If students can successfully complete their first year in college, the odds improve considerably that they will persist to graduation. For this reason, many First Year Seminars function as extended "new student orientation" programs. On many campuses, these classes have become a special support system for new students and a first line of defense against student attrition.

Deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream college situations pose an extremely high risk of withdrawing from college. Most do not graduate. Stinson and Walter (1992) report that two and four-year colleges with programs for deaf students graduate an average of five deaf students for every sixteen they admit, resulting in a retention rate of only 31%. This compares with a 42% rate among hearing students in two-year colleges and 70% in four-year college (Tinto, 1987).

In the fall of 1995, students new to Gallaudet (freshmen or transfer students) had the opportunity to enroll in a three-credit First Year Seminar. This Seminar was based on the University 101 model at The University of South Carolina (USC). A faculty curriculum development team met with John Gardner from USC to outline specific student needs and spent the spring and early summer writing and organizing course materials and establishing relationships with different programs (academic programs, residence hall programs, Library, Counseling Center, and Communications Center). The course was designed to meet the varying needs of students and makes use of innovative teaching strategies such as cooperative and problem-based learning. The course was based on the premise that if students were able to make academic progress and feel connected to other students and the institution, their chances of remaining at Gallaudet would be improved. Students learned to make connections between and among their various courses. Upper class students served as "teaching assistants." Faculty from all schools taught this course.

The course included three major content units. Unit One focused on study skills and time management, and introduced the students to an array of out-of-class workshops offered by the Student Life program. Students also began to develop academic computing skills, through in- and out-of-classroom training developed by the University's Academic Computing program. In the second unit, students explored a wide range of campus resources available to them--such as using the library for both traditional and computer-assisted research, finding appropriate help for personal problems, and investigating the range of scholarships and loans available through Office of Financial Aid. The third and final unit introduced students to the societal functions of institutions of higher learning, the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the liberal arts and how universities in general and Gallaudet in particular attempt to use their general education curricula to expose students to the liberal arts. Through interviews with key faculty members and upper class students, first-year students explored the dozens of major fields of study available to them. This last activity gave the students practice in interviewing and reporting, and also served as a tangible recognition of the often replicated finding that students who learn about and commit themselves to a major field of study are more likely to persist to graduation than those who delay in making such decisions. Each and every activity was designed to actively involve the student in meeting the two objectives for a successful college experience: making academic progress and social/institution connections.

In addition to the actual course content, students in the First Year Seminars explored several specific areas outside of class. One crucial out-of-class activity was involving students in community service activities. For example, students assisted older alumni during Homecoming Week, and participated in a campus clean-up project. Off campus activities included work with sick children, the homeless and AIDS patients. In each case, the students worked together, felt a sense of purpose and in some situations began asking questions about the kinds of majors that might be needed to work in such programs. These off campus experiences often lead to broader discussion related to the value of liberal arts education, i.e. homelessness from economic, social, and medical points of view.

First year students are often hesitant to make use of campus resources. While students are exposed to support services and encouraged to use them, the services themselves must match the needs of the students. If not, students will quickly decide "they don't help me." Services must be more than accessible, they must be "user friendly" to make a difference. Campus tutoring services can be crucial. Students who are struggling must make academic progress if they are to succeed. For students with special needs, the tutor must create user-specific programs. For example, when students in Gallaudet's First Year Seminar were encouraged to attend tutoring sessions, the Tutoring Center was ready with specific programs for specific needs. Whether it be a specific approach on how to solve a math problem using different colors to outline steps, or tutors trained to modify materials for use with students who have specific learning disabilities, those providing the service must take into account student learning styles and needs. Students who have initial success with these kinds of academic services are more likely to use them in the future.

At the end of the first semester, an evaluation of the First Year Seminar was conducted. Results indicated that students who were enrolled in the First Year Seminar withdrew from school at a rate of 11% during the fall semester compared to students not enrolled in the First Year Seminar who withdrew at a rate of 24%. Clearly, the two objectives were met for most students enrolled. That is, when explicit opportunities were made for students to become involved, make friends and be supported in academics, retention increased. In the future, the First Year Studies program will work cooperatively with departments to ensure common academic goals for all first year students. These will include, for example, the reinforcement of study and thinking skills, and reading and writing. This year, the coordinator is working closely with the English Department and sharing information about the Seminar with all departments. We anticipate the retention will be even greater in the future.

The needs of deaf and hard of hearing students are similar regardless of setting. Faculty and staff working with deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream post-secondary institutions can take advantage of existing First Year Seminars on campus to meet the objectives of academic progress and social/institution connections. Institutions can organize a section of the First Year Seminar for all deaf and hard of hearing students. Students might, for example, investigate resources on campus that answer specific questions related to serving them. If a First Year Seminar is not available, support workshops could be designed to accomplish the same tasks. Clearly, the retention rate for deaf and hard of hearing students in the mainstream must be improved. When institutions structure support for deaf and hard of hearing students keeping in mind that when students make academic progress, and feel connected to others and the institution, they tend to stay, higher percentages of deaf and hard of hearing students will receive their degrees.

### References

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