

IMPLEMENTING AN EFFECTIVE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As sustainable living and growth becomes an ever-important topic concerning the future of our society, the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) has aligned their sustainability efforts with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. As Penn State students have a large impact on the world, it is important that the student population is educated on matters which are intimately related to the UN sustainability goals, such as good health and well-being; quality education; sustainable cities and communities; peace, justice, and strong institutions, and creation of reliable partnerships. For this purpose, this policy suggests the restructuring of Penn State's first year seminars (FYS) to equitably educate students, while also increasing retention and ensuring that the maximum number of sustainably-minded graduates are sent into the world ready to drive change.

While Penn State already boasts the use of FYS within the separate academic colleges, they are only taught to about 70% of the students. Moreover, their curriculum, credit-structure and timing within a semester is left completely up to the college. Topics are mostly academic in nature and are usually about navigating resources within the colleges themselves. While this can be important, research suggests that academic programs should not be at the forefront of FYS if the goal is ultimately retention of students. Moreover, surveys conducted within the context of the paper have shown that only 50% of students find that the current FYS was helpful in transitioning to college.

The policy goes into depth about how to achieve a FYS experience that can both increase student retention and create the foundations for a graduate who is sustainably-minded and articulate on the needs of the future. Research done within the context of

the paper has shown that there are lessons and topics which have a positive impact on retention rates and overall happiness of the student body. With that research in mind, and with case studies done on the successes and failures of FYS in other schools, a course plan was created. The implementation of this course plan and its topics within the FYS curriculum, while also allocating time for the college-specific resources to be taught, is the first step to the creation of an effective FYS.

Secondly, it is of utmost importance that those topics be taught to all incoming freshmen at the University Park campus. Regardless of academic college, there must be an identical lesson plan, credit structure, and semester timing of FYS. This will ultimately create an equitably knowledgeable campus and create an unprecedented ease of instilling further knowledge on the subject to any student, no matter their chosen major. It will further work to address issues which exist that negatively impact retention.

This policy was created within the context of Penn State's affiliation with the UN Sustainability Goals, with the ultimate purpose being to increase student retention and aid their goal of increasing sustainable awareness throughout the population. To bring this goal to fruition, Penn State's first year seminar was restructured. Research was done and an appropriate course plan was created to educate students equally on important matters within the sustainability goals stated above. The curriculum was also designed in such a way that it can be implemented by all academic colleges with an equal credit structure, while also allowing them the appropriate time to teach students about the necessary resources within their respective colleges. This policy seeks not only to increase retention, but to do so at a financial gain to the university, all while

shaping the students of the university to eventually be more educated, sustainably-minded graduates in society.

1 - INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

First-year seminars have become an important part of new student initiatives at universities across the country, often taking place in a student's first semester of college with the purpose of facilitating their transition to college, introducing them to faculty and other students, and preparing them for their classes, schedule, college life, and more. These seminars have proven to play an integral role in increasing student persistence, increasing student grade point average, and overall, increasing retention rate at the university level. For these reasons, it is essential that Penn State offers first-year seminars to students of all majors that are effective in improving students' first year experience, and in turn, the rest of their experience at Penn State and beyond.

1.1 Reasons for Implementing Effective First-Year Seminars

There are many reasons for a university to offer first-year seminars for its new students. One of the most obvious is financial exigency, using the seminars' effects as a means of keeping tuition-paying students in school (Porter and Swing, 2006). Other reasons for first-year seminars include enhancing the school's reputation, fulfilling the school's mission statement, and gaining a perceived advantage in areas such as admissions, fundraising, and marketing, as retention rate is often a means to quantitatively measure university quality (Porter and Swing, 2006). It is well known that first-year seminars have positive impacts on students and can therefore be used to

accomplish many of these goals. However, all of these beneficial consequences are only possible if the seminars are effective in positively impacting first-year college students.

One of the key factors to predicting a student's success in college and beyond is persistence. Therefore, it makes sense that instilling persistence in students is one of the main targets of first-year seminars. It has been reported that, "about 16% of students who enter a four-year institution leave during the first year or do not return for their second year" (Horn, 1998). Some of these students transfer to other institutions, others find their way back to college in the coming years, but many of these students never return to school. Obviously, students transferring, taking years off, or dropping out has negative effects on university graduation rate and the cost of higher education as a whole (Porter and Swing, 2006). It should also be noted that enhancing first-year student experience is particularly important at large research universities such as Penn State where students have limited contact with most faculty members and often struggle finding a sense of community (Hendel, 2007). A multitude of research findings has shown that first-year programs can be effective in combating this issue. Research has demonstrated that those who participate in seminars during their first year of college generally earn higher grades during their first year, are less likely to be put on academic probation, have inflated frequencies of campus and service participation, and report more significant connections with school faculty members (Chapman and Reed, 1987; Cannici and Pulton, 1990; Davis-Underwood and Lee, 1994). Clearly, successful first-

year seminars have a wide-scale impact on higher-education institutions, the students that attend them, and their families. (Porter and Swing, 2006)

1.2 Important Content Areas of First-Year Seminars

The main question to be answered is not only whether or not first-year seminars have a positive effect on students' persistence, as it is well known that they do, but rather which specific content areas of first-year seminars have the largest impact. This is much more difficult to study as it requires the separation of the different components of a seminar. However, a study conducted in 2006 surveyed about 20,000 first-year college students at 45 four-year institutions, and combined those results with institution data in order to analyze how certain components of first-year seminars affect early student persistence (Porter and Swing, 2006). The study divided seminar types into five categories: study skills and academic engagement, campus policies, campus engagement, peer connections, and health education, as seen in *Table 1: Survey Items and Course Scales* (Porter and Swing, 2006). Of the five common aspects of first-year seminars, the component found to be the most impactful, statistically, on student persistence was health education (Porter and Swing, 2006). Health education includes the importance of a healthy diet and exercise, mental health information and management, effects of alcohol and drugs, and more. Health education is one of the

| Factors and items | Alpha |
|---|-------|
| Study skills and academic engagement | 0.93 |
| Consider how this class affected your other courses. Taking this class increased the degree to which I... | |
| Participated in classrooms discussions | |
| Reviewed my class notes before the next class meeting | |
| Prepared for tests well in advance | |
| Completed homework assignments on time | |
| Sought feedback from my instructors | |
| Studied with other students | |
| Established an effective study schedule | |
| Coped with test anxiety | |
| Set priorities so I can accomplish what is most important to me | |
| Campus policies | 0.95 |
| Taking this class improved my understanding of... | |
| College/university rules regarding academic honesty | |
| Rules regarding plagiarism | |
| The grading system | |
| Academic probation policy | |
| Registration procedures | |
| Financial aid procedures | |
| Health center services | |
| Faculty expectations of students | |
| The role of my academic advisor | |
| The process of selecting a major | |
| Importance of establishing personal goals | |
| How to obtain academic assistance (tutors/mentors/etc.) | |
| Career decision-making processes | |
| Campus engagement | 0.85 |
| Taking this class increased the degree to which I... | |
| Assumed leadership roles in campus-sponsored organizations. | |
| Volunteered my time for worthwhile causes. | |
| Attended campus cultural events. | |
| Peer connections | 0.81 |
| Taking this class improved, my... | |
| Efforts to get to know students in my classes | |
| Ability to meet new people | |
| Ability to establish close friendships | |
| Health education | 0.91 |
| Taking this class improved my understanding of the ... | |
| Importance of a healthy diet | |
| Impact of alcohol consumption | |
| Impact of drug use | |
| Importance of exercising regularly | |

Table 1 - Survey Items and Course Scales (Porter and Swing, 2006)

most important aspects because students often struggle with their physical and mental health, as many are living away from home for the first time. Additionally, it is believed that another “side-effect” of teaching these topics in a first-year seminar gives students the feeling that their faculty cares about their well-being, allowing them to feel safer, and make better connections with school faculty and staff (Porter and Swing, 2006).

