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Designing for Students: Creating a Robust Interdisciplinary First Year Course

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Abstract: Building a general education program from scratch for a population of first generation and underserved students provided both a challenge and opportunity. Faculty who had limited previous experience teaching and assessing first year students engaged in study of the best practices and research. Faculty designed a four-year general education curriculum that began with a robust First Year Seminar (FYS) course, the focus of this study. This required three-credit hour interdisciplinary humanities course (FYS) was designed to embrace the understanding of what it means to be human, including understanding oneself in relation to the natural world and to others. Full time faculty from all disciplines were selected through a competitive process to teach the FYS course with embedded High Impact Practices (HIPs). Four years of teaching FYS has provided qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness of the design, the role of faculty, and application of HIPs. Through the course assessment process and data analysis, faculty have expanded their repertoire of pedagogical strategies to engage the first year student, and as a result, positively influenced teaching in their other courses. This report offers insights on strategies for course design, the role of faculty, and the power of selected HIPs that may be replicated at other institutions.

Key words: course design, faculty, high impact practices, humanities, learning community, general education assessment

Introduction and Background

Governors State University (GSU) is a public regional university located 35 miles south of Chicago, Illinois, an area with limited economic growth. Since our founding as an upper division university in 1969, GSU has been a beacon of opportunity in higher education. Our undergraduate student population (2,993 FTE) looks like America. As the only public university in our region, we serve urban, suburban, and rural students. We primarily serve the underserved. When we admitted our first freshman class in the fall of 2014, fifty-one percent of our undergraduates were students of color; fifty-six percent received Pell grants; and forty-two percent were first generation.

GSU has always made a strong commitment to ensuring an accessible and high quality education. Over the last five years, GSU has undergone a transformation into a four-year university, providing a growing number of first-generation, underrepresented, and underserved college students with all the benefits of university education—experiences that students from more privileged backgrounds take for granted. For the first time in our history, in fall 2014 we admitted 242 freshmen and opened a residence hall. As we anticipated, an even higher percentage of our first freshman class compared to

our undergraduate transfer students was made up of underrepresented students: seventy-six percent were students of color; sixty-six percent received Pell grants; and nearly seventy percent tested developmental in English and/or mathematics.

The typical student at GSU would be considered nontraditional at other institutions. Designing curriculum as "retro-fit," to shift from meeting the needs of a non-traditional adult learner to meeting the needs of the typical 18-year-old college freshmen could be as challenging as trying to retrofit an existing house with state of the art "green" technology. It runs the risk of being overly expensive, not having the appropriate materials, and not meeting your needs when it is finished. At GSU, we knew our approach to curriculum development required a fresh start, one that used the principles of universal design requiring innovative ideas, sound pedagogical methods, and authentic assessments that took into account the unique needs of all our students. We had to start from the ground up in building our general education curriculum.

Building curriculum this way required the best thinking of all our faculty with professional development centered on shared readings and conversations. A General Education Task Force was formed to take the lead in researching and developing a general education curriculum. This Task Force had representation from the various disciplines primarily in Arts and Sciences, but was led by a faculty member in the Physical Therapy doctoral program, who was a faculty leader and champion for high impact practices. Through small group meetings and workshops, the Task Force examined research on Liberal Education and America's Promise (AAC&U, 2011), high impact practices (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008), student success, equity minded teaching practices, and assessment that matters. Our faculty built a research-based, model freshman program "from scratch." Throughout this process, information, updates and drafts of the general education curriculum were shared with the university community through Faculty Senate, Deans' Council, college meetings, and open forums. Their common understanding of factors that contribute to persistence and degree completion led them to value building community among students and faculty through engaging them in learning communities.

