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CHAPTER TWO

An Historical and Theoretical Framework For the Freshman Seminar

A Brief History

Discussing the history of freshman seminars as a course type presents a number of challenges. First is the challenge of terminology. "Freshman seminar" is a term that has been used to describe two primary types of courses -- the first focusing on providing students an extended orientation to the campus and the world of higher education, and the second replicating a more traditional academic seminar in which students work with faculty on a specific academic topic of common interest. Today many freshman seminars attempt to combine transition issues and academic content; however, historical records indicate that the vast majority of freshman seminars were begun with one or the other as a primary focus (Gordon, 1989).

The second challenge is locating the historical records themselves, many of which are buried in curriculum committee reports or course catalogs of the 19th and early 20th century. Fitts and Swift (1928) maintain that the first freshman seminar for which the focus was extended orientation began at Boston University in 1888. However, this very survey has unearthed an older extended orientation freshman seminar -- one that reportedly began at Lee College in Kentucky in 1882. Levine (1985) traces the history of the academic freshman seminar to a much later date, 1945, and defines it as "a pedagogical technique introduced by Nathan Pusey at Lawrence College which provides freshmen an opportunity to work with a faculty member on a topic of mutual interest" (p. 525).

Since their precise beginning, whenever and wherever that might have taken place, the number of extant freshman seminars has waxed and waned, "virtually disappearing" in the 1960s when American higher education was truly a seller's market and the prevailing educational philosophy was "sink or swim" (Gordon, 1991). The primary growth of this course type has come since the mid-1970s in response to the many challenges, both fiscal and academic, faced by American colleges and universities. Decreasing numbers of traditional-age students, demographic shifts in the entering student population, a commitment to access for students previously excluded from higher education, the alarming student dropout rate which peaks between the freshman and sophomore year, a renewed concern about the quality of undergraduate education -- all these issues have converged to generate increased interest in the first college year and curricular programs that ease the transition of students into college life.

In spite of survey evidence that many institutions continue to initiate freshman seminars of various types in response to any or all of the preceding concerns, the overall percentage of these courses in American colleges and universities (approximately 67%) has remained fairly constant since 1988 (National Resource Center, 1988, 1991, 1994) This may indicate that as freshman seminars are born, others die an untimely death for a variety of reasons which can be summarized as lack of firm institutional support. Levine and Weingart (1974) offer a partial explanation for the problems that often accompany implementation of a freshman seminar. They argue that freshman seminars, in addition to other general education courses may become a "spare room" that is poorly attended and indiscriminately used in the "house of intellect" (Boyer & Levine, 1981, p. 1). Traditional institutional reward systems often do not favor the teaching of courses that are "extra disciplinary" -- outside of traditionally defined academic disciplines. So other than "pay for services rendered," there are few extrinsic institutional rewards for faculty who teach such courses, especially in rigidly departmentalized colleges and graduate universities. In addition, freshman seminars are generally held to higher expectations with respect to outcomes than any other course in the college curriculum. Because of their reputation as a course type that improves student retention and academic success (Barefoot, 1992), the absence of such outcomes (or lack of research to demonstrate outcomes) may spell the demise of the course, even though other valuable outcomes may be realized.

In spite of these inherent difficulties, freshman seminars continue to flourish on numbers of American campuses. In addition to their demonstrated impact on student retention and improvement in grade point averages, faculty praise seminars for serving as a change of pace and for permitting more flexibility than regular courses. Many faculty use the course as a laboratory for experimenting with new instructional formats, and bring these new teaching methods back to their departmental classrooms. (Levine & Weingart, 1974, p. 30)

Linking Scholarship to Practice in the Freshman Seminar

The exponential growth of scholarship and research on student development has provided higher education professionals valuable information that can be used in designing courses and programs for students at all levels of the undergraduate experience. Because of its inherent flexibility, the freshman seminar is a useful structure within which to convert the special body of research on student success and retention into meaningful practice.

The three national surveys of freshman seminars have confirmed that the vast majority of freshman seminars are intentionally designed with one or more of the following research based goals:

- Helping students achieve a felt sense of community
- Encouraging the involvement of students in the total life of the institution
- Academic and social integration of students

Community

Nevitt Sanford (1969) was one of the first higher education scholars to argue the importance of institutional "community" and to note its absence in the contemporary American college or university.

It is fair to say that in most of our universities -- and in many of our liberal arts colleges -- a majority of the students suffer from a lack of a sense of community, confusion about values, a lack of intimate friends, a very tenuous sense of self (including serious doubt about their personal worth), and the absence of a great cause, movement, service, religion, belief system, or anything else that they might see as larger than themselves and in which they could become deeply involved (Sanford, 1988, p. 3).