While health education is one of the most important topics to include in first-year college student

initiatives, it is often left out and replaced with academic content relating to academic advising, majors and minors, classes, and coursework. At Penn State, this is the main content covered in many of the academic colleges’ seminars. While these are important topics to cover with first-year students, research has shown that academically focused seminars, that do not include any supplemental topics like health, campus engagement, peer connection, etc., do not have any statistical impact on student satisfaction and

retention (Hendel, 2007). One study conducted in 2007, focused specifically on student retention at a research-extensive, public, land-grant university like Penn State (Hendel, 2007). Researchers divided seminars into three categories: academic content only, student life and success strategies, and a blend of both (Hendel, 2007). The study found that student participation in solely academic-based freshman seminars had no effect on overall student satisfaction or retention going into their sophomore year (Hendel, 2007). This study makes a convincing argument that first-year seminars need to include content beyond academic-related topics in order to be effective. Therefore, it is important for Penn State freshman seminars to include a mixture of academic and student life topics, with a focus on topics like health education.

In addition to this, according to Vahe Permzadian (Department of Psychology, Albany State University of New York), the structure of first-year seminars strongly relates to its effectiveness in both first-year student retention, as well as first year GPA. He emphasizes that first year seminars which focus on student adjustment to college life and the new academic setting are much more successful in comparison to seminars whose goals are to improve academic skills, such as studying habits and goal setting. By and large, students come into college with these academic skills already firmly set eliminating the need for them to be covered in the seminar (Permzadian, 2016). In contrast, students generally have difficulty with adjusting to the college lifestyle and the new social and academic settings they find themselves in, so these are ideas that need to be targeted (Permzadian, 2016). In relation to academic settings, it is more important to focus on state of mind and theory in relation to academic thinking, such as problem

solving and critical thinking, instead of the actual tasks that one may perform, such as goal-making (Permzadian, 2016). Permzadian's meta-analytic review shows that seminars which target student adjustment to college positively affect first year student retention and first year GPA. The same review also suggests that seminars which promote attachment to the university as part of their goal to improve student adjustment to college life see greater first year student retention (Permzadian, 2016). As mentioned earlier, it is important that first year seminars teach vital coping skills and provide resources to students experiencing entry stress in their adjustment to college (Permzadian, 2016). This supports the framework of first year seminars to align with coping and adjustment abilities, versus strictly academic habit improvement.

1.3 Importance of First-Year Seminars for Student Academic Achievement and Student Satisfaction

Permzadian defines a first-year seminar as, "a course specifically designed to equip new students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are necessary to successfully meet the different transitional and developmental challenges that are faced in the first year of college." Only 59% of first year, full time students actually graduate from four-year institutions, and many of these students complete their degree in six years instead of the intended four (Permzadian, 2016). As attrition is intimately associated with poor academic achievement, there is a need for better academic assistance resources to be provided to students (Permzadian, 2016).

One such resource can be a strong first year seminar. Upon arrival to college, students experience a great amount of stress due in part to the individuation that they

face in early adulthood, as well as mismatched expectations versus the realities that they face in college (Permzadian, 2016). In addition, adaptation to any new environment requires a period of transition and contributes to one's stress. Students must create new academic and social connections while dealing with the demands of taking care of oneself must be met (Permzadian, 2016). Due to a mixture of stressors during entrance into university life, Permzadian characterizes the overarching issue of adjustment that all students face as "entry stress." In order to successfully succeed in college academically, and prevent students from dropping out, students must be provided with proper coping strategies and the skills to overcome these barriers and move past this entry stress (Permzadian, 2016). As examined by three distinct studies conducted between 1989 and 1993 (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft, 1989), it is vital to address the adjustment needs of incoming freshmen as soon as possible in order to promote the smoothest transition to college (Permzadian, 2016). This makes first year seminars the perfect opportunity to provide support for incoming students and demonstrates the importance of including them at the very beginning of a student's college career.

Permzadian uses stress inoculation theory and the theory of met expectations to explain the connection between first year seminars and coping with entry stress. The basis of stress inoculation theory lies in the stress caused by environmental expectations seemingly exceeding the resources or capabilities that one believes they have to manage those expectations (Permzadian, 2016). In the first phase of stress inoculation theory, the audience (in this case, students) is provided with realistic information on the expectations set for them (Permzadian, 2016). In this phase, the theory of met expectations comes into play, outlining that many people entering a new

environment often have expectations for their experience that do not line up with the reality of what they actually experience in that new environment, which contributes to the stress they feel upon entering the new environment (Permzadian, 2016). In phase two of the inoculation theory, coping mechanisms and strategies to handle the reality that the audience has been presented with are shared with the intention of allowing the audience to leave with a better understanding of what they will experience in their new environment and a list of strategies to tackle these expectations (Permzadian, 2016). First year seminars align with this model. They adjust college student's expectations for their university experience towards realistic, attainable goals and provide the resources necessary to properly partake in self-reflection and cognitive adjustment to meet these new demands (Permzadian, 2016).

Student's academic adjustment is directly related to their overall adjustment to college and their new environment (Permzadian, 2016). Since academic adjustment is the biggest predictor of first-year GPA (Permzadian, 2016), efforts to promote quick, effective adjustment to a new environment and demanding academics provides students the greatest opportunity to obtain a high GPA early in college. The inclusion of coping mechanisms and academic strategies into the first-year seminar, student's abilities to maintain a high GPA are bolstered, positively affecting students and the university alike (Permzadian, 2016). Permzadian provides the example of having teachers discuss the way different academic classes will require different studying strategies in order to retain the most information from those classes. This helps students think through their schedules and determine the time that they will need to

dedicate to various commitments, allowing them to be better prepared for the demands they will face and achieve the grades they desire.

Permzadian's review also found that the effectiveness of first-year seminars in relation to first year GPA was statistically higher when they were taught by a faculty member instead of a graduate, or even undergraduate, student. This effectiveness increases even more when the faculty member is provided training specifically to be a teacher for first year seminar.

In addition to Permzadian's review, another article by Keith J. Zullig, PhD, MSPH, FASHA, FAAHB, examines the relationship between student satisfaction with life and retention rate, as well as GPA. Zullig states that researchers were able to predict student retention due to measured life satisfaction levels, as well as GPA averages up to three years in advance. This relates to first year seminars through the ability of first year seminars to have an impact on quality of life through their assistance with student adjustment to college.

