



# Making the Case for a Guided Pathways Informed First-Year Seminar: Frequently Encountered Questions and Concerns

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The first-year seminar can be an essential part of Guided Pathways. Guided Pathways is a national movement aimed at improving student success outcomes (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). By requiring a 3-credit course of all students, colleges and universities can help students choose and stay on a path and close equity gaps. More specifically, within an intentionally structured course, students can engage in meaningful career exploration and academic and career planning and can also develop the academic and career skills needed for success. There is a significant body of research and assessment evidence that demonstrates the value of the course and its positive impact on student success outcome measures such as persistence and graduation rates (Harrington & Orosz, 2018). Requiring the course will ensure that all students will benefit, not just students who are more likely to take advantage of opportunities offered. It is hoped that this document will inform and support campus conversations about institutional reform practices related to student success.

## What is a Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar course?

It is important to note that the first-year seminar can vary significantly from institution to institution (Young & Hopp, 2014). It is also common for the focus of the course to vary over time at the same institution. Some first-year seminars have an extended orientation approach while others have a much more academically rigorous approach. A Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar is academically rigorous and has two primary goals:

*1. Helping Students Choose a Path.* Students will engage in career exploration, and decision-making. Students will also map out a plan that details the courses and actions they will need to take in order to successfully enter that career path. Through the creation of this plan, students will learn how to modify and redirect their path as needed: the planning process becomes a learned and transferable skill that extends beyond the drafting of a single document.

*2. Helping Students Stay on a Path.* Students will learn essential academic (i.e. learning strategies, information literacy, critical thinking) and personal skills (i.e. time and project management, reflection, resilience) necessary for success in college and careers.

## Why does every student need a Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar course?

Perhaps the most important reason that the first-year seminar course should be required of all students is equity. The unfortunate truth is that students who may benefit the most from an optional service or course are often the least likely to take advantage of it. This is true in many different areas. For example, ask any faculty member who is most likely to take advantage of an extra credit assignment and you will overwhelmingly hear that the high-achieving student is more likely to complete the extra credit activity. If there is strong evidence that a service or course is beneficial and will help students be successful, as is the case with the first-year seminar course, then it is

critical for the institution to require it of all students so that even those who lack the social capital to independently recognize its value will reap its benefits (Harrington & Orosz, 2018). Taking a first-year seminar is especially important for community college students who may be first-generation college students and who may not have the same level of social and cultural capital as their counterparts at universities. Although many colleges have only required this course of some students, research does not support this approach. For example, Permzadian and Crede (2016) found that first-year seminars that are only required of at-risk students are the least effective type of seminar. This is probably in part due to the lack of higher-level peers in the course. There is a body of literature that demonstrates the benefits of having high-functioning peer models in class (Yeung & Nguyen-Hoang, 2016). The other significant problem with a course that is only required of at-risk students is that students receive a message that they are not college-ready and this mindset can negatively impact their motivation and performance (Harrington & Orosz, 2018).

**High-Achieving and Transfer Students.** Some might argue that high-achieving students or transfer students with documented success may not need the first-year seminar, but the research does not support this argument. Researchers have consistently found that students of all ability levels benefit from a first-year seminar course (Harrington & Orosz, 2018). Interestingly, four-year colleges and universities, as compared to two-year community colleges, are more likely to offer and require the course (Young & Hopp, 2014). In fact, the course is often offered at very selective and prestigious universities. A Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar course is not a course designed for at-risk student but rather is a course that addresses career decision-making and academic and personal success skills that will benefit all students.

**Decided and Undecided Students.** Students often enter college undecided about a career path. For example, Albion and Fogarty (2002) found that up to 70% of entering college students reported being undecided about what career to pursue. One might be tempted to think that this course is then most needed by students who have not declared a major, but there are many students who have declared a major and thus appear on paper that they have decided, but may have made this decision hastily, without engaging in significant exploration (Cuseo, n.d.a). This is illustrated by the number of students with declared majors who change their mind. According to the US Department of Education (2017), approximately 1/3 of college students with a declared major in their first-year later changed their major. When students change their major, this can delay graduation and have significant financial implications. Even students who have a clearly defined career path can benefit from deeper exploration within that path.

