

THE EVOLUTION OF A FRESHMAN SEMINAR

With a required one-credit freshman seminar in place since 1977, California Lutheran University has a relatively long history of involvement with this kind of course. Using classification schemes from the literature on freshman seminars as a context, this article examines how California Lutheran's seminar has changed over the years as it has been integrated more directly into the University's retention program. The authors also discuss some of the persistent issues involved in maintaining such a course.

INTRODUCTION

The past ten years have witnessed a growing movement in colleges and universities toward an emphasis on the "freshman year experience" (Gardner, 1986). Calls for a continuation of these efforts are heard in recent national reports on the state of American education (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984; Boyer, 1987). While efforts to improve both academic quality and the process of adjustment during the freshman year are valuable in themselves and doubtless long overdue, this trend is clearly motivated in part by more pragmatic considerations, including the arrival of underprepared students in large numbers and a new feeling of urgency about attrition because of its financial impact (Cohen and Jody, 1978; Gordon and Grites, 1984; Gardner, 1986).

An increasingly common approach in dealing with these problems is the freshman orientation course, or freshman seminar. By 1984, the ACE's *College Trends* reported that over 77 percent of the institutions surveyed had a course on "coping with college" (El-Khawas, 1985).

Classification of Freshman Seminars

Not all freshman seminars, of course, emphasize the same goals. Classification schemes discuss both course content and the process by which course goals are reached. Gordon and Grites list a number of possible goals, ranging from developing study skills to helping students clarify their personal values (Gordon and Grites, 1984). Sagaria (1979) classified such courses as 1) **interdisciplinary**, which involve study of an academic topic taught by a faculty member who is often the students' advisor, 2) **utilitarian**, which stress educating the student about the institution's policies, procedures, and resources, and which often emphasize basic skills, and

★ JONATHAN BOE received his *Ph.D.* in History from Stanford University. He teaches *American History* at California Lutheran University and was director of the Freshman Advisement Program for three years.

PAMELA JOLICOEUR received her *Ph.D.* in Sociology from Purdue University. She is a member of the **Sociology** Department at California Lutheran University and has served as director of the Freshman Advisement Program. Currently she is associate dean for Academic Affairs and direct. the evening Adult Degree Program.

3) developmental, which focus on college as a setting where students assume new roles and are confronted with value decisions that can change their lives. The role of the instructor in this type of seminar is to facilitate the developmental process.

Another classification scheme is offered by Dooley (1982), who notes that objectives of providing a context for academic advising and increasing academic skills can conflict with goals of easing adjustment to campus life and improving retention.

Finally, Cohen and Jody (1978) have described three goals for freshman seminars, though they do not regard them as mutually exclusive:

- **transmitting information** (university policies and procedures),
- **developing study skills**, and
- **shaping attitudes** (helping students to see themselves as active learners).

These systems of classification, of course, have features in common, in regard to both content and process. Two of them describe skills as a major content category, and two emphasize the utilitarian, informational aspect of some courses. In addition, Sagaria's developmental courses, Dooley's goals of easing adjustment to college and improving retention, and Cohen and Jody's category of attitude development contain many similarities. They are all, in one way or another, **developmental**, and thus have implications for the process by which course goals are reached.

Changing Emphases in California Lutheran University's Seminar

Such classification schemes have proven helpful in thinking about the modifications which California Lutheran University's freshman seminar has undergone during its eleven-year history. In general, the program has become more developmental than utilitarian, and more concerned with easing adjustment to campus life than with providing academic content, academic skills, or even a great deal of information on policies and procedures.

While not ignoring these other areas entirely, the course has come to focus more and more on two objectives:

- 1) **building relationships within the advising group and between advisor and advisee**, and
- 2) **helping students set academic and career goals**. The decision to focus in this way was made as we came to see the need to integrate the course more self-consciously into our retention strategy.

We concluded that these were the two most important objectives we could pursue if the course were to be used in this way.

There is a great deal of evidence that student-faculty interaction, including contact outside the formal classroom setting, greatly influences student development and decision-making (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977, 1978, 1979; Beal and Noel, 1979; Kramer and White, 1982; Fuller, 1983). In Astin's much-quoted conclusion, "student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic" (1977, p. 223).

