

Executive Summary

UWSP launched a pilot of a First Year Seminar (FYS) in spring of 2011 and enrolled 221 students in 12 sections. In May, near the completion of the FYS, participants were surveyed regarding their perceived attainment of the six FYS learning outcomes. This report briefly summarizes the findings of the survey and examines the participants' retention rates. The FYS learning outcomes are:

- Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.
- Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.
- Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to their academic studies.
- Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances their academic study at UWSP.
- Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support their academic studies and co-curricular involvement.
- Develop a plan that demonstrates their responsibility for their own education, specifically how it relates to their interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.

Findings

After completion of the FYS, FYS participants reported an increase in their perceived achievement of the FYS outcomes suggesting that FYS was a value-added experience. Overall, the FYS course seems to have impacted students' understanding of liberal education and their ability to link this understanding to not only their academic plan, but their career and life as well. Participants also reported that the FYS introduced them to new ways of thinking critically about issues and topics. In addition, FYS fostered discussion about topics and issues in and out of the classroom. For a few participants, the FYS course had little to no perceived impact on their educational plan. They reported having previous experiences learning study skills either in high school or in another support program at UWSP.

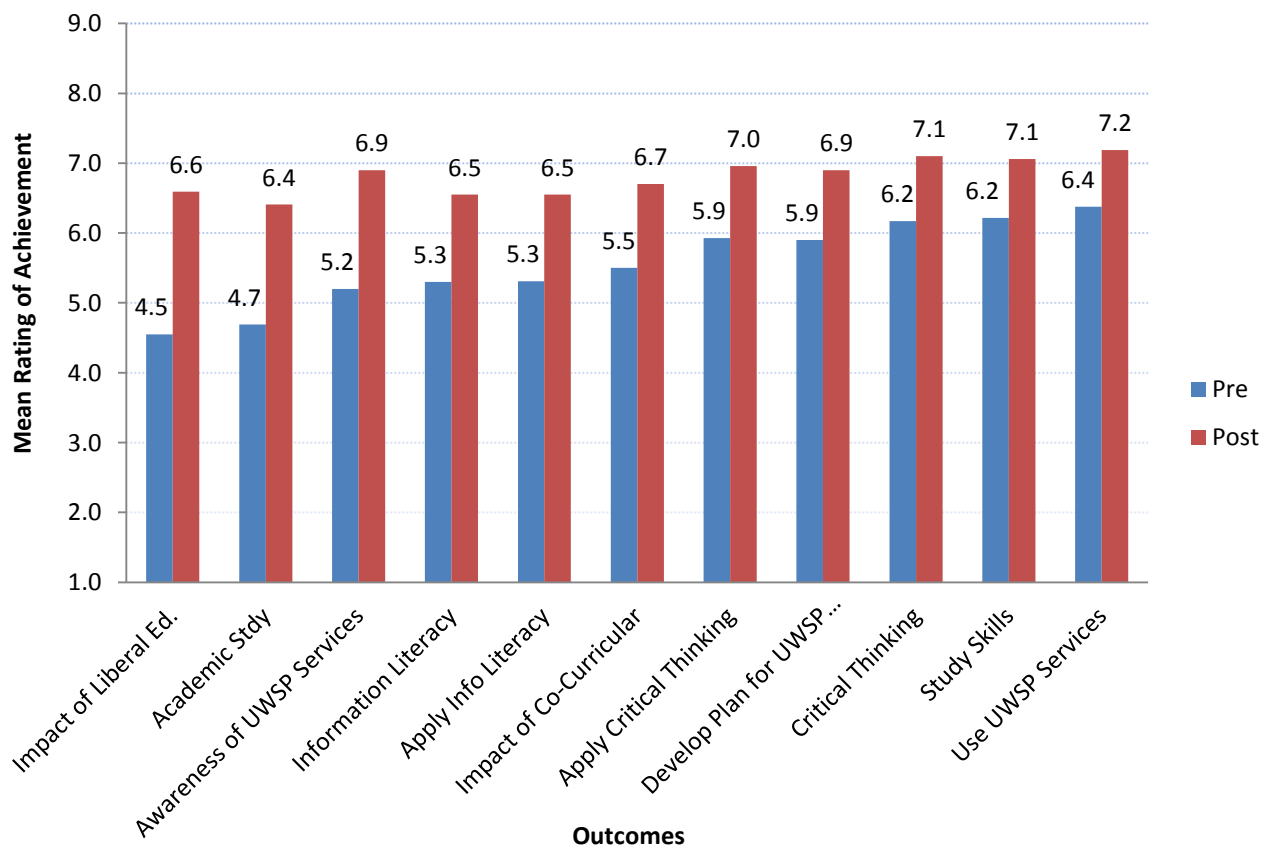
Methods and Response Rates

The web-based survey was administered to all 221 FYS participants just prior to the end of the semester. The total number of respondents was 75, or a 34% response rate. The survey was broken into two parts. The first part was a retrospective pre-post survey asking respondents to rate their perceived attainment of a particular FYS learning outcome both prior to taking the course and after their completion of the course. The rating was a 9-point Likert-type scale where: 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 9 = “Strongly Agree.” The second part of the survey included comment boxes for each outcome. The survey concluded with one final open ended question, “Overall, has the First Year Seminar changed the way you intend to pursue your education at UWSP? If so, how?” A list of the FYS learning outcomes and corresponding survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Findings

The results of the retrospective pre-post survey are illustrated in Figure 1 below. On every item, the post course ratings were higher than retrospective pre-test ratings. The FYS did have a positive effect on attainment of each FYS learning outcomes (as perceived by participants.)

