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# Freshmen Interest Group (FIG) Report


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FRESHMEN INTEREST GROUP (FIG) REPORT  
(Report 2000-01)

Kris Bulcroft  
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May, 2000

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# FRESHMEN INTEREST GROUP (FIG) REPORT

## BACKGROUND

### PROVOST'S TASK FORCE ON IMPROVING THE FRESHMEN YEAR EXPERIENCE

In January, 1998, Provost Delorme formed a task force to study the freshmen year experience and to make recommendations for improving it. Although partly an effort to address the legislative accountability measure on retention, the task force was encouraged to formulate ideas that would improve Western's freshman year experience, including curricular and co-curricular dimensions.

The task force used a variety of data gathering strategies to more clearly identify which freshmen-year experience problems recognized nationally were actually occurring at Western. The identified problems included:

- Decreasing rates of freshmen retention;
- Not performing well enough in school, including
  - Lack of effective study skills, and
  - Lack of challenging classes;
- Ineffective use of advising and support services;
- Difficulty getting access to courses and programs;
- Dissatisfaction with professors or courses;
- Disappointment with large classes; and
- Feeling a lack of 'fit' or connection to Western.

Once these problems were noted, the task force looked for programs and interventions which would construct an integrated experience for freshmen to enhance their skills of inquiry and academic success through some of the following elements:

- Increased opportunities for small group interaction;
- Improved articulation and coherence of GURs;
- Improved connection to support services already available;
- Increased common linking experiences to create sense of community;
- Enhanced living/learning environment; and
- Faculty development opportunities for working with freshmen.

Besides strategies for strengthening current programs and structures, the task force recommended three new initiatives: 1) restructuring GUR program to enhance meaning and connection; 2) initiating a Freshman Reading Program; and foremost, 3) initiating a Freshmen Interest Group (FIG) Program—utilized by a number of institutions, including Port-

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land, Illinois, and Michigan State; and the Universities of Oregon, Washington, and Missouri at Columbia.

FIGs were emphasized because they provide both small group experiences and integrated coursework for new freshmen. Additionally, according to some research, FIGs have had good results, addressing many of the problems identified by the task force. For example, the University of Missouri at Columbia reported that FIG participants had a GPA of 2.89, compared to 2.66 for non-participants (although selection bias cannot be fully ruled out as a factor in this result). The University of Washington reported that FIG participants showed improved academic performance, more effective use of campus advising and support services, increased use of library and computing resources, and an enhanced feeling of connectedness to the university.

## THE DESIGN OF FIGs AT WESTERN

Western's FIGs had elements typical, and basic, to such programs found elsewhere. A Western student enrolled in two large GUR courses with shared thematic connections, and a 2-credit seminar. There were four sets of connected GUR courses, including:

- **The Media and American Politics** (Journalism 190 and Political Science 250, 11 credits total) with University 102;
- **The Politics of Language and Ethnic Identity** (Political Science 101 and Linguistics 204, 11 credits total) with Library 125;
- **Images of the Family** (Sociology 260 and Art History 220, 10 credits total) with University 102; and
- **Northwest Environmental Issues** (General Geology 101 and Environmental Studies 101, 9 credits total) with Library 125.

Because Western's was a pilot project, variety in the seminar formats was encouraged in an attempt to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of each. Seminars shared the objective of linking GUR course content, but the pedagogical approaches varied considerably, as did the staffing for the seminars. Moreover, although seminar enrollment totaled 175 students, over 1300 students—the combined GUR enrollment—benefitted from the technological and pedagogical innovations embedded in the faculty development phase of the program.

Ultimately, three seminars formats were developed: 1) For "Media and American Politics," the GUR course professors also taught the seminar, identified as a section of University 102; 2) For "Images of the Family," graduate teaching assistants taught the seminars, identified as two sections of University 102; and 3) For "Politics of Language and Ethnic Identity" and "Northwest Environmental Issues," Western librarians taught the seminars, identified as four sections of Library 125. The long-term goal of the FIGs programs is to establish one systematic format for all the integrated seminars, but due to the "pilot" aspect of this past year's program, a variety of formats was necessary to explore the efficacy of models.

Led by the GUR course professors, the seminar affiliated with "Media and American Politics" took concepts beyond what could have functionally been allowed in a large group setting. FIGs seminar participants worked on special projects and papers that focused on

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the role of the media in presidential elections. Students eventually designed a paradigm for the use of media in a presidential election, whether an ethical use of media, or the critical manipulation of it in order to influence the election's outcome.