It is also clear that students without at least tentative academic or career goals are more likely to drop out than those who have some sense of direction and purpose (Ramist, 1981), and the success of integrating academic advising and career planning has been noted by several scholars (Grites, 1979; Habley, 1984; Gordon, 1984).

Through these changes in emphasis in the freshman seminar, California Lutheran has attempted to create a "developmental" advising course, one which stresses "the establishment of a caring human relationship" and is related to students' academic, career, and personal goals (Ender, Winston, and Miller, 1984, p. 20). Advising is, as Grites has said, "a decision-making process" (Grites, 1979, p. 1). Students must be partners in the process rather than simply the recipients of advice and information (Ender, et al., 1984).

Substantive Changes in the Seminar

Phase One: 1977

In the fall of 1977, California Lutheran University established a course entitled "Learning Resources," designed to enhance the effectiveness of the freshman advising program. It was a one-credit **pass/fail** course offered in the fall semester, and was mandatory for all new freshmen. The instructors — faculty members who were paid a modest stipend — met once a week with a group of advisees for the entire fall semester.

The initial goal was to help the entering freshmen make the best use of their college experience. The two primary means for accomplishing this were 1) the exploration of the liberal arts **as** expressed in the University's core curriculum, with a strong emphasis on the value of the liberal arts as preparation for a full life and a successful career, and 2) exposure to the academic programs and resource centers of the University. The course thus combined an "academic" component (very important in getting faculty approval at the time) with a heavy emphasis on conveying information. While there was no standard syllabus or curriculum for the course, most instructors assigned books or articles related in some way to the study of the liberal arts, required papers which were corrected and returned, and relied heavily on the University catalog as a resource. Some class periods were spent visiting the library, the learning assistance center, and other campus resource centers.

Phase Two: 1978-1982

After the first year, **as** a result of instructor feedback and student evaluations, some basic structural changes were made. First, the schedule was altered so that the class met twice a week for the first half of the semester. We believed that the need was greater then, and research on the subject confirms that the first six weeks or so are the most critical in determining students' attitudes toward college and the likelihood of their staying (Pantages and Creedon, 1978). In addition, student interest waned considerably during the second half of the semester, **as** the demands of "real" courses began to accumulate, and many instructors found it difficult to maintain the course through fourteen weeks. In order to fit a second class session in (**and** also retain enough contact hours to justify one unit of credit), we incorporated into the course a **program** which had been in existence for some time — the University Forum.

The Forum is a Monday morning lecture-discussion series focused on a year-long theme in which speakers from the faculty and from outside the University address issues of social or ethical concern. The addition of this series to the seminar provided a common learning experience for the freshman class which, we hoped, would spill over into Friday small-group discussions as well as regular classes and informal conversations in the cafeteria and the dormitories.

Finally, because several faculty felt quite a bit of discomfort in teaching a course outside their disciplines, faculty were allowed to team-teach courses. This became the norm.

At this point in the development of the course, the content of the small-group sessions was basically left up to each instructor. Faculty were given a general set of goals and guidelines at a workshop prior to the course and then turned loose. The number of papers was prescribed (one per Forum session), and it was expected that the papers would be marked and graded. In addition, instructors were given a number of surveys and diagnostic tests (e.g., the ACT Entering Student Survey, the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, and study skills inventories) to be administered during class time, some of which provided data for discussion of study skills and career/major choices.

Phase Three: 1983 to the Present

This remained the pattern until the spring of 1983, when a group of faculty and administrators met in a one-day workshop to re-evaluate the program. It was decided that the course should be integrated more directly into the college's retention program. The group decided to shift the focus of the seminar toward the accomplishment of the two goals discussed above: 1) **helping students to build relationships with faculty and with other students**, and 2) **helping them set goals for their college careers**. These were the objectives we felt were most likely to improve retention.

Our strategy for accomplishing this involved several changes in the structure and content of the course, now renamed the "Freshman Colloquium." The college kept the twice-a-week schedule with the Forum on Monday and small group sessions on **Friday**, but eliminated **team-teaching**. Instructors had observed that team-teaching, which not only put two teachers in the class but also meant larger classes, worked against the formation of individual relationships. Class sizes, which had grown as large as twenty-seven, were reduced to about twelve. The literature on the subject suggests not only that small groups are more conducive to the formation of personal relationships, but that students in small orientation and advising groups have fewer adjustment problems, are more likely to succeed academically, and are less likely to drop out (Kramer and White, 1982).