**Academic Strategies Benefit All Students.** In addition to determining a career path, students also need to develop essential academic and personal skills to be successful on that path. Unfortunately, the national retention and graduation rates indicate that many students are not successfully navigating and completing curriculum. The 150% four-year graduation rate is 53.8% and it is 31.6% for community colleges (McFarland et al., 2017). Low completion rates are likely due in part to a lack of academic and personal skills. In the first-year seminar course, students can develop and practice essential academic and personal strategies and skills that have current and lifelong value. For example, students can gain information literacy and critical thinking skills by finding, evaluating, and interpreting research on success strategies. Research has shown that most students rely on academic strategies that do not work and thus need to learn and practice evidence-based strategies (Gurung, 2005). When students use effective strategies, they will be more likely to be successful. There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the connection between the first-year seminar and success outcomes such as retention and graduation (Harrington & Orosz, 2018). Given that student success is a priority at most institutions, the first-year seminar can be used to improve success outcomes.

## **Why cover this material in a course and not through a service like academic advising?**

Some might argue that career and academic planning are activities that should take place in advising. However, meaningful and ongoing conversations about careers are simply not possible with the limited number of advisors. According to the NACADA 2011 survey, the average caseload for an advisor is 300 and some institutions have

ratios of up to 1,000 – 2,000 to 1. Only 36.5% of the institutions reported advising being mandatory for all students. Even in colleges with more manageable caseloads, there is no structure to hold students accountable for truly engaging in career exploration activities between advising sessions and the number of meetings will not be enough to deeply engage in this process. Using the first-year seminar for this purpose enables students to focus on career exploration throughout an entire semester, graded assignments make this process a priority, and students can benefit from learning from peers. Students who are provided with time, space, and guidance to engage in thoughtful career exploration will be more likely to make better decisions. A core principle of the Guided Pathways framework is to ensure that every student has an individual academic and career plan and that their progress can be monitored to keep them on their path. The first-year seminar can be used as a vehicle for this purpose, ensuring all students, regardless of their academic preparation, have developed an academic and career plan.

## **Why does a Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar need to be required in all programs?**

When determining what courses should be included in a program, it is important to focus on the program and institutional goals. The learning outcomes of a Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar will likely align well to these goals. Since most colleges include student success as a major theme of institutional goals and priorities, this course can play a foundational role in setting the stage for students to achieve institutional goals.

**Space in the Curriculum.** One of the primary concerns with requiring the first-year seminar in all programs is finding space in the curriculum. It is true that space in a curriculum is limited. It is also unfortunately true that many community college students stop attending college before completing all of the program requirements. In other words, most students are not taking all of the courses in a program map. Given the evidence behind the first-year seminar and the opportunity it provides students to explore the purpose of education, to engage in career exploration and planning, and develop essential skills, making this course a requirement in all programs will support institutional reform efforts aimed at increasing student completion. By requiring this course in the first-semester, students will be able to develop a personalized academic and career plan that stems from the career exploration process. In addition to walking away with a plan, students will also develop academic skills that will help them perform well in their other courses. It is therefore essential for colleges to find a way to include the first-year seminar in all programs. Simply put, a student has a greater chance of finishing upper level coursework in a degree program if they start their path with a first-year seminar course.

**General Education.** One suggested approach would be to count the first-year seminar as a general education requirement. The focus on academic skill development in areas such as information literacy and critical thinking aligns well with general education outcomes. According to a national survey, “the majority of campuses applied first-year seminar credits toward general education requirements (58.6%)” (Young & Hopp, 2014, p. 19). This is the approach that is being taken at Valencia College where all incoming students are required to take the first-year seminar course and it counts as a general education requirement. Initial assessment data is very promising, showing the positive impact of this approach (Shugart, 2018).

**Infused versus Stand-Alone Course.** Sometimes others will suggest that the first-year seminar content be infused into other courses rather than being a standalone course but this approach will likely not produce the same positive outcomes. In order to engage in meaningful career exploration and skill development, a significant amount of time is needed. If incorporated into another course in the curriculum, it is not likely that enough time would be devoted to these topics and as a result, the learning outcomes would not be achieved. The other challenge with infusing career exploration and academic skill development into other courses is that most programs at the community college level are not overly prescribed, meaning students can choose from a variety of course options. Duplicative experiences may then be possible and the learning activities may be on a more superficial level because they are added onto an already packed curriculum. Similar to writing, having a stand-alone course that provides students with a foundational building block and then infusing supportive learning activities where students will have to use these skills in other courses will lead to the best outcomes.

**Meta-Major First-Year Seminars.** Some colleges are considering a meta-major approach to the course, offering specifically tailored sections of first-year seminars for different meta-majors or career pathways. The research does not indicate that a discipline-specific course is better than a general course. While this approach may work well, the logistics associated with this approach may be overwhelming. Since many students do switch majors outside of a meta-major (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009), it may not be necessary to offer meta-major sections of the course.

