First Year Success Courses Final Report
DRAFT May 6, 2019

Charge: "Develop a set of recommendations for ways to improve the quality of students' experiences in (First-Year Success) courses."

Recommendations

Please list your working group's recommendations in prioritized order. State each recommendation succinctly in one to three sentences. For each recommendation provide a brief one paragraph description of the action your group is proposing.

1. **First-year success course (FYSC) enrollment should be required of all first-year students**, with particular emphasis on delivering the course to first-generation students and students with a C-index score below 85.

   An FYSC promotes familiarity with the college learning environment and facilitates connections with faculty/staff and peers. The institutional purpose is to improve retention and persistence. All incoming first-year students, regardless of "early college" credit, should be enrolled in an FYSC that meets content standards (#2 below). The course may or may not be specific to a particular major or field. It must be credit-bearing. Unless required for a major, participation in the FYSC program should be considered a requirement of the first-year experience but not a requirement for the bachelor's degree.

2. The University should **develop content standards** a course must meet in order to be classified as a FYSC.

   Content standards are based on the following categories:
   A. Tasks incoming students should know how to complete capably
      - Examples: Contact a faculty member, create a plan for completing a major, find an advisor's office, make an appointment at Cutler Health Center, apply for a job on campus, receive and act on Navigate notifications, submit a paper via Blackboard, etc.
   B. Concepts and habits students should master for success in college
      - Examples: basic understanding of how humans learn; habits for effective learning; approaches to organization, time management, and stress relief; ability to recognize when to obtain help
   C. Tools and resources students should know how to locate and use for A and B.
      - Examples: Software tools such as MaineStreet, Navigate, Blackboard, Excel, Google email and calendar, etc.; resource sites such as the college's advising centers, Student Accessibility Services, the Writing Center, Student Employment Office, Title IX Student Services, etc.; and human supports such as advisors, RAs, faculty members, parents, etc.

   The larger learning goals of an FYSC are resilience and self-efficacy. The opportunity also to include field-specific content will depend upon the course's credit hours, among other factors.

   We recommend formation of an FYSC curriculum group to specify content standards within these categories and to propose an assessment plan for UMaine's FYSC program. We also recommend that, where possible, common course materials should be made available to course instructors.

3. **FYSCs should prioritize and maximize individual contact** between the students and the course instructor. One-on-one peer contact with upperclassmen should be considered, as supplementing rather than replacing one-on-one contact with instructors.

   FYSCs should include structured and expected as well as informal opportunities for individual contact. Conversations during these meetings should be purposeful in identifying areas of concern and ways to address them. Near-peer interactions may be useful as supplement but should not be considered equivalent. Another option to consider, where practical, would be to have FYSC instructors assigned as the advisor for students in their section.

4. The University should **offer and incentivize first-year-specific professional development opportunities** for FYSC instructors.

   Ongoing professional development for faculty and staff who teach the sections should focus on evidence-based best practices and opportunities to learn from others involved in the same endeavor. In particular, instructors primarily working in a discipline could gain familiarity with issues and approaches specific to the first year. Where Blackboard is by far the most commonly used Learning Management System in FYSCs, the professional development could include refining instructors' Blackboard skills.

5. **FYSCs should offer an extended experience** for students through either a summer session before classes begin in the Fall and/or a Spring follow-up to their initial FYSC enrollment.

   We suggest piloting and assessing programs that initiate FYSC activity prior to the fall semester and to resume it in the spring. Existing opportunities in the College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture may provide models. Because FYSC participation appears especially beneficial to first-generation students and those with a C-index score below 85, we recommend focusing extended FYSC experiences on these student populations.

Background/Rationale (Limit 5 pages)

Please provide the background information needed to understand the rationale for your recommendations. In the charge to your working group you were provided a set of questions to consider as you completed your work. These questions can be used as a guide to this section of your report but you are not required to respond to each question.

We found that the UMaine FYSC program can be described as follows:

- Enrollments in fall 2018 ranged from 9 to 112, with 75% of sections having 25 students or fewer. Mean enrollment was 23; median was 18.
- Most FYSCs are traditional, full-semester courses. They may be one-, two-, or three-credit courses.
- Per OIR, 94% students in fall 2017 took an FYSC, up 2 percentage points from fall 2015. (Fall 2018 percentages were not available at the time the data were requested.)
- The FYSC program is not a program as such. It exists as disparate courses with little coordination among them, although there is typically coordination within multi-section FYSCs.