We also understood that to make transformative changes across the university, we had to ensure that everyone viewed themselves as stakeholders in student success. We brought together individuals from facilities, business offices, human resources, campus police, advising, academics, student affairs, administration, and student senate to participate in campus-wide symposia led by academic leaders and change agents, such as Carol Geary Schneider, John Gardner, Betsy Barefoot, Roberta Ness, Caryn McTighe Musil, and Daniel Goleman. These symposia provided a venue for community building and candid discussions on what we needed to do together to best serve all of our students, but especially the incoming freshmen. The commitment to student success was incumbent upon everyone on campus.

Literature Review

Scholarship of Teaching

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) opens the classroom and university setting to a site that focuses on inquiry and exploration of the structure and impact of teaching on the learning experience and elevates the focus to the profession of teaching (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). SoTL requires faculty to refute the assumption that only "ineffective" teachers have questions or problems with their practice (Hutchings & Schulman, 1999). Faculty within the university are hired because they are content experts, and the expectations of joining the university community are that these experts will be able to spark in students the same passion and thirst for knowledge for the respective discipline. Expertise in effective pedagogy, curriculum, and course development may not have been part of the

faculty member's preparation, but it is a necessary component of effective college teaching. Arreola, et.al. (2003) identified four professional dimensions of college teaching: base profession skills and knowledge, instructional design skills, instructional delivery skills, and instructional assessment skills. SoTL promotes the understanding that credible research may use many models beyond the traditional empirical model of inquiry (Arreola, et.al, 2003). Effective use of pedagogical strategies and curriculum development require faculty members to understand the dimensions of their meta-profession and truly examine how a wide range of research methodologies informs what transpires in the classroom. This is an integral component of any transformational efforts.

Effective pedagogical strategies that impact the educational experiences include high impact practices and active learning. All high impact practices are designed to increase student engagement with faculty or other students as a means to improve student leaning (AAC&U, 2011). The three high impact strategies that provided a focus for this study include learning communities, first year seminars/experiences, and writing-intensive courses. Through learning communities, students build bonds with their instructors and peers (Tinto & Russo, 1994; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This engagement results in a deeper understanding of course content, a stronger sense of belonging, and increased persistence rates. Students who have opportunities to interact with instructors they perceive as being approachable, respectful, and available both in the classroom and outside of the classroom seem to have a higher level of academic confidence and motivation, both extrinsically and intrinsically (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). Interdisciplinary learning communities also have a positive effect on teaching efficacy and faculty development through joint planning for a course and collaborative projects and assessments (Lester & Evans, 2009). In a study conducted by Willis & Allegretti (2013), they found that instructors teaching the First Year Seminar (FYS) experienced more positive effects on their teaching, including classes outside of the FYS, engaged in more reflective behavior and were more intentional in their assessment practices. Students enrolled in the FYS often benefit from the inclusion of multiple high impact practices in a course that is typically taken in the first semester of a student's academic program as seen by higher levels of engagement and persistence (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013).

High Impact Practices

The GSU First Year Seminar (FYS) was designed to include the HIPs of learning communities and writing intensive. Hotchkiss, Moore and Pitts (2006) found that participation in freshman learning communities was correlated with improved GPA and found that it could improve retention of some students. Likewise, Rocconi (2011) reported that learning communities were related to first year student gains because of increased student engagement. The emphasis on improving student engagement was important as faculty planned the FYS. A small study of FYS that was writing intensive found that students completing the course were better at planning writing and revising by using higher order writing processes (Kolb, Longest and Jensen, 2013). Aurora University (IL) uses an interdisciplinary FYS to introduce students to the importance of the whole general education curriculum and found that their design helped students appreciate the importance of general education (Vander Schee, 2011). This research highlights the importance of selecting the appropriate faculty to teach an interdisciplinary FYS.

Transformation at Governors State University

As Governors State University made the change from being limited to upper division courses and students, an innovative structured four-year program was developed. The ability to start from scratch allowed faculty and administrators serving on the General Education Task Force to use solid research

and best practices to build the program. The GSU General Education Task Force read a variety of research to inform the design and early in the process decided to incorporate high-impact practices (HIPs) as described by AAC&U (2011). A longitudinal study by Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella (2015) reported that active and collaborative learning approaches in the HIPs had the most positive effects. To assist faculty in the implementation of these in the classroom, the GSU plan designated small class sizes and teaching by full-time faculty as core components of the program.

