

## **First-Year Experience Program at California State University, Stanislaus Report for 2005-2006**

The First-Year Experience (FYE) Program at California State University, Stanislaus began in Fall 2004. The program offers first-time freshmen the opportunity to join a learning community with a maximum of 25 other students. For Fall 2004, 84 students were enrolled in a total of 5 learning communities. In the second year, 122 students were enrolled in 7 learning communities and 28 students were enrolled in a special adaptation of FYE for Liberal Studies majors. The classes in each learning community are integrated around an interesting theme and are linked to a seminar that prepares students for academic success and encourages involvement in campus activities. The seminars are co-taught by faculty and peer leaders, successful CSU Stanislaus students, who serve as mentors.

The FYE Program offers two formats. One format, a 3-course format, integrates 2 GE courses with the Seminar in FYE, which also fulfills a GE requirement. The second format integrates 1 GE course with the Seminar in FYE, which also fulfills a GE requirement. This second format was designed to accommodate students in majors that require freshmen to take several courses in the major during the first semester and for students who are enrolled in developmental math and English classes.

### **Learning Communities for Fall 2005:**

1. Movements in History
  - HIST 2600: Problems in U.S. History, Dr. Nancy Taniguchi
  - GEND 2020: Introduction to Women's Studies, Dr. Betsy Eudey
  - MDIS 1040: Seminar in FYE, Dr. Eudey & Dr. Taniguchi
2. Questions of Perception and Identity
  - ENGL 1000: First-Year Composition, Dr. Stephanie Paterson
  - PHIL 1010: Introduction to Philosophy, Dr. Andy Young
  - MDIS 1040: Seminar in FYE, Dr. Stephanie Paterson
3. Business in Today's World
  - BUS 1500: Introduction to Business, Mr. Jack Doo
  - BUS 1040: Seminar in FYE, Ms. S. Clapper
4. Be an Effective Team Player
  - COMM 2110 Group Discussion Processes, Ms. R. DeHeck
  - MDIS 1040 Seminar in FYE, Ms. S. Williams
5. Study Skills for English Language Learners
  - ESL 1005 Intermediate English for ESL, Ms. M. Simoneau
  - MDIS 1040 Seminar in FYE, Ms. M. Simoneau
6. All the World's a Stage
  - THEA 1500 Acting for Non-Theatre Majors, Ms. P. O'Donnell
  - MDIS 1040 Seminar in FYE, Ms. P. O'Donnell
7. Be an Effective Team Player
  - COMM 2110 Group Discussion Processes, Dr. M. MacGregor
  - MDIS 1040 Seminar in FYE, Dr. F. Edmondson
8. Integrating Language Arts and Fine Arts in the Elementary Classroom
  - FA 1000 Introduction to Fine Arts, Dr. J. Mayer, Dr. R. Robbin, and Mr. G. Mulder
  - LIBS 1000 Beginning Field Experience, Ms. C. Gonzales
  - LIBS 1004 Seminar (Co-requisite to LIBS 1000), Ms. C. Gonzales

### **The Seminar in FYE**

Faculty members were trained in developing learning communities and in teaching the Seminar in FYE. Peer leaders were selected to co-teach the seminars and were trained in a semester-long course during Spring 05. Topics in the Seminar in FYE include writing, speaking, critical thinking, time management, learning styles, listening, note-taking, participating in class, reading texts, and taking exams. Students complete weekly quizzes and writing assignments, conduct library research, prepare a group presentation, participate in at least two campus activities, complete a portfolio in which they each analyze themselves as a learner, and develop a 4-year individual education plan (IEP).