Our recommendations are based on the information we gathered and interpreted, mainly through review of FYSC syllabi, surveying FYSC instructors, analyzing data on first-year UMaine students, and considering practices at other institutions.

Review of FYSC syllabi

Method:

Syllabi were requested from the 61 instructors who taught fall 2018 FYSC sections. There were 110 sections of 29 courses. Syllabi were received from 55 of the 61 instructors (90% response), enabling review of all but two courses. A subcommittee of the working group reviewed the content of the syllabi to identify topics specific to first-year success.

Key findings:

FYSC courses at UMaine can be grouped into two categories: (a) field-specific courses in which content and student learning outcomes (SLOs) often relate chiefly to the major or discipline; and (b) courses not specific to a field that focus on success in college and the college experience per se. The field-specific course syllabi varied considerably in how prevalent "success in college" topics were. A few syllabi showed no evidence of these topics, potentially leaving students unfamiliar with many of the elements that we recommend for inclusion in all FYSCs.

Across all syllabi reviewed, the most common topic was an introduction to the major (17 syllabi). Study skills/time management and an introduction to university resources were each included in 15 syllabi. Other topics frequently found were career options (14) and an introduction to the curriculum (11).

Impact on recommendations:

We see value in both field-specific courses and those intended for a more general student population. Our recommendations leave open both alternatives while stipulating that an FYSC be required (recommendation **#1**). We also see no reason to stipulate a specific number of credit hours based on this analysis.

Review of syllabi indicates that "success in college" topics are not uniformly present in FYSC courses. Our working group believes strongly that this should be remedied, as indicated in recommendation **#2**.

Survey of fall 2018 FYSC instructors

Method:

A Qualtrics survey was sent to all 61 fall 2018 FYSC instructors, of whom 43 (70%) responded. Of the 43 respondents, 19 were full-time faculty and 12 were professional staff. The remainder were graduate students (7) and part-time faculty (5). About 70% of respondents were teaching sections with enrollments of fewer than 25 students.

The main purpose of the survey was to gather information about instructors' practices and perceptions. The full report is attached as Appendix 1.

Key findings:

- A majority of FYSC instructors advise some (19%) or all (35%) of students in their sections. This doubling-up of roles could facilitate individual connections between instructors and their students.
- Respondents reported focusing most on "providing orientation on how to succeed at college (study skills, etc.)" and "providing information on how to find and use campus resources (library, career center, etc.)." About 37% of respondents indicated that more than half of students' time and effort in the course was supposed to be dedicated to major-specific topics. These results

should be viewed in the context of our review of syllabi (above), which shows that attention to "success in college" objectives is distributed unevenly across UMaine FYSCs.

- Respondents with sections sizes greater than 25 students were much less likely to report focusing on topics related to "success in college" SLOs. For example, in sections of 24 students or fewer, at least 90% of respondents indicated focusing on using MaineStreet, career planning, learning and study skills, and academic support services. In the larger sections, percentages for these four topics ranged from 46% to 69%.
- The most commonly reported instructional methods were inviting guest speakers from UMaine (40 respondents), active learning strategies (38) and lecture (37); clearly, most instructors are using a combination of teaching techniques. Peer-to-peer mentoring was reported by only 12 respondents.
- A majority of respondents use Blackboard (58%) and @maine.edu email (72%) to manage communication and/or content.
- In response to the open-ended question "Which aspect(s) of your course do you think is most effective for students?", 47% of respondents identified some form of personal connection formed with the instructor and/or with peers—this was the most common answer. In response to a question about strategies that can best help students overcome obstacles to success, individual interaction with the students was the most common answer, at 30% of replies, followed closely by practicing time management and organization skills. A heartbreaking 12% of respondents expressed that they were at a loss and did not know how to help students overcome the obstacles they faced.

Impact on recommendations:
Although several respondents expressed uncertainty or frustration about how best to support their students' success, the one approach most frequently mentioned as effective or helpful involved mentoring or connecting in individual conversations—regardless of whether the instructor is the student's advisor. This finding led to recommendation **#3**.