Similarly, the seminars affiliated with "Images of the Family," headed by teaching assistants, built upon themes discussed in the large lecture classes. Themes were expanded, then integrated into a series of assignments and a final project. The class used technologies such as e-mail, the web, and the student web to communicate ideas and assignments, and to become better acquainted as a group. The seminar also included a community building exercise, as well as served as a forum for frosh to express nonacademic concerns in a comfortable setting.

The seminars for "Politics of Language and Ethnic Identity" and "Northwest Environmental Issues" were taught by Western librarians and focused on information-seeking skills using a variety of information technologies and traditional library research tools. Emphasis was on choosing and refining research topics and then locating and evaluating materials in paper and electronic formats. Students worked in small groups to create annotated bibliographies of information resources on specific topics generated from the larger lecture courses. Students created both research logs and their final bibliographies as web pages, which were then shared both within the seminar sections and the larger lecture courses. From these bibliographies, students created their final projects in the larger lecture courses as short papers and group presentations. These seminars provided the research component for the larger lecture courses in a collaborative, active environment that emphasized information technology.

#### **FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AT THE CENTER FOR INSTRUCTIONAL INNOVATION (CII)**

An added component of Western's FIG program was technical support for FIG Faculty, who were provided access to computer-based technology instruction and, during summer quarter, 1999, a series of eight FIGs faculty workshops that focused on pedagogical issues. The workshops were hosted by the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII). Summer faculty workshop topics included:

- Overview of Goals and Objectives;
- Challenges & Opportunities in Large Lectures;
- Utilizing Campus Resources;
- Crafting Objectives for GUR Sections;
- Integrative Seminars: Utilizing FIGs Resources;
- Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes;
- Infusing Writing in your Course; and
- Integrative Seminars: Critical Thinking & Content Come Together

The CII also provided support for those faculty who wished to incorporate more instructional technologies into their FIGs courses. Besides creating several programs that allowed instructors to set up on-line practice tests, on-line surveys, or electronic discussion boards, the CII's Student Technology Assistants developed multimedia and web projects to help support the instructional endeavors of the FIGs faculty. In addition, the CII developed a portal Internet website, called Classweb, that served to direct students to instructional

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materials on the web. This website not only provided students with access to their course materials, but also linked them to other resources at Western that could be of use to them, such as the Academic Advising Center, or Classfinder.

### **PEER ADVISORS**

The FIG Program included Peer Advisors, experienced returning students who had a strong understanding of Western's resources and past experience working with new students. Peer Advisors were nominated by members of the task force and selected after individual interviews through New Student Programs. A group of six peer advisors were selected in mid-spring quarter to work with the FIG program. Their duties were two-fold: 1) to assist the faculty and teaching assistants in the seminars; and 2) to coordinate evening workshops in the residence hall setting for FIG students.

While the complexity of duties varied with each instructor, Peer Advisors attended the seminar and served as in-class guides for students, answering questions and requesting clarification when needed, assisting instructors with tasks within the class session, and providing a feedback loop for students and instructors. In addition, Peer Advisors, working in teams of two or three, were responsible for coordinating five evening workshops that were held in the Ridgeway Dining Commons. Topics presented included: a faculty panel, overview of campus resources, study skills, winter quarter registration tips, and a closing social.

### **COLLABORATION: AN ESSENTIAL PART OF FIGS**

To carry out the FIGs pilot, new collaborative ties had to be forged. Not only were faculty/instructors, the CII support staff, and Peer Advisors from Student Affairs essential participants, help was required from the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing (OIAT), Academic Advising, the Registrar, the Budgetary Office of Academic Affairs, and individual department administrative staff. The orchestration and management of the FIGs program was complex, and one outcome of the pilot project was a clearer understanding of the interrelated sectors at Western that are needed to launch and maintain such an ambitious first-year experience.

## **METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF FIGS ASSESSMENT AT WESTERN**

Great pains were taken during the initial phases of developing Western's FIG Program to include a thorough assessment component. Indeed, no less than seven different assessment techniques were utilized. These included:

THE LECTURE COURSE SURVEY of all connected large lecture courses was conducted in-class near the beginning and end of the quarter by course instructors. All students present in the large lecture class were given survey forms, regardless of admit status (native or transfer) or year in school (frosh, sophomore, etc.), or whether they were a FIG participant or not. In the pre survey, 790 non-FIG and 161 FIG students participated. In the post survey, 580 non-FIG and 137 FIG students participated. The survey included three sections of multiple choice responses: 1. attitudes (7 prompts); 2. self-ratings (20 prompts); and 3. time management (13 prompts). In retrospect, researchers were disappointed that admit status and year in school were not included in the survey form.

