

One Size Doesn't Fit All: Students' Perceptions of FYE Approaches

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Abstract: First-Year Experience (FYE) programs have become a focal point for efforts to transition and retain all students, as numerous studies suggest that such initiatives deepen students' academic preparation for college and support their emotional investments in the campus community. Using quantitative and qualitative data gathered from 842 students in 54 courses during Fall 2013 and 2014, this article considers the comparative merits of Living Learning Communities (LLC), "habits of mind" First-Semester Core (FSC) courses, a hybrid-model (LLC-FSC) initiative, and non-FYE courses by considering students' perception of their academic gains and social engagement. Survey results indicate that students perceive very different benefits across the various FYE models, especially when the FYE is housed in disciplinary rather than general education courses. The comparisons suggest the need for an intentional, goals-oriented approach to FYE programs, as a "one-size fits all" approach may not result in both academic growth and community engagement for students. For institutions with limited faculty and curricular resources, the choice of which type of FYE model to adopt is particularly important.

Key Words: First-Year Experience (FYE), Living-Learning Communities (LLC), First-Semester Core (FSC), retention.

First-Year Experience (FYE) programs have become a focal point for efforts to transition and retain all students. 95% of colleges offer First-Year Seminars in hopes that they help students become more academically prepared and emotionally engaged in ways that will encourage them to remain in college—and perhaps more specifically—to remain loyal to the particular college at which they initially enrolled (Goodman and Pascarella, 2005). Each institution's increasingly significant investment in its student body requires a dual focus on academic preparation, and emotional and social acclimation. Kuh et al. (2008) provided data to support Braxton et al.'s (2004) proposal that "psychosocial engagement," or the energy students invest in social interactions, directly influences the degree to which they are socially integrated into college life" in the context of "the interplay between student behaviors and perceptions of the institution and psychosocial engagement." Much is expected of FYE programs, and they often call on otherwise discrete campus units with divergent priorities—particularly Student Affairs and Academic Affairs—to work together (Blimling, 2001 cited in Brower and Inkelas, 2007). Despite requiring significant campus resources, such as time and money for faculty development, staff training, administrative attention, housing issues, co-curricular events, and

assessment, the value of FYE programs is nonetheless substantiated throughout the literature (Goodman and Pascarella, 2005; Brower and Inkelas, 2010; Stassen, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004).

FYE programs—including learning communities, living-learning communities, first-year seminars, and first-year experiences—may be aligned with disciplinary outcomes, general education outcomes, student interest, and/or faculty expertise. The myriad forms of FYE, however, means that there is no “one-size fits all” approach and what works at one institution or for one cohort of students may not work so well for another (Hunter 2006; Jaffee, 2004; Kuh et al, 2008; Finley and Staub, 2007). In addition, students’ abilities to transfer academic and psychosocial gains in an FYE to other course experiences and across their college career may be limited. For example, students may resist or resent FYE in general education courses, seeing them as busy work interfering with the “real” work of their major. This may negatively influence outcomes associated with the FYE.

So despite the near unanimity of enthusiasm for and expansive research on adopting FYEs, their creation and maintenance requires significant attention to the desired outcomes and institutional contexts. We offer this article as a case study that explores the challenges of designing a sustainable FYE for a mid-sized comprehensive private university with limited resources. We begin by describing the institutional and pedagogical contexts that frame our work, and the methods for implementing specific FYE initiatives on our campus: Living Learning Communities (LLC) and First-Semester Core (FSC) (described more fully below). These two initiatives, both targeting first-year students, differed in their focal outcomes and thereby represent different models for approaching the FYE. We anticipated that LLCs, with their focus on building community, might be more effective in cultivating students’ social connections, whereas the FSC, with their focus on fostering academic habits of mind, might be more effective in developing students’ academic skills. Using quantitative and qualitative data gathered from students in 54 courses of four types during Fall 2013 and 2014, we compare first-year student perceptions of LLCs and FSCs with those of students in hybrid LLC-FSC and “control” non-FYE-specific courses. The quantitative and qualitative data from the surveys distributed to students reveal that some FYE models might be more effective in achieving particular student outcomes than others, and that a single model may not achieve all desired results. We conclude by tracing the relative merits (and drawbacks) of the LLC and FSC approaches to FYE to consider the potential benefits of a hybrid (combined LLC-FSC) model. We argue that intentional decision making about the goals of the FYE is crucial, especially in an institutional context like ours in which resources are limited. In making those decisions, then, our data suggest the need to consider some important questions, namely: the ways in which different initiatives might be profitably combined—and the extent to which a single hybrid-model can effectively serve different sectors of our student body moving through various curricula.