To overcome instructor anxiety about leading the small group sessions, the program director provided much more direction for instructors, including a detailed syllabus and weekly hand-outs containing guidelines for each session. Instructors remained free, of course, to tailor the class to suit their own personalities and preferences.

Toward the goal of building relationships, we also put more emphasis on individual counseling sessions with advisees (at least two during the semester), and on group participation in events outside of class, such as activities during orientation, an evening in the faculty advisor's home, and a social activity which takes the group off-campus. Funding for the latter two events is provided by the University. In addition, the role of peer advisors, who have greater access to students outside of class, was expanded.

In terms of content, the emphasis of the forum lectures and **discussions** has **shifted** from somewhat abstract discussions of global issues to matters more related to the developmental concerns of college freshmen, allowing class discussions to deal with issues in more personal ways. This was a change the course planners believed appropriate for the new emphasis on the establishment of personal relationships. The original Forum emphasis on social and ethical issues, however, has been retained, and remains an important part of the colloquium. The two most recent Forum themes, for example, have been "The Challenge of Community in Diversity" and "Women and Men in a Changing World." Speakers have attempted to relate these subjects to the situation in which the freshmen find themselves. In addition to **theme-related** topics were Forum speakers who addressed such issues **as** career choice and substance abuse. Recent alumni have been particularly successful as Forum speakers.

The small-group sessions deal both with the Forum presentation and with the issues of academic and career planning. All of these are matters involving the fundamental decisions students make, and are presented in a context of examining basic values and goals (see the discussion in Grites, 1982).

The changes in the seminar are also reflected in the paper topics: an autobiography, an academic plan, and a brief paper on the Forum series as a whole. None are marked or graded. The autobiography is simply intended to help the instructor get to know the student better. The students receive feedback on their academic plan during a personal advising session with the instructor and on their Forum paper during class discussion.

Aspects of the course, which previously had been central, have been reduced in importance or shifted away from the seminar itself. Surveys and diagnostic testing are done during orientation or in the various resource centers. Visits to resource centers are required, but they are done individually outside of class. The heavy emphasis on information — the nature of the liberal arts, core requirements, etc. — has also been reduced. Sagaria, Higginson, and White (1980) reported that academic information was the most important perceived need of entering freshmen. We would not quarrel with this, but we have concluded that such information needs to be given as students express a need for it during small group or individual discussions, or when some specific event, such as registration or declaring a major, calls for it.

ISSUES

A number of issues have arisen as the course has developed. Among the more significant are the following:

The Role of Peer Advisors

Research indicates that peer advising can be effective on a number of dimensions. Peer advisors are often reported to be more accessible, enthusiastic, and credible than faculty advisors. Student satisfaction with peer advising is generally high. On the other hand, peer advisors tend to provide subjective and experiential advice; at worst, they may fall into a pattern of advising students away from difficult courses and instructors. In general, peer advisors need close supervision (Grites, 1979; Ender and Winston, 1984; Crockett and Levitz, 1984; Elliot, 1985; Davis and Ballard, 1985).

Peer advisors are chosen in a competitive process. Recommendations by faculty play a major role, though all applications are accepted. Applicants are interviewed by student affairs staff members and former peer advisors. Criteria include academic success, leadership skills, the ability to relate to others, and knowledge of university policies and resources. Peer advisors meet with their assigned faculty advisor in the spring, and receive three days of training before the fall semester, including a review of university policies and resources and discussions on how to deal with personal difficulties freshmen are likely to encounter.

The role of peer advisors has grown in our seminar, but has done so within clear limits. In the beginning, their responsibilities were loosely defined. With the course revisions in the spring of 1983, however, they became more specific. Peer advisors attend all of the seminar sessions, contribute to them, and lead one of the discussions. They coordinate group activities during orientation and help arrange the social activity during the semester. They also relieve faculty of some of their bookkeeping responsibilities. Beyond this, they are sometimes invaluable in being available to students in the dormitories when the faculty advisor is not.

On the other hand, it is important that the faculty instructor remain the main helping agent in the advising process. It is the relationship with the faculty member, far more than that with the peer advisor or the advisee group, which is important to student development. Thus, the faculty instructor is responsible for academic advising, is the one who meets with the students individually, and is clearly in charge of the seminar.

