What number of credits (units) should the FYS carry?

The most recent national survey of first-year seminars reveals that 42.5% of responding campuses offer the FYS for one unit of credit, 12.6% offer it for two units, 33% offer it for three units, and about 10% for four or more units (Tobolowski, 2008). Several conceptually sound arguments can be made for the FYS to carry as many credit hours and as much contact time as possible, such as the following:

* More credit hours allow for greater breadth (and depth) of content coverage and more extensive (and intensive) skill development.
* More credit hours provides longer “incubation time” for the development of social-emotional ties (bonding) between students and the instructor, and among students themselves.
* The larger the amount of credit carried by the seminar, the greater weight it will carry toward students’ GPA. A course carrying more units is more likely to be taken seriously by students and provide students with a greater incentive to invest more effort in the course. A course carrying more units is also likely to elevate faculty expectations of the amount of time and effort that students commit to the class. This combination of heightened student effort and higher faculty expectations is likely to magnify the seminar’s potential impact on student learning and retention.
* More credit hours create more class-contact time for instructors to make use of engaging, student-centered pedagogy, such as class discussions and small-group work. Limiting course credit and contact time in the FYS is likely lead to greater use of the lecture method to disseminate as much information as possible in an attempt to “beat the clock” and cover as much as possible with the limited amount of contact time they have with their students.
* More credit hours allow the FYS to better accommodate coverage of additional topics or issues that are likely to emerge over time. It is common for the seminar to be the curricular place or space for addressing student needs and campus issues that cannot be addressed elsewhere in the traditional college curriculum (e.g., technological literacy, money management, academic integrity). The seminar has displayed a capacity for functioning as a “meta-curriculum” that transcends specialized content and traverses disciplinary boundaries As Hunter and Linder (2005) note: “The use of first-year seminars to address important topics, content, and processes that do not fit logically into, or that transcend, existing disciplines has been in practice for some time” (p. 289). One FYS practitioner and researcher refers to the seminar as the “spare room” in the college curriculum, where any and all issues that do not fit into other rooms (courses) are conveniently deposited (Barefoot, 1993).
* Offering the seminar for the same number of credits that characterize most other courses in the college curriculum (for example, three credit hours) enhances the seminar’s credibility in the eyes of students because the course will more likely be perceived as equivalent in value to other college courses. In contrast, a one-unit course may send the message (to both students and instructors) that the seminar is devalued, and not worthy of the amount of classroom contact time that characterizes the vast majority of courses in the college curriculum.

Empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of more credit hours and contact time for the FYS is provided in a critical review of the research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) who found that “orientation interventions” that are longer in duration and more comprehensive in scope tend to be empirically associated with stronger direct effects on student retention. The FYS may be viewed as an “extended-orientation intervention” that extends orientation into and
through the first term, thereby increasing its duration and comprehensiveness. According to Pascarella and Terenzini’s research review, this should increase the course’s potential to exert stronger, direct effects on student retention.

Additional evidence for first-year seminars that carry more credit hours is provided by research conducted by Swing (2002c). Working under the aegis of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, survey-generated data were obtained from more than 31,000 students at 62 different institutions, and it was found that students enrolled in seminars that involved more contact hours generally reported larger gains in learning outcomes than students enrolled in seminars with fewer contact hours. In the principal investigator’s own words:

Three-contact hour courses exceeded both 1- and 2-contact hour courses on the two factors measuring gains in academic skills (writing, speaking, and library skills), and critical thinking skills. Overall, the data show that 3-contact hour courses produce the widest range of [positive] learning outcomes. These data confirm the common wisdom applied to first-year seminars that 1-contact hour is better than none, 2 are better than 1, and 3 are better than 1 or 2 (Swing, 2002c, p. 2).

These empirical findings are consistent with Astin’s (1984) theory of academic involvement, which posits that when students invest more time in the learning process (e.g., the amount of time spent in class and on course-related work outside of class). Based on a 4-year longitudinal analysis of pre/post data collected from a national survey (CIRP) that included more than 4,000 students, Astin (1993) found that the amount of time students allot to classes and out-of-class coursework correlated strongly with self-reported gains in cognitive development.