### **Assessment**

Retention data indicate that the FYE Program is especially effective at retaining first-generation students:

- Of the 84 students in the 1<sup>st</sup> year (Fall 2004) cohort, 77 (91.7%) were 1<sup>st</sup> Generation students
- 86.3% of 1<sup>st</sup> Generation students were retained from Fall 2004 to Fall 2005
- 81.8% of the overall Freshman class were retained from Fall 2004 to Fall 2005

The FYE Program was assessed using the First-Year Initiative (FYI) Survey from Educational Benchmarking, Inc. The results of the FYI Survey for Fall 2004 indicated two areas for faculty to improve in the Seminar in FYE: time management skills and student-faculty out-of-class communication. Faculty agreed to teach time management more explicitly. A requirement of at least 2 out-of-class contacts with both faculty and peer leaders was added to the seminar. Results of the FYI Survey for 2005 indicated improvement in these areas. The results of the highest and lowest questions on the FYE Survey for 2005 can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to the FYI, students completed a writing exercise at the beginning and at the end of the seminar. The student writing samples for 2004 were scored for writing outcomes assessment, and the end-of-semester essays were content analyzed to determine experiences perceived as important by first-year students. Results indicate that the writing prompt at the end of the semester was too similar to the initial writing prompt to motivate students. For Fall 2005, the end-of-semester writing prompt was changed to respond to this finding. The results of the writing assessment can be found in Appendix B.

### **Conclusions**

At the conclusion of the semester, faculty and peer leaders met to discuss their FYE experiences. Successes of the program were noted in student reflections in the portfolio. Students indicated that they had become better writers over the semester, a few students reported the Seminar in FYE kept them from dropping out of school, and students reported that the experience empowered them to take control of their education (for example, by developing an IEP). Students appreciated that assignments had purpose, and some indicated that through this program they took a class they might not have chosen but found beneficial. Students reported that the FYE Program facilitated their making friends. Finally, faculty noted that the students in the Seminar in FYE demonstrated

leadership skills in group activities in the linked GE classes. Faculty members were pleased with the opportunity to integrate classes.

For the 2005 year, learning communities that served different groups of students were added to the program: 1) a learning community for ESL students, 2) a learning community that was connected to the Faculty Mentor Program (FMP) (all students in this learning community were required to join the FMP to fulfill their campus involvement requirement), and 3) a learning community for Liberal Studies majors. Anecdotal evidence indicates that foreign exchange students were able to make friends easily in the learning community for ESL students. The FMP noticed that students who were in the Seminar in FYE demonstrated a greater integration into FMP than other new students. The FMP has requested a second learning community for 2006. Finally, faculty teaching Introduction to Fine Arts incorporated the language of California K-8 content standards in their course, providing students with valuable information that will contribute to their success as teachers and their ability to pass the CSET.

The FYE Program will be expanded in Fall 2006 to include several more learning communities, including a learning community designed for undeclared students and one additional learning community connected to FMP. FYE faculty members believe that the Seminar in FYE can be taught with 30 students rather than 25. This change will be in effect for Fall 2006 and reviewed at the conclusion of that year.

### **Challenges**

The biggest challenge for the FYE Program is enrolling students in learning communities. The University has changed the procedure for enrolling freshmen in that the schedules for these students are built before they come to New Student Orientation. This has been helpful in enrolling students in FYE, but it has not solved the problem. In Fall 06, the ALS Pilot New Student Orientation Scheduling Plan may provide more assistance. The director of the FYE Program will contact department chairs and share with them the learning communities most appropriate for their majors. Hopefully, chairs will then request that these learning communities be included in freshman schedules for their majors. A brochure is also being developed to send to incoming freshmen to inform them about the program before they arrive on campus.

A second challenge for the FYE Program has been attrition of students. Upon receiving a schedule at New Student Orientation that includes a learning community, some students go home and then drop the Seminar in FYE on the web. By increasing maximum class size from 25 to 30 students in Fall 06, it is hoped that class sizes will stabilize at 25, the class size that was initially desired.