The findings from the survey also inform recommendation **#4**. For example, instructors could benefit from professional development in providing academic support to students with struggling with mental health or emotional issues. The clear predominance of Blackboard as the LMS invites professional development in using Blackboard. With certain topics included in nearly every FYSC, sharing consistent information about how best to present these topics would be beneficial. Along the same lines, providing lesson plans, modules, videos, etc., that instructors could use or adapt would save them time and potentially create a better learning experience for students. This observation supports recommendation **#2**.

Analysis of retention and GPA based on FYSC participation
Method:
Data were analyzed for the 2015, 2016, and 2017 cohorts of first-time, full-time students, excluding those admitted to the now-discontinued Foundations program. The aim was to identify correlations, if any, between students' retention and their participation in an FYSC. The three cohorts were combined for a total of 6,184 students, of whom 5,717 took an FYSC and 467 did not. The full report is attached as Appendix 2.

Key findings:
In nearly every student population, students who completed an FYSC were retained at a higher rate than those who did not. The sole exception was the tiny group of students with a C-index of 95 or above. The

most striking gaps in retention occurred for first-generation students and students with a C-index below 85.

Among first-generation students, 53% of those who did not take an FYSC returned to UMaine for their second year, whereas 70% of those who took an FYSC were retained. Most of the difference can be accounted for in students who withdrew rather than being suspended; this suggests that the support provided by the FYSC had a position effect on retention. Among students who took an FYSC, there is a difference of 6 percentage points between first-generation and not first-generation students who withdrew. That difference grows to 15 percentage points (35% first-generation withdrawing vs. 20% not first-generation withdrawing) when students are not in an FYSC.

Although taking an FYSC is correlated with higher retention for students with C-index scores of 85 to 94, the differences are relatively modest: 86% retention for students not taking an FYSC vs. 91% for FYSC students. In comparison, students between 75 and 84 on the C-index were retained at 69% without an FYSC, and at 80% if taking an FYSC—a much bigger difference. For students below a C-index of 75, retention was 53% with no FYSC course, and 68% with an FYSC. Students with a C-Index of 70 or less earned mean GPAs below 1.8 in the first semester and the first year without an FYSC course. With an FYSC, the means range from 1.9 to 2.23.

Across the whole student body in these three cohorts, retention was 8% higher for FYSC students: 78% vs. 70%. Keeping in mind that the great majority of UMaine students do take an FYSC course, the difference in headcount is about 37 students, or roughly a dozen students per cohort who might have stayed at UMaine had they taken an FYSC.

The data yielded a variety of other findings worth noting, such as:

- International students enroll in FYSCs at a lower rate than the rest of the student population (81% vs. 93%), and international students who do not take FYSCs earn notably higher GPAs than their domestic counterparts. However, their retention rates correlate with FYSC participation approximately as for the student body as a whole.
- 1/3 of students take an FYSC supposedly in their major and 2/3 take a course in their college, according to the data. However, our group questioned the categorization of some courses.
- The DFWL rate for FYSCs is 10%, with higher rates in “college” than in “major” FYSCs. Students with a C-index below 65 accounted for 22% of the students unsuccessful in an FYSC. Only 37% of students in the DFWL group were retained; 25% were suspended, which suggests that their academic difficulties were pervasive.

Impact on recommendations:
Because these data show that students in an FYSC are consistently retained at a meaningfully higher rate, we recommend that all students participate (recommendation **#1**).

The generally poor results for students with a C-Index below 70 invite doubt about the wisdom of admitting so many of them. Even with an FYSC, 25% withdraw. Without an FYSC, a stunning 42% withdraw from the University. Suspension rates are identical for both groups: 13% of students with a C-Index below 70 are suspended, whether they take an FYSC or not. However, this observation is beyond the scope of our charge.

The predominance of withdrawals among first-generation and low C-Index students who did not take an FYSC suggests that the connection formed with an FYSC instructor may be especially helpful in retaining

students in these groups. We recommend maximizing FYSC instructors' opportunity for individual connection with students (recommendation **#3**). Implementing this recommendation could entail adjusting class size as well as pedagogy.

In light of the apparently greater impact of FYSCs on retention for first-generation and middle or lower C-Index students, we recommend professional development for instructors to develop pedagogical strategies most likely to be effective with these populations (recommendation **#4**).