The Problem

Institutional and Pedagogical Context

The case study presented in this article is drawn from a mid-size, private comprehensive university that has not yet developed a robust FYE for students despite several iterations of dedicated attention to general education. In 1995, faculty applied for and received a grant from the Davis Foundation that led to the implementation of a general education curriculum comprising five discipline-based “core” courses, a selected core concentration of five courses in one traditional liberal arts discipline, a senior capstone, two courses in writing, and one in math. Designed to offer breadth and depth, the core curriculum was initially taught by a small number of arts and sciences faculty who were able to work closely together, but as the University expanded, the ability of the faculty to maintain coherence—especially with little administrative oversight or resourcing—resulted in a splintering of the curriculum.

Gradually, “the core” came to be seen by students and even by some faculty as something to be “gotten over with” as soon as possible, creating a negative orientation toward first-year courses which students in subsequent focus groups described as “intro intro” courses rather than challenging and engaging academic forays. More recently, a general education committee and dedicated dean have been charged with investing in ongoing evaluation and, as prudent, proposing revisions to the curriculum. Part of the dialogue has focused on how to design and implement a robust FYE program. Prior to this, other faculty and administrative groups independently undertook “pilot” efforts to explore first-year programming which resulted in implementation of the efforts described in the next section.

The Solutions

Two Initiatives

Beginning in the spring/summer of 2013, two different initiatives were undertaken in varying degrees of conjunction with broader general education reform: Living Learning Communities (LLC) and First-Semester Core (FSC) courses. The radical expansion of a very small ongoing LLC experiment was led by the administration, chiefly with the understanding that LLCs improve student retention by bonding students to faculty mentors, each other, and the campus community. The much smaller FSC initiative was organized and led by faculty with the intent of integrating an intentional focus on academic habits of mind into required core classes dedicated to first-semester students that might better prepare them for college. In 2014, the two types of courses were merged to create some hybrid LLC-FSC courses, in the hopes of retaining the best elements of both, that is, the social emphasis of the LLC and the academic focus of the FSC. Separate LLC courses were retained in 2014. In 2013, non-FYE courses were included as a type of “control” in which upper-class students were enrolled alongside the first-year students and no specific FYE outcomes or programming were included.

The learning outcomes for the LLC initiative revolved around the concept of “community,” and were articulated in writing by a small team of administrators and faculty:

1. Students will recognize that there is no individual learner apart from a community of learners
2. Students will identify a degree of reciprocity and responsibility in their relationship with other learners; Students will articulate the personal and communal importance of the RWU pledge ‘to conduct ourselves responsibly and honorably, and to assist one another as we live and work together in mutual support’
3. Students will discover that ‘in the classroom’ and ‘out of the classroom’ experiences constitute a discrete continuum of learning
4. Students will develop peer and faculty connections during their first-year living-learning experience that will carry over to future active and collaborative learning.

Faculty development and preparation for the LLC program consisted of a required one-day summer workshop in which outcomes were discussed, student affairs staff were introduced, and resources were announced. Outside of the required workshop, there was no faculty “training” for teaching an LLC. In 2013 (but not in 2014), faculty met twice during the semester to share their perceptions of the emergent strengths and challenges, but attendance at these meetings was not mandatory. LLC faculty received stipends of \$1500 for the semester, and classes were capped at 24

as further incentive.¹ While there were elected faculty representatives on the LLC planning committee, the initiative was largely driven by administrators, and decisions about how and whether to extend the program into a second year were made prior to the collection or analysis of the data that follows.

