

---

■ **2006-2007 Alpha Student Focus Group  
and Faculty Feedback Report**

**Jennifer Duffy Annulis  
Office of First-Year Research**

**May 2007**



**LOYOLA**  
COLLEGE IN MARYLAND

## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Methodology.....	1
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>DETAILED FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Expectations and Outcomes .....	5
Characteristics of the Alpha Students .....	6
The Jesuit Tradition.....	6
Advising.....	6
Activities and Social Experiences.....	7
New Ideas .....	7
<b>SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: ALPHA FOCUS GROUP INVITATION .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: ALPHA STUDENT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: ALPHA FACULTY QUESTIONS.....</b>	<b>12</b>

This report prepared by The Office of First-Year Research  
using data collected in student focus groups and from faculty written feedback.

## **2006-2007 Alpha Student Focus Group and Faculty Feedback Report**

### **Introduction**

Students in the Alpha Program at Loyola College enroll in one small, seminar-style class taught by an experienced member of the College's faculty in their first semester. The faculty member also serves as advisor to the students in the class. Students choose their Alpha class from a wide range of disciplines such as Biology, History, Philosophy, Theology, and Writing. There is an extra class meeting, referred to as "the fourth hour," every week which allows students and instructors to further explore and discuss course-related issues. Students spend time outside the classroom in excursions designed to complement the seminars.

Students who are enrolled in the program have the option to live in Alpha House, a floor in Campion Tower, with other Alpha students. Choosing this option allows students to be a part of a living/learning community.

In 2006-2007, there were 295 students (31% of the incoming class) who participated in the Alpha program and 51 of them lived in Alpha House. There were 24 faculty in 24 different courses who taught Alpha students. Overall, 60% of the first-year students participated in one of Loyola's four first-year programs.

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. In addition, faculty and instructors teaching in the programs were emailed a set of questions about their experiences in the programs and asked for written feedback. This report provides results from the study on Alpha students and faculty only. Results from the Collegium, FE 100, and Honors studies can be found in separate reports available from the Office of First-Year Research.

### Methodology

The feedback from the Alpha students was collected by holding a discussion group towards the end of the first semester. The goal was to have between 8 and 10 participants. To achieve this objective, 40 individuals were invited via email to the session (See Appendix A for a sample invitation). Invitees were selected randomly from all Class of 2010 Alpha students who did not reside in Alpha House.

The focus group was planned for November 29th from 5:00 to 6:30. Invitees were notified that dinner and two movie tickets would be provided to all participants. Eleven students indicated that they would participate in the focus group but nine students attended the discussion. The focus group was facilitated by Terra Schehr, Director of Institutional Research and Jennifer Duffy Annulis, Coordinator of First-Year Research. When students arrived at the focus groups, they helped themselves to dinner and introductions were made. 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 taped for purposes of writing the report only; all comments would remain anonymous and no one else would listen to the tape. (See Appendix B for the discussion guide.)

A second discussion group for Alpha students who reside in Alpha House was scheduled and then cancelled on two different occasions due to the very small number who accepted the invitation.

Faculty feedback about the Alpha program was collected via email. It was decided that trying to hold a discussion group for instructors was too difficult due to the small number in some of the programs (for example, Collegium and Honors) and past history of scheduling difficulties. Faculty were sent an invitation from Dr. Ilona McGuinness, Dean of First-Year Students and Academic Services, and Jennifer Duffy Annulis, asking them to send in their responses to a select number of questions about their experience in the program (see Appendix C). All faculty were given nine days to respond, and they were assured that their written comments would be kept confidential. They had the option to mail in their comments anonymously if they did not feel comfortable using email to submit their replies. Eleven of the 24 faculty who teach Alpha students provided feedback.

## Executive Summary

### *Expectations and Outcomes*

- ◆ Participants associate Alpha with small classes, connections with faculty, enriched classes, and seminar-style classes (at least in most cases).
- ◆ Some students were very pleased with their class discussions, while others described their sections of Alpha as lecture-based classes.
- ◆ Several students felt their class went more in depth into the subject matter than their other classes. They felt that it was the class size, the extra hour, and activities outside the classroom that made this possible.
- ◆ Many faculty feel that participating in Alpha requires a large amount of work on their part.
- ◆ Many faculty are happy to teach Alpha and especially enjoy the small class size and the relationship with the students.

