

Students' Perceptions of a Freshman Seminar

Dennis C. Scanlon and Rama Radhakrishna

How freshman seminars impact the academic and social experiences of freshman students, and whether or not they contribute to increased success both academically and socially, is still being debated. This paper presents an evaluation of a freshman seminar offered by the faculty in the College of Agricultural Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University, during the Fall Semester 1991. The course was designed to help students achieve a smooth transition to the university through a variety of experiences known to enhance student persistence and success in college. Overall, students were very positive about the seminar, had greater understanding of the scope of agriculture, and were more informed about the working of the university system.

Introduction

The 1980s was a decade of enrollment declines in colleges of agriculture across the nation. Student enrollment at land grant universities declined 24% between 1978-88 (Manderscheid, 1988). In addition, sky-rocketing costs of higher education, longer periods of time needed to complete a baccalaureate degree, and low retention rates caused many to criticize academia for focusing more on research and publishing than on undergraduate education (Boyer, 1988). As a result, many colleges of agriculture are looking for more effective ways to retain students and enhance the undergraduate experience. One avenue being seriously investigated is the development of freshman seminars that enhance the initial learning experience and provide the support that freshmen need to successfully transcend from high school to college. Although the content of freshman seminars ranges from study skills to content specific issues related to particular disciplines, the real intent is to light a spark of enthusiasm and commitment to the pursuit of academic rigor (Tinto, 1988).

How freshman seminars impact the academic and social experiences of freshman students, and whether or not they contribute to increased success both academically and socially, is still being debated. This paper presents an evaluation of a freshman seminar course, offered by faculty in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State University.

The Study

A freshman seminar, AG 150, Be a Master Student, was offered Fall Semester 1991 by faculty in the College of

Scanlon is an associate professor and Radhakrishna a research assistant in the College of Agricultural Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802.

Agricultural Sciences at Penn State. The course was designed to help students achieve a smooth transition to the university through a variety of experiences known to enhance student persistence and success in college. Specifically, objectives of the course were to: (1) develop basic study and research skills, (2) develop a working knowledge of the university system, and (3) develop an understanding of the broad scope of agriculture on both the international and domestic levels.

This study attempted to evaluate the course by (1) assessing student attitudes about the course as related to experiences resulting from enrolling in the course, and (2) determining various outcomes of the evaluation that would help enhance undergraduate education in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State.

Methods and Procedures

Seven sections of AG 150 were offered Fall Semester 1991 with a total of 148 students enrolled. The course was innovative in two specific aspects: (1) it was developed collectively by a group of senior professors who identified objectives and strategies for delivering the courses, and (2) it represented a commitment to clarifying and improving student expectations of an undergraduate education. Each section, limited to 20 students, was taught by two faculty members in the College of Agricultural Sciences.

Data were collected through a structured survey instrument. The instrument included items related to course objectives, perceptions of students, and select demographic characteristics. The content validity of the instrument was established using a panel of experts that included faculty members in the College of Agricultural Sciences. The instrument was administered during the last week of classes by the instructors. A total of 129 students completed the survey yielding a return rate of 87%. Data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages and means.

Findings

To evaluate the course, three criteria were used: students' perceptions of academic skills needed for success; an understanding of the working of the university system; and an understanding of the scope of agriculture. These criteria reflected the course objectives. To measure their perceptions of academic skills for success, students were asked questions relative to study skills, use of the library, and time spent studying. The findings suggested that about an equal number of students study in small study groups or individu-

ally. Eighty-two percent of the students indicated they use the library. However, the number of library hours ranged from a low of one to a high of 25 hours, with a mean of 4.5 hours. On an average, students studied 6.5 hours per week.

Students' understanding of the working of the university system was measured through a series of questions with the key question being, "Do you believe you are more knowledgeable about policies, rules, services, procedures, support personnel and organization of the university system?" Students responded to this question on a scale where 1 = no; 2 = not sure; 3 = yes. Ninety-three percent of the students indicated "yes," 5% "not sure," and 2% "no." Similarly, for the question, "Would you recommend AG 150 to a close friend?" 75% of the students said "yes," 8% "no," and 17% "maybe." To the question, "Would you require this course (AG 150) for all freshmen?" 44% said "yes," 27% "no," and 29% "maybe."

Students' perceptions about understanding the scope of agriculture was measured through a series of questions with the key question being, "Do you perceive yourself as better informed about agriculture after completing this course?" Students responded on a five-point scale that ranged from 1 = don't know-not sure to 5 = very much informed. Eighty-six percent of the students indicated they were "much to very much informed" about agriculture, while only 1% of the students said "don't know-not sure." Further, male and female students did not significantly differ in their perceptions relative to the above question. However, examination of mean scores indicated that female students seemed to be more informed about agriculture than male students.

To ascertain students' general opinions about the course, they were asked, "In general, how has AG 150 been helpful to you?" Many students indicated that the seminar helped them to understand the scope of agriculture and have positive attitudes toward agriculture. Below are some responses to the open ended question:

"It was very interesting to me to learn more about different aspects of agriculture."

"It gave me better and positive attitude toward agriculture."

"Information provided in the class was helpful, more relaxing and enjoyable."

"Very helpful in developing study skills and reading skills."

"The course fulfilled my all expectations."

"Helped me realize how much and where I need improvement."

"Gave me a better attitude toward doing well in college."

"Now I have a better understanding of the university systems, library etc."

Other students, however, saw a need for more information on agriculture. These included:

"I would have liked to hear some speakers on topics dealing with agricultural issues."

"I would like more activities and discussions about agriculture than study skills, understanding university systems etc."