In addition, we anticipated that as a regional, public institution located in an economically disadvantaged area that we would serve many first generation students from under represented populations. The work of Rashne Jehangir (2009) on cultivating student voice informed our curricular design as well. She recommends the use of learning communities to combat the isolation that she found among first generation, low-income students. GSU designed the first three semesters around a student learning community model, that we called cohorts. The first component was a required First Year Seminar course.

First Year Seminar (FYS) courses are the most common and longest used HIPs in higher education (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). Authors have reported as many as 95% of four year institutions offer a first year seminar (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Summary research indicates that student participation in an FYS results in greater likelihood to persist from the first to second year of college and greater likelihood to graduate from college (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Recent calls from authors to enhance teaching for first year students are found in many places, one example is Bowen and McPherson (2016) on "the deadening effect of too much poor teaching of foundational courses…especially among less prepared students" (p. viii, as cited in Maimon, 2018). At GSU the commitment for full-time faculty to teach FYS and the other courses in the learning community (nine courses in three semesters) came from the faculty and the president. The focus was on increasing student and faculty interaction, in support of student engagement. As the GSU president commented in her recent book, "permanent faculty members are present and involved in the life of an institution outside of the classroom" (Maimon, 2018, p. 55). GSU identified these aspects of faculty availability beyond the classroom and care for student learning as foundational to the FYS course.

Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya (2010) found that positive faculty student interactions were important for development of student academic self-concept and achievement. They also reported on the importance of students feeling respected as part of these positive interactions, in agreement with the findings of Jehangir (2009).

Since many GSU faculty members had no experience teaching first and second year college students, we were concerned about supporting faculty so they could develop these important relationships with students. Other researchers have found that teaching an FYS course has an impact on the faculty member. Murray and Wolf (2016) found that teaching and Interdisciplinary FYS had a significant influence on faculty as they reached beyond their discipline. Faculty reported high satisfaction with benefits also to their morale, teaching, and research. Likewise, Willis and Allegretti (2013) found enhanced teaching after participation in collaborative teaching in FYS. The researchers found faculty reported that they reflected on their teaching, improved assessment and gained a sense of community with other faculty.

With a commitment to high impact practices (HIPs) the faculty established basic tenets that guided the development of our first freshmen class curriculum. Based on the research of Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinsey, & Gonyea (2008), Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot (2005), Tinto (1987), and Bean (1981), the faculty determined that all first-year courses would be taught in small class sizes by full-time, fully dedicated, faculty members. As noted by Bettinger and Long's study, "Adjuncts have positive impacts on introductory course grades but negative impacts on subsequent course enrollment and performance" (2004, p.6). Thus, full-time faculty were committed to teaching freshmen to ensure long-term student success.

Building this new curriculum had some unexpected barriers. There were challenges, but these challenges often led to opportunities and new avenues of thinking. Based on four years of experience, this report describes the journey and the processes used to design the general framework of the FYS course. The methods used to recruit full time faculty from all four academic colleges, bringing their expertise and academic passions to the teaching of the FYS course, and the identification of an agreed upon measure of student success are shared.

