

Research Universities Project

“Strengthening First-Year Student Learning at Doctoral/Research-Extensive Universities”

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC takes seriously its commitment to excellence in undergraduate education. In so doing, a faculty committee, the Committee on the First Year, recommended the initiation of a program entitled the CHASS First Year Seminars (CFYS), which was established in 2000-01. The primary focus and objective of the First Year Seminars is to ensure that, right from the freshman year, the new students will be brought into close interaction, in the context of small academic classes, with members of the regular full-time CHASS faculty who are committed to developing the skills of critical thinking and inquiry in their introductory courses. The CHASS First Year Seminars are required of all incoming students in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences regardless of major, with each seminar being designed to meet college or major requirements. CFYS classes all meet at the same morning hour, are limited to 15-20 students and while they necessarily differ from instructor to instructor, they are all organized around a central, unifying theme. The emphasis in each class is the exploration of the subject matter through dialogue and discussion of challenging texts, regardless of disciplinary approach. The instructors lead their students through inquiry-guided learning whereby students learn to ask important questions, reflect critically on significant issues, and take responsibility for their own learning within the structure of the course. Faculty are encouraged to emphasize to students the significance of research, both in terms of the faculty member's own work and the opportunities that exist for undergraduate student research within the University.

The solicitation and selection of the proposed courses and bi-annual themes for the seminars is coordinated through a CHASS First Year Seminar Committee, made up of faculty representing all the departments in the College in addition to the program chair. The CFYS theme for 2000-01 and 2001-02 is “The World, the Nation, and the Self.” In keeping with this theme, 8 courses were offered in the Fall 2000 and 9 in the Spring 2001. All faculty teaching these courses were full-time, and most were tenured or tenure-track. During 2001-02, a total of 19 CFYS courses are being offered, 7 in the Fall, 2001 and 12 in the Spring 2002, most of these courses taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty. For 2002-03 and 2003-04, the CFYS Committee has chosen “Ethics and Justice in Global Perspective” as its theme. A total of 17 course proposals have been accepted and scheduled. Student enrollment in the seminars is conducted on-line, prior to New Student Orientation in the summer. Letters are sent to all incoming freshmen explaining how to register for these courses and most of the students are enrolled in their CFYS course of choice by the time that they arrive on campus.

Assessment and evaluation of the CHASS First Year Seminars is recognized as a significant component of an effective academic program. During the next bi-annum, and beginning in Spring 2002, the effectiveness of the seminars will be determined by the use of several measures: 1) A self-report survey of faculty teaching the CFYS courses; 2) a self-report survey of all students enrolled in a CFYS course during a given semester; and 3) an analysis and assessment of early and late student writing samples, looking, in particular, for evidence of growth and development in the areas of critical thinking, inquiry and self reflection related to the

general seminar theme. Two aspects of the CFYS Program lend themselves particularly well to assessment measures, namely the CFYS Colloquium which gathers all of the students together at the mid-point of the semester, and the CFYS Symposium, which takes place at the end of the semester. At the Colloquium, students are afforded the opportunity to hear a lecture by a selected speaker related to the seminar theme. This semester, for example, the students will benefit from the expertise of our CHASS Dean. At the conclusion of her talk, the students will be asked to write a short reaction paper addressing such questions as: What did you learn from the lecture that you did not know before? What questions did it answer for you? What new questions did it raise for you? How did the content of the talk relate to what you are learning in class? These short reaction papers will then be collected and the responses will become part of the assessment of the development of the students' critical thinking skills. The CFYS Symposium, which also includes all of the students, will, this semester, be organized so that students will meet in small groups on that day in instructors' classrooms other than their own, where they will discuss a common set of questions based on a selected reading that had been chosen in advance. Students will be asked to write a short reaction paper at the conclusion of the Symposium also. Rubrics and guidelines for measuring the students' work will be determined by the instructors. In this way, the CFYS instructors will be involved in taking an active part in the assessment of the student material and in determining if the student goals and objectives of the seminars are being met. Instructors' input and participation are sought in person at faculty meetings and electronically through a CFYS Instructors' Listserv that has been set up for the purpose of encouraging dialogue and discussion throughout the semester.

In order to encourage the CHASS tenured and tenure-track faculty to take time from their busy research, teaching and service schedules to develop a first year seminar, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences has offered \$1,000 stipends to the CFYS instructors for teaching a CFYS course. (Instructors usually teach the same course twice during a two-year period..) The proposed budget for any given year is approximately \$20,000. The money for these stipends is considered by the College to be a sound investment in faculty, as well as student, development. In addition to proposing and teaching the CFYS course, each instructor is also requested to attend and participate in a number of professional development activities, sponsored by the University. Over the last two years, in the semester prior to their teaching of the course, the CFYS faculty were offered workshops such as "An Introduction to Inquiry-Guided Instruction," "Strengthening First-Year Seminars: A Foundation for Student Success," and a day-long workshop with University guest Richard Paul on Critical Thinking. This Spring 2002, the future CFYS instructors will be requested to attend two half-day workshops on Inquiry-Guided Instruction in coordination with the campus Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, thereby offering them the opportunity to increase their own knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning while increasing that of their first year students.

Submitted by
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