A diagram from Zullig's report demonstrates the examined connection between life, school, and academic achievement, showing how they cyclically influence one another:

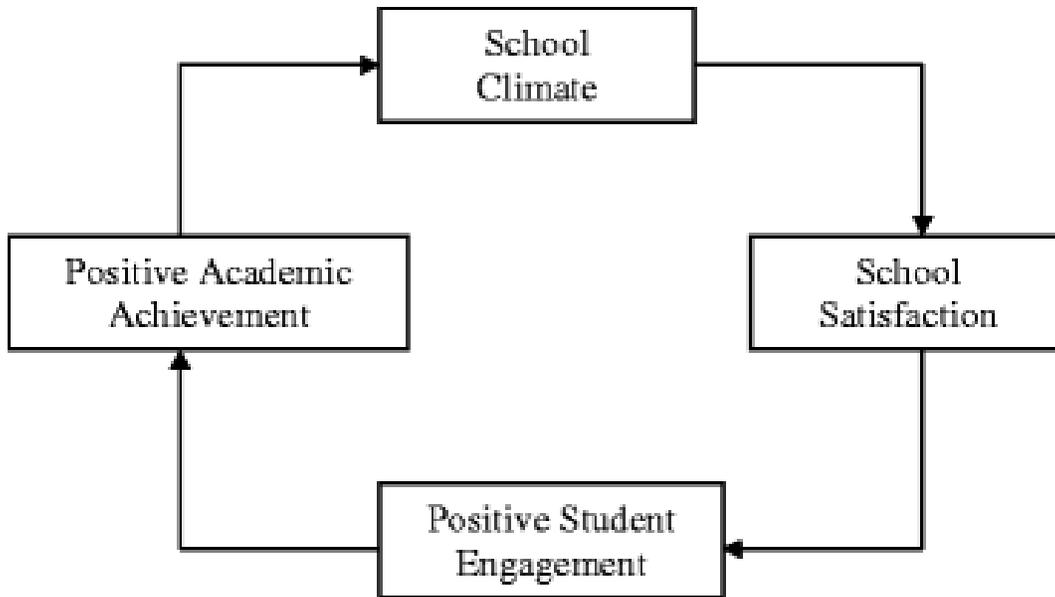


Diagram received from: Zullig, K. J., Koopman, T. M., & Huebner, E. S. (2009). Beyond GPA: Toward More Comprehensive Assessments of Students' School Experiences. *Child Indicators Research*, 2(1), 95-108. doi:10.1007/s12187-008-9029-z

As demonstrated by the diagram, school satisfaction is connected to overall academic achievement. A report conducted by the state of Ohio found four areas affecting the overall climate of education, and consequently student achievement (Zullig, 2009). The four domains needed to promote highest academic achievement are: a sense of physical safety, a perception of high academic and behavioral expectations, a feeling of connection to both the school and community surrounding the school, and demonstrated support on part of the administration for students and staff alike in both academic and social spheres (Zullig, 2009). As discussed by Permzadian, a feeling of connection to the school and community, as well support in the development of social and academic skills, are both topics to be covered in examined, well-achieving first year seminars.

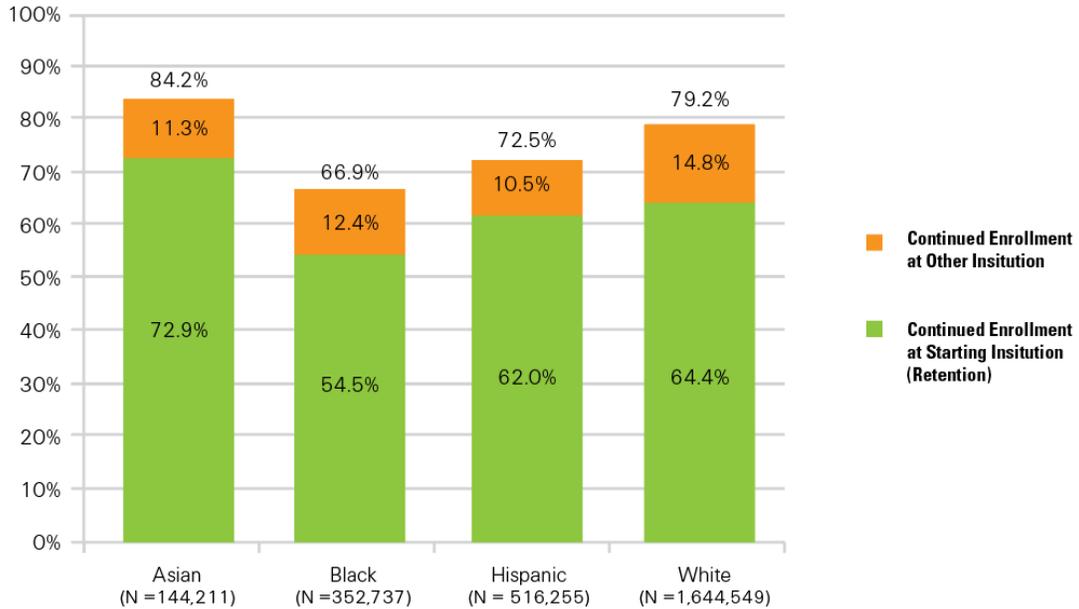
1.4 First-Year Seminar Effect on Graduation Rates

It can be argued that the biggest reason for universities to spend resources on developing effective first-year seminars is retention, which closely corresponds to graduation rate. A study carried through the academic years of 1991 to 1994 at a public, Midwestern university followed 1,700 students to determine whether or not their rate of graduation would be affected by participation in a first-year seminar (Schnell, Louis, & Doetkott, 2003). The seminar in the study had a well-rounded course plan, which included topics such as personal learning styles, time and stress management, and responsible decision-making techniques (Schnell et. al, 2003). The study's analysis concluded that the graduation rate of those who were enrolled in the seminar their first year was statistically higher than those who were not enrolled in the freshman seminar (Schnell et. al, 2003). Additionally, the study found that the effect was greatest for students from middle to lower class, which further amplifies the importance of effective freshman seminars (Schnell et. al, 2003).

1.5 Minority Population Retention

Through data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, it is apparent that retention rates between different ethnicities in the U.S. vary greatly, showing need for improvement on the strategies utilized to increase student retention rates in regard to specific strategies for minority retention.

Figure 2. First-Year Persistence and Retention by Race and Ethnicity
Fall 2015 Entering Cohort, All Sectors

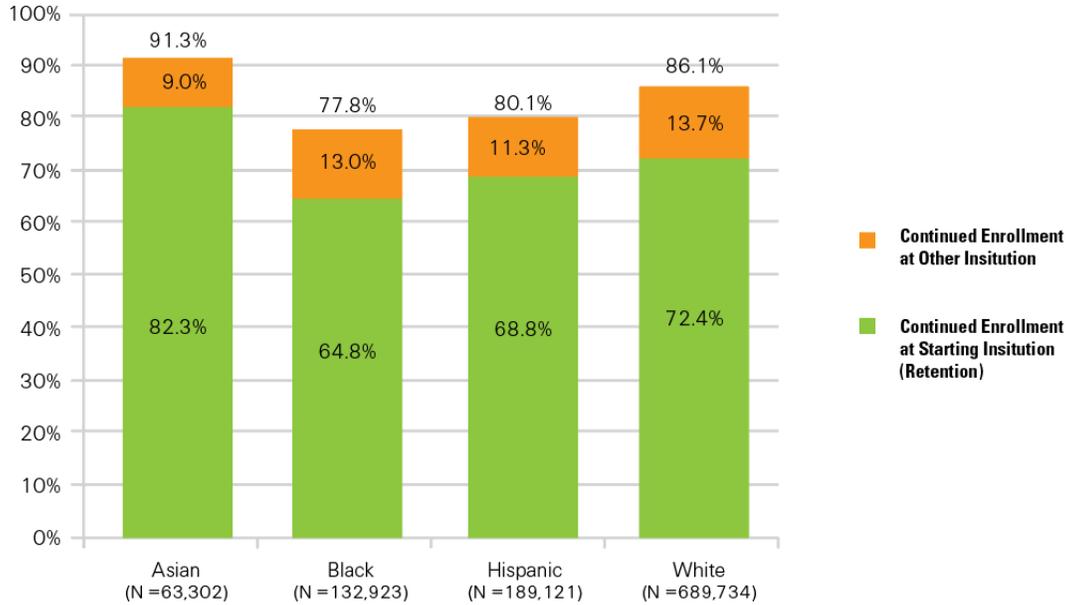


Refer to the last page of this report for additional definitions and notes on cohort selection. Data tables for this snapshot may be downloaded from the NSC Research Center website: https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC_SnapshotReport28_PersistenceRetention_Data_Tables.xlsx.

