
■ **2008-2009 General Student Focus Group
and Faculty Feedback Report**

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LOYOLA
COLLEGE IN MARYLAND

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This report was prepared by the Office of First-Year Research, in the Office of Institutional Research, using data collected in a student focus group.

2008-2009 General Student Focus Group and Faculty Feedback Report

Introduction

First-year students may enroll in only one of the College's first-year programs—Alpha, FE 100, or Collegium. Students are also invited into the Honors program and may choose to do this instead of one of the three aforementioned programs. In fall 2008, 57% of full-time, first-time students participated in a first-year program. Students who do not enroll in one of these programs are considered to have enrolled in the “general” academic program. This group constitutes a substantial proportion of the first-year student population and it is important to understand their first-year experience.

In order to assess how well the first-year programs are functioning and what improvements could be made, focus group discussions were conducted with students in each of the programs. Further, a discussion group with students who did not engage in a first-year program was conducted to understand their first-year experience and how it differed from their peers who chose to engage in a first-year program. This report provides results from the study on General students only. Results from the Alpha, FE 100, Collegium, and Honors studies can be found in separate reports available from the Office of First-Year Research.¹

Methodology

The feedback from the General students was collected by holding a discussion group towards the beginning of the spring semester. The goal was to have between 8 and 10 participants. To achieve this objective, five sets of 25 students were randomly selected from the pool of eligible students who did not engage in a first-year program. They were invited via e-mail to the session (See Appendix A for a sample invitation). Invitees were selected randomly from all Class of 2012 General students who were not participating in the Educational Intentionality Study that began fall 2008.²

The focus group was held on February 19th from 5:00 to 6:30 p.m. in DeChiaro College Center, room 107. Invitees were notified that dinner and two movie tickets would be provided to all participants. Eight students responded to the invitation but only six students attended the discussion. The focus group was facilitated by Shannon Tinney, Associate Director and Coordinator of First-Year and Retention Studies in the Office of Institutional Research. Students were greeted upon arrival, offered to help themselves to dinner, and invited to get comfortable. Introductions were made. The facilitator explained the role of the Office of Institutional Research on college campuses, as well as the nature of a focus group. It was explained that there were no right or wrong answers and that students should feel free to voice their opinions. It was explained that the discussion would be digitally recorded for purposes of writing the report only and that first names should be used during the discussion. Students were informed that all comments would remain anonymous by using fictitious names in the reports and that no one besides the primary investigators would listen to the recording. (See Appendix B for the discussion guide.) There were five women and one man who attended the focus group. Two students lived in Campion Tower and four students lived in Flannery O'Connor Hall, one of which had moved to the latter from Hopkins Court.

¹ <http://www.loyola.edu/IR/Students/First-Year%20Research/First-Year%20Research%20Tools>

² Students participating in the panel study on Educational Intentionality at Loyola College were excluded because they are being asked similar types of questions during their interviews. Also, we desired as diverse a group of respondents as possible without overlap between the two institutional research efforts.

Executive Summary

Motivations and Intentions

- ◆ Students chose to pursue a college degree because: it was the socially acceptable thing to do, it would provide them with career options, it would help them to mature intellectually and socially, and it was the most desirable and viable option for them at that time.
- ◆ Only one student intended to enroll in a first-year program—FE 100—and could not because it was at capacity. Other students chose not to engage in a first-year program because they did not want another obligation or wanted the freedom to meet people on their own and not in a contrived setting.

Expectations and Outcomes

- ◆ Students were most excited about living in a dorm, being independent, and having new experiences; engaging in community service; exploring and becoming acquainted with Baltimore; and studying abroad.
- ◆ For some students, the academic transition went well the first semester, while others learned important lessons like time management and study habits that made the spring semester more manageable.
- ◆ Some students expressed that they were “friend-sick” or “homesick,” but that soon passed as they easily made friendships which helped them to like Loyola even more because they felt like they “fit in”.
- ◆ A little distance between students and their families made participants find a new appreciation for their parents and siblings, and develop a more mature relationship with their parents.