### *Characteristics of the Alpha Students*

- ◆ For the most part, Alpha faculty describe their students as more motivated and more engaged than their other students.

### *The Jesuit Tradition*

- ◆ Students expressed mixed experiences when discussing the Jesuit tradition in the Alpha program. At one end of the spectrum, there was a student who said her professor touched on the Jesuit tradition all semester. At the other end were students who felt like the Jesuit mission wasn't woven into their Alpha experience.

### *Advising*

- ◆ Most of the Alpha students believe that having their Alpha professor as their advisor is one of the best parts of the program.
- ◆ Advising helps contribute to the close relationship that faculty feel they have with their Alpha students.

### *Activities and Social Experiences*

- ◆ In general, students wish there was more interaction at the Jesuit dinners. They also wonder why the Jesuits don't attend the dinners.
- ◆ The outside excursions help to promote the closeness that students feel with their professors and fellow classmates. However, the number of outside excursions the Alpha students go on varies from section to section.
- ◆ Students chose not to live in Alpha House because they wanted to branch out and meet as many different people as possible.

### *New Ideas*

- ◆ Students don't want Alpha to be mandatory for all students. Furthermore, they recommend that there be better descriptions of all the first-year programs to help incoming students in their decision-making.
- ◆ Students point out that there should be more similarities among the Alpha sections than there currently are. Some sections are lecture-based rather than seminar-style and some have many more excursions than others.

- ◆ Faculty suggestions for the program include team-taught classes with an interdisciplinary approach, special-interest housing, and a special “bridge” program for students of color.

## Detailed Findings

### ***Expectations and Outcomes***

Participants said that Alpha means small classes, connections with faculty, enriched classes, and seminar-style classes (at least in some cases). For some there is also a connection among the students that seems to develop during the out-of-the-classroom activities. The Alpha experience was different for many of the students and seemed to vary from instructor to instructor.

Reactions were mixed as to whether Alpha met their expectations of the program. Some students were disappointed because they were expecting a seminar-style class with a lot of discussion. Instead, they found themselves in a college-lecture class where discussion was not encouraged. At least two of the students said they went to very challenging high schools with small, discussion-based classes and were disappointed when they found that their Alpha classes were lecture-based. One student described his professor's teaching style in this way, "It's just spitting information out and we have to regurgitate it to him."

Others were pleased with their class discussions and their class's use of the fourth hour. Some indicated they were glad that Alpha had gotten them off campus. Many expressed their pleasure with their professors and specifically the advisor/advisee relationship.

Students were asked whether participation in Alpha helped them with their other courses. Most of the students said no with a few exceptions. One student said she took an Alpha writing class specifically because she dislikes writing. She has noticed that she's improving while in the class and this, in turn, has helped her writing in other courses. She said, "When I write for other classes now, it's a lot better now. I'm getting a lot better grades than I thought I'd be getting." Another student who said that she participates in class discussions a lot in her Alpha class said she has become more confident participating in her other classes.

Students were asked about the quality and level of learning in their Alpha classes. Responses were mixed. Some saw the class as not necessarily more difficult than other classes, but different. Some felt their class went more in depth into the subject matter than their other classes. They felt that it was the class size, the extra hour, and activities outside the classroom that facilitated this. A few students felt like their professors saw the Alpha class as more important than other classes and assigned a lot of work. Sometimes this is overwhelming and leaves little time for work in other classes.

The reasons for choosing the Alpha program were varied. Several students indicated that they were attracted to the program by a specific course or courses offered. Some viewed Alpha as the best option of the first-year programs because they didn't want an extra class (FE 100) and they didn't want to have as much contact with the same group of people as the Collegium students do. A couple of students mistakenly believed it was mandatory to choose a first-year program. One student suspected that students who choose Alpha would be serious about learning. Another student simply said, "It sounded more fun."

Faculty provided mixed feedback as to whether the program is meeting their expectations. Several indicated that the program requires an enormous amount of work on their part. One professor said, "...the additional expectations of intensive writing, reading, and fourth hour represent enormous dedication and work that becomes taxing and is hard to sustain." A few professors felt that collaboration with their fellow Alpha colleagues could be better. One had this to say: "I thought there would be some sense of

camaraderie among Alpha faculty, more sharing of resources, ideas over the semester but I didn't really feel this way."