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THE **FIGS PARTICIPANT SURVEY** was administered in the FIGs seminars by the instructors, pre and post (138 participants in the pre-survey; 116 in the post-survey). The survey featured 42 multiple choice prompts, plus five open-ended prompts. Topics covered included: 1. demographics (7 prompts); 2. satisfaction with and worthiness of the program (14 prompts); 3. seminar satisfaction and worthiness (4 prompts); 4. Peer Advisor effectiveness (5 prompts); and 5. use of technology (11 prompts).

A **FIGs FOCUS GROUP** was conducted during “dead” week (week eight of quarter). There was one, two-hour session, attended by four facilitators and twelve FIGs students. The session was taped, then transcribed.

**OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES** by FIGs Participants Survey were analyzed using NUD\*IST, a qualitative software program developed to analyze comments in rich text formatting.

**STUDENT TRACKING SYSTEM DATA** was analyzed. Western’s Student Tracking System (STS) is simply the data stored in student files, including grade point averages, ethnicity, gender, etc.

**FRESHMEN SURVEY DATA** was incorporated into the analysis. The Student Information Form questionnaire is more commonly known as the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program), and at Western as the Freshman Survey. Western administers the CIRP each year to first-time, in-coming freshmen. Certain questions included on the Lecture Course Survey and the FIGs Participants Survey were taken, with permission, from the CIRP. Using CIRP survey questions allowed researchers to compare certain findings to a large national data base. Western’s 1999 Freshmen Survey had 983 participants.

**OPEN-ENDED FACULTY COMMENTS** were solicited. FIGs faculty (including the two Teaching Assistants responsible for “Images of the Family” seminars) shared their opinions on the summer faculty workshops hosted by the CII, and, at the end of quarter, the overall effectiveness of the program (9 responses for summer workshop; 9 also for the end of quarter analysis—out of 14 total faculty and TA participants).

## **FIG ASSESSMENT FINDINGS**

### **DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE**

Demographically, FIGs participants did not look much different when compared to the over all population of fall quarter, 1999, freshmen. FIGs participants had slightly more females than males (FIGs = 65%/35% females/males vs. all WWU freshmen = 58%/42%). Ethnically, there were slightly fewer white students in the FIGs, and slightly more Asians. Of the 174 FIGs participants, 10.9% had transferred Running Start credits; for the entire population of fall quarter freshmen, 14.0% had earned Running Start credits. (See Table 1.)

Occasionally programs such as the FIGs are criticized for being “self-selecting” and therefore not necessarily reflective of the general student body. And while the “self-selecting” concern is certainly one that should be noted, Western’s first FIG offerings probably were not affected by the issue. For one reason, because of registration logistics, 34% of those students signing up for FIGs did so because there “were no other courses to take, or other

Table 1: Gender and Ethnicity  
by All WWU Frosh and FIGs Frosh

<b>Gender</b>	<b>All Frosh</b>	<b>FIG Frosh</b>
Male	41.8%	35.1%
Female	58.2%	64.9%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White	75.7%	73.6%
Black	1.8%	2.3%
Hispanic	3.1%	3.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.6%	12.0%
Native American/AK Native	1.7%	1.7%
Unknown/Other	7.5%	6.3%
<b>Running Start Credits</b>		
Yes	14.0%	10.9%
No	86.0%	89.1%

courses were full.” (Findings taken from the FIGs Participant Survey.) Another 24% signed up for FIGs because of the recommendation of Summerstart advisors, suggesting that the decision was made at the last minute, and probably also influenced by course availability. Indeed, one student in the FIG Focus Group said, “It was the only class schedule I could get,” while another said, “Because I enrolled late and there was almost nothing else to take.” Still another student said that, “I was registering the day before the last day, and there were no classes open, and I had no idea what was going on. And they were going to register for me if I picked a FIG. So I did. I bought it.” Similar sentiments were echoed in the open remarks section of the FIGs Participant Survey, with one student noting that, “I enrolled late and there was almost nothing left to take,” while another said they enrolled, “to relieve the stress about picking out classes.”

And while 33.3% of FIG participants indicated they registered because they found the concept intriguing, or because the content of the lecture courses interested them, less than 2% of those who signed up for a FIG said they were influenced by the materials they received in the mail, also suggesting that students made their decisions “spur of the moment.” One focus group participant expressed a rather typical attitude when they said, “I was in there looking for classes, hardly any time left. I wanted to take Sociology, the family one. And one of the kids that were walking around with the shirts on [Summerstart advisors wear blue Western t-shirts] said, ‘Oh, did you hear about this FIG thing?’ I hadn’t even heard about it before.”