Retrieved from: Persistence & Retention - 2017. (2017, June 12). Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport28-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>

As demonstrated by this graph, both Hispanic and Black populations experience lower rates of retention at colleges across the United States. When looking at four-year institutions specifically, retention is higher across the board, but similar disparities are seen between ethnicities, as shown below:

Figure 5. First-Year Persistence and Retention by Race and Ethnicity
Fall 2015 Entering Cohort, Four-Year Public Institutions



Refer to the last page of this report for additional definitions and notes on cohort selection. Data tables for this snapshot may be downloaded from the NSC Research Center website: https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC_SnapshotReport28_PersistenceRetention_Data_Tables.xlsx.

Retrieved from: Persistence & Retention - 2017. (2017, June 12). Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport28-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>

As noted in the graph above, Hispanic and Black populations still have lower retention rates than White and Asian students, even when strictly examining four-year institutions, such as Pennsylvania State University.

In order to address this clear divergence between retention rates dependent on ethnicity, multiple research papers have been conducted on strategies for minority student retention rates.

As discussed in Biggs et al., issues facing students in minority communities often differ from those faced by predominantly white students. One example of this comes out

of the systemic societal limitation of resources for those within marginalized communities, causing disparities in the funds available for these students to attend college (Biggs, 1998). In relation to this, parental support and opinion on the importance of being in college is linked to student persistence while at university, and families that have limited funds are less likely to encourage their children to continue with their very expensive studies (Biggs, 1998). Beyond this, theorists have suggested that even when a student faces great financial barriers, when they are provided with, “a strong campus network of students, faculty, and staff who offer support in the form of encouragement and strategic information,” students are more likely to overcome these barriers and positively impact retention rates (Biggs, 1998). This is exactly the environment that can be built through effective first year seminars.

As further discussed in Biggs et al., university efforts to promote dual socialization are also theorized to improve minority retention rates. Dual socialization refers to the implementation of a “bicultural model” in which students in both the minority and majority populations interact to improve understanding and adaptation on both sides (Biggs, 1998). As stated in their report, Biggs et al. describes university efforts to promote dual socialization as, “focusing on providing minority students with information and skills for interacting with mainstream culture and values of the institution while affirming the basic values of the minority group member’s culture.” This illustrates the need for first-year seminars to be based on completely random class selection within each college so that students of minority and majority populations can come together each week.

2 - CASE STUDIES

2.1 Pennsylvania State University

According to the Academic Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, at Penn State, the faculty senate passed legislation requiring a first-year seminar for all incoming first-year students in 1997 for implementation in fall semester 2000. They revised the legislation in spring of 2008 for implementation during summer session 2009. Bachelor degrees received at University Park, through World Campus or Continuing Education, must include at least one credit of first-year seminar for graduation. Commonwealth Colleges and University Colleges are not required to have first-year seminar as a graduation requirement.

The legislation also includes procedural information about implementation of the first-year seminar (FYS). FYS classes are not to be taught to more than 25 students and they are generally taught by tenure-line or regular, full-time faculty members. There are three different styles of seminars denoted with different letters in Lionpath. The first one is solely a first-year seminar, the second one is a first-year seminar and an honors course, and the third one is a first-year seminar that is writing intensive.

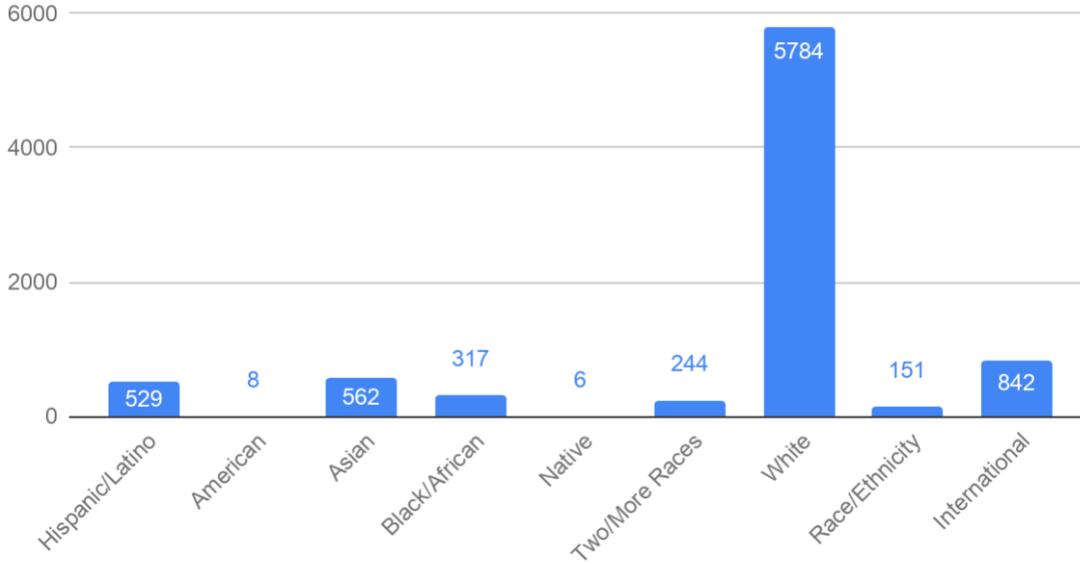
The number of credits (between 1 and 4) as well as the content of the seminar are at the discretion of each college. “The seminars should engage students in learning and orient them to the scholarly community while facilitating students' adjustment to the high expectations, demanding workload, and other aspects of the transition to college life. These goals may be achieved through: Introducing students to university study; An emphasis on Penn State as an academic community, with many fields of study and areas of interest available to students; The acquisition of learning tools and resources;

Opportunities to develop academic relationships with faculty and peers; and The concern for responsibilities that students accrue as members of a community” (Office of Undergraduate Education, & Pennsylvania State University). Each college must ensure that there are a sufficient number of seats in FYS to meet enrollment demands as well as a portion of students who are in the Division of Undergraduate Studies. Students must take the FYS during their first 27 credits of enrollment, in either the first or second semester. If student changes colleges their FYS requirement is portable regardless if the colleges have different FYS credit requirements.