At the same time, in 2013, faculty members who had been deeply involved in a prior movement toward significant general education reform sought to maintain the momentum for an academically robust first-year experience by designing the FSC initiative. With financial and course allocation support from the administration, faculty leaders created the FSC to help students achieve desirable and widely appreciated learning outcomes (habits of mind) and enhance their success in all their courses. These FSC learning outcomes were iteratively discussed and agreed upon by the FSC faculty:

1. Explanation
2. Interpretation
3. Evaluation
4. Synthesis
5. Empathy
6. Reflection

The FSC courses were formed by integrating these outcomes into the five pre-existing disciplinary core (general education) courses,² so that content of the core courses (based on their respective outcomes) remained the same but would be supplemented and enhanced via the FSC outcomes. Building upon the literature on educational theory and outcome-based learning (Fink 2013, Wiggins and McTighee 2005), the FSC learning outcomes were designed to more fully engage students in academic coursework and to help them develop academic skills across levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. In addition, other goals of the FSC initiative were to: 1) enhance the educational experience of first-semester students, in part by providing the "safe space" of a class with only first-year students 2) improve their transition to college academic life, 3) and complement other efforts for increasing student retention rates.

Initially open to full-time faculty with prior experience teaching Core (general education) courses, and later opened to part-time faculty, the participating faculty met extensively and consistently throughout the summer before instruction and during the fall semester while teaching the FSC class.³ These monthly meetings allowed faculty to discuss common readings on outcome-based learning and backward design, as well as to identify and assess the goals of the FSC. Faculty received stipends of \$500 for their monthly meetings through the summer and fall semester, and classes were capped at 18 in 2013 and then 24 in 2014 when most FSC courses were integrated with an LLC component.

Analysis of the Solution(s)

Methods

Participants were 842 first-semester students enrolled at a private, residential comprehensive university in Rhode Island, USA with an enrollment of approximately 3900 undergraduate students. The

¹ In 2013, 21 faculty lead LLC courses; in 2014, the number increased to 27.

² Core 101: Scientific Investigations; Core 102: Challenges of Democracy; Core 103: Human Behavior in Perspective; Core 104: Literature, Philosophy, and the Examined Life; Core 105: Aesthetics in Context-The Artistic Impulse.

³ In 2013, participating faculty included nine faculty teaching FSC courses in the fall and two faculty facilitators who did not teach an FSC course; in 2014, the numbers increased to 11 faculty teaching courses, plus the two facilitators.

surveyed students were from two cohorts: the first-year students entering in the fall semesters of 2013 and 2014. The academic first-year experiences of these students varied as follows: students enrolled in an LLC (some connected to Core course and some to a disciplinary course, often a foundational course in the student's major; all LLC courses were restricted to first-year students); an FSC (all of which were Core courses restricted to first-year students); a hybrid-model (LLC-FSC) (all of which were connected to a Core course and restricted to first-year students); or a Control class (some of which were disciplinary in focus, others of which were Core classes; these classes were not restricted to first-year students). Across the two years, we surveyed 55% of the LLC sections (29 of 53 sections); 82% of the FSC sections (9 of 11 sections); 73% of the hybrid LLC-FSC sections (8 of 11 sections); and 8 control sections.⁴

LLC Courses In both years, approximately half of the University's total incoming student population was placed into Living Learning Communities (LLCs). These students lived in dorm rooms on the same floor (with a shared resident assistant) and enrolled in one common course. Students were assigned to specific LLCs based upon their responses to a residence life survey administered prior to orientation, where they were asked to select three choices of LLCs: options included disciplinary courses required for students' majors, and required general education core courses, a small number of which were populated exclusively by "deciding" (undeclared) students. In addition to a shared community service requirement before classes started, two co-curricular activities—one on-campus event, one off-campus event—were required to foster student connection to their peers, faculty, institution, and local community (see course outcomes above). LLC sections were capped at 24 students, based upon housing groupings. 65% of the LLC sections were affiliated with introductory courses in a major area of study (i.e., Public Health, Criminal Justice, Psychology, Engineering, Architecture), and 35% were affiliated with general education courses required as part of the University's core curriculum.

FSC Courses In 2013, a smaller number of students (approximately 162) were enrolled in an FSC course. Students enrolled in the FSC courses did not self-select this option, nor did they know before classes began that they were in an FSC section of their core class. FSC students did not share a residence hall, nor did they participate in course-based co-curricular activities; moreover, because the FSC courses were all general education classes, students in these courses were from all majors, including students still undecided. Course sections were capped at 18 students per course section.

