PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A CHANGING WORLD:
A FRESHMAN SEMINAR EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Business Computer Information Systems and Economics (BCISE) at Western Carolina University (WCU) launched a new freshman seminar course in Fall 2001. This paper describes the course's rationale, development, and implementation. Lessons learned from the pilot year are included.

Keywords: freshman seminar, freshman experience, curriculum, first-year, general education

INTRODUCTION

Many institutions offer freshman or first-year seminars to help students make a successful transition to college or university life. Students leave higher education for a variety of reasons, such as the following: they cannot afford to continue, they do not feel that they can succeed, or they have not made friends with their classmates and connections with their faculty members.

The authors' institution recently introduced a new liberal studies curriculum that includes a freshman seminar. The purpose of the freshman seminar is to introduce students to university life by setting high standards for the academic habits and intellectual dispositions of entering freshman. This first-year seminar also attempts to strengthen student connectedness to the university and, thereby, increase its freshman retention rate.

The CIS department considered the pros and cons of offering a freshman seminar and chose to develop a new course. This paper describes the work that took place in the development and initial offering of the CIS department's first freshman seminar, "The Information Society@Work." The course examines the role of computer and telecommunications technologies on work and the workplace. The course aims to help students transition to university life as well as prepare them for the changing world in which they will live and work.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

According to the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, less than half of the students that directly enroll in a college or university after high school actually complete a bachelor's degree within five years (7). Institutions concerned about retention look at a number of alternative interventions to help students make the transition to university life. Among these alternatives is the freshman seminar experience.

Freshman orientation courses have a long and rich history.   One of the first orientation courses can be traced back to 1888 at Boston University (1). The decade of the 1980s is particularly

remembered for its significant growth in orientation courses. From 1982 to 1992, the number of institutions offering "ongoing" orientation courses grew from 40% to 69% (10).

Freshman seminars come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (http://www.sc.edu/fye/) contains links to almost 50 freshman seminar courses offered by a variety of institutions. A Web search using the keywords "first year seminar" or "freshman seminar" also reveals the descriptions of similar courses at dozens of other colleges and universities.   Consider the following examples of first-year seminars:

- Stamatoplos (9) uses a first-year seminar course to introduce students to research and the library. "Rather than merely presenting library tools and teaching research strategies, [Stamatoplos] wanted to emphasize connections to the early stages of research and related critical thinking throughout the process, including its inception."
- Students at William Jewell College (11) in Missouri complete a required freshman seminar, The Responsible Self. "Students read books like the Bhagavad Gita and John Stuart Mill's On Liberty with the goal of looking at themselves and their society in new ways."
- Indiana University (2) offers several freshman experiences to help with the problem of transition. According to many first-year students, "what matters most . . . is knowing that someone cares about them."

Advocates of the first-year experience point to the positive impact freshman seminars have "on student retention, academic achievement and relationships, knowledge and use of student seminars and activities, student satisfaction, and other selected variables (5)". However, the freshman experience is not without its critics. As Moreno (8) describes, the "common suspicions about expanded orientation programs are all largely valid. Rather than helping students make a transition from high school to college, the FYE instead extends high school, using the same sort of content-free, self-esteem boosting, game-playing that renders so many American eighteen-year-olds unprepared for college." Despite such criticisms, freshman experiences remain popular solutions for increasing student success and retention.

TO DO OR NOT TO DO: THE FRESHMAN SEMINAR DECISION

The authors' institution implemented a new liberal studies program in Fall 2001 that introduced a freshman seminar requirement. The primary goal of the freshman seminar is "to introduce students to intellectual life at the university level." The hours needed for establishing a freshman experience came, in part, at the expense of the computer literacy requirement. The former computer literacy requirement generated substantial enrollment in the CIS department's Management Information Systems course.

Faced with a significant loss in semester credit hour production, the department considered whether or not to develop a freshman seminar. Development of a freshman seminar would help to replace lost semester credit hours. Representation in the new liberal studies program would also help to promote the CIS major to incoming students. For these two reasons, faculty

members agreed that participation in the liberal studies program through a freshman seminar was essential.

A lead faculty member was charged with the responsibility of developing a course proposal. As part of the proposal development, the following questions were addressed:

- What types of similar courses have been offered by other institutions?
- What is an appropriate focus/theme for our freshman seminar course?
- How can freshman seminar components be incorporated?
- Who can and should teach the course?