The Jesuit Tradition

- ◆ Participants saw the Jesuit tradition woven into their experiences at Loyola through interactions with the Jesuits, taking the Core curriculum, engaging in community service and campus ministry.

Advising

- ◆ Participants expressed both favorable and unfavorable Core advising experiences. Students who approved of their Core advisors described them as accessible, knowledgeable about the Core curriculum, interested in their advisees’ academic interests, and helpful in gathering information to assist students in making informed decisions about their schedules and academic program.
- ◆ Students who disapproved of their Core advisors described them as inaccessible, unhelpful in terms of getting guidance on the Core curriculum and schedule planning, and lacking interest in them as advisees.

New Ideas

- ◆ Students are interested in the College developing ways to invigorate school spirit.
- ◆ Participants wanted healthier food options and greater variety. One suggestion was to have a traditional-style meal plan, like an all-you-can-eat cafeteria style plan adopted by many other schools that their friends and family members have attended or currently attend.

Detailed Findings

Motivations and Intentions

Participants were asked why they decided to pursue a college degree and what they hoped to get out of doing so. A few participants noted that they didn't consider doing anything other than going to college because it was expected of them—they were socialized to do so from a young age. One student explained it this way, "For me not being in school, like, wasn't an option, like, both of my parents did and both of my brothers did, and my one brother went here. And since my freshmen year of high school—this is where I wanted to go to college." Three students also mentioned reasons that aligned with a careerist orientation towards pursuing a four-year degree. One of these students mentioned that going to college would give her the most options in terms of career choice, while another student stated that she "wanted a good job," meaning she wanted "to get paid a lot of money to do something [she] want[ed] to do." The third student aspired to the field of dentistry and saw a four-year degree as a prerequisite to her educational and vocational endeavors.

At the same time, these students also noted that they pursued college to grow intellectually and socially, and to become more independent. For example, two women expressed they simply wanted to learn more. One student wanted to become a "more well-rounded person" where she learned to better relate to others and had an opportunity to learn more about the world, in general. Another student noted that college "brings a maturing experience along with the academics" such that one learns how to take care of oneself, including how to do laundry, determine what one was going to eat, and take care of daily chores and cleaning. Another student articulated a feminist orientation towards her reasons for pursuing a college degree; she wanted to be economically independent and not have to "depend on anyone else for money."

Finally, a first-generation college student in attendance told us that she came to Loyola because other options were less desirable or seemed unviable. She explained:

I actually was a little discouraged because I wasn't getting in to where I wanted.

I wanted to go to Fordham and I didn't get in and I was discouraged for a little bit.... But then, um, my parents both didn't go to college...and so they were open to me doing whatever I wanted to do. They wanted me to, like, be happy doing what I wanted to do, but I knew I didn't want to just stay in my town and hang around so I thought about, like, getting a job and taking a year off and then going to school. I knew I eventually wanted to get the whole experience 'cause, like, a lot of my friends are older and they went to college and had a great time.... So, I wanted to go eventually, but not yet, because I didn't know what I wanted to do or anything. But then when, like, all of the realities of the real world [hit me]....'cause you're not under, like, your parent's insurance and all that stuff, so I just decided to go here and figure out what I wanted to do. So, now, I'm like on

the right track.... My original plan was to figure out, like, what I wanted to do before I came to school, but instead I came here.... Since you have to take Core classes and stuff it kind of gave me an opportunity to, like, take things and kind of figure out what I wanted to do here instead of not being in school.

Although this student thought she needed to figure out what she wanted to do prior to coming to college, she realized that through the Core curriculum she could explore her interests to then determine the right path for her.