Control Sections (Fall 2013 only) Control sections were comprised of both first-year students and upperclassmen (147 students in total), though only first-year students within them were surveyed for this study. Some control sections were second sections of courses taught by a faculty member who was also teaching an LLC or FSC for the same course. 38% of the control sections were affiliated with introductory courses in a major area of study (i.e., Business and Criminal Justice), and were capped at 32 and 20 students respectively, while 62% were affiliated with a general education CORE course, capped at 25 students.

Hybrid LLC-FSC Courses (Fall 2014 only) In the fall of 2014, an option for a hybrid LLC-FSC model was added: all FSC sections became LLCs, although not all LLCs were FSCs. In other words, all students in this hybrid course type were in LLCs that integrated the habits of mind for core (general education) courses. Other students were placed in discipline-specific LLCs, which did not include the FSC habits of mind in the curriculum. Combining the LLC and FSC learning outcomes in the hybrid

⁴ We invited all faculty teaching LLC, FSC, and hybrid LLC-FSC courses in the fall of 2013 and 2014 to participate in the assessment. Faculty who agreed to participate had their students complete the survey during a class period near the end of the semester. In fall 2013, we invited faculty teaching introductory, first-year courses in the disciplines and in general education to participate in the assessment as control sections (8 agreed to participate, some of whom were teaching second sections of the same class as an FYE).

model represents the university's efforts to move toward a more integrated set of first-year experiences. Blending the outcomes provides a natural comparison group representing an additive model, and which allow for a more detailed analysis of discrete components. Like LLC sections, hybrid LLC-FSC courses generally had 24 students per course section, based upon housing groupings. 264 students participated in 11 sections of a hybrid LLC-FSC course.

Procedure and Measures

At the end of the Fall 2013 and 2014 semesters, 842 students in LLC, FSC, Control, and Hybrid LLC-FSC classes were administered a brief survey designed to assess students' perceptions of their own learning and experiences within their first-semester course [Table 1]. The survey included both 5-point Likert-scale (Q 1-14) and open-ended questions (Q15-19) targeting LLC learning outcomes, FSC learning outcomes, and students' overall perceptions and experiences in the course. To explore the survey results and identify differences in students' perceptions of first-year experiences, we conducted a series of one-way Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs), followed by Tukey post-hoc analyses, across the four course types for each quantitative item of the survey (Q1-14), with significant differences determined at $p < .05$. Prior to combining the 2014 and 2013 data, preliminary analyses were conducted to examine potential differences in student perceptions across cohorts (2014 vs 2013). The findings revealed a lower level of student perceived satisfaction in 2014 compared to 2013 for multiple items on the survey (Q1, 10, 12, and 14). Upon closer inspection however, these cohort differences could be accounted for by differences in the types of comparison groups offered each year rather than by the cohort itself (FSC-LLC in 2014, Control group in 2013). Thus, the data were combined to allow for a more comprehensive analysis of between group differences in student perceptions of academic first year experiences. Means and statistical analyses for the Likert-scale questions are presented in Table 2. For simplicity and clarity, the narrative description of the results, below, highlights key differences.

The second part of the survey asked five open-ended questions to solicit qualitative feedback. Students were instructed to write short answers based on their perception of the course content and goals—what the class was and what the student expected to learn—not based on their perception of the instructor (all students were given the opportunity to evaluate their instructors in an online course survey administered by the university).

We first read through the responses to gain a general sense of students' perceptions about their experiences in a first-year class and to ascertain what trends or themes emerged from the data. Our research assistant then coded the answers for each question by cohort, according to the themes that emerged in the responses to each question. Themes were identified based on common trends relating to various aspects of the courses such as class structure, assignments and activities, and professor and peer interactions. Because survey questions were worded differently as appropriate for the specific cohort, responses tended to focus on different facets of the students' experiences (social versus academic) between cohorts; therefore, the themes for each question are not identical across the cohorts. In reading the responses, we read both within and across cohorts. Reading within cohorts reveals valuable information about how students perceived the strengths of the class/program and about recommended improvements. For our purposes, however, reading across cohorts is more revealing as it indicates that the distinct foci of the LLC and FSC initiatives directly impact students' perceptions.

