

How Many Weekly Contact Hours Is Enough?

Note: This is the third in a series of essays describing the results of a national survey of first-year seminars. The series is archived at: <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/essays/index.htm>

One of the first decisions in building a new first-year seminar is the basic structural question about the number of contact hours to be devoted to the course. For most seminars, the number of weekly contact hours is roughly synonymous with the number of credit hours. The 62 pilot institutions reported that:

6%	offered non-credit seminars
40%	offered one credit hour seminars
24%	offered two credit hour seminars
24%	offered three credit hour seminars
6%	offered seminars carrying more than three credit hours

These findings are consistent with data reported on the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center 2000 survey of first-year seminars (slight differences are probably due to the inclusion of two-year institutions in the NRC data) and show that the pilot group is representative of all first-year seminars.

National data about contact hours is available for the 62 institutions in the 2001 FYI pilot study. We chose to perform analyses based on contact hours rather than credit hours, since the "non-credit" courses did, in fact, meet for either 1, 2, or 3 hours per week. We believe that the core issue here is time on task, not amount of credit given. Data analyses did show very different patterns of learning outcomes and levels of course effectiveness across variations in contact hours*

The current study was limited to 1, 2, and 3 contact hour courses because the 2001 FYI data contained few examples of courses with more than 3 contact hours.

One contact hour courses

A smaller proportion of students rated 1-contact hour courses as highly effective* on all but one factor (Knowledge of Campus Policies/Practices) in comparison with 2- and 3-hour courses. Other than increasing student knowledge of campus policies/practices, one contact hour courses did not equal the level of learning outcomes* produced by seminars using more than one contact hour per week.

Two contact hour courses

Two-contact hour courses performed well on most of the learning outcomes measured. On five

of the ten learning outcomes, the proportion of students rating two-contact hour courses as highly effective was statistically equal to the proportion in 3-contact hour courses. No meaningful difference was found in 2- and 3-contact course learning outcomes for the following factors.

- Course improved study strategies
- Course increased connections with faculty
- Course increased connections with peers
- Course increased out-of-class engagement
- Course improved knowledge of wellness & spirituality issues

In addition, courses carrying 2-contact hours were rated as equally effective in comparison to 3-contact courses on the summary measure of "Overall Course Effectiveness."

Three-contact hour courses

Three contact hour courses were rated as highly effective by a larger proportion of students or tied with two-hour courses on 7 of the 10 learning outcomes and on both measures of course effectiveness. Particularly important to note is that 3-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. The high performance of 3-contact hour courses is explained by the large proportion of students rating those courses as highly effective in using engaging pedagogies, as measured by the factor "The Course Included Engaging Pedagogy"*.

Summary

How many contact hours per week make the best first-year seminars? It depends on the goals of the course and the institutional context.

If the course goal is to introduce students to campus policies and practices, then a 1-contact hour course is as effective as courses that meet for more hours per week.

If the course goals also include increased knowledge of campus services, improvement in time management and other study skills, increasing student/student and student/faculty connections, and increased out-of-class engagement, then at least 2 contact hours per week are more effective in producing these learning outcomes.

If the course goals also include gains in academic skills and critical thinking, then a 3-contact hour course is more likely to produce the desired learning outcomes.

Overall, the FYI data show that 3-contact hour courses produce the widest range of learning outcomes. However, the actual decision about number of contact hours per week includes political, financial, and curricular implications

along with hopes for learning outcomes. The final decision on contact hours should be based on an array of institutional variables. 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.

Randy L. Swing, September 17, 2002

Notes:

*See data chart at: <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/chart2.htm>

* Highly effective is defined as factors with mean scores of 5.50 or higher. On a 7-point scale, scores of 5.50 or higher are in the top ¼ of the scale.

* See “Engaging Pedagogy” Factor – <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/2001surveyfactors.htm - factor11>

* The learning outcomes measured by FYI include: 1) Course improved study strategies, 2) Course improved academic/cognitive skills, 3) Course improved critical thinking, 4) Course improved connections with faculty, 5) Course improved connections with peers/others, 6) Course increased out-of-class engagement, 7) Course improved knowledge of campus policies/procedures, 8) Course improved knowledge of academic services, 9) Course improved managing time/priorities, and 10) Course improved knowledge of wellness issues.

*The Factor, “Engaging Pedagogy” was discussed in the 2nd essay in this series. Additionally, a list of the survey items can be at:

<http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/essays/index.htm>

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