As further evidence that Western’s FIG students were not in some way “different” from the general population of Western students, no findings in the Lecture Course Survey could differentiate between FIG or non-FIG participant. (Though it should be kept in mind that admit status and year in school could not be factored in.) Moreover, data taken from the annual Freshmen Survey of first-time, in-coming freshman indicated no significant differences between the educational backgrounds of the parents of Western freshmen, whether a FIGs participant or not. And finally, the high school grade point averages (hsgpa) of FIG and non-FIG freshmen were virtually identical (3.42 for FIG freshmen versus 3.48 for non-FIG freshmen).



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## GENERAL FINDINGS

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** The vast majority of FIGs students found it a worthwhile experience that helped their transition to college.

Survey results indicated that 68% of FIGs participants said their experience was worthwhile, while only 11% felt it was not. When asked if they would recommend having FIGs for next year's freshmen, 76% indicated that yes, they should be offered. Only 8% said that FIGs should not be offered again. When asked if joining a FIGs cluster helped their transition to Western, 70% said it had, while only 5% said it had not. Participants also felt the FIGs were worthwhile because the friends and contacts they made (74%), because it provided them with a partial fall quarter schedule (84%), and because of the opportunity to study with other people in the class (72%).

When asked if they had it do over again would participants enroll in a FIGs again, 58% of participants indicated they would, while 15% said they would not. When asked about their feelings based on their experiences in their FIGs courses, 75% of participants indicated those experiences were positive, while 2% indicated those experiences were negative.

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** Most students found it easy to register for the FIGs at Summerstart.

Behind the scenes at registration, FIG Program developers found the newly established procedures rather chaotic—partly due to the coinciding change to the BANNER registration system—and thus were pleasantly surprised that 69% FIGs participants indicated that registering for the FIGs “was easy.” Another 22% indicated that registering for the FIGs “wasn't easy, but it wasn't too difficult either.” Although tweaking the registration process is a must for FIGs administrators, it was good to see that *students* were not negatively affected by registration logistics this first time out.

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** Summerstart advisors (faculty and students) were critical to FIGs enrollment process.

FIGs participants indicated that the most useful source of information about the FIGs clusters were Summerstart faculty advisors (30%), followed by Summerstart staff or peer advisors (25%) and the FIG pamphlet (22%). These findings echo the idea outlined earlier that FIGs participants sign up for the program late, if not spur-of-the-moment. As mentioned, 34% of FIGs participants gave as their primary reason for enrolling for the FIGs that no other courses were available, while another 24% cited the recommendations of Summerstart faculty. And while 33% indicated they enrolled because the idea and/or courses sounded interesting, less than 2% indicated that the primary reason they enrolled in a FIGs cluster was the literature they had received. (It may be that many students didn't actually read the pamphlet until they arrived for their Summerstart session.)

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** Among other appeals, FIGs helped course access and scheduling.

The reasons students signed up for FIGs were reiterated by open-ended comments. Homing in on key words and phrases using the NUD\*IST software program, analysis of qualitative findings noted that 36% of students mentioned course selection problems as their reason for enrolling in a FIGs cluster. “Other classes full,” “only thing open,” and “no other options” were typical comments.

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Yet students did not enroll in FIGs only because of last-minute registration concerns. Analysis of opened-ended comments revealed that for 53% of the survey respondents, some aspect of the program itself held a particular appeal. Some students believed the program and its courses would be interesting in various respects (16%); some were drawn by the integration of two courses (10%); some felt the program offered an appealing transition into college (11%); and some felt the program would facilitate meeting people and making new friends (10%).

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** Participants valued the residential/peer component of FIGs, for both social and academic reasons.

Overall, FIGs participants were pleased with the friends and connections they made; indeed, 46% of survey respondents noting social contact as one of the most valuable aspects of the program. Moreover, 84% of respondents indicated that yes, “being with the same group of students (in the FIG seminar) helped (them) this term,” with the two most frequently cited reasons being: 1. respondents valued the friendships engendered by the program (63%), and 2. it made finding study partners/groups easier (63%).

Many FIGs participants (40%) noted that improved learning was a major benefit of the program. Learning was perceived to have been enhanced by “hands-on” group projects and discussions, small classes and study groups, course integrating seminars, and exposure to various technologies (e.g., PowerPoint, library, internet).