Methods

The study examined the design decisions for the new the First Year Seminar (FYS) course and the extent that those purposeful design decisions influenced student learning. The focus of design decisions included which faculty were selected to teach the course and the application of High Impact Practices (HIPs) through course delivery and assessment. Student learning was measured using faculty assessment of student learning outcomes, course grades and responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

Commitments for Course Development

The Task Force determined that the FYS would be submitted and approved for transfer to Illinois institutions participating in the statewide articulation agreement as a three-credit Interdisciplinary Humanities course prior to offering it to students. Additionally, an intentional decision was that this course would be required for new first year students as part of a three-course block schedule taken in the Fall Semester, and that class size would be capped at 30 students. Three HIPs were embedded in all sections of FYS; they include first year experience, writing intensive, and learning community. A policy was written delineating requirements for writing intensive courses. Creation of the learning community occurred through scheduling students into the FYS with Writing Studies I and a History, anthropology, or geography course. Service-learning experiences and/or collaborative assignments to the course could be added at the discretion of the course instructor. The extent to which these agreed upon commitments were implemented was examined through the GE Council course approval process, student performance, and an ethnographic analysis of faculty learning community seminar reflections.

Faculty Selection

The General Education Council (permanent replacement for the General Education Task Force cited above) sought faculty applicants each spring to teach FYS for the following fall. The application provided potential instructors with the approved syllabus and then posed some short answer questions. Faculty were asked to consider the theme they will apply to the course, their preparation to teach it, and willingness to teach multiple years (if invited). Only full-time faculty (tenure and non-tenure track) were eligible. A faculty committee reviewed the applications and the General Education Director notified faculty of their acceptance. When needed, a second call was sent for additional applications or the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences nominated appropriate faculty in the humanities. After selection, a workshop was held at the end of the spring semester and again in early August to discuss pedagogy and partnerships with other linked courses. These interactive sessions were designed to encourage faculty exchanges among those with prior experience with faculty who never taught the course before. These meetings also facilitated the development of shared assignments across two of the three courses that students took as part of the learning community. Midterm meetings were planned to provide exchange of teaching strategies across the FYS faculty and to share

ways in which they exercised the option of using a junior or senior student as a peer mentor to the class. Data on the outcome of these professional exchanges were collected through ethnographic means of analysis of notes taken during the faculty meetings, and faculty interviews.

A purposeful approach in the design of the First Year Seminar (FYS) course was in the development of course outcomes, met within the context of the themed pathways of civic engagement, global citizenship, and sustainability. Thus an outcome statement such as, *generate evidence-supported arguments, which reflect sound interpretation of societal and ethical issues* was broad enough to be addressed within any of the themes, and allowed for the selection of faculty members representing multiple disciplines. Selection required a commitment to developing course activities and assignments that related to the chosen theme and that addressed the underpinning research from Tinto on interconnectedness and from Bean on the impact of external factors toward persistence (Cabrera, Nora, & Castenada, 1993). Moreover, this course was designated as *writing intensive*, which, by policy, meant it must include significant writing assignments with a minimum of 4,000 words total (may include a combination of non-revised assignments and revised assignments). In addition, a minimum of 40% of the course grade must be dependent on written assignments, and it should include instruction intentionally planned to support writing skills. The extent to which these decisions were met through course delivery and faculty interactions was captured in this study through examination of faculty seminar notes and analysis of data collected through scoring of signature assignments by faculty within the learning community.

Faculty Learning Communities and other HIPs

Faculty learning communities completed assessment of the FYS student learning outcomes (SLOs). During each spring semester, key assignments identified by the instructor are submitted to the General Education Director. The Director organized faculty learning communities to facilitate the review of these student artifacts. The learning community designed a rubric to measure achievement of the student learning outcomes in the foundational knowledge category of student learning outcomes (SLO). The group completed a norming activity and then applied the rubric to the student assignments. These results were presented to the General Education Council annually and result in recommendations for change; participation in these assessment activities was required by faculty, in fact, failure to participate has resulted in a faculty member not being invited to teach FYS in a subsequent year. In addition, the General Education Council reviewed student grade distribution data each year. Ethnographic data collected during the spring semester professional development session and analysis of the scoring of the foundational knowledge assignment were used in this study to determine how these data informed the development of and improvement to the working of the learning communities.