Participants were asked why they did not enroll in a first-year program. Only one out of the six participants had originally wanted to engage in one. He had attempted to sign up for the FE 100 course but could not get in because it was closed. He wanted to engage in FE 100 because he thought it would provide him with an extra group of people to meet with whom he could hang out. He considered Alpha too but then decided against it; he didn't offer any reasons for this decision during the discussion. Another student who was a member of the FE 100 Leadership Experience community (by nature of her roommate) expressed regret for not having signed up for the class because she saw the bond the other students had by nature of doing so. She said:

I kind of regret not signing up for FE just because I was living on the FE floor...So I was maybe like one of three people on the floor that didn't have an FE class and most of the kids on my floor were, like, in FE classes together. So I regretted not signing up for that just because they were always together, like, in class and going different places and talking about, like, certain experiences. So I think just like where I was living kind of made me feel like left out in a sense because they did have that experience together.... Not that I didn't feel a connection with anyone—I got to know people on my floor—it's just that they had that extra time and extra experiences to get to know each other.

Although she regretted not having enrolled in the FE 100 class so that she would have that common experience with her floor mates, she later expressed that she didn't feel like she was in a different position compared to others for her choice not to enroll in a first-year program.

The remaining participants provided reasons why they did not enroll in a first-year program. Two students didn't take one because they didn't want to feel constricted in the way that they met people or made acquaintances and friends; they wanted to do it their own way. Another student added that she was on a sports team which would allow her to meet people and make friends; she wanted to be able "to get adjusted to everything" and "not have to worry about an additional thing".

Expectations and Outcomes

Participants were invited to think about what they were most excited about learning or doing their first year, and what they expected to get involved in on campus (or had done so already). One student said she had looked forward to living in a dorm, being independent, and experiencing new things. The student-athlete was excited for the tennis season to begin. A couple of other students looked forward to community service and noted that attending college in Baltimore afforded them many opportunities to do this—they had gotten involved with service activities already. On that note, one student looked forward to getting to know Baltimore better too. Other responses included looking forward to researching and engaging in study abroad programs.

Participants discussed their transition to college. For the most part, participants were positive about their academic and social transitions. Students had different perspectives on how their first semester went in comparison to their spring semester. On the one hand, there were participants who said the fall semester was hard but that they learned important lessons that made the spring go better because they learned how to balance the academic and social aspects of college life. For instance, one student noted being overwhelmed with work the first semester and learned time management skills and better ways to study. On the other hand, there were participants whose fall semesters went really well but thought the spring semester was more challenging; they attributed it to their current workload since it was close to mid-terms. Another challenge for students was that they needed to learn how to understand and accommodate their different professors' expectations and deal with the fact that even though they may be taking the same class as a peer who has a different professor, the expectations may differ. One student viewed this as inequitable.

With regards to participants' social transition, some expressed that they were "friend-sick" or "homesick," but that soon passed as they developed friendships on campus. Even though they missed their friends from home, students quickly made friendships at Loyola. Almost all of the participants said that making friendships helped them to like Loyola even more because they felt like they "fit in". When asked how their transition seemed different from their peers who had engaged in a first-year program, participants were quick to note that they had to put themselves out there to make friends because they did not have an affiliated group like first-year program participants did. One participant commented, "I think they're [those who engaged in a first-year program] more kind of secluded to their own group...They didn't really branch out as much as I think you would if you were forced to." Another participant described it this way:

My old roommate was in FE and, like, the first two weeks he hung out with three guys from his FE class over in Flannery where I would just walk through the hallway, knock, and just find somebody. Like that's how I met all of my...floor mates from Hopkins and started hanging out with each one of them.

One participant who lives on the fourth floor of Flannery O'Connor where the Phil-o-Lodge is located described the tight-knit bonds that those community members had, while also noting its exclusive nature. In the end, all participants expressed that, in hindsight, they would *not* have enrolled in a first-year program.

With regards to the social transition to college, students mentioned that the space created between them and their families by the nature of being away at college impacted those relationships in a positive way. For example, participants noted that they found a

new appreciation for their parents, developed a more mature relationship with them, had better relationships with siblings, and were less likely to engage in “silly arguments”.