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** Most FIG students made use of the technological enhancements used in the courses.

The technology component of the FIGs program was one given high priority, and findings bear out that students were at least willing to try the technologies, if not taken by them. When asked how much they spent per week using web-based FIGs course materials, 86% of participants indicated one-two hours a week or more. The most popular uses included: syllabus or assignments on the web (98% of FIG participants had used this resource); on-line lecture notes (92%); electronic discussion board (91%); and on-line surveys (90%).

Access to the FIG’s ClassWeb system (<http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/classweb>) was mostly through on-campus labs (77%), but also from modem-pool dial-ups (15%), non-Western ISP’s (4%), and AOL users (1%). The Center for Instructional Innovation randomly sampled student log-in of the ClassWeb and noted that students were most likely to log-on to the Sociology 260 site (50%), or the Environmental Studies 101 site (19%).

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** More synthesis between GUR courses and the integrative seminar is needed.

As would be expected of any first-time program, there were also identifiable weaknesses in Western’s FIG Program. For instance, although a strong mitigating factor exists, only 52% of FIG participants indicated that the FIGs lived up to their expectations. The mitigating factor, of course, as noted earlier in this report, is that enrollment in the FIGs appeared, for the most part, to be a last minute decision. Few students appeared to have had their attention drawn to the FIG concept before they actually signed up. Only 2% were influenced to sign up for FIGs based on the material they received before registering for classes at

Summerstart. Which begs the question: How much thought had students given to the FIG concept before enrolling in one and, therefore, how considered where their expectations?

Relatedly, focus group comments revealed that some students didn't grasp fully the design of the FIG Program. At the time of registration, one student thought, "the classes were only going to be small ones...And then we walked in and there was, like, huge classes. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it was kind of shocking." Another student said, "I thought it (the lecture class) would be all FIGs."

A finding of more importance was that only 53% of FIG participants thought the content of the large lecture courses related to each other. One student in the focus group noted that, "after it (the seminar) was done it was easier to say, 'Okay, now I guess that makes sense,'...but during the class it was like, 'What's going on? Is this really important? Do I have to be here?'" It wasn't that students didn't ultimately recognize the value of the seminars. For instance, when talking about the library skills they were exposed to, one focus group participant said, "Right now (at the end of the quarter) I'm really happy that I took this class. But, like, sitting through the first couple of weeks I was just, 'What is this?'"

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** FIGs freshmen had a higher WWU gpa than non-FIGs freshmen

The academic performance of FIGs freshmen was gratifying. The 174 FIGs freshmen had an overall Western gpa of 2.74, compared to the 2.65 earned by the 211 non-FIG's freshmen enrolled in the same large lecture courses. Moreover, 41.2% of FIGs freshmen earned a grade of B or better, compared to 33.6% of non-FIGs freshmen enrolled in the same large lecture classes. (See GPA Table.)

Within the related large lecture course, GPA comparisons varied. In a few cases, there were

Table 2: High School and Fall Quarter (WWU)  
Grade Point Averages Compared  
FIG vs. Non-FIG freshmen

	HS GPA		WWU Fall Qtr. GPA	
	FIG Frosh	Non-FIG Frosh	FIG Frosh	Non-FIG Frosh
A	4.1%	1.5%	1.7%	-
A-	19.2%	23.4%	7.1%	5.2%
B+	44.5%	50.7%	14.2%	16.1%
B	17.7%	19.5%	18.2%	12.3%
B-	11.6%	3.9%	17.3%	18.5%
C+	2.9%	1.0%	20.2%	19.4%
C	-	-	7.4%	13.3%
C-	-	-	2.3%	3.8%
D+	-	-	5.4%	8.1%
D	-	-	1.7%	1.9%
D-	-	-	2.3%	-
F	-	-	2.3%	1.4%
<b>B or better</b>	<b>85.5%</b>	<b>95.1%</b>	<b>41.2%</b>	<b>33.6%</b>
<b>Mean GPA</b>	<b>3.42</b>	<b>3.48</b>	<b>2.74</b>	<b>2.65</b>

simply not enough first-time, in-coming freshmen who were not FIGs students for the comparisons to be meaningful. Standard deviations, too, were varied. Generally, however, as with overall Western GPA, FIGs freshmen appear to have done slightly better than their non-FIGs counterparts. In the table below, the sections of related large courses have been give arbitrary alphabetic assignments. Interestingly, GPAs for FIG freshmen have quite a wide range, from 2.01 to 3.19, while the range for non-FIGs freshmen is less wide, from 2.30 to 2.78. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: GPAs in large lecture courses, FIGs freshmen compared to non-FIGs freshmen