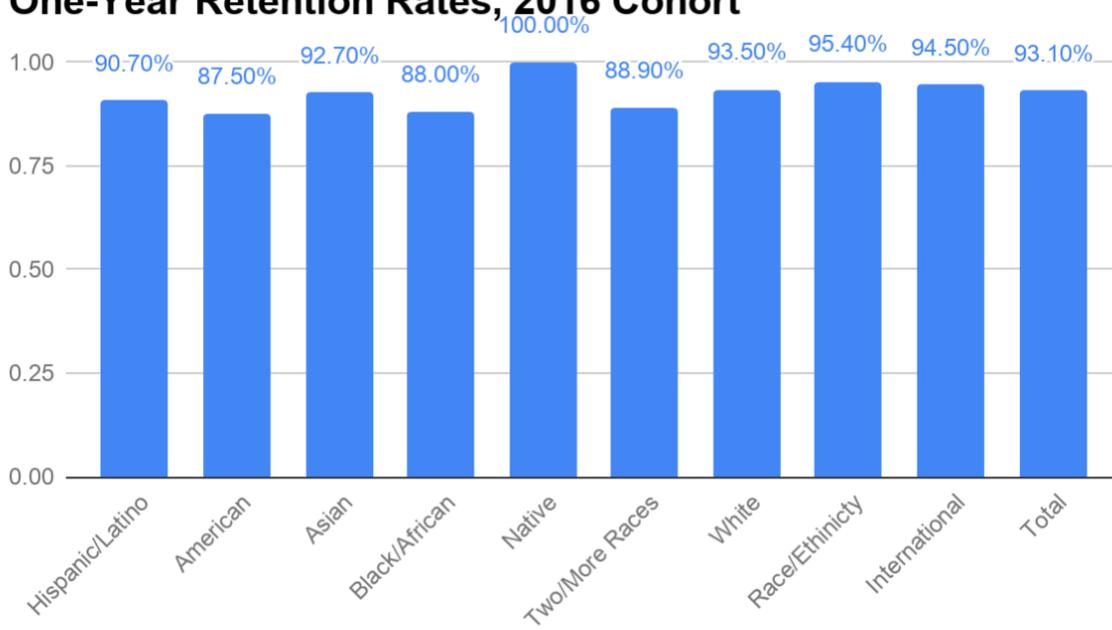
Exemptions to FYS requirements are granted to students in provisional or non-degree programs who have completed 18 or more credits in that status. Advanced standing admits with 18 or more transfer credits in another status at Penn State, such as associate degree candidates, can also be exempt.

As previously stated, there is a strong correlation between taking a FYS with retention and GPA. At Penn State University Park, the retention rate for students in the 2016 cohort returning for a second year are 93.1% for the overall student population (One-Year Retention Rates 2016 Cohort). As the tables below illustrate in the 2016 cohort, there are significantly more White students at Penn State than there are of all the other minorities combined (One-Year Retention Rates 2016 Cohort). The only racial/ethnic minority group that has higher retention rates than the White student population is Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders. There are only six students that fit into the Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander group while there are 5,784 students that are White (One-Year Retention Rates 2016 Cohort).

Penn State Students 2016 Cohort



One-Year Retention Rates, 2016 Cohort



Although this sounds positive, there is room for improvement because other public institutions, including other Big Ten Schools, have higher retention rates and different first year seminar policies.

2.2 University of Michigan

At University of Michigan, the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts established the program in 1978 and vastly expanded it in 1994. Each FYS course meets one of their area distribution requirements. They are all three credit hour classes. The classes are limited to 18 students and are taught by regular faculty (First-Year Seminar Program).

The FYS program aims to allow first-year students to: “Interact with the tenured and tenure-track faculty who are chiefly responsible for the University's ongoing intellectual life; Join the community of scholars and participate in studying topics and issues that are engaging and important; Discover the value of specialized academic knowledge and expertise in efforts to analyze and understand problems of consequence; and Experience frequent opportunities to write and receive written commentary on their writing, and to present oral reports” (First-Year Seminar Program). All of the classes are within the College of Literature, Science, and are within the disciplines of humanities, first year writing, interdisciplinary, natural science, and social science.

FYS classes give faculty an opportunity to explore a topic they are interested in. The classes are sent out in a glossy brochure each year to incoming students and the program itself is valuable in recruiting prospective students to attend the university.

For example, one of the classes in humanities is titled “Vampires and Monsters.” It meets twice a week for an hour and a half each time and “analyzes the history of the United States through the emergence of monsters, supernatural creatures, the uncanny, and phantasmagoric tales” (First-Year Seminar Program). Another example is “The Biopsychology of Sports” which also meet twice a week for an hour and a half. The class uses “sports to introduce and explore key topics in bio-psychology. Competition is at the heart of both sports and natural selection, leading to many areas of overlap between sports and biological studies of behavior” (First-Year Seminar Program). These FYs classes are very different than those at Penn State because they introduce students and help them transition to the university through a topic of their choosing.

At University of Michigan, the retention rate from first to second year is 97% (Admissions & Enrollment | U-M Office of Budget and Planning). For the total population of Michigan students, there are 3% of students who stay for less than one year (Admissions & Enrollment | U-M Office of Budget and Planning). For the underrepresented, minority groups at Michigan, there are 3.6% of students who stay for less than one year (Admissions & Enrollment | U-M Office of Budget and Planning). This is extremely high compared to the national average and is higher than at Penn State overall and at University Park.

2.3 Appalachian State University

At Appalachian State University, first-year seminar is a three-credit course taught through their General Education program. All incoming students are required to take the first-year seminar, and it counts towards their General Education requirements (First Year Seminar Program).

Appalachian State's first year seminar faculty come from all different academic backgrounds and responsibilities. Some are full-time faculty members that teach in their prospective colleges, while others are full-time faculty members who teach only first-year seminar. However, they do not need additional training to teach their first-year seminars because they are already teaching within their field of knowledge with a different primary goal than their traditional classrooms. They are not aiming to teach students a lot of information about a specific topic but are aiming to help students transition and adjust to college through a topic of interest.

The first-year seminar classes come from a variety of fields, including but not limited to: STEM, Sustainability and the Arts. Professors can propose a first-year seminar class on what they would like to teach through an application method, as long as the class meets the programs requirements of teaching students how to "(1) think critically and creatively and (2) communicate effectively. In addition, students must be introduced to the learning goals of (3) making local-to-global connections and (4) understanding responsibilities of community membership" (First Year Seminar Program). Much like the first-year seminar classes offered at Michigan, Appalachian State's first year seminar classes smooth students transition into the college experience by giving them the information they require to succeed through a topic of their choosing.

Appalachian State boasts a very high first to second year retention rate of 87% (Appalachian State Undergraduate Admissions). However, Appalachian State struggles when it comes to their 4-year graduation rate which hits a low of 53%. This likely means that they have an effective first-year seminar that keeps students coming back the

second year and likely have downfalls in other areas that affect graduation rates later in student's academic careers.

3 - THE POLICY

Each college has the ability to dictate how their first-year seminar looks in terms of number of credits, curriculum, and timing of the semester. Therefore, first year students across different colleges can have vastly different experiences in their first-year seminars. In order to create a universal experience of equality for first-year students, the university needs to take a larger role in deciding on these factors.