The foregoing logical arguments and empirical findings point to the conclusion that first-year seminars should be offered for as many academic units as campus culture and politics will allow. This conclusion is consistent with the recommendation offered by John Gardner (1989), founding father of the “freshman year experience” movement,

I believe in asking for as much credit as the political process seems willing to grant. The more credit awarded, the more work can be legitimately asked of students and hence the more likely the probability of achieving desirable outcomes. Possible outcomes for freshman seminars are

much more likely to be achieved in an academic credit-bearing course awarding three semester credits rather than one, because more time will be spent in instruction, more time can be asked of the students to do out-of-class assignments, more effort will be expended, and more student time, energy, and interest will be invested (p. 46).

**Class Scheduling**

*When should the FYS begin and end?*

Perhaps the first administrative decision that needs to be made with respect to scheduling the FYS is when the course should start and stop. Although all first-year seminars are designed for delivery during the student’s first term in college, some seminars start before their first term.
begins, and some stop before their first term ends. For instance, Gardner-Webb College (NC) begins its FYS during the orientation period that precedes the fall term. The University of Colorado at Colorado Springs begins its FYS two days prior to the onset of new students’ first term and ends its course at midterm, as does Castleton State College (VT).

Among the advantages associated with starting the FYS before the start of the term is that it allows students special time together to bond as a unit and get situated on campus before the onset and onslaught of a full schedule of classes. The pre-term FYS experience can also be used to promote academically-related peer interactions prior to the start of the term—a time that would otherwise be entirely consumed by social activities. Although there appears to be no published evidence on the comparative effectiveness of early-starting versus traditionally scheduled seminars, a FYS that includes a pre-term component represents a very proactive approach to promoting the success of new students, allowing them the opportunity get settled in, get early support, and get a “jump start” on the college experience. This practice is consistent with the oft-cited principle of “front loading”—redistributing resources to provide support to new college students because it is the time when support and can have the most impact (National Institute of Education, 1984). For this reason, it is recommended that this proactive strategy be adopted, if the college can accommodate the logistical and fiscal demands associated with bringing new students to campus prior to the onset of their first-term classes.

Offering a firm recommendation about when to end the FYS is more challenging. Some institutions end the FYS at midterm, rather than at the end of the first term. Solid arguments can be made for concluding the course at either time. Listed below are the pros and cons of both decisions, along with some suggested strategies for resolving the issue empirically.

The Case for Concluding the FYS Before the End of the Academic Term

If the FYS is offered for one or two units, it might be advantageous to offer the course only during the first half or first two-thirds of the term. This scheduling strategy has three potential advantages: (a) It further “front loads” the course so that students experience it, in its entirety, at an earlier point in their first term, thus delivering the course’s content more proactively. (b) It can promote greater course continuity by having students meet more frequently during a more limited time frame, rather than spreading out class sessions out across the entire term—which results in larger time gaps between successive class meetings. (c) If the FYS carries only one or two academic credits, it will meet during the first half of the term with about the same frequency and regularity as a “normal” 3-unit course, perhaps sending the message to students that the seminar is equally important as other courses in their class schedule. (d) By concluding the seminar before the end of the term, new students will have one less course to manage during the last weeks of the term and one less exam to take during finals week, thereby relieving some of the stress that is likely to accompany their first experience with college finals.

