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## Supporting the First Year Transition Through Experiential Learning

*Linda Beck  
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The transition to college life--both academic and social--can be quite challenging for any first-year student. This transition is further complicated for first-generation college students who do not have a parent, or maybe another family member or friend, to help prepare and guide them through the process. This is one of the reasons UMaine Farmington created “Summer Experience” (SE), a week-long program intended to help students become more familiar with campus, connect with some of their new classmates and upper class student mentors, and gain some early exposure to coursework and discussions at the college level.

Unfortunately, the participation of incoming students in the SE program was constrained by scheduling conflicts with summer jobs and family vacations, largely because SE occurred in mid-June. Moreover, despite its name, Summer Experience offered limited experiential learning, tending instead to feature more traditional academic reading and writing exercises.

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach that combines the conceptual and theoretical knowledge typically taught in a classroom with hands-on learning experiences, culminating in a reflective project, exercise and/or write-up that encourages students to synthesize the knowledge, skills, and insight they gained from these two forms of learning. Experiential learning is an important component of high-impact learning practices that have proven to be critical to undergraduate student success and retention.

In an effort to address both of these issues, a new program was developed in 2019 that fused SE with the First Year Seminar (FYS) in which all first year students are required to enroll. Piloted in Fall 2019, the First Year Fusion (FYF) sections of the FYS program began a week before college orientation in an effort to avoid scheduling conflicts for students with busy summers. During the pre-semester “Fusion Week,” each section engaged in various forms of experiential learning, designed to enhance the students' understanding and engagement with the selected academic theme of the course while also meeting the co-curricular goals and activities associated with SE by

creating a supportive learning community and connection to UMaine Farmington. An added bonus for incoming students is that the intensive week-long program prior to the start of the semester allows the FYS to end mid-term, so that students can focus on their remaining classes during the second half of their initial college semester.

### **Overview of Pilot First Year Fusion Courses:**

In 2019, FYF was launched with pilot sections run by three faculty members with prior expertise in experiential learning. As described above, the pilot courses were structured as an intensive, travel-based experiential field week that took place prior to the semester's start, followed by a truncated half-semester FYS that ended in October. In its pilot year, the planning horizon was somewhat abbreviated when compared to the typical preparation for an off-campus travel course, and the program was launched with three sections. In 2020, the FYF sections were expanded to five offerings, and in 2021 the program is slated to offer 11 sections. Planning is underway for international FYF sections in subsequent years, representing a dramatic increase in the reach, scope, and complexity of the experiential offerings under this new program.

The format and structure of FYF has several rationales. First, the pre-orientation field week provides unparalleled opportunities for cohort-building, and jumpstarts the process of making connections with fellow incoming first year students (before the hectic schedule of college orientation and the inevitable chaos of the first weeks of the semester). For students making the transition to college, having this defined period of intensive focus on one class and with one group of peers forges bonds and creates a useful space between the summer's activities and the upcoming shift into campus life. Second, the pre-semester field week contains sufficient contact hours to allow the seminar portion of the course to be shortened by half a semester. This lightens the students' course load for the latter half of the semester, providing them more time and space to focus on their other courses and final exams. Third, enrollment in FYF courses in the first two pilot years was targeted especially to certain groups of students who can benefit from additional programming and greater social support. This included out-of-state students, who may not have strong prior connections to Maine communities or have family and friends close by. Enrollment was also focused on first-generation college students, as a way of building momentum for college success through completing half a college course even before the semester had begun.

The first three pilot FYF sections were “Making Change in Maine,” taught by geographers Matt McCourt and Jesse Minor, and religion professor Philip Francis’s “The Good Life.” The three classes traveled off campus for Fusion week, with experiential learning as a core component that linked hands-on and outdoor work with course themes, readings, site visits, and activities. At the conclusion of Fusion week, the sections rejoined for final presentations and a group cookout to celebrate the successful completion of half of their first college course at UMaine Farmington.

“The Good Life” FYF prompted the questions “what counts as a good life and how do I go about living that good life?” and approached the topic through a five-day retreat at the Seguinland Institute, an educational nonprofit founded by Philip Francis in Georgetown, Maine, that offers credit-bearing courses through UMaine Farmington. During the Fusion Week, students engaged in a variety of activities such as canoeing, mindfulness and guided reflection, and group food preparation that linked readings in philosophy and nature writing to the questions of what it means to live meaningfully.