First, the university needs to get rid of the credit range for first-year seminars. Instead, all colleges must have a one credit seminar so that all students are spending the same number of hours in class. If some students are spending more hours in a seminar than others, then there is unequal opportunity for learning, connections to faculty, retention, and potential for a higher GPA. Beyond that, it is imperative that the university specifies some of the topics that are taught in the first-year seminar instead of outlining broad goals. All first-year students at the university need to be aware of resources for health education, financial literacy, substance use, and other topics but some colleges might value these topics less than other colleges. Hence, the need for the university to decide on half of the class topics for first-year seminars so that all students are receiving eight classes on the same topic and all have the necessary information. The eight topics decided on by the university will cover the first eight classes of the semester and the last seven classes are when the colleges can choose their topics.

As of now, there are several reasons that students may be exempt from a general first-year seminar. They may take their seminar as part of an English class, Honors class, or take one specifically for athletes. This policy will no longer accept these classes for the first-year seminar credit requirement because they fail to cover the necessary introductory information for first-year college students. If students transfer colleges after the first semester, the first-year seminar credit will remain transferrable mainly because all students are getting predominately the same information no matter which college their seminar was taken in.

The timing of the semester that the seminar is offered is incredibly important. Right now, first-year seminars are offered in several different formats. Some are first semester while others are second semester. Some are twice a week for an hour and 15 minutes lasting a month while others are once a week for 50 minutes lasting the entire semester. This is an ineffective layout because the most critical time of the semester for first-year student's retention is the first six weeks of the semester. So, first-year seminars in the second semester are completely ineffective at reaching students during this critical time period. In addition, seminars that only last for one month are over before this critical time period ends. The end of the seminar may create anxiety for students because they no longer have a small class or a class with a professor whom they have a budding relationship with. These factors illustrate the needs for all seminars to occur in the first semester, starting at the beginning of the semester and occurring once a week until the end of the semester.

With the addition of new topics to the first-year seminar syllabus, it is important for professors teaching this class to be knowledgeable about them. All first-year seminar

professors teaching the new curriculum will need to go through a day-long training put together by the university with one keynote speaker on each syllabus topic. Then the professors in each college will need to get together for a day-long training to go through the college-specific topics that they will be covering. After going through this training, the first time, professors will not need to complete it again in subsequent years, but the university will send out yearly updates with any information regarding the required topics.

Since Commonwealth Campuses do not currently have a first-year seminar requirement, this policy will only go into effect at University Park. After implementation at University Park there needs to be data analysis on retention and GPA changes or lack thereof. If there are positive changes, then the university should consider expanding the policy to include Commonwealth Campuses and University Colleges with relevant topics at their institutions included in the syllabus.

4 - IMPLEMENTATION - SYLLABUS

4.1 Health Education and Well-Being

As discussed previously, health education is one of the most important components to have in a first-year seminar in order to impact overall student persistence (Porter and Swing, 2006). Not only does including this education teach students about the many aspects of their health, especially while at Penn State, but it also strengthens their relationships with faculty who show they care about student health.

The health education and well-being topic would cover topics including mental health, sexual health, exercise, and diet. The main purpose of this would be to inform students of any and all risks involved regarding their health, how to manage their physical and mental health, and what health-related resources are available on campus should they need them.

Health-Related Penn State resources include:

University Health Services (UHS)

Student Health Center, University Park, PA 16802

University Health Services (UHS) is the main on-campus healthcare resource for students. UHS performs the treatment of both ongoing medical concerns and emergency health-related situations.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

Student Health Center, 501 16802, State College, PA 16801

CAPS offer a large array of services for students, including both individual and group counseling, psychological evaluations, prevention and consultation services, and crisis intervention. It is a great resource for students to utilize when managing their mental health.

Additionally, there are more health resources at Penn State that professors can cover if they desire. Along with health education, this lesson will also be combined with general well-being guidelines and advice. Well-being will be addressed with topics including but not limited to, happiness, sleep, expectations, and bias.

4.2 Financial Literacy

It can be argued that one of the greatest factors in determining student retention comes as a result of financial difficulty. The National Center of Education Statistics (2012) found data that suggests 31% of college students that leave school do so because of financial reasons. While the price of tuition can often be the reason behind these financial difficulties, most students know very well how much their tuition will cost before they start college. However, tuition gets paid first. It is the other costs accrued over time that can cause a feeling of uncertainty and dread to a college student. Costs such as rent, living expenses and leisure budgets can, when amassed, bring a lot of distress to a student in college.

Most college students are not knowledgeable about personal finances at the time that they are studying. A study done on 924 college students from multiple universities across the country found that on average, participants answered only 40% of the questions on saving and investment correctly (Chen, H., Volpe, R.P, 1998).

In a study on the impact of teaching financial literacy to college students, it was found that college students with \$0 in an emergency fund could save a mean of \$475 simply by learning how to save properly (Christi, 2016). While at first sight that may not be a lot of money, it equates to around 48 hours of work at most on-campus jobs. Those 48 hours could be used to study, which further boosts GPA and thus retention, or they could be used by students to engage themselves in activities on campus, or join campus organizations, which has also been found correlated to an increase in retention.

Therefore, first-year seminars need to teach students how to create budgets as a first step in money management. These budgets would include determining how much

money they can spend on each meal to make sure their meal plan lasts until the end of the semester. It would also include an understanding of LionCash and tracking purchases to see where their money is going.

Second-year housing is a topic that is discussed relatively early at Penn State. This class would cover the cost of different options such as living in a traditional room on campus, living in a renovated room on campus, living in an apartment downtown, and living in an apartment that is not walkable to campus. The costs of the aforementioned living situations vary incredibly so it would be very helpful for students to understand the prices before getting into a living situation that could cause financial distress.

4.3 Bystander Intervention

Across campuses, bystander intervention programs have been utilized to target social issues such as sexual or racial based harassment within student environments. The hope is that they increase safety and levels of contentment throughout the student body. By improving student awareness of these efforts, Penn State increases the ability of students to step in at the moments when it counts most, and to improve understanding across the student body of the adversity that some student populations face. First year seminars can be a tool that helps students learn about and understand this issue. They can also motivate students to get involved in pre-existing programs such as Stand for State. Stand for State is Penn State's bystander intervention program that focuses on four topics: sexual and relationship violence, mental health concerns, acts of bias, and risky drinking and drug use. Whether or not students choose to participate, knowledge about bystander intervention will hopefully create an army of

informed students protecting other students in order to create a strong, connected community.

In addition, it is imperative that all students learn about the Medical Amnesty Law in this class. The Medical Amnesty Law in Pennsylvania protects students from university punishment as well as legal punishment for underage drinking, if they are seeking medical assistance for someone else. All too often, students neglect calling the police in dangerous situations involving drugs or alcohol because they are worried about their own consequences. This law is in place so that situation does not occur, and the first-year seminar is an effective way to make sure that all first-year students are aware of its existence.

4.4 Online Personal Brand Management

In the past several years, technology and social media platforms have been rapidly growing making the world more and more interconnected. There are many upsides to this interconnectedness but there are also reasons to be wary. It is important to make smart, informed choices about what one chooses to post on their social media platforms because posts can be deleted later but nothing is ever erased. In addition, many educational institutions and companies look at applications social media when considering them for admission or for a job. So, online personal branding can affect someone's ability to be accepted into post-undergraduate educational opportunities as well as jobs.