## Appendix A

### California State University, Stanislaus

#### Highest Mean Questions on the First-Year Initiative Survey

**This set of questions are the highest mean questions for California State University, Stanislaus  
Scale: 1-7**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Dev</b>
• The Degree That: Student wants to return to this college/university for the next fall term	102	6.16	1.31
• The Degree That: Student would recommend this college/university to a friend	103	6.05	1.46
• The Degree That: Student's college experience was a positive experience	103	6.01	1.21
• Course/Experience Included: encouragement for students to work together	99	5.92	1.31
• Course Improved Understanding of: The impact of establishing personal goals	100	5.84	1.33
• Course Improved: Efforts to get to know students in my classes	103	5.83	1.43
• Course Increased Understanding of: Available library resources	101	5.73	1.44
• The Degree That: Student's college experience was a high-quality learning experience	103	5.72	1.40
• The Degree That: Student is accepted by students in this college/university	102	5.68	1.29
• Course/Experience Included: Encouragement to speak in class	102	5.67	1.42
• Course Increased Understanding of: College/University rules regarding academic honesty	101	5.64	1.26
• Course Increase Understanding of: Registration procedures	101	5.61	1.59
• The Degree That: Is it easy for you to make new friends at this college/university	102	5.49	1.56
• Course Increased: Setting priorities to accomplish what is most important	102	5.49	1.28
• Rate: Level of effort in this course	93	5.47	1.09

## California State University, Stanislaus

### Lowest Mean Questions on the First-Year Initiative Survey

**This set of questions are the lowest mean questions for California State University, Stanislaus**

**Scale: 1-7**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Dev</b>
• Course Improved: Computer skills	96	3.43	1.75
• Course Increased: Attending campus cultural events	96	3.57	1.90
• Course Increased: Volunteering time for worthwhile causes	98	3.67	1.93
• Course Increased: Contributing to the success of campus-sponsored organizations	93	3.76	1.83
• Course Improved Understanding of: College students' sexual issues	90	4.09	1.71
• Course Improved: Studying with other students	101	4.25	1.75
• Course Improved: Reviewing class notes before the next class meeting	101	4.36	1.62
• Course Improved: Coping with test anxiety	99	4.47	1.57
• Course Improved Understanding of: The impact of exercising regularly	96	4.47	1.71
• Course Increased Understanding of: Academic probation policies	99	4.48	1.75
• Course Readings Were: Interesting	103	4.51	1.72
• Course Increased: Preparation for tests well in advance	103	4.54	1.49
• Course Increased: Participation in campus-sponsored organizations	98	4.57	1.96
• Course Improved: Reading skills	102	4.57	1.67
• Course Improved Understanding of: The impact of drug use	96	4.59	1.75

## Appendix B

### Writing Assessment for FYE Dr. Marjorie Jaasma and Dr. Stephanie Paterson

#### **Research Questions:**

- Do students in the FYE Program improve in writing ability over their first semester?
- What college experiences are important to first-year students?

#### **Method:**

- Pre-Test: Students complete essay from prompt in first week of class.
- Post-Test: Students complete essay from prompt in final week of class.
- Scoring: Essays scored by trained readers using scoring rubric (1-6)
- Qualitative Analysis: Open Coding of post-test essays.

#### **Results: Writing Ability**

- 73 students completed both pre-test and post-test essays
- Mean score for pre-test—3.08  
Mean score for post-test—3.15
- Pre-test mean score for classes with English-ready students—3.35  
Pre-test mean score for classes with some students who did not place in college-level English—2.67
- Post-test mean score for classes with English-ready students—3.07  
Post-test mean score for classes with some students who did not place in college-level English—3.33
- 73% of students with a pre-test score of 3.0 or lower improved in the post-test
- 13% of students with a pre-test score higher than 3.0 improved in the post-test

#### **Conclusions: Writing Ability**

- Post-test writing prompt must be distinctly different from the pre-test writing prompt to motivate students.
- Instructors must provide an environment in which students cannot rush to complete the writing assessment and leave class early.