Implications and Recommendations

The literature (Gardner & Jewler, 1992) suggests that freshman seminars enhance the probability that new students will be successful in their first year of college. By providing structured learning activities aimed at improving study skills, critical thinking skills, time management skills, and interpersonal relationships with faculty and friends, students are more likely to make a successful transition from the high school to the college classroom.

Based on the findings and conclusions, it appears that freshman students are positive about the AG 150 freshman seminar. Freshmen were more informed about the working of the university system and had a greater understanding of the scope of agriculture. Freshmen who completed the seminar in the academic year 1990-91 scored consistently higher than their predicted GPAs and higher than a comparison group of similar students not enrolled in the freshman seminar. Although the increased performance was not statistically significant at the .05 level, the "practical" significance was positive enough to suggest that results were worth the effort. While we cannot point to a definitive cause and effect relationship between the freshman seminar and increased academic performance, the last two years have given us a gross indicator that a freshman seminar type experience can make a difference in student academic performance and retention.

Now attention needs to be turned to gathering data that describe what specific parts of the seminar make the greatest impact. The findings suggest some areas where improvement is needed. First it appears that most students do not use the library on a regular basis or spend a high proportion of their time studying. Therefore, an effort should be made to design course activities and assignments so students would practice library use skills. In addition, assignments should be structured to require reading and study time to prepare for class. And finally, students should develop a mentoring relationship with instructors and advisors to improve personal study habits and academic performance.

Further research is needed to assess the long-range impact of the freshman seminar course. A control or comparison group would give a better indication of the long-range effectiveness of the freshman seminar on improving academic performance. In addition, students who were enrolled in the freshman seminar should be monitored in their academic progress via a longitudinal type of study to determine the impact of the freshman seminar on a long-term basis. Overall the data suggest that the freshman seminar provided various opportunities and learning experiences that enhance a student's ability to succeed in college.

Currently, 40-50% of students who enter the land grant system in Pennsylvania never obtain a baccalaureate degree. Future retention data will provide evidence on the freshman seminar's success in reducing the drop-out rate.

References

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The Merit of Service Courses

Robert E. Lyons

Abstract

Large numbers of undergraduates may be exposed to a discipline outside of their major via the service course. Without the restrictions of prerequisites, a service course like Indoor Plants welcomes students of all academic backgrounds and introduces them to the horticultural basics necessary for successful houseplant cultivation. Plant growth requirements of major species groups are discussed and over 75 individual species are learned by sight. Laboratories are designed to illustrate lecture concepts in a practical manner, and are tightly scheduled to the related lecture. Graduate teaching assistants have instructional and administrative responsibilities for their own class section but work closely with the course administrator in test construction, grading, and course refinement. Service courses like Indoor Plants have proven recruitment potential and serve an important marketing function for the discipline.

Introduction

The undergraduate "service" course is generally what academicians label a course offering meant to attract students from throughout the university. Such courses are sometimes closed to in-house departmental majors or can be taken only for "free" or "unrestricted" elective credit towards a degree. If you're currently a student, or at least not too far removed, then the name "gut", "crib", or "cume-builder" course may be more familiar. While such campus colloquialisms do not portray all service courses accurately, these names did not arise without some basis. Documenting individual examples would, obviously, be difficult, debatable, and probably of little value in the long run. Therefore, is it valuable for a horticulture department to embrace the service course concept?

Background

The service course commonly presents a broad survey of an entire discipline to an undeclared major or it may cater to

Lyons is an associate professor in the Department of Horticulture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0327.

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students with a peripheral interest in the subject. For example, the following are listed in the 1991-1992 General Catalog of Undergraduate Courses at Virginia Tech: Statistics and Society, Telecommunications and Technology, and Survey of Textiles. It is no secret that bolstering departmental enrollments via these courses benefits a department's financial position; does the phrase "weighted student credit hours" ring a bell? It's an effective tactic during periods of declining enrollments in one's own department. It can be exemplary when the material is substantive and benefits the department and students alike. A service course can attract uncommitted majors to a department, give graduate assistants a meaningful exposure to undergraduate education administration, and have the flexibility to adjust to timely, intriguing subject matter trends. It can just as easily become shallow, dull, and simplistic through neglect, indifference, frequent instructor changes, or when solely driven by the need to increase enrollment.

Course Mechanics

Indoor Plants (Horticulture 2144), originally developed in the 1970's, is an example of a service course at Virginia Tech which has withstood the test of time. It survived the switch from quarters to semesters, involves graduate teaching assistants in more than just a janitorial capacity, and typically enrolls nearly 450 students on a year-round basis. Greenhouse facilities are required but the operational budget is derived entirely from student laboratory fees. A description of the course is presented herein so that others may compare, adapt, and/or adopt features for their own curricula.

The philosophy is simple. Teach a variety of basic horticultural principles with a slant towards tropical ornamentals. Furthermore, provide a wide variety of "hands-on" activities so that lecture principles are quickly and successfully illustrated. Indoor Plants is a 3 credit course consisting of 30-35 students (maximum) per section and meets for 75 minutes twice per week; there are 4 sections in the fall, 5 in spring, and 2 in each of the summer semesters (13 sections total/year). Instead of scheduling a separate laboratory, a class session may be a lecture alone or unevenly split between lecture and laboratory. This arrangement works because the classroom is inside the greenhouse complex and permits a high degree of time flexibility for either the lecture or laboratory. Several examples of lecture/laboratory pairings include sexual propagation/seeding three species, asexual propagation/taking various cuttings, ferns/terrarium construction, and special horticultural techniques/