First-year students may know about this idea of online personal brand management from their college application process. However, college is a time where many students live on their own for the first time and often start developing strong

opinions on social issues as well as a political ideology. Therefore, students need to learn to think about considering what messages they are sharing before they share them. If students choose to share their political leanings on social media, there can be negative effects. Their friends and followers might feel isolated or offended by their views. Yet again, there could be consequences when it comes to future opportunities because companies might now want to hire someone who openly shares controversial opinions because that might carry over into the workplace.

The focus of this class is making students aware of the effect that technology and social media can have on their futures. It is not meant to scare them from posting but to encourage them to post responsibly.

4.5 Substance Use

Substance use has been an ongoing problem at many universities, including Penn State University. Penn State has a reputation as big party school with a large drinking culture. A reputation like this comes with some benefits such as attracting students to the school. However, once the students arrive, the university needs to ensure that they understand the effects of risky drinking behavior on their mental health, physical health, and academic performance. Many students may have experience with alcohol before college but still not be properly educated on the effects of alcohol use, including the permanent ones on the brain.

There is a plethora of academic papers that establish a strong and clear relationship between academic achievement and retention. Similarly, there are many academic papers that link alcohol and academic achievement. Dr. Liguori at the University of Tennessee studied the effects of alcohol abuse on retention.

In his study, data was collected from 820 students at different major universities through an online wellness assessment at four different points in time which included questions related to alcohol use. They found that male students had a significantly higher, 2.29 times, risk of lower retention associated with high episodic drinking in comparison to females (Liguori 2015). They concluded that first-year male students were at a particularly high risk of having their retention affected by their alcohol consumption. They concluded that their findings were “important for health promotion professionals because they suggest programming related to social drinking and HED, especially among first-year male students, is critical to retention efforts” (Liguori, 2015).

It is recognized that Penn State already uses *SAFE* (Student Alcohol Feedback and Education) to teach students about heavy drinking and its consequences before they come to school. However, it should be noted that a lot of students simply rush to complete the questions and answers without pausing to understand the necessity behind them. Therefore, a small seminar style class will provide a prime learning opportunity to relay this information to students. Further, they are more likely to understand this information and use it to make behavioral changes when it is coming from a professor rather than through a screen.

4.6 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In college, many students see people that look and act different from them for the very first time. Generally, most high schools consist of students that come from very similar backgrounds so they are not used to this diversity. Therefore, it is important for the first-year seminar to foster understanding, acceptance, and inclusion of everyone

regardless of their background, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, and socio-economic status.

As illustrated in the graphs earlier, there are lower numbers of racial and ethnic minorities at Penn State and generally their rates of retention are lower than that of White students too. For that reason, it is imperative that the first-year seminar provides resources to all students at the beginning of college should they be struggling.

These resources include:

LGBTQA Student Resource Center

101 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Ally Student Resource Center works to create and maintain an open, safer, and inclusive environment honoring gender and sexual diversity through educational, social, and supportive programming as well as workshops and individual consultation.

Gender Equity Center

204 Boucke Building, University Park, PA

The Gender Equity Center is for students who are impacted by sexual violence, relationship violence, stalking, harassment, and other campus climate issues through education, advocacy, and crisis intervention/support counseling. They also have a 24-hour confidential hotline called Centre Safe and can be reached at 877-234-5050.

Affirmative Action Office

328 Boucke Building, University Park, PA

The Affirmative Action Office works to ensure equal opportunity in employment and to foster diversity at the University.

Professors are not limited to covering only these three resources but can include any and all other resources and programs that they feel would support their students in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In addition, it is important to keep the first-year seminar class sizes small so that students can get to know one another on a personal level. When students are learning about resources in this transition time together, they can bond together and get to know others who are different from them. As part of this class, it is important for professors to foster a community within their classroom so that all students feel equal and included.

4.7 Time and Stress Management

In addition to providing information on resources for student well-being, a session spent on strategies to manage stress and specifically stress-related health outcomes allows for students to learn skills to assist in their adjustment to college. When students first come to college, they are often overwhelmed with the amount of free time they have because they were not used to that in high school. This can lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety as they do not know what to do with themselves. While, time management is something that seems to be constantly forced onto students, repetition of this topic is important. The repetition of this topic allows for continued emphasis of supports that are in place for students to use their time to manage their stress. For example, students would again hear about mental health resources on campus that they can access when they are feeling overwhelmed. Further, professors can hold a very interactive lesson where the class can partake in yoga, meditation, and/or breathing exercises so students can learn and practice effective ways to deal with stress. In addition to practicing stress-relieving techniques, students can work to design

individualized schedules that allow them to fit in all of their schoolwork, extracurriculars, and other time-consuming endeavors.

While this is one of the university mandated classes, it can also be a time where professors introduce college-specific resources for dealing with stress and time management. For example, students in the College of Nursing have access to an “academic achievement coach.” The coach acts as an advisor specifically for time management, as first-year nursing students commonly find themselves overwhelmed with their workloads. Nursing students are able to schedule one-on-one meetings with this advisor, where they can get personalized counseling on organizing their schedules to promote better study habits, less stress, and overall better achievement in classes. This coach is specific to the College of Nursing, but other colleges likely have similar resources that professors can make students aware of during this class.

4.8 Campus Engagement and Sustainability

The focus of this session is to better acquaint students with engagement opportunities on campus. At this point in the semester, the general Involvement Fair on HUB Lawn would have already passed. However, professors would take this opportunity to make students of other involvement fairs such as ones for global programs, THON, and the spring Involvement Fair. Many first-year students are unaware of these occurrences and miss out on opportunities to find out about many involvement activities on campus. Professors would also introduce students to “orgcentral,” a PSU site outlining every club and organization available to students on campus. Information would also be provided on how to get involved with THON, Greek life, business fraternities, University Park Undergraduate Association (UPUA), as well

as other large entities on campus that students might be interested in joining. In addition, information would be provided on how to find a minor, get involved in undergraduate research, and join honors societies on campus. In terms of joining honor societies, professors would also explain the process of applying to Schreyer as gateway students and the process of applying to the Presidential Leadership Academy.

Students would also be oriented to sustainability measures implemented at PSU, and how to get involved in them. An example is information about the EcoReps program as well as information on how to apply. Further, it would cover the sustainability leadership minor, as well as information on the Green to Go program because all first-year students are required to live on campus. Professors would also explain PSU's different recycling bins provided at all dining halls and building across campus in order to improve student comprehension of the importance of sorting their waste and how to do so properly.

4.9 Major Specific Topics

In order to avoid taking all of the autonomy in deciding on the first-year seminar curriculum from the colleges and to recognize that first-year students need to know different things based on their college, each college will be able to decide on the topics for the seven other classes. It is recommended that each college hosts an open forum with upperclassmen in the college to find out what they wish they knew as first-year students. It is also recommended that each college covers career development within their field. Both of these are recommendations and are not required by the colleges. It is expected that the colleges use this time to help students transition into college and to prepare them for their future college career in the way that they best see fit.

