



WORKING WITH YOUR IR OFFICER

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The following is an invited contribution to the First Year Assessment listserv, the "online magazine" of the [Policy Center on the First Year of College](http://www.brevard.edu/fyc) (<http://www.brevard.edu/fyc>). The essay draws upon a paper, [The Role of Institutional Research in Implementing First-Year Seminars](#) that Dan Nugent and I presented at the 2001 conference of the Northeast Association for Institutional Research.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should begin by noting that The Pennsylvania State University does not have a single institutional research office, and I am not "the" Institutional Research (IR) officer. Our Center for Quality and Planning provides data and analyses to support decision-making on a variety of issues that relate to university-level planning and continuous improvement. We approach IR in a decentralized and cooperative manner, and try to deal with questions that have practical implications. I do believe that institutional research (wherever it's located organizationally) can and should contribute to the development, implementation, and assessment of a first-year seminar program.

Penn State's First-Year Seminar Program

In 1999-2000, Penn State started one of the nation's most ambitious first-year seminar efforts by enacting a university-wide freshman seminar requirement. This was part of a substantive revision to general education put forward by a faculty committee. (For more detailed information about general education at Penn State, see <http://www.psu.edu/oue/gened/>.)

The hallmark of the new curriculum was the establishment of a required first-year seminar for all incoming baccalaureate students. Members of the General Education Committee drew on their own experiences and ideas in developing the concept, but objective, research-based information contributed significantly at all stages of the process (Dooris and Blood, 2001).

IR and Early Deliberations

Early in the exploratory process, IR produced information gave credibility to the proposal for some type of first-year seminar initiative. At Penn State, for example, committee members learned from transcript analyses that 55 percent of general education student credit hours were earned in classes of 100 or more students and that freshmen and sophomores were disproportionately likely to be enrolled in large classes. Attendance studies revealed that student absenteeism was strongly and positively correlated to class size. Alumni and student surveys highlighted a need for students to better understand the linkages between general education and major courses, especially early in the college experience. Several colleges within the Penn State system were already using elective first-year seminars, and data were available from the assessment of those existing programs. The literature on undergraduate education and on first-year seminars, and benchmark information on

practices at other colleges (not all of which were in Penn State's normal research-university peer group), were also helpful.

IR and FYS Implementation

Institutional research guided the implementation of the first-year seminars. While the creation of any first-year seminar program is a significant undertaking, it was especially ambitious for a large, diverse campus like Penn State (about 12,000 first-year students, 24 campuses, and 17 undergraduate degree-granting colleges offering 232 majors.) Every college or university, of course, faces its own unique challenges. IR can help faculty, staff, and administrators decide how those challenges can be best addressed.

In Penn State's situation, the general education committee favored a university-wide requirement option, but had doubts about whether the university would be able to overcome the obstacles for full implementation. IR data provided information on factors such as existing patterns of faculty instructional assignment; curricular requirements (credit loads, course sequencing) of different majors; estimated numbers and costs of additional small sections; and physical facility constraints --- that is, the number, size, and availability of classrooms. That information helped the committee decide that a university-wide program was feasible at Penn State.

Assessment of the Program

IR services continued to be valuable once the program was created. At Penn State, analyses of non-obtrusive data such as transcript files and registrar's databases have been an especially efficient and powerful way to answer questions about how the new requirement has been enacted. For example, we now know that 93 percent of freshmen who return as sophomores have completed the requirement; we know how many sections of how many different courses have been offered, by what categories of instructors, and so forth. Student and faculty focus groups and surveys have provided mostly positive feedback about the seminars, along with some insights into opportunities for refinement and improvement.

Emphasizing Pragmatic Analyses

IR support was especially productive by emphasizing relatively pragmatic analyses (such as how the curriculum is being enacted) more than classic assessment approaches (such as pre- and post-tests). There are two main reasons for this. First, the challenges of conducting valid and reliable assessments of cognitive and affective gains, or educational outcomes, are substantial, especially for a small IR staff juggling multiple responsibilities with limited resources of time, money, and expertise. Second, as Ernest Pascarella (2001) recently suggested, academic decision-makers should concentrate on practices and processes that are known to be linked to important cognitive and noncognitive outcomes. He wrote, "the assumption here, and it is not an unreasonable one, is that an excellent

undergraduate education is most likely to occur at those colleges and universities that maximize good practices” (Pascarella, 2001, p. 22). A persuasive research literature has already demonstrated that first-year seminars do constitute good practice; and as John Gardner often notes, first-year seminars may be “the most studied and assessed course genre in American higher education history” (1998, p. xiii).

Our FYS-related work has, in short, been mostly directed toward practical and efficient institutional research. IR support helped develop the original plan, evaluated the implementation of the plan, and provide on-going evaluation of a program that much research has shown (and that Penn State faculty and administrators believe) is a good idea.

References

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