“Making Change in Maine” took students on a five-day trip through interior and coastal Maine to meet with a variety of “changemakers,” typically recent UMaine Farmington graduates, who are engaged with positive improvements in their rural communities. Site visits included an arts-based redevelopment project in Monson, a craft brewery and natural history museum in Milo, and an under-construction ice arena in Dover-Foxcroft, followed by a youth boatbuilding program, a 2-room K-8 schoolhouse, and waste management on Little Cranberry Island (Islesford). Experiential learning activities ranged from navigating the sidewalks of Monson wearing goggles (modified to mimic various sorts of visual impairments) and using a guide cane, to hands-on data collection in which students mapped sidewalk hazards in Monson, and used mobile GIS software to map all the houses and addresses on Islesford for the island’s public safety department. The two “Making Change in Maine” sections traveled together in a fully-blended cohort before pursuing separate projects during the half-semester seminar. Matt McCourt’s section of “Making Change in Maine” partnered with UMaine Farmington’s Sweatt-Winter Early Care and Education Center to design and build nature-based playscape elements. Jesse Minor’s section employed public life survey methods to study transportation issues on and near the UMaine Farmington campus.

In 2020, the FYF pilot was expanded to include two additional sections: “Success and Failure” taught as an Honors FYS by Shana Youngdahl, and “How to Succeed in College without Trying” taught by Denisa Cundick. During Fusion week, these FYF sections were combined into a larger cohort, and they explored the Farmington area through visits to outdoor sites that reinforced course themes such as ‘going with the flow/sink or swim’ while floating down the Sandy River. These sections featured tight integration of habits and skills central to college success combined with outdoor activities and experiences, making explicit links between the personal and community resources, attributes that support growth and success, and the natural and social amenities located in Farmington and on campus.

### **COVID-year experiences:**

The novel coronavirus pandemic that was identified in late 2019 caused sharp disruptions to daily life through economic shutdowns, closures of public amenities, and reconfigurations of space to accommodate physical distancing and reduce the risk of virus transmission. The UMaine System responded by converting all Spring 2020 classes to remote offerings following spring break, which was extended by a week to accommodate the change in instructional mode. All work-related and course-based travel was suspended, putting field work, grants, travel courses, athletic competitions, and other off-campus activities on hold. The Fall 2020 semester saw an alteration of course delivery, with far more fully remote courses offered both synchronously and asynchronously, and hybrid/blended courses that combined in-person and online course activities. Some hybrid/blended courses started the semester in-person and converted to remote learning partway through the semester, while others offered combined sections in which some students joined remotely and others attended in-person. Classes were also offered fully on campus and in-person, using classrooms that were altered to accommodate physical distancing and reduced occupancy. Many instructors took advantage of warm and dry weather early in the semester to teach largely or entirely outdoors, where viral transmission risk was even lower (see Minor’s essay on outdoor teaching in this volume).

Under these conditions, FYF could not operate in the way it was initially envisioned and piloted in 2019. Travel was disallowed by the UMaine System, and van occupancy was reduced to 2 people and a driver. As a result, the FYF sections were obliged to operate on foot and in Farmington, with all activities either on or near campus. This required rethinking and revising the FYF sections’ community

partnerships and experiential activities, particularly those planned for the pre-semester field week.

Students returned to campus 2 weeks before the start of the Fall 2020 semester, and were quarantined in their dorm rooms. Upon a negative COVID-19 test, FYF students were cleared to attend field week activities while their peers remained in isolation. Against this setting, FYF represented an opportunity for socialization, cohort-building, and academic exploration that not all incoming UMaine Farmington students encountered. Assessment of the FYF program is ongoing (and will be reported in a future manuscript). Assessment will compare college success and retention of FYF students in relation to students who took ‘traditional’ full-semester FYS courses by comparing GPA and their long-term persistence.

One effect of basing all of the 2020 FYF sections on the UMaine Farmington campus was that all of the participating students gained a fuller orientation to Farmington’s geography and experienced some of its natural and social amenities. Some of the FYF sections were centered on community-engaged topics and service-learning projects, which deepened their exposure to and accelerated their integration into the Farmington community.

### **Initial Assessment of First Year Fusion:**

The benefits of the FYF program were captured through student surveys and faculty debriefing conducted in 2019 and 2020. After the completion of the high-impact Fusion Week in the fall of 2019, students were primed for embarking on their undergraduate adventure. This was evident not only in their outstanding final presentations, but also in their responses to assessment questions. In terms of helping them prepare for academic success at UMaine Farmington, students rated their Fusion Week experience at 4.52 on average on a scale of 1-5, with a score of 5 indicating a significant level of benefit. When asked about their favorite activities, students cited a wide range of experiential learning activities, from mobile geographic mapping to meeting with one of Maine’s “change makers” (a UMaine Farmington graduate), who helped them experience “the difficulties of mobility from the perspective of a visually impaired person through fieldwork.” Students rated the benefits of the Fusion program even higher in terms of their social adjustment (4.7), and indicated that they were highly likely (4.85) to recommend a FYF experience to future incoming students. As one respondent stated, the Fusion Week “was a great way to make friends before school started.” When asked for one of the high points of

the experience, another student noted “I think the whole Fusion program was a high point because I didn’t feel left out. [I could tell that] my classmates and the professor cared about me.”