The Case for Continuing the Course Throughout the Academic Term

This scheduling strategy has the following advantages: (a) At midterm, students often experience their “first wave” of college exams, deadlines, and evaluations. Because first-year students often receive their first formal academic feedback at this time, the period after midterm
can often serve as a key “teachable moment” for new college students. For students who are struggling academically, this may be the first time they become aware of how poorly they are actually doing. Immediately after midterm, the FYS can provide a meaningful forum or supportive sanctuary for intentional reflection and discussion on how to effectively self-monitor academic progress, how to respond constructively (rather than defensively) to midterm feedback, and how to use their midterm grades as feedback to improve their subsequent academic performance—before it eventuates in low first-term grades, academic probation, or academic dismissal. Support through and after midterms may also enable students to better cope with the “midterm slump”—a time of the semester when the “honeymoon” period for first-term college students may begin to decline, and the novelty or thrill of simply being in college is replaced by their first major encounter with its academic demands. In their book, *Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester*, Duffy and Jones (1995) refer to this period as the “doldrums” and describe it as, “A time when the reality of papers, projects, and exams seem to color every course. More students are absent from class, and those who are in class frequently appear distracted or overwhelmed” (p. 162).

(b) For beginning college students, the last weeks of their first academic term can be a very stressful period in terms of time-management demands and performance pressures relating to meeting imminent deadlines for term papers or final projects, and preparing for their first “final-exam week” in college. A FYS that continues through to the end of the first term can provide support for new students during this “crunch period.”

(c) The last weeks of the fall term are often sandwiched in-between two major holidays—Thanksgiving and Christmas—a time when students return home, revisiting hometown friends and family, and possibly rekindle separation-anxiety issues. These social developments have the potential to adversely affect new students’ persistence to successful completion of their first term, or their motivation to return for a second term.

Terminating the FYS at midterm would mean that students lose access to a class and classmates that may be evolved into a social support system by this point in the term. Sudden withdrawal of this support at this time may leave new students more vulnerable to the academic, emotional, and social stressors that can emerge during the critical final weeks of the first term.

Since sound arguments can be made for ending the FYS before, or at the end of the first term, both scheduling strategies may be offered as options for FYS instructors. If an instructor has a strong preference for one or the other of these course-scheduling formats, that instructor will probably be a more enthusiastic and effective teacher when working with his or her preferred scheduling format. Also, providing instructors a choice between scheduling formats is another way to give instructors a sense of ownership or control of the course, which should increase their instructional satisfaction and motivation.

Another potential advantage of allowing instructors either scheduling option is that it creates two scheduling formats, which allows for a comparative assessment of student and instructor perceptions of each format. For instance, a question could be included on the course-evaluation instrument that asks students for their views on the scheduling format of the course. Students in the full-term course could be asked whether they felt the course would have been more effective if it met more frequently and ended at midterm. In contrast, students in the half-term course could be asked whether they felt the seminar would have been more effective if it met less frequently
and continued throughout the entire term. Or, the two scheduling formats could be compared with respect to their impact on the intended outcomes of the FYS (e.g., student retention or first-term GPA).

Lastly, it should be noted that some institutions offer a two-term FYS, extending it into a course that spans the entire first year. For example, Clark Atlanta University (GA), Ferris State University (MI), and the University of Charleston (WV) continue the FYS into the following terms, thus making it a yearlong course. Extending the FYS beyond the first term to create a full-year course is clearly advantageous, because it generates extended course-contact time, which is likely to result in greater course impact. Furthermore, a second-term FYS can supply timely support for student adjustments that peak during the second half of the first college year (Hunter & Gahagan, 2004). It is noteworthy that most first-year attrition tend to occur between the end of the first year and the start of the second (sophomore) year, which suggests that supporting students at the end of their first year may be a timely strategy for increasing the likelihood that first-year students will return for their sophomore year.

**Length and Frequency of Class Meetings**

Another scheduling decision to be made is the *length and frequency* of individual class sessions. It may be advantageous to schedule class meetings for a longer period than the common 50-minute session because this will provide the instructor more time and flexibility to accommodate the logistical demands of small-group work, such as preparing students for the group task, rearranging seats for students to form groups, and reconvening the whole class following completion of small-group tasks. Naturally, selecting longer class periods carries with it the disadvantages of less frequent class meetings per week and longer time gaps between successive class sessions. However, since it is strongly recommended that the FYS involve less instructor-centered lecturing and more student-centered pedagogy, such as the use of collaborative learning groups, the benefits of longer class sessions should outweigh their costs.

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