Peer advisors have not been compensated, either monetarily or by academic credit. Being a peer advisor has become a somewhat prestigious position, and there have been about twice as many applicants as there are positions to fill.

Major vs. Non-Major Freshman Advising

California Lutheran's seminar has assigned students to advisee groups without regard to declared major. Despite the careerism of many students, there is no evidence either in the literature or in our experience that students are concerned about this issue (Cohen and Jody, 1978). Many freshmen, of course, will change their declared major even before they arrive in the fall, and many others will change it during the course of their college careers. Perhaps more important, as a university stressing the liberal arts, we believe it is appropriate to encourage exploration rather than to help commit students too quickly to a major they may have chosen on the basis of inadequate information.

This policy has not always been popular with some departments, and efforts continually need to be made to create links with the departments. Students who have a major in mind, for instance, are required to check their schedules with a member of that department before registering. This has been largely a *pro forma* procedure, however, since materials given to freshman advisors clearly spell out the freshman program for each potential major.

Maintaining University-Wide Support

Faculty support for the program has been consistent, perhaps due in part to the fact that the founders and directors of the program have been mid-rank to senior faculty. The director also teaches a seminar section. The seminar is a faculty program; there is no sense among the faculty that it has been imposed from above.

We have also believed it important to create links to the Student Affairs office. The Student Affairs staff is closely involved in selecting the Forum topics, and has the primary responsibility for choosing and training peer advisors. The seminar thus has wide "ownership" on the part of significant University groups.

Credit and Academic Content

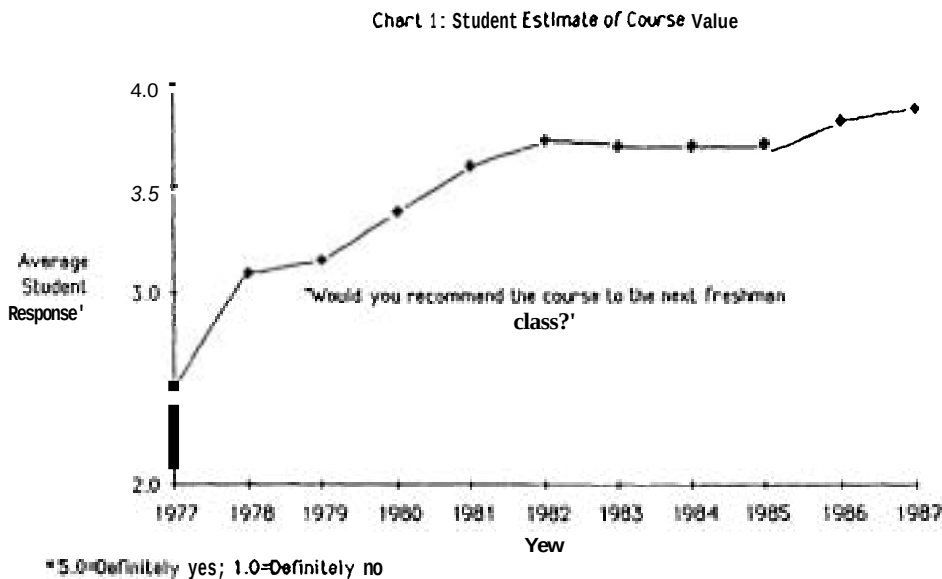
The literature suggests that non-credit courses tend not to be taken seriously either by students or by faculty, and that, in Gardner's words, "credit is essential" if a freshman course is to be successful (Gordon and Grites, 1984; Gardner, 1985, p. 30).

The extent to which there is resistance to giving credit for a freshman seminar probably depends on what the college has given credit for in the past. At California Lutheran there was concern about the issue of credit, and the academic content of the initial course was important in winning faculty approval. While the emphasis of the course has shifted, contact hours have remained equivalent to any one-hour course. We would be prepared today to argue that a course which eases adjustment to campus life and helps students begin to make decisions about their academic careers is worthy of a credit regardless of traditional academic content, but the issue has not arisen.