Many faculty pointed out positive aspects of the program with which they were happy. A few cited the small class size and the relationship they had with the students, specifically the advising relationship. One advisor noted that he is "able to give more informed and specific advice." A few expressed their pleasure with the class interaction and participation in extracurricular activities.

### ***Characteristics of the Alpha Students***

In speaking about their Alpha students, most of the faculty indicated that they were more engaged or motivated than other students. One professor indicated that "they are more engaged in the course work than those in comparable classes. They develop a greater rapport with each other and me. They seem to have a greater respect for their peers. This allows them to take more academic risks in their studies, asking more probing questions and challenging each other's work." Several noticed that the students tend to bond well with one another and/or engage with the Loyola community in general. A few professors, though, did not agree that the Alpha students were different from other students. In fact, two professors specifically said their students showed very little self-motivation.

### ***The Jesuit Tradition***

A discussion about how the Jesuit tradition was woven into their Alpha experience revealed mixed experiences. One student said her professor touched on the Jesuit tradition and values all semester. Another student said that two Jesuits were brought in to talk to his class during one of their fourth hours. Other students either didn't feel it was a large component of the program or simply mentioned the Jesuit dinners.

### ***Advising***

The Alpha professors serve as advisors to their Alpha students. This is "one of the most beneficial parts of the program" in the words of one student, and the majority of students agreed with her. A couple of students mentioned that their professors used class time to talk about scheduling and registration and this was quite helpful. Several feel closer to their Alpha professor than their other professors. One student said, "Out of all my classes, my Alpha teacher really cares so much about us." A few students noted that their friends do not have the same relationship with their advisors. One student, in fact, said that her non-Alpha friend came to her for advising advice because she knew that the Alpha advisees would be well-informed.

One student indicated that he did not have an ideal advising experience. He said that his advisor always had to refer him to other resources for information.

Almost all the faculty mentioned the great relationship that they have with their Alpha students. The advising component of the Alpha program strongly contributes to this. One faculty member said, "I also have a better feel for their talents, their personalities, so I believe I can be a little more helpful in responding to whatever questions or needs they have." In addition, the extracurricular component of the program also helps to contribute to the positive relationships. "...Students are more open, reveal more of their issues, fears, concerns because they have a chance to get to know the faculty as a friendly adult outside of class." For many, the relationship with Alpha students is stronger than with their other students: "There is no comparison. I feel invested in the futures of my Alpha students."

---

***Activities and Social Experiences***

Students discussed the different types of activities that they participated in with the Alpha program. The Jesuit dinners were mentioned by several, but opinions about them were mixed. One student attended a dinner and said she was “bored to tears.” She expected the dinner to be more discussion-oriented and interactive than it was. Other students expressed similar sentiments. One student, however, attended a dinner and was lucky enough to sit with a French professor who was excellent at facilitating the table’s discussion about the presentation. In general, students seem to wonder why the Jesuits aren’t at the Jesuit dinners.

Students mentioned a variety of excursions that they went on with their classes such as museum visits, dinner outings, and tours of Baltimore. From what students said, it seems that the off-campus activities help foster the closeness with the professor and fellow students. However, some classes participated in more outside activities than did others. One student said that the Alpha program should “push teachers to use extra hour and go on excursions – that is why students take the class!” For several students, the off-campus trips were their favorite part of the program. One student mentioned that had it not been for Alpha, he probably would have never gotten off campus.

Only one student mentioned any kind of community service associated with an Alpha class. Her photography class had plans to go to St. Mary’s School to take photographs of the children and then give the photos to the children. Another student talked about his professor trying to arrange for some kind of community service activity but plans never came to fruition.

Students also discussed the “Best of Baltimore” program for first-year students that is sponsored by the Office of Student Activities. Best of Baltimore provides one opportunity each month to do something off campus. This year’s activities included a “Duck Tour” of Baltimore, a Navy vs. Notre Dame football game, a musical at the Hippodrome Theater, and an excursion to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Students believe that this program should be better advertised. The students who participated seemed to love it, and the ones who didn’t participate wished they had.

