

“Designing Freshman Interest Groups That Address Millennial Learning Styles”

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ABSTRACT

Residential Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS) have recently become a popular instructional and social model for academic and student affairs colleagues who are concerned that millennial students learn to reflect on life experiences and daily events as part of the learning process. An introductory FIG program recognizes that millennial students are in the initial stages of an academic transition and social assimilation that requires increasingly more collaborative and interactive learning experiences that make explicit connections between academic learning and student life. The integration of academic learning and student development, however, demands that we as program administrators and directors also become more active participants in the educational enterprise by providing a caring and supportive learning environment in which millennial students begin to play a major role in their own learning while they are engaged in classroom instruction and residential living activities that enrich their lives and enhance their potential career success.

## Residential Freshman Interest Groups

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### Initial Blueprint

A collaborative team of faculty, student affairs professionals, and student resident assistants design a theme-based academic and residence floor blueprint that reflects the content of three linked courses and includes living-and-learning activities that foster an integrative experience in each of the linked courses in the FIG. The focus is holistic and weaves together a seamless array of shared classes in specific disciplinary subjects, residential programs, and collaborative group projects that enrich the development of a first year's student's academic and social skills.

## Basic Principles

One of the instructional principles of a FIG is to model basic learning skills *e.g.*, critical thinking, knowledge application, information analysis and reflection, and to emphasize communication skills, collaborative practices, problem solving and decision-making. The questions we need to ask ourselves in the initial planning of a FIG model are: (1) “Do the linked courses and living-and-learning activities prepare first year students to make independent and yet informed academic decisions?” (2) “Does the tentative model promote thinking and learning opportunities for first year students to explore their own value and ethical code?” (3) “Are there alternative learning components in the model that encourage first year students to make connections with other non-academic life experiences?”

## Model Blueprint

A FIG model blueprint enrolls a cohort of twenty students and the residence theme floor generally reflects a significant issue, historical period, or current event that is explored in the content of the linked courses *e.g.*, “Censorship and the Media,” “The Politics of Religion,” “The Gender Gap,” or “Film and Society.” The residential component of a FIG encourages first year students to translate classroom theory into practice through small group study discussion, team problem-solving tasks, role-playing assignments, and co-curricular program events. A typical residential program format might include invited speakers, films, panel discussions, career planning events, peer mentor role-modeling sessions or informal workshops on selected awareness programs *e.g.*, alcohol and drug abuse, internships, community service, cultural diversity, volunteerism, conflict resolution or honor codes.

The model blueprint may also include a non-credit or one-credit First-Year Success

Seminar (FYSS) as part of the program design. Frequently team-taught by academic and student affairs colleagues, resident assistants, and student peer counselors, FYSS seminars may include a series of educational sessions related to health and wellness, academic advising, civil behavior, time management skills, information literacy, social behavior, technological resources, conflict resolution and management skills, or diversity perspectives. Linking the FYSS to a FIG provides a broader and more diverse opportunity for a team of professionals to focus on specific support services that meet the immediate needs of first year students, structure the sequence of learning experiences to encourage first year students to be more resourceful and independent in their ability to think and plan, and provide timely feedback that encourages first year students to have more faith in themselves and to assume more “self” control and responsibility for their individual learning experiences.

Frequent interaction of faculty, student affairs staff, and student resident assistants in planning both the FYSS and FIG is crucial in promoting educational and social engagement opportunities for first year students. A collaborative team approach provides immediate personal and professional feedback that (1) contextualizes instructional material that enables first year students to make meaningful and relevant connections themselves (2) offers first year students constructive criticism in a supportive, mutually inclusive and non-threatening environment and (3) provides first year students with examples, models, and prototypes of living and learning experiences that enhance their individual abilities and talents. This experiential learning perspective also serves as a viable alternative to make more explicit connections between academic learning and student life more visible and frequently provides a more practical application and understanding of the dynamic interrelationship between

academic and student affairs.

### Initial Preparation

Academic and student affairs colleagues interested in designing a FIG and FYSS will need to begin meeting one year in advance to explore appropriate classroom assignments, plan small group projects for first year students, schedule guest speakers and workshops, set a calendar of residential events, and identify activities that reinforce the FIG residential theme. Initial planning sessions should define learning objectives for the FIG and FYSS—both academic and social—establish the sequence of experiences, individual and small group assignments, and grading or performance rubrics. An essential ingredient in the initial preparation is to include a number of alternative learning activities so all first year students can be actively engaged in the living-and-learning environment. It is also important to consider peer developed assessments as well as individual student achievement within the context of “team” assignments or projects to complement assessments by academic and student affairs personnel.

The residential component of a FIG requires working closely with residence life staff to identify space for small group activities, interactive workshops, and social events that promote collaborative team-work initiatives. A number of peer assistants will need to be identified to serve as student mentors and to provide additional support in designing orientation sessions, co-ordinating project activities, and facilitating a regular series of small group discussions that assist first students in making explicit curricular and co-curricular connections. Peer assistants may also play an invaluable role in modeling team-building, problem-solving, and decision-making

skills for first year students in small group settings.

An integral part of pre-planning a successful FIG program is securing institutional support for a modest budget to support program activities, social events, guest speakers, peer student assistants, publicity, publications and instructional supplies. It will also be important to negotiate the terms of faculty and professional staff participation in the FIG program—particularly issues related to compensation for faculty and professional staff, reduced teaching or administrative responsibilities and a more flexible schedule to accommodate evening and weekend program activities.

#### Summary

Institutional FIG programs facilitate explicit connections between academic learning and student life, promote collaborative teaching and learning experiences and enrich the intellectual life and sense of community for first year students. From both an epistemological and pedagogical perspective, the FIG model is an invaluable strategic blueprint that fosters an academic and social context for learning, provides interdisciplinary learning opportunities and promotes an integrated and interactive campus living-and-learning environment.