The Jesuit Tradition

Participants were asked to consider how they saw the Jesuit tradition woven into their experiences at Loyola. One participant noted that the Core curriculum is a reflection of the Jesuit tradition. Although she thinks it's good to have, she sometimes feels the work is unnecessary given what she wants to be doing. A couple of students noted that it was nice to see the Jesuits always around campus. One student shared:

I kind of like...[that] the actual Jesuits are just around. One time I was coming down...to the first floor [of Flannery O'Connor Hall]...and Father Jack was like, 'Hey, do you want some breakfast?'...there was [sic] bagels and doughnuts and hot chocolate and...we just had breakfast and talked to Father Jack about, like, going out the night before and he asked what we're being for Halloween, and we were just, like, chatting. It was just, like, a great conversation. He wasn't, like, talking to us about religion or anything—he was just having a conversation with us....he lives in our building and I see him at the gym...I like how they're [the Jesuits] just around...'Cause they are, they're part of the school. That's what I like about it [Loyola].

Participants commented that they also saw the Jesuit tradition woven into their experience through community service activities and campus ministry. Students were interested in engaging in spring retreats through campus ministry and looked forward to pursuing that in the future.

Advising

Participants were asked to describe their relationships with their Core advisors. Half of the group expressed that they had good relationships with their Core advisors and found their Core advisors to be helpful. Conversely, the other three students did not have favorable comments about their Core advisors. For those who expressed positive sentiments, they described their advisors as accessible and knowledgeable about the Core curriculum. Also, their Core advisors made efforts to learn about their intended majors, and were willing to contact other offices on campus to gather information to help students make informed decisions. With regards to the registration process, participants who had a positive Core advising experience mentioned that their advisors had provided them with advice about developing a schedule and helped them in this process.

To the contrary, the three students who were disapproving of their Core advisors perceived them as inaccessible and unhelpful in terms of giving guidance on the Core curriculum and how best to plan their schedules. Also, students felt their advisors lacked interest in them as advisees. In particular, one student had a difficult time getting in touch with her advisor, and two of the other students perceived that when it came time for spring registration, their advisors were only interested in signing their registration

sheets and not providing guidance. For advice these students turned to upper-class students or parents. One student described the experience this way:

Mine [her Core advisor] just, like, e-mailed me and he was going to a conference...during registration time so there was one day that we could meet with him so that was kind of difficult.... He just, like, wanted to sign off on the paper and I wasn't done with filling it out so he was like... 'I'll just sign it'. So, I basically didn't have anything planned out so I just, like, called my parents and talked it over with them.

Participants were invited to consider how their relationships with their Core Advisors were different from students who enrolled in a first-year program. Two students drew examples from their friends or roommates who were in FE 100. Both noted that these students tended to have more personal relationships with their advisors where the advisors knew their advisees well. Participants noted that the personalized and comfortable relationship formed between advisor and advisee was cultivated through activities that faculty members and students engaged in through the first-year program.

New Ideas

Participants feel the Loyola campus has school spirit, but it is in "pockets"; it does not permeate the campus like at other schools where the campus and surrounding community gather together to root on sports teams. Participants attributed low attendance at sporting events to bad weather and teams' unimpressive records. Although participants did not think a new sports team was necessary to generate excitement, they wanted the College to come up with events or activities that would cultivate school spirit. Students were aware of two ways in which school spirit had been cultivated, including tailgating events and the Super Fans—a group of students who rally around Loyola's teams at every event.

Participants wanted better food options, including healthier food options and more variety. One suggestion was to have a meal plan, as some speculated it would be less expensive than the a la cart options they have currently. Ultimately, students were not convinced they were getting a good value for the price.

Summary

First-year students choose whether or not to enroll in a first-year program, but sometimes this is out of their control because sections are at capacity and closed by the time some students register during summer orientation. Nonetheless, there is a substantial proportion of first-year students who do not enroll in one of these programs, and it is important to understand their first-year experience. Overall, participants did not regret not participating in a first-year program, and did not feel at a disadvantage for not doing so. The discussion group participants were comfortable with having a less structured environment where they could figure out on their own how to meet people, manage the transition to college, and seek out resources when they needed to do so. From their perspective, they were hardier since they had to put themselves out there to meet people and become academically and socially integrated into the community as they experienced similar ups and downs of first-year students. In the end, the main

distinction between students who engaged in a first-year program and those who did not was their experiences with Core advisors. Although the group was split evenly with regards to having favorable and unfavorable attitudes towards their Core advisors, those who had a good relationship recognized that their peers who engaged in a first-year program had an even more personal and comfortable relationship with their advisors.

