

What type of seminar is best?

Note: This is the fourth in a series of essays describing the results of a national survey of first-year seminars. Printer-friendly versions of the series is available at: www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/essays/index.htm with new essays posted each week.

Drawing from the work of Betsy Barefoot and the National Resource Center on The First Year Experience and Students in Transition, four types of first-year seminars were identified in the First-Year Initiative (FYI) study.

College Transition Theme seminars cover academic topics exploring orientation to college, life transitions, and academic skills. These follow the University 101 (University of South Carolina) model.

Special Academic Theme seminars focus on a selected theme other than college transition. These are often taught as interdisciplinary seminars where a small group of students and a model learner/teacher use a variety of methods to investigate an important theme. Themes may be consistent across sections or different for each section.

Discipline-Based Theme seminars are offered as an introduction to a major or academic department. They are usually based in individual academic departments.

Remedial/Study Skills Theme seminars are those narrowly focused on basic study skills. These exist on many campuses, but there were too few such seminars in the 2001 FYI study to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Telephone interviews with seminar coordinators were used to determine the proper coding of seminar type for each campus. When campuses used more than one seminar type, we reviewed each section of the course to determine if at least 80% of the sections were of the same type. If less than 80% of sections were the same, we coded that institution as “mixed” and did not use those data in these analyses. Results for the 62 campuses in the 2001 FYI pilot study are shown below.

College transition theme (73%)
Special Academic theme (14%)
Discipline-Based theme (8%)
Remedial/Study Skills (0%)
Mixed (5%)

The FYI study investigated the percent of students ranking their seminar as highly effective* on each of 10 learning outcomes* and disaggregated by type of seminar (actual data can be found at <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/chart1.htm>). Below is a narrative summary of these data.

Discipline-based theme seminars

With only one exception, the discipline-based theme seminars produced the lowest ratings for effectiveness on learning outcomes in comparison to other theme formats. On the learning outcome, “Knowledge of Campus Policies/Procedures,” the discipline-based theme courses produced the highest rating, with over 1/3 of students raking the course as highly effective, a result that was statistically equal to the courses using the transition theme format.

Special academic theme seminars

Special academic theme seminars were rated by a larger proportion of students as highly effective on two learning outcomes (Course improved academic/cognitive skills, and Course improved critical thinking skills) and rated by a nearly equal proportion of students as highly effective on three other learning outcomes (Course improved connections with faculty, Course improved connections with peers/others, and Course improved managing time/priorities).

College transition theme seminars

College transition theme seminars performed best overall across the ten learning outcomes investigated by FYI. These courses were rated by a larger proportion of students as highly effective on four learning outcomes (Course improved study strategies, Course improved out-of-class engagement, Course improved knowledge of academic services, and Course improved knowledge of wellness issues). In addition nearly equal proportion of students rated college transition theme seminars as highly effective on four other learning outcomes (Course improved connections with faculty, Course improved connections with

peers/others, Course improved knowledge of academic services, and Course improved managing time/priorities).

The factor measuring “Engaging Pedagogy” helps explain the results for these three seminar types. Special academic theme seminars were rated by the largest proportion (36.5%) of students as highly effective in using engaging pedagogies. A slightly smaller proportion of students (30.5%) rated college transition theme seminars as highly effective on engaging pedagogies. A large drop in the proportion of students (18.3%) rated discipline based seminars as highly effective, revealing considerable differences in how the discipline based seminars may have been presented to students.

Summary

The FYI data clearly support that the discipline-specific seminars were less effective than college transition theme or special academic theme

seminars in producing learning outcomes. The low rating for the factor, “Engaging Pedagogy, suggests that discipline-specific courses might be improved with greater attention to the way these courses are delivered to students. A comparison would be more fair if these courses had used the same level of engaging pedagogy as the other formats.

The difference between college transition theme and special academic theme seminars is more subtle. Both are highly effective formats and each excels in some unique dimensions. College transition theme courses are best at learning outcomes associated with college success skills and behaviors. Special academic theme courses are best at learning outcomes including academic skills and critical thinking skills. The differences probably reflect the divergent goals of the two courses as they relate to institutional mission and context.

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Notes:

* 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 the FYI learning factors at: <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/surveyfactors.pdf>