Figure 1. FYS Participant Pre and Post Test Ratings of Learning Outcome Attainment



Survey Ratings Results

The differences between pre and post results ranged from 0.8 to 2.0. The highest rated items on the retrospective pre- test were; use of UWSP services (6.4), importance of critical thinking (6.2) and application of study skills (6.2). This suggests the students felt they already knew how to use UWSP services were able to describe the importance of critical thinking and had a strong grasp of college level study skills. At the end of the course, students also rated these three items most highly. The lowest pre-ratings were; students' understanding of the importance of a liberal education (4.5), and the understanding the structure of academic study at UWSP (4.7). This indicates that students felt these were their weakest area of skill or understanding.

However, the largest difference between pre and post-mean scores were noted on these two outcomes. In other words, the greatest perceived gains in learning were realized on these two FYS outcomes. After the FYS, participants felt more confident in their ability to describe the importance of a liberal education, and their understanding of their academic plan relates to their education. The smallest gap on the pre and post scores was on the outcome regarding study skills- evidenced by just a slight difference between the pre and post ratings. This was true for student's understanding of how their academic plan relates to their interests, abilities, career choices and personal development.

Survey Response Results

FYS participants were invited to provide comments on each learning outcome. Overall, it appears the majority of the comments expressed reflect positive learning experiences in the FYS. The comments provided regarding each FYS learning outcome mirrored the quantitative results in that there were generally more positive comments regarding students perceived increase in understanding a liberal education. One student stated, *"The FYS very strongly emphasized the importance of a liberal education."* Other students reported that the FYS fostered new ways to think critically, such as, *"We studied critical thinking in class and tried out various methods of doing so, and it was enlightening to open my mind to other methods."*

More than a few students reported that the FYS helped them develop or fine tune an academic plan that relates to their career or interests. One student reported, *"This was my favorite part of the FYS! Definitely very helpful to get advice and tips from professor."* Another student echoed, *"This was another great part of the class for me. The planning process helped me tremendously."*

The comments regarding UWSP services and ability to apply study skills indicated that many students felt they had this information in other UWSP programs or services or high school. One student reported, *“Again, I had known about this information before I took this class.”* Another student suggested, *“Maybe modify this requirement to make it more about how note taking, test taking, and time management are different in college and how to modify the skills we currently have to rise to the challenges that college brings.”*

FYS participants were asked one final open ended question, *“Overall, has the First Year Seminar changed the way you intend to pursue your education at UWSP? If so, how?”* Of the 75 FYS participants who completed the survey, 48 responded and generated 57 responses. Responses were themed by the FYS learning outcomes and are listed in Table 1. Illustrative comments by themes are provided in Table 2.

Table 1. Response Theme Frequencies of FYS Participants

Response Themes	n	%
• Importance of Liberal Education	11	19%
• Critical thinking/Information Literacy	5	9%
• Note/test taking & time mgmt..	4	7%
• Co-curricular involvement	6	11%
• UWSP Resources	6	11%
• Academic Plan/Interests, abilities, careers	20	36%
• Overall experience	5	7%
Total	57	100%

The most prevalent theme is the impact that the FYS had on the students’ academic plan and their understanding of how this relates to their interests, abilities and careers. The second most prevalent theme related to FYS participants’ understanding of the importance of a liberal education. The remaining themes had approximately equal distribution of responses.