**Transfer.** Sometimes a concern about transfer arises. Many states have legislation that require four-year colleges to accept all credits students taken as part of a degree program at a community college and some agreements stipulate that credits transfer as block even if there is not a direct transfer match. Since more four-year colleges and universities than community colleges offer and require the first-year seminar, there will likely be a course match at the four-year institution. If there is not a direct course match, students are often given elective credit for the course, which of course still counts toward graduation requirements.

**Financial Aid.** If the first-year seminar is not a general education or other program requirement, it is essentially an option. An optional approach can put some students at a disadvantage. One disadvantage is that if the first-year seminar is not in a program, then it will often not be covered by financial aid. Thus, offering the course as an elective could contribute to both social and financial inequities.

### **Why should the Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar be 3 credits?**

The Guided Pathways informed first-year seminar course is a rigorous, academic course. It requires students to engage in activities that build foundational skills in research and information literacy, self-reflection, critical thinking and communication and to also engage in the career exploration and decision-making process. Time is needed for students to develop these essential lifelong skills and achieve the course learning outcomes (Karp et al., 2012). Students and faculty alike devalue courses that are only one or two credits and, as a result, are less motivated and put forth less effort (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Research has demonstrated that both student motivation and retention were higher with a 4-credit versus 1-credit course (Du, 2016).

### **How would we find enough qualified instructors to teach Guided Pathways informed first-year seminars if we required it of all students?**

Scaling any program or initiative takes planning and some financial investments. The professor-student relationship is one of the best predictors of student success (Delaney, 2008). It is therefore critical that we recruit the best faculty to teach this course. Although there are graduate degrees in First-Year Studies, these programs are relatively new so it is not possible to require that instructors have this type of educational background.

**Faculty Qualifications.** Most colleges and universities require a minimum of a master's degree to teach the first-year seminar course. The obvious advantage of hiring full-time faculty is that these instructors are available to students outside of class, are knowledgeable about college resources, and will have a deep understanding of what is expected of students. This would also be the case for full-time employees who teach the course as an adjunct faculty member. In many cases, adjunct faculty will also need to be hired and they too can bring great talent and passion to the position.

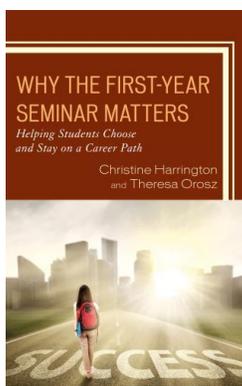
Educators with expertise in fields such as student affairs, psychology, and education obviously have strong expertise in the discipline of student success. However, educators in other fields can also be very effective if supported with professional development. It is critical that instructors teaching this course believe in their students and have a passion for assisting students with developing academic and career skills (Cuseo, n.d.b.).

**Professional Development.** Because many instructors teaching this course come from numerous different backgrounds, professional development is particularly important. Thus, to bring the first-year seminar to scale, it is

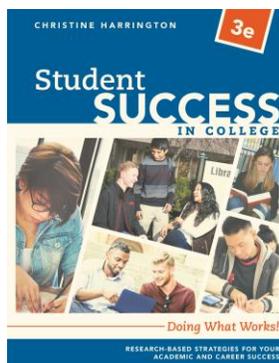
important to devote resources to a first-year seminar course coordinator and for faculty development. Partnering with Teaching and Learning Centers is recommended because helping instructors engage their students with effective pedagogical practices is critical. However, it is also important to recognize the need for discipline-specific training. For example, academic faculty from different fields may be able to easily assist students with the academic components of the course but may need training on career exploration. Instructors with a strong background in student services, on the other hand, might be skilled at assisting students with career exploration but need support in helping students develop academic skills.

**Financial Investment.** Scaling a first-year seminar program may require a modest budget for expenses such as a coordinator and professional development, but there is a strong likelihood of a good return on investment. NCII's Rob Johnstone has been providing return-on-investment (ROI) models to the field for 15 years. As is often the case, Rob suggests we not only consider the incremental costs of innovative approaches such as FYE programs, but also on their potential to create incremental revenue for colleges. If, as early evidence suggests, FYE programs can increase retention and downstream unit-taking as student's progress, Rob points out that it wouldn't take a huge average unit increase per student to pay for the usually modest incremental costs of coordinating FYE programs. To explore this in more depth, NCII's ROI model for guided pathways is available [here](#), and can be used to model the ROI of FYE programs.

## Resources



[Why the First-Year Seminar Matters: Helping Students Choose and Stay on a Career Path](#) (Harrington & Orosz, 2018) - a professional resource for course coordinators on re-imagining the course and making the case for the course. Publisher by Rowman and Littlefield.



[Student Success in College: Doing What Works!](#) (Harrington, 2019) - a research-based first-year seminar textbook aligned to Guided Pathways. Published by Cengage.

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