The completed proposal would require review and approval of the department and college curriculum committees as well as a Liberal Studies Oversight Committee.

THE COURSE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

A Web search revealed a diverse group of freshman seminar titles available at other institutions (see Table 1). The formats of these courses varied from one to three semester credit hours.

Table 1. Sample Course Titles from Web Search

MSN Search Term	Freshman Seminar Course Titles	MSN Search Term	Freshman Seminar Course Titles
Freshman seminar technology	The Politics and History of the Internet Technology-Enabled Education Science and Technology Freshman Seminar in Information Technology Surfing the Internet Traveling the Information Highway: Security	Freshman seminar business	Business Freshman Seminar The Workplace: The Roles of Business, Labor, and Government Business Works History of Communication Infrastructures Business on the Information Highway Economics in the Real World
Freshman seminar computer	The World of the Computer Freshman Seminar Computer Literacy Computer Science Freshman Seminar The Genius Who Lit the World Computer and Information Security Introduction to Computer Animation	Freshman seminar workplace	The Information Age, Its Main Currents, and Their Intermingling Learning for the New Century

Examination of the course titles in concert with the course syllabi illustrated the many directions freshman seminars can take. For example, "Computer Science Freshman Seminar" and "Business Freshman Seminar" emphasize introducing students to a major. Courses such as "The Politics and History of the Internet" or "History of Communication Infrastructures" paint a picture of a more traditional general education offering.

An important observation the authors noted in reviewing current courses is the importance of the course title in marketing to freshman. "The Genius Who Lit the World" has more appeal than "Science and Technology." Many times, freshman only see a title when selecting courses for

their schedules. The authors concurred that once the focus and content of the new course was defined, careful consideration would be needed in identifying an appealing title.

The department considered several iterations of course titles and themes before deciding on CIS 195, "The Information Society@Work." The theme selected for the freshman seminar was the impact of computer and communications technologies on work and the workplace. Specific learning objectives were identified for the first year:

- Identify crucial issues related to changes in the workplace.
- Research emerging technologies and their impact on the world of work.
- Apply critical discussion and evaluation to assigned readings.
- Write a clear and effective article evaluation.
- Build confidence in the ability to converse with people concerning technical issues and ethics in the information systems environment.
- Present an effective virtual group project on a selected technology and work topic, demonstrating course objectives with acceptable presentation skills.
- Demonstrate mastery of an appropriate vocabulary for discussing technical issues and emerging technologies.

Topics for the course included examining issues and or changes in the following: The Gaming Industry, The Music Industry, Telecommuting, Intentional Communities, Distance Learning, Virtual Communities, On-line Banking and Stock Investments, Censorship and the Web, Purchasing through an Auction Site, Understanding E-Commerce, Privacy Issues, Internet Dating, Extended Work Weeks and Family Life, Evaluating Information Sources: A Look at Alternative Web Sites, Photography and Digitizing, The Web and Communication, The Online Job Search, and Health Care Issues.

The CIS department, as well as the College of Business as a whole, does not have significant experience working with freshman. Students cannot declare a business major until their sophomore year. The MIS course that met the literacy requirement enrolled some freshman, but was not specifically designed for freshmen.

Five faculty members in the CIS department were identified as potential instructors for the new freshman seminar. Although any of these instructors were qualified academically, not everyone was comfortable working with freshman. Whoever taught the course needed to be creative, flexible, and nurturing at the least. Given these requirements, a faculty member emerged to pilot the first year.

THE PILOT YEAR

One section of the freshman seminar was scheduled for the first offering during Fall 2001. The "seminar" designation dictates small-group settings that facilitate dialogue and interactions are essential. All freshman seminars at the authors' institution are limited to 22 students.   Two of the 22 students enrolled in CIS 195 withdrew. Sixteen (80%) of the twenty students completing the course were male.

The university requires all freshmen to own a personal computer. The instructor surveyed students at the beginning of the course to determine how they used their PCs. Students were asked to identify applications for which they used a personal computer. The results of the survey are shown in Table 2. The most frequently used applications were games followed by email and chatting. The least used application was spreadsheets.