First Year Seminar Pilot- Learning Outcomes Assessment

Table 2. FYS Learning Outcomes and Illustrative Comments of FYS Participants

Response Themes	Illustrative Comments
Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.	<p><i>... it did make me realize that every learning experience can be relevant and gave me a bit more faith in my liberal arts education.</i></p> <p><i>...It has enhanced my understanding of UWSP requirements and liberal education, along with my knowledge of campus resources. I have learned valuable skills in my first year seminar.</i></p>
Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.	<i>The FYS classes taught me how to be open to new ideas and not so closed off to other ideas. The classes also were very helpful because they could be used in real life situations and made me really think about things from different points of view.</i>
Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to their academic studies.	<i>I learned better ways to participate in lectures by learning good note taking skills. Also I learned how to effectively use the library for future research I may need to do.</i>
Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances their academic study at UWSP.	<i>This class was helpful in finding organizations to get involved with while at UWSP. ...This class also helped me find out about different resources available at UWSP to utilize regarding my studies.</i>
Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support their academic studies and co-curricular involvement.	<i>FYS taught me a lot about the different resources that can help me reach my goals on campus.</i>
Develop a plan that demonstrates their responsibility for their own education, specifically how it relates to their interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.	<p><i>Definitely. It actually got me to start thinking ahead in life and I've developed a full educational plan AND declared 2 majors. I'm finally on a path to being successful in life.</i></p> <p><i>It has not really changed how I will pursue my education but it surely has helped me know how I go about it...</i></p> <p><i>It helped me have a better idea and actually think of an academic/life plan for the next year.</i></p>
Overall Experience	<p><i>I believe a FYS is a very good class to take.</i></p> <p><i>I feel like this course was very helpful with everything that I had questions about after leaving class. It was a great course and I would recommend to anyone.</i></p> <p><i>No it really hasn't changed anything for me.</i></p>

Retention

Results of retention analyses of FYS participants from spring 2011 to fall 2011 semester are presented in Table 3. At first glance, it appears that the FYS may be most effective for traditional, first semester freshman; however, the sample size is very small. These populations should be tracked in the future with the understanding that different student populations may need different services.

Table 3. FYS and Non-FYS Participant Retention to Next Term

	N	<i>Not Retained</i>		<i>Retained</i>	
		n	% of Total	n	% of Total
FYS Participants	221	37	16.7%	184	83.3%
Fall 2010 New Freshman ^a	167	26	15.6%	141	84.4%
Spring 2011 New Freshman ^b	13	2	15.4%	11	84.6%
Transfer Student ^c	15	3	20.0%	12	80.0%
Re-entry Student	2	2	100%	--	--
High School Student	1	1	100%	--	--
Other ^d	23	3	13.1%	20	86.9%

^a = New Freshman in Fall 2010

^b = New Freshman in Spring 2011

^c = Transfer student either Fall 2010 or Spring 2011

^d = Students that were not freshman

To compare retention of students from a single entering cohort, Fall 2010 freshman who enrolled in spring 2011 were examined. A total of 1524 students were enrolled in spring 2011, 167 of whom enrolled in a FYS section. The FYS participants had a slightly lower retention (84.4%) than non-FYS participants (86.5%), though not to a statistically significant degree, $\chi^2_1(N=1524)=.418$, $p=.518$ (see Table 4). These retention figures are not surprising given that the FYS was piloted in the spring when it is less likely to affect a student's decision to return to an institution. Thus, all of these retention data are not standard and should be interpreted with caution. As additional semesters of the FYS are offered and cohort sizes increase, retention and persistence data will become more robust.

Table 4. Retention to Second Year by Placement Code

	Not Retained	Retained	Sig.
FYS Participants (n=167)	15.6%	84.4%	NS
Non-FYS Participants (n=1357)	13.5%	86.5%	

At UWSP, high school rank is a useful indicator of students' ability to persist in their studies. Average high school rank of FYS participants (69%) was slightly lower than that of Non-FYS participants (74%). Table 5 presents the distribution of high school rank of FYS participants and Non-FYS participants. Notably, a higher proportion of FYS Participants had a high school rank below 50, suggesting that FYS Spring Pilot served students of greater academic need.

Table 5. High School Rank of First Year Seminar Pilot Participants

High School Rank	Non-FYS Participants (n=1357)	FYS Participants (n=167)
< 50	4%	20%
50-74	46%	46%
> 75	50%	34%

Summary

Overall, the pilot FYS appears to have fostered achievement of the FYS learning outcomes, at least from students' points of view. In the future, pre and post methods are recommended to get a truer sense of perceived changes of learning. In addition, retention and persistence data should be tracked which will contribute to a more robust understanding of the impact of FYS on student success.

11/21/11

Appendix A**Table 2: FYS Learning Outcomes and Survey Questions**

FYS Learning Outcome	Question:
Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.	<i>I am able to describe the importance of a liberal education</i> <i>I am able to describe the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.</i>
Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.	<i>I am able to describe the importance of critical thinking.</i> <i>I am able to apply critical thinking skills to my studies.</i> <i>I am able to describe the importance of information literacy. I am able to apply information literacy skills to my studies.</i>
Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to their academic studies.	<i>I can identify note taking, test taking and time management strategies.</i> <i>I can apply appropriate note taking, test taking and time management strategies to my studies.</i>
Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances their academic study at UWSP.	<i>I understand how co-curricular involvement can enhance my studies at UWSP</i>
Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support their academic studies and co-curricular involvement.	<i>I am able to identify UWSP programs, resources and services that support my studies.</i> <i>I know how to use the UWSP programs, resources and series that will support my studies.</i>
Develop a plan that demonstrates their responsibility for their own education, specifically how it relates to their interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.	<i>I have a plan for my education at UWSP.</i> <i>I understand how my education relates to my interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.</i>