Table 1: Survey Questions

Student Survey of Course Experiences

1. This course has helped prepare me to succeed academically at RWU.
2. I have improved my ability to synthesize information because of this course.
3. This course has helped me feel like I am part of an academic community with other RWU students.
4. During this semester, I have reflected on my own learning and understanding of course concepts.
5. Throughout the semester, I have given my best effort on course assignments.
6. I have connected or applied information learned in this class with experiences that I have had outside of class.
7. In this course, my learning has been enhanced by working with and listening to others.
8. This course has helped me improve my ability to explain information.
9. By participating in this course, I have improved my ability to learn college-level material.
10. This course has helped me increase my ability to empathize with other people.
11. My relationships with my classmates have helped motivate me to succeed in this class.
12. Overall, I am satisfied with how much I have learned in this class.
13. Overall, I am satisfied with how much my academic skills have improved in this class.
14. Overall, I am glad that I was able to have this class experience.
15. In thinking about this course, what do you see as its strengths?
16. What aspects of the course would you suggest need improved?
17. What information, skills and/or experiences would you like to have had in your first-semester at college to help you transition to college life and academic work?
18. Overall, how would you describe this experience to a student who is thinking about signing up for it?
19. Do you have any other comments about the content and goals of the course that you would like to share?

Table 2. Mean values of student survey responses for 14 questions across six course types and grouped by question theme.[#] Different letters among means in a row indicate significant differences with the post-hoc Tukey test.

Survey Question Number [^]	Disciplinary		General Education (Core)				F value	p value
	LLC	Control	FSC-LLC	FSC	LLC	Control		
Academic								
1	4.06a	4.52b	3.62cd	3.99ae	3.52c	3.97ade	15.36	0.000
2	3.89a	4.23a*	3.79a*	3.99a	3.47b	3.87a	10.07	0.000
8	3.84a	4.13a	3.86a	3.92a	3.39b	3.82a	9.67	0.000
9	3.95ab	4.17ab	3.78abc	4.10b	3.67c	3.98abc	5.28	0.000
12	4.07ab*	4.53a	3.76bc*	4.26a	3.64c	4.21a	13.78	0.000
13	3.9ab	4.27a	3.72bc	3.97ab	3.51c	3.95ab	8.32	0.000
Community								
3	4.23a	4.21ab	3.92ab	3.81b	3.82b	3.81b	7.25	0.000
6	3.98a	4.21a	3.86ab	4.09a	3.68b	4.00ab	4.44	0.001
7	3.98ab*	4.27a	4.07a	4.15a	3.73b*	3.95ab	5.14	0.000
10	3.70a	3.67ab	3.86ab**	4.01b	3.52a**	3.76ab	5.06	0.000
11	4.04a	3.90ab	3.87ab	3.69b	3.73b	3.52b	4.74	0.000
Self-Efficacy								
4	3.97a	4.27a	3.90ab	4.14a	3.72b	4.10a	6.78	0.000
5	4.20	4.52***	4.32	4.37	4.16***	4.27	2.38	0.037
Overall Satisfaction								
14	4.22a	4.45a	3.82b	4.24a	3.82b	4.33a	7.72	0.000
Notes:								
# The sample size for each sample grouping (type of course) is:	298	52	94	152	184	62		
[^] The text for each question is provided in Table 1.								
* These pairs differ at $p < 0.058$.								
** The noted pair differs at $p = .061$.								
*** The noted pair approaches significant ($p = 0.07$) with the Tukey test.								

Reflection

Results and Discussion

Results from our student surveys support previous findings that FYEs can play a significant role in first-year student retention and engagement. They also indicate the need for careful attention to the desired FYE outcomes, as not all models will simultaneously yield both academic growth and community engagement. The quantitative survey data reveal that overall student perceptions of learning gains and satisfaction were higher for disciplinary courses than general education courses. Indeed, for general education courses, students in LLC sections indicated they were less satisfied than students in control courses in terms of academic gains. Within the general education courses, students in FSC sections reported stronger academic gains than did students in LLC sections, suggesting that explicit focus on academic skills and habits of minds may be an important component of FYEs designed to intensify student gains in general education curricula.