The course is graded "Pass/No Credit." Assigning letter grades was not considered when the course was proposed, in part because of lingering doubts about academic respectability. Given current course objectives, grading would be clearly inappropriate. In order to receive credit, students are expected to attend the Monday and Friday sessions regularly, and to complete satisfactorily the three written assignments. In general, only about 2 percent of the freshmen receive a "no credit" grade for the course.

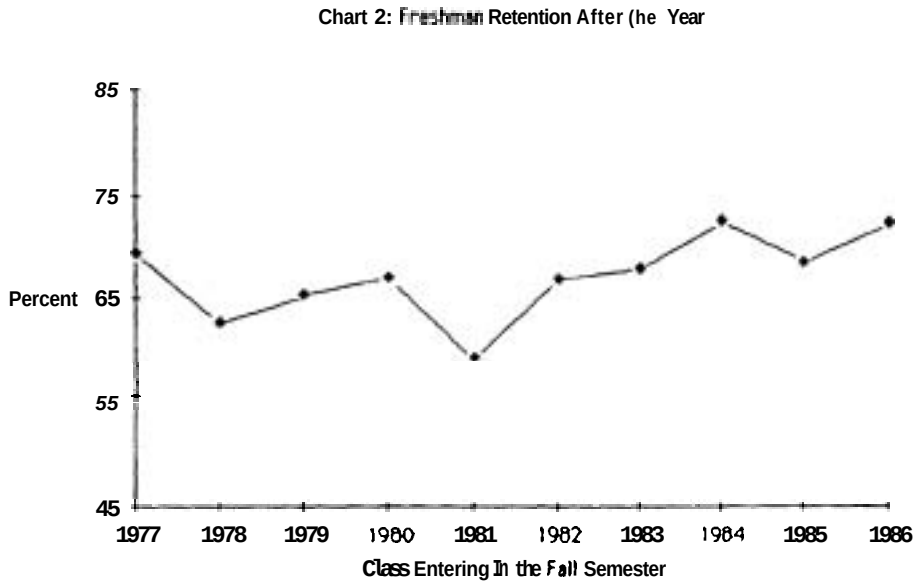
RESULTS

California Lutheran's freshman seminar is a required, non-transferable course, so it might be expected that the student evaluation would be decidedly mixed. In fact, student evaluation has improved as the course has evolved. One of the questions in a detailed twenty-seven-question evaluation form given each year asks for an over-all evaluation of the seminar: "Would you recommend this course to the next freshman class?" Student response on a one-to-five scale, with one meaning "definitely no" and five "definitely yes" has risen from 2.50 in the fall of 1977 to 3.94 in the fall of 1987 (Chart 1).



The dramatic increase between 1977 and 1978 was, in all probability, due to the changes made after the first year and to the greater self-confidence instructors felt under the new format. The format remained the same between 1978 and 1982. Improved evaluations during this period may be due to increasing instructor familiarity with the course, and, more important, to the fact that a core of instructors who enjoyed the course and taught it well was being assembled. The changes which went into effect in the fall of 1983 appear to have led to further improvements in evaluations as instructors became comfortable with the new format.

It is more difficult to determine the seminar's effect on retention. Since the course is required of all entering freshmen, control groups are not available. Retention of freshman students has been uneven, but has, on the whole, shown an upward trend, particularly since 1978 (Chart 2).



There is no **direct** correlation between colloquium evaluations in a given year and freshman retention that year. Obviously, the colloquium is not the major factor in determining retention rates, and can deal with only some of the variables which determine whether students stay or leave.

Without control groups, it is impossible to attribute any improvements in freshman retention directly to the colloquium. We believe, however, that the program is intrinsically worthwhile, and is concentrating on factors which research indicates lead to improved retention. We have, in fact, experienced a steady rise in student evaluations and a modest improvement in retention, in the absence of any significant improvement in student academic preparedness.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the wide variety of purposes which freshman seminars can serve, it will probably be necessary for most schools to limit their goals for these courses, or at least to shift the responsibility for subsidiary goals away from the seminar itself. California Lutheran has focused its structure and goals in three ways, all of which are supported by the literature on retention. The course is limited to the first seven weeks of the semester, and it focuses on building relationships and helping students make decisions about their college and occupational careers. The results clearly show that the course has become increasingly popular with students. While no conclusions can be drawn about the relationship of the course to retention, the University has experienced a modest increase in freshman retention without a significant increase in student academic preparedness.

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