#### **Results: College Experiences Important to First-Year Students** (Categories and comments from student voices in the end-of-semester essays)

##### **Freedom/Responsibility Tension**

###### **I. Time Management**

- “Stanislaus is a lot different than my years at...high school. I have discovered that I have much more freedom because I am a hundred miles away from my parents. No one wakes me up in the morning, tells me to eat right, or scolds me for missing class. I am on my own, and I decide what is right and wrong.”

## II. Academic Responsibility

- “While it is a startling conclusion, every student has to realize that if he/she doesn’t keep up with the class they were going to get left behind. And once your behind you have to work two times as hard to catch up.”

## III. Benefits of Managing this Tension

### A. Self-awareness

- “I’ve realized that if you miss any assignment the Professor will not chase you down for it. Instead they never make a remark because what you do or don’t do counts against your self being.”

### B. Satisfaction

- “If I’ve learned anything at all this semester, it’s this: Making your own choices is much more satisfying than following people’s choices.”

### C. Development of Personal Characteristics

#### 1. Motivation

“The option and choice to do your work actually motivated me to work harder.”

#### 2. Initiative

- “It’s just a matter of taking the initiative if I want to pass.”

#### 3. Responsibility

- “College requires that I be more responsible, and that is something that they never teach you in high school.”

## Wider Worldview

### I. Learn New Ideas and Ways of Thinking

- “College education opens up each student to new ideas and ways of thinking. It allows for more than one way of thinking to be heard and to make each individual more accepting of other views.”
- “Going to college has opened my eyes to new ideas and views of life. In my philosophy class I have learned about many different ways in which people view life and what different religions believe...I have enjoyed getting to know new people and being opened up to more ideas.”
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### II. Learn Appreciation for Diversity

- “In college you’re likely to meet people from all over the world and people older than you. These people in the real world you would have never met otherwise.”
- “College is a place full of diversity...students gather...to expand their knowledge as well as learn about the world around them.”

### III. Learn to Express Oneself

- “Expressing your own opinion is vital.”

- “Communication is one of the most if not the most important tools you will need when you are in college. Being able to talk to a professor or even just meeting new people makes the college experience a whole lot more exciting.”

## **Study Groups: Students Helping Students**

### I. Nature of Study Groups

#### A. Teamwork is reinforced in many classes

- “Teamwork is strongly enforced in two of my classes. I had an eight-person group for a project in Intro. To Fine Arts and a four person group for a project in this class.”
- “Those two characteristics identify what colleges want the students to learn. Teamwork and communicating ideas clearly to others.”

#### B. Frequency, Time and Place

- They choose meeting sites where they won’t be distracted “Just two days ago my friends Jordan, Daniel, and John were having a study session under a tree at Stanislaus. We had a big test in our Economics class, so we figured the best place to go was somewhere peaceful on campus, so that we wouldn’t have the distraction of television, or video games.”

### II. Value of Study Groups

#### A. Help each other learn

- “In high school it was kind of rare to turn to your classmates for answers. The teacher would always have the answers and they could be the only ones you interacted with. It seems to b that their [sic] is no actual leader or teacher in the group. Everyone is just cooperating and grouped together with everyone. Listening attentively to each other in college is very much the case whereas in high school you just looked up at the instructor.”
- “I have formed a study group for my statistics class in order to help me learn from other students.”
- “College is a big challenge, many times the only way to pass a hard class is to divide and conquer.”

#### B. Provide motivation

- “Being able to have a group of people in my class that I can call and have study sessions with has really helped push me to do better on papers and exams. Having someone or a group to study with also made enjoy cramming for a test a lot more and helped me to do it more often.”

#### C. Expand insights

- “Having a study group can give you...a different insight into the materials covered in the class.”
- “You have chances of discussing your topics and ideas with your classmates and they will help you with their feedback and give you more ideas.”