Consideration of practices at peer institutions and elsewhere

Method:

A subcommittee of our working group explored the websites of UMaine's Hanover peer institutions and also contacted (or attempted to contact) relevant offices at these institutions. In addition, some published materials on best practices were gathered.

Key findings:

There is no consensus among our peers. For example:

- The University of Wyoming requires a First-Year Seminar of all students. Seminars may be housed within a department, but general options are also available. Departments may not require the seminar as part of a major. Seminars are "designed to help students gain skills in critical thinking and information literacy skills - academic skills that we know help students succeed in college" http://www.uwyo.edu/unst/usp2015/fys/faculty-faqs.html.
- At the University of Rhode Island, URI 101: Planning for Academic Success is required for all first-year students as well as transfer students with fewer than 24 credits. It is "an introductory seminar for incoming students, intended to assist in the transition to college, from academic planning to use of resources and programs for academic success" https://web.uri.edu/newstudent/uri101/.
- The University of New Hampshire offers a class similar to college-wide FYSCs at UMaine in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the College of Education and Human Development. It is intended only for undeclared students in the UNH College of Liberal Arts https://www.unh.edu/uac/cola401.
- North Dakota State University offers UNIV 101: Major Exploration and Academic Planning for first-year students https://bulletin.ndsu.edu/course-catalog/descriptions/univ/, along with departmental first-year courses.

In 2012, the University of Wyoming published a best practices document that provides useful guidance https://www.uwyo.edu/unst/_files/docs/first-year_seminar_best_practices_part1.pdf. Other overviews of the first year in college include an 2014 article by Andrew Koch and John Gardner http://www.wiu.edu/first_year_experience/instructors_and_faculty/students/History%20of%20the%20FYE%20Article_Koch%20and%20Gardner.pdf. The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina provides a wealth of information about FYSC practices and objectives https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/index.php, including data from a 2017 National Survey on the First-Year Experience https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/research/research_findings/details.php?id=13 .

Impact on recommendations:

The peer examples most similar to what we recommend are from the Univ. of Wyoming and URI. Both universities require participation (recommendation **#1**). Our content recommendations match the URI objectives better than those at Wyoming, but the diversity of courses at Wyoming corresponds better with the model emerging at UMaine (recommendation **#2**).

The published best-practices documents describe a variety of objectives for FYSCs. Results from USC's 2017 national survey show that UMaine's current FYSCs share many of the objectives that are common nationally. As a clear set of topics and SLOs is developed per recommendation **#2**, the USC results could provide a helpful benchmark.

The Koch and Gardner article, among others, emphasizes the importance of assessing FYSCs and other first-year success initiatives, and of considering support after the first year as well: "Assuming that once the first year is over, students no longer need support, the first-year experience ends abruptly – often leading to an inevitable drop in performance during the second year of study known as 'the sophomore slump.' Although it is widely recognized now that the beginning experience does make a great difference in student outcomes, nevertheless, most institutions have not subjected themselves to a rigorous 'self-study' of the first year" (p. 34). The need to consider FYSCs in the context of students' ongoing success underlies recommendation **#5**. The notion that assessment must be part of a high quality FYSC program is reflect in the assessment dimension of recommendation **#2**.

Other contributing sources

Also making a positive contribution to the working group were:

- Input from Assistant Provost Debra Allen, who provided data and met with the group to help us understand and prioritize the results.
- A meeting with members of the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies. This meeting focused our attention on the benefits of providing support before and after the fall semester of the student's first year (recommendation **#5**).
- Comments by other participants at the two convenings.

Resource Information (optional)

Your charge did not include the development of an estimated budget needed to implement your recommendations. Nonetheless, if in the process of completing your work you gathered information about key resources needs (e.g., operating expenses, personnel, space, equipment, software), please include that information.

Recommendations with personnel costs associated include the following:

- Adding 6-7 FYSC sections each fall to accommodate the 6% of incoming students who do not currently take an FYSC.
- Possibly reducing the size of larger FYSC sections to facilitate more individual contact between students and instructors.
- Professional development for instructors. Separate compensation should be considered for part-time faculty and graduate students.
- Extension of FYSC-type support into the summer preceding and/or spring following the first semester in college.