Because HIPs were a key component in the course design, it was important for GSU to measure those with students. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed as a national tool that would provide "high-quality, actionable data that institutions could use to improve the undergraduate experience" (Kuh, 2009, p.9). The three core purposes include measurement of best practices in education, guide institutional enhancements, and provide public advocacy. Students self-reported their participation in a variety of educational activities, for this study only three areas were analyzed: participation in a HIP, participation in learning communities, and frequency of interaction with faculty members. The instrument has strong psychometric properties and is administered each spring to students at participating institutions (Kuh, 2009). In addition, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), which poses parallel question sets to faculty, was used to measure the faculty's perception of these valuable teaching practices and to help us evaluate our purposeful curricular design. In this study, the results were analyzed to determine how students and

faculty viewed their participation in HIPs and the frequency and types of faculty-student interactions for first year students.

Results and Analysis

FYS Course

Faculty learning communities designed a custom rubric to assess SLOs on foundational knowledge that were taught in the FYS course. Qualitative and quantitative data were generated. Assessment of the FYS artifacts prompted discussion about the relationship between the SLOs and the key assignments. The learning community concluded in their final report that:

> *"The most glaring challenge was that there was a poor fit between the assignments and the Student Learning Outcomes. As other faculty learning communities have noted, FYS instructors felt that the SLOs have too many criteria included in each one of them. …The learning community... noticed that students would meet the first part of the statement, but not the second. It is recommended that the statement be broken down into two SLOs. Also, too many criteria extended the breadth of some SLOs, making it very difficult for any one course or assignment to cover."(GSU Faculty 2015).*

This feedback resulted in some revisions to the key assignments and started an ongoing discussion about the wording of the SLOs. Additionally, the members of the learning community realized that creating a rubric tailored to the common activity for that particular term, made it difficult to draw conclusions about overall success of the FYS over the last four years. Thus, during this fifth year of implementation, the faculty learning communities are considering the adoption of a standardized rubric, such as one of AAC&U VALUE rubrics for greater consistency.

Faculty Learning Communities

A commitment to learning communities and the collaborative assessment of course activities were necessary attributes of the selected faculty member. During the spring semester meeting of the faculty from the themed pathways, ethnographic data were collected on their experiences in forging *learning communities*. Analysis of these data over the four years provided the following themes across the groups:

Theme 1: Understanding the level of student engagement:
- Faculty challenged to discover what freshmen students care about;
- Shared strategies on how to discover student interests;
- Desire to turn student led interests into research activities.

Theme 2: Community formation:
- Strain of forced community through course placement;
- Challenge of natural development through shared interests when already placed in the themed pathway.

Theme 3: Levels of support for service learning component:
- Required, but individually performed, missed opportunity to create community;
- Challenges of identifying project completed as a "cohort" community building activity.

Theme 4: Communication across different learning communities:
- Desire for more guidance in connecting faculty members;
- Concerns about forced and uncompensated time commitment.

Theme 5: Selection of common or linked assignments:

- Tied to common interests of students;
- Challenge of linking it to learning outcomes of all courses within the community.

Faculty Selection

During the first four years of this model, all faculty teaching FYS were full time employees. During the first two years they represented all four of our academic colleges; however, more recently, the College of Business has not participated and the College of Arts and Sciences has provided more faculty. See Table 1 for the distribution of college representation.

Table 1. Faculty teaching FYS by College

Year	College of Arts and Sciences	College of Business	College of Education	College of Health and Human Services
2014*	3	1	4	3
2015*	2	2	4	3
2016*	5	0	1	4
2017*	7	0	1	0

* Some sections were team-taught and some faculty taught more than one section

For some faculty, interest in teaching the FYS course has diminished since it is no longer novel, and it does require a significant commitment of time and energy. However, a core group of faculty, who are committed to the course, has begun to emerge. Although they are mostly concentrated in the College of Arts and Sciences, they do represent multiple disciplines, such as Philosophy, Performing Arts, Spanish, and English, which continues the interdisciplinary theme.