Table 2. Student Application Experience

Application	% Using	Application	% Using
Games	90.5	Web Page	52.4
Email	81.0	School Work	52.4
Chat	76.2	Shopping	19.0
Entertainment	66.7	Learning	19.0
Word Processing	61.9	Spreadsheet	9.5

As explained earlier, institutions offer freshman seminars to help students make the transition to university life. Gordon (6) identified several components often associated with freshman experiences. Table 3 relates these components to specific activities and assignments introduced in CIS 195. Exercises were selected with the intent of helping students (1) understand the academic rigor of university life and (2) establish campus connections with faculty and students. The department also hoped to interest students in the CIS major.

Table 3. Freshman Seminar Components

Gordon's Freshman Seminar Components	Related Activities/Assignments from CIS 195
The value and benefit of higher education	Preparing resumes and using the Internet for job searching
How to think and learn	Giving students a shopping list and budget for acquiring goods
The nature of educational processes and the role and responses of students in these processes	Assignment of specific roles within student groups; requiring progress reports from students
Cognitive, writing, communications, and library skills	Student presentations; mid-term essay exam, weekly journal entries
The curriculum, including general and major requirements	Discussion of technical skills required to implement applications used in class and courses in the curriculum where skills are learned
Students' learning styles and how to apply this knowledge in and out of the classroom	Use of articles, video clips, guest speakers and hands-on projects with student evaluations
Critical reasoning and problem solving	Examining alternative news sources; projecting trends for future technologies

FIRST-YEAR LESSONS LEARNED

The first time a course is offered is a learning experience for both the instructor and the students. Designing course materials for freshman students who have yet to declare a major is a challenge. It requires a significant shift in the perspective of the teacher as to performance expectations, degree of commitment, and basic attention span.

- Class scheduling. The teaching method selected focused on a hands-on approach that required use of an electronic classroom. To fit within the scheduling parameters, the class met from 5-7:50 p.m. Students had to learn the local server idiosyncrasies as well as basic online library searching techniques. Both skill sets took more time to teach than had been allowed by the instructor in the preplanning stage.   Additionally, the struggle to use time wisely was intensified by the length of time between classes and the tendency for students to procrastinate doing assignments until just before class time. Instructor/course evaluations indicated that most freshmen were not ready for a class that met once a week for nearly three hours.
- Textbook. The topics included in the course were dependent on current and future technologies and relevancy for first-year students. No textbooks were found to meet both criteria. A series of readings were selected and posted on the Web by topic. Students were required to read the Web-based articles each week before coming to class. Incoming freshmen were accustomed to having a textbook, although behaviors seemed to indicate that even if a textbook had been provided it would not have been read without highly structured applications or projects.
- Reading requirements. Highly informative journal articles or research based articles can easily extend to 20 or more pages. The purpose of the reading was to facilitate thoughtful discussion. Five to ten pages were the maximum that most students would read each week. Topics reflecting students' personal interests made it possible to assign slightly longer readings, but again, it hinged on whether or not the student felt a "need to know." Short tests, written discussion questions, brief projects, and student presentations all helped to encourage students to read the assigned materials.
- Homework. The instructor for this class has traditionally assigned a consistent, but demanding amount of outside work for all classes. The majority of freshmen were not prepared for a weekly assignment without teacher reinforcement throughout the week. The instructor relied heavily on email for class reminders and for communicating with students. Not all students were in the habit of checking their email regularly, nor in responding in a timely manner.
- Each week, students gathered online information and conducted an in class evaluation of the content of the information and its source. Short tests, video clips, take home exams, journal entries, guest speakers, a local field trip, and student and teacher presentations were used to illustrate concepts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The department will begin offering multiple sections of CIS 195 starting in Fall 2002. Some of the changes under consideration for the next year based upon the first year pilot include the following:

- Renaming the class title to the "Information Society@Work and Play" to increase marketing appeal to freshmen and to provide a link between work and leisure.
- Scheduling the class to meet more frequently than once per week.
- Select a textbook. Two books under consideration are, The Social Life of Information by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid (3) and The Invisible Future: The Seamless Integration of Technology Into Everyday Life by Peter J. Denning, Editor (4).

- Develop assignments for teaching "how to skills" as well as course content. Most incoming freshmen are not sophisticated in their use of basic computing skills or applications that required navigating university resources.
- Develop a pre-test and post-test to monitor changes in student behavior and in mastering course content. During the pilot year, most effort is placed upon just putting a course structure in place. The second year provides a better opportunity for monitoring student changes.

Developing and delivering the first freshman seminar for the CIS department has been challenging. Not only does the course help prepare students for a changing world, it helps prepare faculty members, too.

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