Qualitative data gathered from the open-ended survey questions add another layer to our findings. In contrast to the LLC sections (both disciplinary and general education), where students valued social relationships, students in FSC courses praised the academic rigor and class structure as the primary benefits. While the different foci in students' comments between LLC and FSC classes

are unsurprising given the different emphases of the FYEs, it does indicate the need to design FYEs around desired course outcomes as the LLC component may interfere with academic gains unless they are an explicit focus in the class.

Table 3. Number of student responses to the question "In thinking about this course, what do you see as its strengths?" in 9 qualitative themes across six types of FYE courses. See the main text for descriptions of the course types. The largest number of responses per class type is bolded to highlight differences among the LLC, FSC and Control courses.

Theme	Disciplinary		General Education (Core)			
	LLC	Control	FSC-LLC	FSC	LLC	Control
Peers	199	6	18	0	117	5
Class Content (e.g., assignments)	14	11	23	38	25	7
Professor	10	10	0	2	4	11
Class Structure (e.g., discussions)	8	3	28	48	9	8
Relatability	3	0	1	7	3	0
Skills (Thinking)	0	0	0	30	0	0
Grades/Success	0	5	0	0	0	10
No strengths	6	0	0	0	5	0
Other	0	9	14	6	2	15

Is the LLC an Effective FYE Model? Our research demonstrates that students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the LLC model depends on whether the course is attached to a discipline-based class (e.g., an introductory course in the major) or to general education. Within the disciplinary-based LLCs, we found few differences between the LLC sections and the control sections. The only significant difference is that students in the control sections agreed that the course helped prepare them to succeed academically at RWU (Q 1). Within the general education sections, LLC students' perceptions of academic gains are significantly lower than those of their counterparts in the control sections (Q 1, 2, 4, 8, 12, 13, and 14).

LLC students in both discipline-based and general education sections perceived strong social gains from living together and taking a common class. They commented overwhelmingly on the social aspect of the class as its primary strength, explaining, as one student did, that "[i]t is more cohesive than other classes since we also live with each other. This class is the most social out of the rest of mine." Many students commented on the ease with which they could obtain help from classmates living in the same dorm, stating that "since most of us live together, it is easier to seek help from classmates" and "being an LLC we have an immediate group of friends to go to when we need help." In addition to facilitating their ability to obtain "help" from their peers, students reported that they developed close bonds with their classmates, "building friendships that will take us through college." Students seemed to perceive positive benefits from those friendships, but a few noted that the strong interpersonal relationships between classmates intensified peer pressure. Living together meant that students could not remain anonymous in class, which sometimes inhibited participation: as one student noted, "the relationship with my LLC floor interfered with my participation in this class because I did not always feel comfortable talking up in class."

It is perhaps important to note that in the Likert-scale questions, no differences emerged between the LLC and control sections in terms of social interactions—yet the open-ended questions told a different story. Students in the LLC sections provided copious commentary about the social strengths of the class, while the control sections did not comment on their peer relationships (either affirmatively or negatively). Perhaps the inconsistency between the quantitative and qualitative results

stems from students' affective response to social interaction overwhelming their cognitive perceptions of the academic benefits of community and collaboration. In other words, students recognized the emotional connections they developed through social interaction with their peers, but did not recognize how such interactions might prompt academic gain.

It is also important to note that while LLC students overwhelmingly praised the LLC structure for enabling them to develop close relationships with their classmates, others criticized the LLC for limiting their peer relationships. A number of students commented that they felt constrained by the LLC because they weren't easily able to develop friendships outside the LLC. As one student put it, the LLC was "[t]oo closed off for freshmen, would like to be able to meet many people with different majors." In addition to not finding friendships outside the LLC, some students indicated that the LLCs resulted in too much "togetherness". According to one student, "people have complained on living and taking classes with the same people—you are with the same exact kids all the time."⁵

Is the FSC an Effective FYE Model? Our findings indicate significant differences between the FSC and general education LLCs. The FSC students responded more favorably for 10 of the survey questions (Q 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14), demonstrating that within a general education program aimed at helping students develop their academic skills, the FSC model is a better choice than the LLC. Given the limited resources for supporting FYE programs that are available to most colleges and universities, it is probable that choices will have to be made about the type of FYE program most likely to deliver the desired outcomes—including social connections, academic success and retention. Assuming that academic success is a universal goal for FYE programs, our results suggest that administration and faculty might most appropriately support general education FYEs that contain an explicit and intentionally integrated academic focus.