#### D. Contribute to overall wellbeing

- “It does not matter if the group gets together to go out or to help in school work. The importance of groups is that they help you cope with stress and feel relieved that you are not isolated from the world.”
- “Just two days ago my friends Jordan, Daniel, and John were having a study session under a tree at Stanislaus. We had a big test in our Economics class, so we figured the best place to go was somewhere peaceful on campus, so that we wouldn’t have the distraction of television or video games.”

#### E. Are enjoyable/a way to make friends

- “As the weeks went by in college, I started to notice a dramatic shift in my thoughts of college. I soon gathered a pool of friends that is my study group. We are all becoming great friends. They have done nothing but help me to succeed more in college.”
- “Study groups are a great way to make friends. You are in the same class and that gives you plenty of conversation topics ranging from talking about the teacher to talking about things that happened in class.”

### **The Student-Professor Relationship: Importance of Communication**

- “But in high school, teachers would be constantly asking a student for a missed homework assignment or given the chance to make up a quiz or a test. In college it’s different. After spending my first semester at CSU Stanislaus, I’ve realized that if you miss any assignment the professor will not chase you down for it. Instead they never make a remark because what you do or don’t do counts against yourself.”
- “...you are on your own now. You have your own responsibilities. It is a step from the real world. Your life is just getting started.”
- “interaction and communication seem to be the keys to successfully graduating.”

### **Shifting Perceptions of Cool and Not-Cool**

- “High school was not as laid back as college. There were too many students trying to fit in, being popular and so on. In college, it’s much different. Students do not take notice if you are popular or not. It is much easier to meet people in college than high school.”
- “Since the kids in high school were so immature, it was kind of tough to actually do the work. It contrasted because high school if you even studied for 10-15 minutes you would be okay, but in college, you need to constantly review and study because you are the only one responsible if you fail.”

### **Friendships**

#### I. Meet New People/Make Friends

- “Knowing that you have built a strong network of friends to be able to turn to is a good feeling, and is a feeling that I have @ CSUS.”
- “College is really about making friends and learning.”

#### II. Enjoy Getting Together/Socializing

- “Classes can be fun depending on the subject, but generally they are just a necessity to be managed. What really matters is the social life. Your world revolves around hanging out with friends and parties.”
- “Even though school is about business, the social atmosphere on campus is unbelievable.”

## **College Leads to Success in Life**

### **I. College is a Choice**

- “The classes cost a lot and take up a lot of your time and most college students like me don’t want to waste time or money.”
- “Compared to my high school experience, college life places more responsibility on the students, allowing them to value their education on a higher level. High school was all about trying to get your work done in class as fast as you can, watching the clock so you can count down when class ends, and rushing out of class to socialize.”

### **II. Students Gain Maturity**

- “The most obvious reason why college differs from high school is that there is no one reminding you to do your homework. In high school, parents as well as teachers were constantly reminding you to do your homework. I now have to remind myself I have a quiz I have to study for.”
- “As a first-year college student, I was not prepared for the easy going college lifestyle. Ever since I started school, my teachers would call my house if I missed a class. We were never unaware of our grades because of weekly progress reports...when I entered college...what I didn’t expect was the independence and self-sufficiency of it all. If I didn’t want to go to class, I didn’t have to and I wouldn’t get a call about it that night. Everything was up to me, there would be no one pushing me or give me progress reports or calling my mom to tell them instead of going to class I went to Starbucks.”

### **III. College Leads to Success in Career**

- “While I still have a ways to go, these fifteen weeks have taught me to step up my game to gain a higher education that will prove [marketable] in the future.”
- “If you don’t take the education seriously then how do you expect to succeed in the career that you choose?”
- “College is just my next step to reaching my goals, and earning my place in the world.”

## **Conclusions: Experiences Important to Students**

- Students wrestle with freedom/responsibility tension. Successfully negotiating this leads to academic and personal growth.
- College is perceived as an important, life-changing experience.
- Relationships with students and professors are significant.
- Relationships with peers take on a new dimension—studying together and helping each other succeed.