Student Performance

Improvement has been seen over time in terms of student performance, based on grading in FYS. According to University policy, students must earn a "C" or better for general education courses to be accepted toward degree completion. The institution does not designate + or – in the grading system. See Table 2 for course grades of C or better earned in FYS by year.

Table 2. FYS grades for full time freshmen

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Cohort total	266*	241*	220*	192*
Number "C" or better	174	166	159	145
% "C" or better	65.4%	68.9%	72.3%	75.5%

* Includes students who repeated the course to earn a "C" or better

Measurement of HIPs

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was first administered at GSU in the spring of 2015 to the first group of freshmen students and our senior students that were all transfers from other institutions. We have continued annual administration of the NSSE to develop baseline data. Results are shared across campus when they are available to help inform decision making about general education and student activities. The results for GSU are compared to the other Illinois public universities that completed the survey, which varies by year. In 2016, only four other Illinois public universities participated, but in 2017, participation increased to nine public institutions. Results on selected items for the freshmen are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3. NSSE Results for freshmen

	GSU 2015	IL Public 2015	GSU 2016	IL Public 2016	GSU 2017	IL Public 2017	GSU Average
Response Rate	21%	16%	19%	16%	14%	20%	18%
Participation in HIP	93%	53%	91%	49%	87%	50%	90.3%
Student – Faculty Interaction	26.2%	20.4%	20.0%	20.2%	25.4%	21.3%	23.9%
Learning Community (done or in progress)	30%	15%	16%	11%	44%	10%	30%

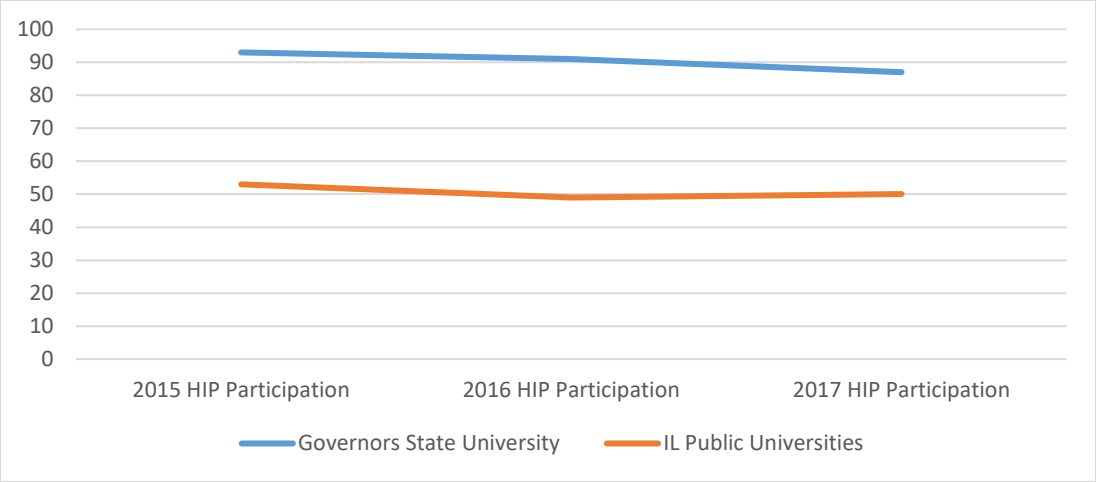

Figure 1. NSSE Results for freshmen regarding participation in one or more High Impact Practices

NSSE offers an optional module to survey faculty members about similar topics. GSU participated in the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) during the 2016-17 academic year. The results for 2017 included responses from 80 faculty members for a 33% response rate. Fifty percent of the participants indicated that learning communities are either very important or important for

undergraduates. Detailed responses for how often faculty interact with students in their courses or their advisees are summarized in Figure 2.

