

EPC Report on the 1997-98 Freshman Seminar Assessment

The freshman seminar program was established with the following primary goal: The primary goal of the freshman seminar program is to help the student develop his or her ability to engage in critical thinking and independent learning. To accomplish this, the seminars provide the student with an active small-class experience that includes opportunities for discussion, writing, and other modes of expression appropriate to the subject matter of the course.

Although most of our freshman courses also strive to help our students develop their ability to engage in critical thinking and independent learning, the freshman seminars are different because they are all strictly limited to no more than 15 students, and because they are all writing intensive. This combination is believed to be especially effective for promoting an active experience when contrasted to a large lecture class, where a student can avoid participation (or attendance) without notice. The smallness of the class was also expected to allow faculty to introduce students to the excitement and intensity of higher education. Finally, we note that the freshman seminar program now serves to satisfy the writing proficiency requirement for nearly 60% of our freshman.

For the 1997-98 Freshman Seminar Assessment program, students and faculty were asked to complete questionnaires that rated the course emphasis and the perceived improvement in four major areas of skills:

Critical thinking

Independent Learning

Discussion

Writing

In all four of these areas, the students and faculty report a high emphasis on skills, and a slightly lower evaluation of how much the seminar improved skills. The independent learning skills had the lowest overall scores: 3.9/4.0 (for students/faculty, with a top score of 5) for the extent to which independent learning was emphasized, 3.5/3.6 for the extent to which independent learning skills improved. The writing skills had the highest overall scores: 4.6/4.6 for extent to which writing was emphasized, 3.7/4.0 for the extent to which writing skills improved. The EPC believes that this 1997-98 Freshman Seminar Assessment shows clearly that both the faculty and the students perceive the Freshman Seminar as meeting its stated goals.

However, it is difficult to assess performance on the basis of self-reporting. The EPC believes that the comparison of student responses to faculty responses is one important measure. Since the faculty are charged with grading the students' performance in the course, they should be able to provide an accurate evaluation.. In all four areas, faculty ratings were consistent with student ratings, and always slightly higher.

Of the responding students, almost 15% were not placed in one of their top choices of freshman seminars. Even among these students, there were no major differences in the perceived emphasis of the courses in each of the four areas. Those students did report somewhat lower skill improvement and perceived value, especially for discussion skills. Again, this lends support to the accuracy of the measures of skill emphasis. It also argues that it is important to try to provide places for all students in one of their top choices.

The writing skills received high overall ratings from students and faculty for both emphasis and skills improvement. There is a 0.5 point difference between the student ratings given to the three-credit freshman seminars (not w-designated) and those given to four credit w-designated seminars by students who were fulfilling their writing proficiency requirement. Much of this difference disappears when all one considers the ratings given by all students who were not satisfying their writing proficiency requirement, including those taking four credit w-designated courses. Nevertheless, since clear writing is such a crucial skill, the EPC and the Writing Committee will discuss what skill assessments might be possible and useful.

The assessment also examined the ratings for differences among the Humanities, the Social Sciences, Interdisciplinary Studies, and the Natural Sciences & Mathematics. They found very few. Students taking seminars in the social sciences report 0.3-0.4 less emphasis on discussions and less skill development in discussions.

Emphasis on discussions and the improvement of discussion skills are the two categories with the largest number of marginal responses. In 7% of the seminars, the students reported an average score below 3 for emphasis on writing, but in 17% of the seminars, the students gave an average score below 3 for the improvement of their discussion skills. In the other categories, virtually all seminars had an average score above 3 for emphasis, while about 75% had an average score above 4. Approximately 90% of the seminars had an average score above 3 for skill improvement in these other areas.

Learning on one's own had the lowest percentage of scores above 4 for either emphasis (48%) or skill improvement (12%), but a majority of students reported that the seminar helped them to research or investigate a topic on their own. Moreover, a large majority of students reported that they plan to pursue their seminar topic further, and that they used skills developed in their seminars in other courses.

The 1997-98 Assessment of the Freshman Seminar Program made the following recommendations:

1. Distribute results of the freshman seminar assessment to departments and individual instructors
2. Encourage faculty to review with students the goals of freshman seminars, the relevance of various experiences and assignments for achieving those goals.

3. A discussion-intensive seminar experience for first year students is an important new initiative of the College. Leading class discussions is a skill that has been a topic of College-sponsored faculty workshops. Continue to support the discussion-intensive initiative through workshops and other opportunities that allow faculty to explore ways to encourage and support seminar discussions.

4. All freshman seminars are writing intensive. However, not all students take freshman seminars to meet their lower level writing requirement and not all seminars carry the "w" designation. Students may fulfill their lower level writing requirement in several ways, including the successful completion of a w-designated freshman seminar. Comparisons of these groups suggest modest differences between students enrolled in w-designated seminars and those who are enrolled in non w-designated seminars. Continue to make these comparisons in order to provide information for discussions of the lower level writing requirement and of the distinction between w- and non w-designated seminars.

5. In related assessment studies, ask upper level students about the value of their freshman seminar experiences.

6. Continue to conduct periodic reviews of the Freshman Seminar Programs.

The EPC agrees with these recommendations, and makes the following addenda:

1. The EPC will discuss with the Writing Committee the possibility and usefulness using writing samples to assess those students who have passed their writing proficiency. Since approximately 60% of our students pass their writing proficiency by taking a freshman seminar, any further assessment may well have implications for the freshman seminar program.

2. In further studies (for concentrations assessments or alumni surveys), the EPC will discuss with the Assessment Steering Committee the inclusion of questions comparing the freshman seminar experience to that of upper level seminars, and other small group experiences. In particular, advanced students and alumni might be asked to rate seminars in their concentration with the same questions that were asked for the Freshman seminar. Further, they might be asked if their perception of the Freshman Seminar experience has changed in view of their later work and experiences at William and Mary. If the Freshman Seminar is still perceived to have initiated critical thinking, independent learning, active participation in class, or good writing, then the program can clearly be labeled a success.

Significant differences among students in various concentrations might suggest that some departments are making better use of the Freshman Seminar experience. Such comparisons might help some departments improve the format of their Freshman Seminars, based on the most successful models. For example, some freshman seminars in the social sciences closely follow the same material as the large introductory courses, while in many other departments, freshman seminars introduced topics which were completely new to the curriculum. This assessment does not find major differences

between these two approaches. If differences do later appear, they might have educational policy implications.