Related Large Lecture Sections	GPAs in Lecture Courses				
	Non-FIGs freshmen			FIGs freshmen*	
		N	Std.		Std.
A	2.78	13	0.796	2.99	0.779
	2.73	63	0.760	3.09	0.773
B	2.78	52	0.625	2.34	0.649
	2.30	3	1.000	2.01	1.012
C	2.54	34	0.828	2.56	0.901
	2.37	24	0.752	2.19	0.850
D	2.78	52	0.625	2.68	0.584
	2.30	3	1.000	2.35	0.907
E	2.43	3	0.513	2.72	0.707
	3.49	11	0.437	3.16	0.474
F	2.54	34	0.828	2.64	1.034
	2.37	24	0.752	2.35	0.955
G	2.78	13	0.796	3.19	0.669
	2.73	63	0.760	3.06	0.560

\* N for FIGs was about 25 per seminar

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** FIGs effected withdrawal rates

The course withdrawal rate for non-FIGs participants was 2.8% versus 1.1% for FIGs participants. In all likelihood, the fact of linking anywhere from 9 to 11 credits of a student's course load reduced the impulse to withdraw.

**FACULTY VIEWPOINTS**

Generally, faculty response to the FIGs program was favorable. They especially found the technology component useful. One instructor noted that, "The web-based interface a major factor for success in the class." Regarding student comments culled from faculty evaluations, one instructor noted that, "There was not a single negative comment about the technology." Another instructor commented enthusiastically that, "You've successfully dragged a Neanderthal a few more feet into the technology revolution."

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Many instructors thought FIGs students had a positive influence on the large lecture classes. One instructor noted that, “FIGs students...brought an infectious level of energy that encouraged questions and discussion in a large lecture room. Too, the questions had a greater ‘sophistication.’” Another instructor thought that, “An unanticipated outcome of the FIGs was the general socialization that occurred as a result of the upper classmen in the class being aware that the FIGs was attached to the course. I believe that this awareness led to many comments being made on the online discussion boards that articulated the norms of the academic environment regarding appropriate classroom behavior, exam expectations, and achievement goals.” Yet another instructor said, “I saw some evidence that FIGs folk were teaching non-FIG people what they’d learned in terms of getting around the library.”

Yet faculty also noted where they thought the FIGs program could stand improvement. One seminar instructor thought, “There need(ed) to be much more direct linkage with the larger lecture courses...In retrospect, all these instructors (of seminar and large lecture sections) should have met to mesh their syllabi and assessment to provide a meaningful connection between the courses.” Another instructor thought, “(T)here should be some way to have them (FIGs students) reassemble after the quarter is over...(M)aybe having them be able to stay in touch via e-mail or a listserv or the internet.” This same instructor also encouraged program designers to “not survey future FIG students to death—they were really whining about them by the end of the quarter.” Based on the reflective narratives provided by the FIGs instructors, the following strengths and weaknesses are summarized.

#### STRENGTHS

- The summer faculty development workshops provided an opportunity for interdisciplinary support and mentoring in classroom innovations.
- Technical support provided by staff and students at the CII was invaluable in providing a foundation for course enhancements in large lecture sections.
- Working as a team, collaboration and mentoring between these individual faculty members has continued beyond the FIGs program. (Note: Even though stipends will not be available, all eight instructors from FIGs year one have signed on for year two.)
- Participation in FIGs achieved articulation of shared learning objectives and pedagogical approaches across GUR course offerings.

#### WEAKNESSES

- Conducting workshops across the 9 week summer session (one workshop per week) fostered sporadic attendance due to other summer commitments.
- More connection between the students in the FIGs seminars and the instructors is desirable.
- Documentation of course enhancements and reflective practice needs further development (i.e., course portfolios, formative evaluations, etc.).

#### PEER ADVISORS

##### ◆ HIGHLIGHT: Peer Advisor role need clarification

Experienced returning students served as Peer Advisors and had two-fold duties: to assist the faculty and teaching assistants in the seminars; and to coordinate evening workshops in

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the residence hall setting for FIG students. This component of the FIGs had mixed results. On the one hand, when asked about the Peer Advisors, 89% of FIG participants felt they were friendly, 69% felt they were enthusiastic, 63% felt they were helpful and informative, and 57% felt they well-organized.