Appendix A: General Focus Group Invitation

Subject Line: A Special Invitation from Dean McGuiness

The College is interested in what students think about their experience as a new student. Having completed your first semester, we hope you'll share your opinions with us.

The Office of Institutional Research is holding a discussion group from 5:00 to 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, February 19th in conference room 107 of DeChiaro College Center.

You've been selected as one of only a small group of students invited to attend!

Students who participate will be given a gift of two free movie tickets. Pizza and refreshments will also be provided for dinner during the discussion.

This is an excellent opportunity for your voice to be heard at Loyola! Feedback about your experiences as new student will help the College know how to improve programming for future students.

Space in the group is limited to 10 students, so you must R.S.V.P. quickly!

You may contact Shannon Tinney, Associate Director and Coordinator of First-Year and Retention Studies in the Office of Institutional Research, by e-mail (smtinney@loyola.edu or ir@loyola.edu) or by phone (410-617-2680) by *Friday, January 23rd* to be a member of the discussion group.

Please join us! We look forward to seeing you on February 19th.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ilona McGuiness
Dean of First-Year Students and Academic Services

Shannon M. Tinney
Associate Director and Coordinator of First-Year and Retention Studies in the
Office of Institutional Research

Appendix B: General Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

- I. INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME (5 min)
 - a. Who we are
 - b. Why we asked you here tonight
 - i. Focus on your first semester experience
 - c. What is a focus group and ground rules
 - i. Enjoy the food
 - ii. Opinions, no right/wrong answers
 - iii. Digitally recorded (no full names used)

- II. SELF-INTRODUCTIONS (3 min)
 - a. Name
 - b. Where they are from
 - c. What dorm they live in

- III. EXPECTATIONS (15 min)
 - a. We're new to Loyola and are curious about its campus. What words come to mind that you'd use to describe Loyola?
 - b. Why did you decide to pursue a college degree? What do you want to get out of it?
 - c. What are you most excited to learn or do during your first year? [PROBE: Are there specific skills or things that you want to learn? What are those?]
 - d. The majority of first-year students engage in a first-year program, like FE 100, Alpha, Collegium, and the Honors Program. A common characteristic among all of you is that you did not enroll in a first-year program. Why didn't you take one? (Of those who said they wanted to but could not, PROBE: WHY?).

- IV. OUTCOMES (15 min)
 - a. How was your transition to college? Do you think this transition was different than what your first-year program friends experienced? How so? (Probe any references to LLCs and their role in transitioning to Loyola).
 - b. In hindsight, do you wish you had taken a first-year program? (Probe the "yes" and "no" responses for why).
 - i. If yes, how do you think taking a first-year program would have helped with your transition (or benefited you?)
 - ii. If no, why?
 - c. How was the Jesuit tradition woven into your experience at Loyola in general?

- V. FACULTY/ADVISORS (15 min)
 - a. Let's talk about your Core advisors for a few minutes. Describe your relationship with your Core advisor.
 - b. How is the relationship different than your friends' relationships with their advisors who engaged in a first-year program?
 - c. Tell us about your advising experience. (Probe: How have you worked with your advisor?)

VI. CLOSING (15 min)

- a. When you talk with friends or relatives who are at other schools, what do you hear about that you would like to see at Loyola College? (Probe: Specifics for first-year students.)
- b. Now, before you leave, I want you to do one last thing. We're going to do a one-minute paper. You don't need to put your names on it. I'm going to pose a question, I want you to take a moment to think about it, and then you're going to write for one minute on that topic. Think back over your first semester. What have you learned about yourself and your academic interests? What are your educational goals?