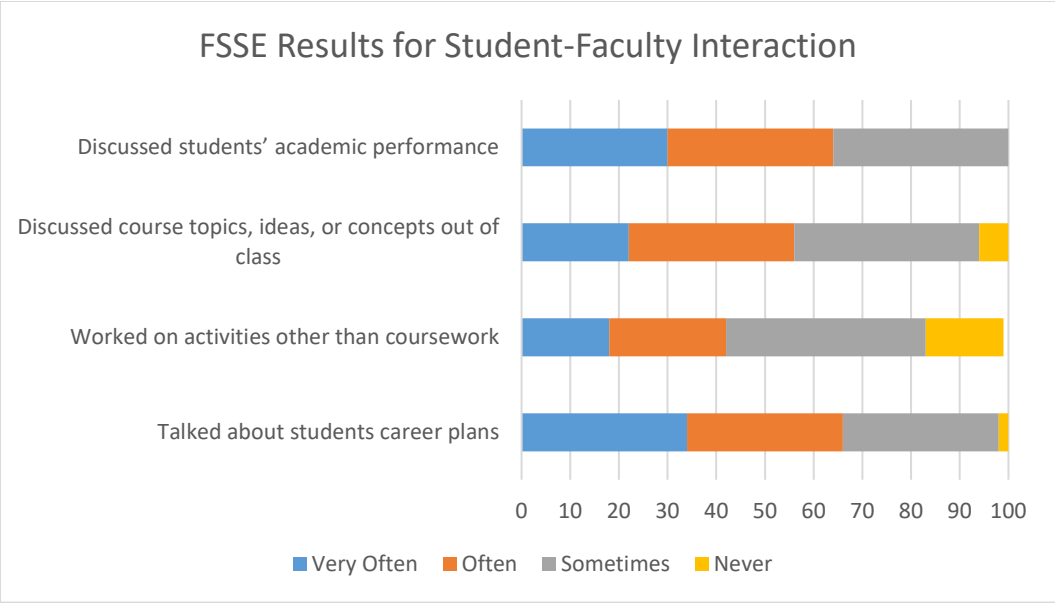

Figure 2. FSSE Results 2017 for Student-Faculty Interaction (%)

Discussion

After four years of experience, this study presents the impact of the design of the FYS course, the role of full time faculty to teach it, and the application of selected HIPS. Faculty designed the General Education program, which included a required academic seminar for all first year students. The commitment of full time faculty to teach the FYS course has yielded a strong contingent of faculty teaching the course multiple times with improving student performance.

As we are learning from our examination of the data on the FYS, the challenges inherent with delivering a course with broadly written outcomes, a thematic context, an interdisciplinary approach, and a focus on social connections with full time faculty could be a daunting task for even the most seasoned faculty. Because of the work of the learning community's examination of signature assignments from the FYS, we have used the data to change the signature assignment to better align to the identified learning outcomes. The percentage of students earning a grade of C or better over the four years have improved with this change. Modification of course outcomes to reduce multiple criteria within a single statement, and improvement of the social connections of students with full-time faculty are a work in progress. The NSSE and FSSE data on faculty/student interaction indicate that we are outperforming others within Illinois, yet less than 30% of the freshmen students believe there is strong faculty-student interaction.

Faculty play a pivotal role in ensuring that students are engaged in high impact practices through the First Year Seminar (FYS). This study identified the importance of full-time faculty taking ownership of the development and delivery of the FYS. Though many of the faculty teaching the FYS were self-nominated, it became clear that having a range of disciplines represented in the FYS courses was essential to the robustness of ideas and connections presented. Over the four years, faculty gained a deeper understanding of how the FYS provides a foundation for the educational experience. Through the guidance of the faculty, students were able to experience a broad scope of disciplines and see the interconnectedness of their core general education courses.