As with the LLC students in general education courses and students in control sections (non-LLC sections of the same general education courses), no differences emerged between student perceptions in FSC (all general education courses) and general education control sections. This suggests important lines of inquiry for future research. It is possible that because the control sections included upperclassman, while the FY courses were restricted to first-year students, students in the control sections perceived a higher academic rigor—a perception that matched FSC students' perceptions of the academic gains of a first-year course with an explicit emphasis on academic habits of mind. It is also possible that students did not fully recognize the strengths and weaknesses of an FYE at the end of their first-semester; follow-up surveys one to three years after their experiences are needed to see if they yield new information.

In contrast to the lack of differences between the FSC and general education control sections, the qualitative data provides insights that suggest important nuances in how students perceived the strengths of their respective classes. The top three positive experiences for students in control sections were: the professor, the class content/assignments, and grades/academic success. Developing positive relationships with their professors, and seeing the faculty as being open to questions and willing to help students, was an important positive experience of their first semester for nearly a quarter of the students (20). As one student put it, they appreciated "how easy it is to talk to my teachers in and out of class. The teachers want each student to do well, so the teacher-student relationship is really nice." Other students commented on specific accomplishments related to course content and assignments as being the most significant positive experience in their courses. Here students identified completing a business plan or learning oral communication skills as significant. Finally, many students reported

⁵ We suggest that students' perceptions of "constant togetherness" may be exaggerated. Students took 3 or 4 courses that were not part of the LLC and thus included students with whom they did not share dorm space. However, while students' perceptions on this point may be overstated, they are an important finding as it suggests other interventions might be useful to help students meet and interact more with peers from different courses and residence halls.

their positive experiences relating to grades. These students felt proud to have put significant work into their studies, and to have earned good grades as a result. “My most positive experiences in my courses would be succeeding in them. I put a lot of effort into my work, so when I get the grades back it is a great feeling to know my work is appreciated,” one student commented.

Unlike the LLC students, the FSC students did not overwhelmingly agree on a primary strength; instead, they reported nearly equally on three strengths: the class structure, the academic skills gained through the class, and the class content. Around one-third of the students (39) commented that the structure of the class was a significant strength. Students commented on the benefits of class discussion and reading assignments, stating that they afforded opportunities to expand one’s perspective and develop collaborative skills. As one student phrased it, the class “helps you think of the world differently, gives you a different perspective and leaves you with questions that can make you think and/or act in a different, more positive way.” Another primary strength, according to a little over one-quarter of the students (30), had to do with the academic skills (the habits of mind outcomes) emphasized throughout the semester. Students commented on critical thinking, close reading, textual analysis, and on thinking outside the box. One student wrote, “the strengths of this course are in learning to be skeptical—not to take everything at face value and blindly agree to it. The course taught me to really read a piece and decide whether or not I agree with what it says and then explain why or why not.” Another added, “A strength of this course would be its preparation for critical thinking and personal growth. We did a lot of self-reflection and focused on our future goals, which I think is important.” Other students identified the class content—and specific types of assignments—as the major strength of the class. These students commented explicitly on course content such as democracy, sociology, literature and philosophy, but they also talked about how the course emphasized connections between what they were learning in class and “real world” applications. For example, one student shared that, “I see the strengths of this course as the ability to connect ideas of the social sciences with students’ everyday lives and real world experiences.” Another student reiterated this point, stating that the course’s strength is that “we learn concepts about ourselves that we can apply to our everyday lives. This course makes the students think deeply and ask questions.”

Although students’ reported satisfaction with the course and perceptions of its strengths do not appear to differ between the FSC and control sections, what they actually say about those strengths is markedly different across cohorts. While the FYE may not yield greater student satisfaction than a non-FYE general education course, how students perceive the respective value may be of import in determining which programs to offer (if any).