Yet, as one FIGs faculty member pointed out, “Students did not reach out to the peer advisors as advisors, but rather viewed them more as teaching assistants, a role for which they were not adequately prepared. Moreover, at least for the Library 125 seminars, teaching assistant were hardly necessary, as classes were small and most sessions included group work. Students in the focus groups noted that peer advisors sometimes seemed “More like a teacher’s aide than a peer advisor.”

◆ **HIGHLIGHT:** The evening presentations needed further development.

As far as the evening presentations, only 35% of FIG participants felt that the Peer Advisors planned worthwhile activities. Though to be fair, the Peer Advisors were responsible not for the content of the evening activities, but rather for administering them. These evening activities came under particular scrutiny in the focus group discussion. One student said that, “The reason I didn’t go (to the events) was they didn’t sound interesting.” Another student said, “I went to three out of four. And there were never very many people there.” The one event that did sound promising to some students was entitled “Winter Quarter Registration Tips.” One student said, “I was really excited to go.” But for those who attended, the sentiment was that, “They (event presenters) helped you a little bit, but everyone left after ten minutes. I stayed and tried to get help, but I didn’t think that they really told us that much.”

One FIG participant thought the events should have focused on an activity. “Like huge social things. Like bowling and doing those types of things.” Echoing these sentiments, another student said, “(The event I went to) lacked fun, It was kind of dead. I guess if had, maybe, centered around an activity or something (it would have been better).” One of FIG seminar instructors thought that “the peer advisor role should be changed to become a ‘social coordinator’. I think the students would have enjoyed social outings in groups instead of the workshops.” Indeed, on the heels of these assessments, one the more closely scrutinized aspects of next fall’s FIG program will be the role of the Peer Advisors.

## **YEAR TWO: PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND CHANGES MADE**

Based on the program and student outcomes assessment of year one of the FIGs, a number of changes are being implemented in the second year. They include:

- The development of a systematic and outcomes-based integrative seminar model. In the fall of 2000, the two-credit seminars linked to the large GUR sections will be offered as Library 197/Communication 197. These seminars will assess student outcomes in writing, critical thinking, and information literacy. The data obtained in these seminars will provide the baseline assessments for 350 first-year students and serve as the foundation on which GUR reform of outcomes assessment can be built.

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- The dedicating of peer advisors to two living/learning cohorts of FIG students. Specifically, one cohort of 25 freshmen in Soc 260/Art History 220 and one cohort of 25 freshmen in Psych 219/Theatre 102 will con-enroll in one of these FIGs clusters and live on the same floor at Fairhaven Residential Complex. Peer advisors, under the direction of New Students Programs, will assist these students with study groups and transition to Western.
  - The reformatting of summer faculty workshops from the summer-long weekly seminars to a two-day retreat in early June. This format should better facilitate group support for course development and meet the summer schedule conflicts encountered in year one's program. Follow-up to the retreat will be provided by the CII, with faculty working on technological enhancements throughout the summer.
  - The expansion of recruitment efforts for the FIGs to include more coordination with the Offices of Admissions and Academic Advising. For example, information about FIGs will be disseminated not only at Summerstart but also Discovery Days and Western Preview. A web page has been developed as well that provides access to course information and advising into the program.
  - The encouragement of students to register prior to Summerstart through the web or by mailing their course requests in early June. This advance registration process will also make it possible to provide special advising sessions for FIGs students at Summerstart.
  - The organization of FIG students follow-ups in the winter and spring quarters organized with assistance from New Student Programs.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The FIGs program pilot was developed as one of the recommendations by the Freshmen-Year Experience Task Force to improve Western's freshman year experience, including curricular and co-curricular dimensions. FIGs provide both small group experiences and integrated coursework for new freshmen. Research indicated that FIGs have had good results, addressing many of the problems identified by the task force.

Western's FIGs had elements typical, and basic, to such programs found elsewhere. A Western student enrolled in two large GUR courses with shared thematic connections, and a 2-credit seminar. There were four sets of connected GUR courses and three seminars formats: 1) taught by the GUR course professors; 2) taught by graduate teaching assistants; and 3) taught by Western librarians. The long-term goal of the FIGs programs is to establish one systematic format for all the integrated seminars, but due to the "pilot" aspect of this past year's program, a variety of seminar formats was encouraged. Importantly, although seminar enrollment totaled 175 students, over 1300 students—the combined GUR enrollment—benefitted from the technological and pedagogical innovations embedded in the faculty development phase of the program.