In his classic, *Where Colleges Fail* (1969), Sanford argued that colleges fail whenever they treat students as less than whole persons and that learning depends on the whole personality, not merely intelligence. He maintained that institutions themselves lack "coherence." He foreshadowed the later research of Astin (1977) and Boyer (1987) by calling for the "involvement" of students themselves in campus life and involvement of faculty in the lives of the students.

Ernest Boyer (1987, 1990) also found that "new [college] students have little sense of being inducted into a community whose structure, privileges, and responsibilities have been evolving for almost a millennium" (1987, p. 43). The comprehensive research that Boyer and his colleagues reported in *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* found that

> a successful freshman-year program will convince students that they are part of an intellectually vital, caring community, and the spirit of community will be sustained by a climate on the campus where personal relationships are prized, where integrity is the hallmark of discourse, and where people speak and listen carefully to each other. (1987, p. 57)

Involvement

Alexander Astin and Robert Pace are the best known of an array of higher education scholars who have researched and documented the positive correlation between student involvement and improved success/retention. Astin (1984) defines involvement accordingly:

> Quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Thus a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. (p. 297)

Both Astin (1984) and Pace (1984) found that highly involved students "who interact frequently with faculty" (Astin, 1977a, p. 223) are more satisfied with the college experience than those who do not. Astin (1977b) found further that virtually every significant effect on student persistence can be explained in terms of the involvement concept. Every positive factor is one that is likely to increase student involvement in the undergraduate experience, while every negative factor is one that is likely to reduce involvement. (p. 145)

Social and Academic Integration

The importance of student social and academic integration into college life has been the central message of Vincent Tinto's (1993) research on student retention. Using the work of Dutch anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep (1960), as a framework, Tinto identified three stages in students' "rite of passage" into the first college year. The first stage, separation, is characterized by a decline in interactions with members of a former group. The second stage, transition, is a period during which the individual begins to interact with members of the new group. In this stage, persons learn the knowledge and skills necessary to function successfully in the new situation. The final stage, incorporation, may be marked by rituals or ceremonies which certify membership (Tinto, 1988). Tinto states that during the freshman year, students may feel a sense of normlessness. "Having given up the norms and beliefs of past associations and not yet having adopted those appropriate to membership in a new community, the individual is left in a state of at least temporary anomie" (1988, pp. 442-443).

Tinto (1988) found that student integration into the college experience is achieved primarily through interaction -- with peers and with faculty. His findings parallel the more recent work of Astin (1993) who found that the greatest degree of positive student change in both cognitive and affective domains comes about on campuses in which there is a great deal of student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction. Interaction between students themselves and between students and instructor is an explicit goal of many freshman seminars.

Tinto's views on the importance of academic and social integration have been validated by numbers of other campus-specific studies. One of the most significant is the report of a 17-year investigation of the freshman seminar (University 101) at the University of South Carolina. Fidler (1991) found that the positive significant relationship between participation in University 101 and freshman-to-sophomore retention was related to course "process"; that is, "University 101 participants are more likely than non-participants to achieve strong relationships with faculty... [and this] reflects greater social integration" (p. 34).

Tinto's recent research interests have focused on the learning community concept (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). Learning communities (I. e., linked courses, cluster courses, blocked courses) link courses across the curriculum so that a single cohort of students enrolls in two or more courses together. The learning community concept enables a single group of students to share the same academic (and social) experience, therefore bringing together the related concepts of academic and social integration.

Whether freshman seminars have or have not been intentionally grounded in student development theory relates to when and why the seminars were begun. But with or without intent, common practice in many freshman seminars is consistent with theoretical constructs. Anecdotal evidence exists to indicate that when seminars depart from sound theory, their effectiveness, as measured by correlation with improved retention, grade point average, and overall student satisfaction, drops. Freshman seminars, in order to be most effective as tools for enhanced student success, need to be designed to bring about a sense of community, student involvement, and social interaction between all participants about academic topics and other issues of concern to students.

Conclusion

Frederick Rudolph (1977) stated that "the curriculum has been an arena in which the di*mensions* of American culture have been measured. It has been one of those places where we have told ourselves who we are. It is important territory" (p. 1). Throughout higher education's history, the changing curriculum has mirrored the changing needs and values of society. But the curriculum has also become the arena within which some of the fiercest and most interminable educational battles have been waged.

As a classroom structure with many specific and varied definitions, the freshman seminar represents a popular curriculum reform which has grown slowly but steadily, generally from the bottom up, with little in the way of accompanying fanfare. Campus by campus, institutions have chosen to employ the freshman seminar as a structured, intentional way to ease the transition into college life. This reform, like others before it, has seen its share of resistance from sincere educators who, like Mayhew, Ford, and Hubbard (1990), believe that "there should be some limit as to how much effort an institution should expend on individual students"(p. 101). But in spite of such resistance, many American colleges and universities continue to redefine the limits of their responsibility to first-year students through the implementation of a freshman seminar.