Does a Hybrid LLC-FSC Model Have Benefits? The second year of our FYE study gave us the opportunity to combine the LLC and FSC approaches in a few sections, to consider the benefits of a hybrid model. Combining the social strengths of the LLC and the academic habits of mind focus from the FSC would seem a reasonable foundation for a strong FYE experience. However, our results indicate students do not perceive the same benefits we expected they would. In fact, few differences emerged, though the hybrid LLC-FSC did score lower than control sections on overall satisfaction (Q 14). The hybrid LLC-FSC model scored higher than the LLCs for one question [Q 4], which suggests that the hybrid model generally retains the benefits of the FSC—but not in terms of the emphasis on metacognition. This is perhaps a significant detriment, given the role metacognition plays in learning transfer. The hybrid LLC-FSC model also scored lower than the FSC in regards to overall experience with the course (Q 12 & 14), which suggests that in some cases the LLC component may interfere with students’ learning experiences.

Students in the hybrid LLC-FSC model echoed their FSC counterparts in ascribing the strengths of the class to prompting new (and deeper) thinking. As one student put it, “[a] strength of this course would be its preparation for critical thinking and personal growth. We did a lot of self-

reflection and focused on our future goals, which I think is important.” With the added LLC component, students in the combined model also reported their relationships with their peers as a primary strength: “having people in the class that you live with really helps. That way if you need help with something, or don't remember what an assignment is there are other people right there that you can ask.”

Overall, is it Worthwhile to Invest in FYE?

The overwhelmingly positive responses from students across the LLC, FSC, and LLC-FSC courses suggest it is indeed worthwhile to invest in an FYE. Of course, we recognize that students' perceptions are but one factor to evaluate in determining the benefits of FYEs: it is also important to examine the potential long-term impact of FYE on student retention, academic success, graduation rates, etc. Indeed, we would have liked to contextualize our survey findings with this information, but such data was unavailable to us.⁶ Still, we encourage administrators and faculty contemplating an FYE to consider what kind of FYE is most efficacious for their purposes. Given the limited resources with which most institutions have to work, and given that there is no “one size fits all” model of FYE, our results suggest that it may be necessary to prioritize desired outcomes in order to design an appropriate FYE. The FYE programs were initially driven by two very different motivations: the LLCs, driven by administration, were designed to increase retention; the FSCs, driven by faculty, were developed from a desire to help students improve academic skills and also improve engagement with the general education curriculum at the important first-year level. The bifurcation in these pilot FYE programs meant that some focused on social engagements, with others focusing more exclusively on academic gains. Both FYEs achieved their respective goals, but we suspect that most faculty and administration might agree that a better goal would be to achieve gains on *both* the social and academic fronts. However, our findings suggest that simply combining learning outcomes is not necessarily effective. In fact, while the LLC initiative may have produced relatively strong perceptions of positive social engagement, and positive experiences for courses in the major (Palm and Thomas 2015), it actually appeared that students registered a negative impact on the academic gains when the LLC and FSC initiatives were combined into a hybrid model. Still, the careful study of the quantitative and qualitative data does suggest that, at least on our campus, LLCs work better for students in major-related rather than general education classes, and that if FYEs are going to be integrated into general education, it is perhaps best done through an academically-focused set of outcomes similar to the Habits of Mind piloted in our FSC sections. In short, if we want to increase student engagement (and thus retention), while also developing academic habits of mind—especially in the context of general education—then we need to make careful decisions about how to design an appropriate FYE.

While we do not dispute the general valuation in higher education of FYEs as best practice, we argue it is important for administrators and faculty to continue to search for the right program to prepare students for their college future and bind them to the campus community. Although constrained by limited resources for faculty development and current curricular structures that make the creation of a dedicated first-year seminar a challenge, the university in this case study has nonetheless provided very positive experiences for the vast majority of its incoming students, as reflected by the high averages on the survey responses (all on the agree side of the scale). While this study has highlighted differences in student perception of their social and academic gains, overall, students perceive their experiences very positively; even so, we suspect there remains much about

⁶ We do hope in the future to work with institutional research to explore the long-term effects of these FYE models on student retention and academic success.

learning and community in their first year that students will not be able to reflect on until they are well beyond it.

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