An added component of Western's FIG program was technical support from the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII), who provided FIG faculty access to computer-based technology instruction and, during summer quarter, 1999, a series of eight FIGs faculty workshops that focused on pedagogical issues. The CII also provided support for those faculty who

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wished to incorporate more instructional technologies into their FIGs courses. In addition, the CII developed a portal Internet website, called ClassWeb, that served to direct students to instructional materials on the web.

The FIG Program included Peer Advisors, experienced returning students who had a strong understanding of Western's resources and past experience working with new students. Their duties were two-fold: 1) to assist the faculty and teaching assistants in the seminars; and 2) to coordinate evening workshops in the residence hall setting for FIG students.

To carry out the first year of the pilot project, new collaborative ties had to be forged. The orchestration and management of the FIGs program was complex, and one outcome of the pilot project was a clearer understanding of the interrelated sectors at Western that are needed to launch and maintain such an ambitious first-year experience.

Great pains were taken during the initial phases of developing Western's FIG Program to include a thorough assessment component. Indeed, no less than seven different assessment techniques were utilized. These included:

- The Lecture Course Survey of all connected large lecture courses conducted in-class near the beginning and end of the quarter.
- The FIGs Participant Survey administered in the FIGs seminars by the instructors, pre and post.
- A FIGs Focus Group conducted during "dead" week.
- Open-Ended Responses by FIGs Participants Survey analyzed using a qualitative software program.
- Student Tracking System Data (gpa's, ethnicity, gender, etc.) analyzed for both non-FIG and FIG course participants.
- Freshmen Survey Data incorporated into the analysis where appropriate.
- Open-ended Faculty Comments solicited and received from most FIGs instructors.

Demographically, FIGs participants did not look much different when compared to the over all population of fall quarter, 1999, freshmen. Neither did issues of "self-selection" play much part in the analysis of FIG assessment. (See discussion in the main body of the report.) In fact, no statistical evidence was found that greatly differentiated Western's FIG students from the general population of Western students.

Highlights from the findings included the following:

- The vast majority of FIGs students found it a worthwhile experience that helped their transition to college.
- Most students found it easy to register for the FIGs at Summerstart and that Summerstart advisors (faculty and students) were critical to FIGs enrollment process.
- Among other appeals, FIGs helped course access and scheduling.
- Participants valued the residential/peer component of FIGs, for both social and academic reasons.
- Most FIG students made use the technological enhancements used in the courses.
- More synthesis between GUR courses and the integrative seminar is needed.



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- FIGs freshmen earned a higher WWU gpa than non-FIGs freshmen. The 174 FIGs freshmen had an overall Western gpa of 2.74, compared to the 2.65 earned by the 211 non-FIG's freshmen enrolled in the same large lecture courses. Moreover, 41.2% of FIGs freshmen earned a grade of B or better, compared to 33.6% of non-FIGs freshmen enrolled in the same large lecture classes.
  - FIGs effects withdrawal rate. The course withdrawal rate for non-FIGs participants was 2.8% versus 1.1% for FIGs participants.
  - Peer Advisor role need clarification. Students in the focus groups noted that peer advisors sometimes seemed more like aides than advisors.
  - The evening presentations need further development.

Based on the program and student outcomes assessment of year one of the FIGs, a number of changes are being implemented in the second year. These include the following:

- A systematic and outcomes-based integrative seminar model will be developed.
- Peer advisors will be dedicated to two living/learning cohorts of FIG students. Under the direction of New Students Programs, they will assist these students with study groups and transition to Western.
- The format for the faculty workshops will shift from the summer-long weekly seminars to a two-day retreat in early June.
- The recruitment efforts for the FIGs have been expanded in year two to include more coordination with the Offices of Admissions and Academic Advising.
- Students will be encouraged to register prior to Summerstart through the web or by mailing their course requests in early June.
- To insure continued support of first-year students, follow-ups in winter and spring quarters will be organize with assistance from New Student Programs.

Year one of the FIGs program at Western was a rousing success. Overall, results were positive and encouraging. Aided by the scope and breadth of the assessment component, program developers easily identified problems and were later able to address the issues while designing year two of the program. Faculty exhibited clear enthusiasm—as can be noted by the number of faculty interested in participating in the program next fall. Students, too, were enthusiastic. Indeed, many were interested in taking a FIGs cluster again in the winter quarter.

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**APPENDIX A:**

**1. LECTURE COURSE SURVEY FORM**

**2. FIGs SEMINAR SURVEY FORM**

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**APPENDIX B:**  
**COMMENTS FROM FIGS PARTICIPANTS**

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