In light of the successful pilot in 2019, UMaine Farmington decided to add two additional FYF sections in the fall of 2020, only to have COVID nearly cancel the entire program. Fortunately, the resilient faculty and their equally resilient students and TAs managed to pull off a modified version of the courses, or what we lightheartedly came to refer to as “Fusion Lite.” In the Farmington-based Fusion Week, all courses were required to meet on campus with highly modified activities due to COVID restrictions. As before, the FYF students began their course prior to Orientation, but this time all the other incoming students were on campus, sleeping in late, hanging out together, playing pick up games and exploring campus, town and the vicinity (despite protocols) once they received a negative COVID test. Needless to say, this alteration to the FYF program dramatically changed the social and academic context for the expanded pilot and is reflected in slightly lower ratings in the student assessments.

But even if the favorable assessment of the FYF sections was tempered in 2020, there was still a great deal of enthusiasm for the courses. After the completion of the FYF courses in October, students rated its contribution to their preparation for academic success as a 4.04 out of five, indicating that they were likely (4.23) to recommend a Fusion experience to future incoming students. Although they were not able to travel around the state, students emphasized the benefits they found from their experiential learning, even if significantly modified. As one student noted: “My high point of the course was the presentations from various people [who met with us on campus]. It gave me real life stories that eased stress about the overall scheme of things.” Although some may have been envious of the unstructured time of other students not in an FYF section, others recognized the benefits of this opportunity to transition to college: “High points were the first week experience kept me busy and threw me into a class experience.” Another student talked about how the Fusion experience “let us dive into deeper thinking about topics generally not covered in school.”

Undoubtedly, the Class of 2025 who will join us this coming fall will benefit from our ability to return to experiential learning beyond campus. Going forward, we hope to strengthen our assessment of the FYF program through comparison of retention and GPA rates between students who have and have not had the benefit of

the FYF transition to college.

### **Post-COVID Expansion of the First Year Fusion Model:**

Since its inception in 2019, the FYF program has grown from three sections, to five in 2020, with 11 planned for the fall of 2021. Although the FYF experience was significantly modified in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each section was able to retain experiential components while based on UMaine Farmington's campus and strictly adhering to CDC guidelines. The decision to more than double the number of sections this coming fall was tied in part to the anticipation of some degree of continued COVID protocols (that fortunately are likely to be less strict by late 2021). Given that all first-year students were required in fall 2020 to arrive early for testing and quarantining, leaving the majority of students with little to do for a full week prior to Orientation, the decision was made to offer as many FYF sections as possible, so that the students can begin their transition to UMaine Farmington early. With widespread vaccination and tentative plans for requiring vaccinations for all students, fall semester will see a relaxation of testing and isolation protocols. That means that the FYF program can resume its off-campus experiential learning, with plans for sections to do field work in Acadia National Park, visit other sites along the Maine coast, and explore the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

COVID also slowed down but has not stopped UMaine Farmington's plans to expand the FYF program globally. Originally scheduled for fall 2021, two new sets of FYF sections are being developed for fall 2022 that include pre-semester travel segments to Japan and Senegal, during which students will undertake experiential learning with their international counterparts. The Global FYF initiative is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to promote Undergraduate International & Foreign Language Studies. Through the benefits of digital technology, the Global FYF courses will incorporate a Virtual Global Experience after returning to campus, which will support collaborative projects with their international classmates that extend beyond the pre-semester international travel component.

### **Conclusions:**

As we build on the foundation that has been created for FYF in these first two pilot years, it is clear that the program is primed for growth and expansion. A broader FYF program affords the possibility of differentiation across sections beyond what we have attempted thus far. In addition to international FYF offerings, we envision



future sections that will expand on direct service-learning to community groups in various parts of Maine, explore topics in health and wellness, focus on college readiness, and deploy project-based learning in the social sciences and natural sciences. In our view, FYF represents the best of what UMaine Farmington has to offer: authentic, experiential, and diversified programming geared toward student growth and success.

The FYF program also represents the sort of innovation that UMaine Farmington is known for doing so well, and provides a robust opportunity for marketing, niche differentiation, and storytelling that helps recruit students to our campus. The structure and format of FYF is tailored to aid in student retention and collegiate success. As we move beyond the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that this model of curricular innovation will yield significant positive results.

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