

“Strengthening First-year Student Learning...”

University: North Carolina State University

Program or Strategy: “First Year Inquiry Program”

Contact Person: David Greene

Title of Contact Person, Director, First year Inquiry Program; and Head, Division of Multidisciplinary Studies

Address Box 7107, North Carolina State University, Raleigh NC 27695-7107

Telephone 919 513 1903 Fax 919 515 1828 email David_Greene@ncsu.edu

Description of program

The First year Inquiry (FYI) Program began in the fall semester of 1999 with eight sections of regular courses whose enrollment was limited to 22 students, and restricted to first year students. Since then the program has grown:

	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Spring</u>
1999-2000	8	3
2000-2001	15	8
2001-2002	30	16
2002-2003	40	16

The plan is to add ten new sections every year until there are enough sections that there will be a seat available for every first-year student in an FYI class. We do not anticipate that students will ever be required to take an FYI course. Rather, they have reasons to elect the FYI sections: they have to meet the General Education Requirements that the FYI courses satisfy, and the prospect of a small class has widespread appeal. Departments contributing FYI courses are History, Communication, Philosophy, Art and Design, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Physics, Chemistry, Entomology, Animal Science, Mathematics, Accounting, Foreign Languages, Multidisciplinary Studies

The program is funded by the Provost’s office. While it is not clear that there will be funds available for the expansion to accommodate every first-year student, funding to support at least 66 sections per year is committed for the foreseeable future.

While the program does not have a common theme or content, it does have some common pedagogical principles. The basic idea is to use the small-class format as an opportunity to integrate the cognitive goals of the particular course with the special objectives of the FYI program:

- * students will take responsibility for their own education
- * students will improve their critical thinking skills through guided practice in critical thinking
- * students will grow beyond dualistic thinking (in which questions have a right/wrong answer, or they merely invite opinions, and all opinions are equally valid) toward intellectual maturity

All faculty participating in the FYI program meet for two workshops at the end of the semester preceding the one in which they will offer the FYI section of a course. One of these workshops features a visitor such as Peter Facione or Richard Paul, and the other consists of presentations by participants in the program. We work toward a common understanding of our FYI objectives, an understanding that evolves

as new faculty join the program, and we share particular classroom strategies to integrate the cognitive with the FYI objectives. During the semester, FYI faculty meet in teams of six to eight once a month to discuss problems, strategies, and agree on procedures for assessing the program as a whole.

The assessment has evolved to include three components: First, student writing samples are collected from the beginning and the end of the semester. These are scored in terms of the quality of critical thinking they exhibit, using the Facione critical thinking rubrics. Last semester (fall '01) the average increased from 2.9 to 3.5 on a 5-point scale. We are still working to improve the scoring process, but it is already apparent that the process itself has helped faculty to devise clearer writing assignments which elicit better critical thinking and to communicate more effectively the standards of critical thinking to their students.

Second, we ask the faculty to write up their judgment of their students' progress toward each of the three FYI objectives. About two-thirds of the faculty see significant progress toward all three objectives, while all faculty see significant progress toward at least one of the three. In their reports, faculty reported progress in critical thinking with the greatest emphasis.

Third, we ask the students to report on their experience with questions like, describe a time in the course when you were most engaged; describe a time when you had to distinguish among fact, opinion, and judgment; has this course helped you to cope with large classes; how have you changed as a learner. From the specific examples that students offer, it is undeniable that they have made considerable progress toward taking responsibility for their education, and articulate clearly the strategies they will need to follow in order to succeed in subsequent courses.

Success in future courses, being in position to benefit maximally from courses in the major, becoming genuine, life-long inquirers who know how to find and evaluate evidence—these are the overarching goals of the program. These goals cannot be achieved in a single course. The gains the students made in this course must be reinforced in other General Education courses as well as courses in the major. FYI objectives need to become the objectives of other first-year courses and General Education courses in the sophomore year. What has happened so far is that about 100 NCSU faculty have come to agreement about the FYI objectives and have learned strategies for meeting them that are applicable in the other arenas as well. The First-year program is becoming the springboard for a widespread and thoroughgoing transformation of our students' educational experience.