Figure: Sample Course Plan:

| Week | Topic |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Health Education and Well-Being |
| 2 | Financial Literacy |
| 3 | Bystander Intervention |
| 4 | Online Personal Brand Management |
| 5 | Substance Use |
| 6 | Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion |
| 7 | Time and Stress Management |
| 8 | Campus Engagement and Sustainability |
| 9 | College Specific Topics |
| 10 | College Specific Topics |
| 11 | College Specific Topics |
| 12 | College Specific Topics |
| 13 | College Specific Topics |
| 14 | College Specific Topics |
| 15 | College Specific Topics |

5 - FINANCIAL IMPACT AND ANALYSIS

The implementation of our policy does not serve the primary purpose of financial gain to Penn State University. However, with any new implementation of policy or change to the university, it is very important to consider the respective financial impact on the institution. After all, while many additions of sustainability initiatives may benefit our students, it must also be financially feasible for the institution to implement and sustain them as well. While the costs and benefits of changing a first-year seminar are very difficult to define without first discussing the very minutia details with the deans of each academic college, there is literature available on the financial impact of increasing retention rates, which is ultimately the actionable goal of our policy.

Ohio State University, a Big Ten school just like Penn State, set out to increase their retention rates by identifying students most at risk of dropping out and assigning a team of proactive “tele counselors” to call those students and discuss their issues to proactively help them through any thoughts of dropping out (Mager, 2003).

Mager estimated that these efforts resulted in an increase of retention at Ohio State of 4%. This increase in retention came at an overall cost of \$345,000 for all new staff, training, phone bills and more, while bringing in \$2.25 million dollars in tuition revenues that would have otherwise been lost to the university. This equates to around a 650% profit, and that’s simply based off the one year of implementation. A lot of the costs (recruitment, training, acquisition of hardware) were first-time costs only, which lends itself to the conclusion that financial benefits will be greater in subsequent years. (Mager, 2003)

While Penn State already boasts very high second-year retention rates of 93%, Ohio State surpasses that statistic with a 94% retention rate. A simple 1% increase in retention with similar costs would still put Penn State at a net positive, all while promoting a better environment for the students. In reference to the case study on University of Michigan, it is entirely possible to have an increase in retention of 4% even when it as high as 93% already. Penn State also has a lot of space to grow when it comes to creating a foundation for a successful 4-6-year graduation rate, as well as in improving the retention rates of our Commonwealth campuses, assuming that the policy’s implementation shows promising results and a reproducible model.

“A similar study was conducted at the UK Open University. New students vulnerable to withdrawal were identified using a logarithmic regression analysis of

previous students' personal characteristics and subsequent withdrawal rates (the main factors in the analysis were previous educational qualifications, sex, and age). Students were listed in reverse order of their 'predicted probability of success' based on the analysis (ranging from 9% to 83% probability of passing) and alternate students were chosen from the list in order to construct a fully equivalent control group." (Simpson, 2004b)

The study lasted for three years and yielded similar results to the Ohio State Case study. With an average retention rate increase of 4.5%, they estimated that the aggregate cost to reach out to each contact was around £10, while bringing in £1100 and saving £200 on re-recruitment costs. In aggregate, they calculated a 450% return on investment for an annual net profit of about £1.2m pounds. (Simpson, 2005)

While the policy to redesign the freshman seminar to achieve similar increases in retention will have different costs attributed to it, results from both case studies indicate that it is very possible for the policy to be financially viable for the institution of Penn State University.

6 - CONCLUSION

6.1 Difficulties and Downsides

It is important to acknowledge that there will be several difficulties in implementation of the policy and some downsides as well. First, the policy indicates that all first-year seminars must occur in the first semester and that there may not be any exemptions. This will significantly increase the number of first-year students that need to be enrolled in a seminar while keeping the class capacity at the same number. Therefore, there will be some difficulties finding times, classrooms, and professors for

all of the sections. However, the importance of the first-year seminar for the students outweighs the organizational difficulties for the university.

The policy specifies topics for eight of the fifteen classes that will be taught in the first-year seminar. By the university designating these classes to specific topics, the colleges have less autonomy over the class and the topics that will be presented to their students. While this is a valid concern for the colleges, the policy has outlined eight topics that are essential for all students to be knowledgeable in for success as a college student. In addition, each college still has seven classes for which they can cover any topic of their choosing so that the colleges do not completely lose their autonomy in the first-year seminar course.

6.2 Impact on Sustainability

The successful implementation of a university-wide first-year seminar at Penn State and its effects would have a positive impact on multiple sustainability goals. It impacts United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) numbers three, four, eleven, sixteen, and seventeen which are good health and well-being, quality education, sustainable cities and communities, peace, justice, and strong institutions, and partnerships to achieve the goals respectively.

The third United Nations SDG is good health and well-being. It is foreseen that this goal would be specifically impacted through first-year seminars by educating Penn State students on topics such as mental and sexual health, alcohol and drug use and abuse, diet, exercise, and more. With an entire class dedicated to health education and well-being, and another devoted to substance use, students will become more aware of

the importance of their own health in all aspects, and how to manage their health to live happy and productive lives. This will, in turn, increase the knowledge of health and quality of health across Penn State.

The fourth United Nations SDG is quality education. A well-designed first-year seminar at Penn State would directly impact the goal of quality education by improving upon and adding to students' educational experience by teaching on a wide array of topics. Not only would students who attend first-year seminars gain important knowledge through education during their seminar experience, but they would also be more equipped to persist through college to earn a degree, along with potential advanced degrees, in the future. In addition, effective first-year college seminars can positively affect students' grade point average, reflecting a better understanding of their studies. It is in this way that an effective first-year seminar at Penn State would impact goal three, by affecting students in a way that allows more of them to go on to become educated, well-rounded adults, and prevents more students from discontinuing their college education. Universities graduating students is a measure of success in creating an educated citizenry, and essential in achieving a multitude of educational goals and as well as other SDG's.

The eleventh United Nations SDG is Sustainable Cities and Communities. The ultimate intention behind bettering the first-year seminar experience is to give students the tools and knowledge they need to be successful in college and beyond. By doing so, the newly effective first-year seminar will aid in eventually graduating more highly educated individuals. By producing more educated citizens, Penn State will affect the

communities in which its students and alumni reside. People who are educated at the university level and beyond will be able to better contribute to their communities.

Additionally, the first-year seminar course plan includes educating students on topics such as financial literacy, diversity, equity, and inclusion. These lessons will carry over into the adult lives of students, where they will apply what they've learned to benefit the well-being of their communities.

The sixteenth United Nations SDG is peace, justice, and strong institutions. Through the university-wide first-year seminar program, students will develop closer relationships with faculty, and closer relationships with each other. Also, in order for Penn State to offer a first-year seminar that has mostly the same content for students across all majors, academic colleges within Penn State will have to coordinate with each other. Building a stronger foundation of relationships at the student and faculty levels at Penn State will strengthen the institution as a whole, contributing to SDG number sixteen.

The seventeenth United Nations SDG is partnerships to achieve this goal which is contributes to creating peace, justice, and strong institutions. The newly designed first-year seminar connects the university and the colleges in deciding on the syllabus topics rather than the university providing broad guidelines and the colleges solely designing the syllabus. After that, the colleges must work to train their faculty on the new first-year topics and use their input and feedback to decide on the college-specific topics of the syllabus. The trained faculty then have the job of utmost importance by presenting this information to students. The faculty are not just supposed to tell the

students this information but rather work with the students to create a community in the classroom and help them understand the importance of the first-year seminar topics.

The ultimate goal of the new first-year seminars is to create a smoother transition process for first-year students by providing a plethora of relevant information and resources to improve retention and GPA. A sub-goal of this is to create a more interconnected university where university staff and policies work with colleges and faculty to best serve first-year students.

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