One continued challenge is to sustain faculty interest across all four colleges in teaching FYS. Broader participation occurred in the first two years and then tapered off. The majority of the instructors are coming from disciplines in Arts and Sciences; however, the goal is to have the FYS seen as a university-wide course. We need additional efforts to attract faculty members to this first year experience. Having faculty who have taught the FYS share their experiences and the impact on the lives of our students at workshops, open forums, and Faculty Senate meetings will be a way of bringing in a more diverse pool of FYS faculty. Also giving special recognition to the FYS cadre of faculty may also raise the profile of teaching this fundamental course. Workload and team teaching are two additional areas that the General Education Council, faculty, deans, and chairs will continue to examine.

Through this study, it became evident that the majority of our faculty had limited experience teaching freshmen, developing a FYS course and integrating HIPs into their instruction. Providing appropriate professional development for faculty was a key component of the program. The use of faculty learning communities emerged as a valued network of support as they implemented HIPS into their FYS. In addition, the work of the Director of General Education to organize assessment activities was an essential component of faculty learning communities. Faculty members had a variety of previous assessment experiences and the GE Director's ability to structure the assessment sessions was important for improving faculty understanding of the assessment process. During the next year, the General Education Council will continue to apply the assessment findings to the structure of the program, planning changes to the outcomes in the FYS course, and continued professional development on building and maintaining learning communities.

The FYS course serves the purpose of introducing the students to GSU and building early relationships with faculty. The student learning communities are one HIP that supports the social connectedness that is crucial to student persistence. The high rate of participation among GSU freshmen for HIPs with 87-93% indicating that they participated in one or more HIPS during their first year is higher than the rates of other Illinois public institutions of 49-53%. This rate of participation is encouraging, although the FYS course alone is designed to incorporate three HIPs itself, indicating that 100% of freshmen are participating in HIPs. It is clear that most freshmen understand their involvement in HIPs, but not all recognize participation in HIPs during their first year.

The NSSE results on learning communities, which are one of the HIPs embedded in the first year curriculum with FYS, indicate that GSU freshmen think they are important at a rate of 16 to 44%, which is higher than other Illinois public universities (10-15%). However, the students did not rate learning communities as important as the faculty did at 50%. This indicates a need for further discussion about the value of learning communities and their role in student success. One potential improvement for GSU is the use of clear language because on campus we have used the terms cohort and learning community interchangeably, which is not accurate. A greater effort to define learning communities, their distinctiveness, and benefits should help the campus better define the role for these important structures and learning opportunities. More input from students about what they want in a learning community might also help improve these numbers.

The NSSE and FSSE results on faculty-student interactions are encouraging. According to GSU students, they interact with faculty outside of class at a rate of 20.2 to 26.2%, which is higher than other Illinois public universities (20.2-21.3%). Faculty value this interaction as indicated by the results that all respondents indicated discussing student's academic performance with students at least sometimes. This is an area with room for growth as faculty and students continue to work together beyond the classroom.

Conclusions

This study described the course design elements, role of the faculty, and the use of selected HIPs to improve student success. GSU's opportunity to build an innovative general education curriculum from scratch was a unique chance to integrate current literature and best practices into new courses and sequences. As this study revealed, the decisions made to develop an interdisciplinary humanities course, with a conscious decision of having full time faculty members teaching the course, had some positive effects on student performance and persistence. The faculty learning communities that developed were able to reflect upon the wisdom behind course design decisions and use student performance data to make changes to the originally selected course outcomes to capture more precisely, the intended course purpose. Changes made from term to term, contributed to increased student success and persistence. Additionally, by using full-time faculty, the faculty learning communities that developed had stability, and they were able to regularly share ideas and strategies used in the FYS to build the connections between students and faculty. The outcome of the decision to select only full-time faculty members as FYS instructors supported the literature cited: faculty that taught the course found a new sense of connectedness with their colleagues; a renewed interest in teaching freshmen students, and their students reported via NSSE more positive connections with the faculty than other universities. Results from this study have prompted deeper faculty reflection and further investigation into instructional research and practices. Effective teaching and learning that promote student engagement require continuous refinement, and GSU faculty will continue to monitor the results from students and faculty to improve this course and strengthen the student's educational experience.

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