There were no Alpha House residents among the discussion group participants so students were asked why they had not chosen Alpha housing. Students seemed to be in agreement that they did not want to be limited socially. They wanted to branch out and meet as many people as possible. Some students simply wanted to live in a double. One student perceived Alpha House as being for people “who have a harder time making friends.”

***New Ideas***

Students believe that the Alpha program should not be mandatory for first-year students. There is a fear that having people in the classes who don’t want to be there would bring down the morale of everyone. As one student said, “Things are always better when you want to do them, not when someone tells you to do them.” Another concern was simply that in a given semester the Alpha topics might not appeal to certain students.

Many students believe that the first-year programs are not explained in clear or necessarily accurate ways to incoming students. One student recommended that the program “make sure all prior information is clear and accurate to avoid false expectations.” Some thought a first-year program was mandatory. One person almost didn’t sign up for Alpha because he believed all five of his first-semester courses would be Alpha courses if he joined. They felt that other first-year programs besides Alpha weren’t advertised accurately either. For example, they indicated that the FE 100

advertising makes it sound like students take trips to Baltimore every week which they found out, from their friends, is not the case.

Students also discussed variations between the different Alpha sections. They seemed to suggest that there should be more similarities between the sections than there sometimes are. For example, since the program is advertised as having seminar-style classes, then that should be consistent. It was also clear that some classes go on more excursions or do more with their fourth hour than others do. One student expressed this concern in the following statement: "Try to keep classes on a level playing field – the courses and topics do vary but the amount of involvement and enrichment should be similar."

A few faculty members had suggestions for the program. One suggested team-taught classes with an interdisciplinary approach. Another suggested special-interest housing. One professor was especially concerned about students of color in the Alpha program. She said that her students "were less confident, had fewer networks for specialized study groups (for example, Spanish or Biology), and had less cultural information about how to succeed in college." She recommended that Alpha create special "bridge" programs for students of color, possibly using UMBC as an example. The following are her specific recommendations:

Alpha should:

1. View the experience of students of color as central to its self-assessment;
2. View the success of students of color as central to its mission;
3. Actively argue for more faculty of color to mentor its students of color;
4. Actively develop off-campus experiences and events that speak directly to the issues of students of color; and
5. Work to engage white students in issues of privilege, racism and exclusion to them become more aware of how these issues affect their own academic success and intellectual growth.

## Summary

When asked to list the best aspects of participating in the Alpha program the most popular responses included the small classes, the fourth hour, out-of-the-classroom excursions, and having their professors as their advisors. Because of the Alpha program's special components, the classes are able to go more in depth into their subject matter than other classes.

Many students would like to have more excursions than they did. They also expressed a need for clearer information about the programs for incoming students.

Many faculty find their Alpha students to be more engaged and motivated than other students they teach. They are able to develop close relationships with the students, in large part, because they serve as the students' advisors. Several faculty do note, however, that teaching in the Alpha program requires a lot of work.

## **Appendix A: Alpha Focus Group Invitation**

Dear Name,

The College is interested in what students think about their experiences in the Alpha program. As your first semester comes to a close, we are hoping that you will help us by sharing your views of the program.

The Office of First-Year Research is holding a discussion group from 5:00 to 6:30 on Wednesday, November 29th in Campion Tower 115. You've been selected as one of only a small group of students who are being asked to attend.

We are giving a gift of two free movie tickets to each student who participates, and we will also provide pizza and refreshments during the discussion.

This is an excellent chance to let your voice be heard at Loyola. Feedback about your experiences as an Alpha student will help the College know how to improve the program for future students. Please join us. Space in the group is limited to 10 students, so please reserve your space quickly. You can reserve your space in the group by replying to this email.

Thank you. We look forward to seeing you on the 29th.

## Appendix B: Alpha 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 Alpha program
  - c. What is a focus group and ground rules
    - i. Enjoy the food
    - ii. Opinions, no right/wrong answers
    - iii. Tape recording (no full names used)
- II. SELF-INTRODUCTIONS (3 min)
  - a. Which Alpha class they are in
  - b. Where they live
- III. EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES (20 min)
  - a. We're new to Loyola. What would you want to tell us about the Alpha program? How has the Program been this semester?
  - b. What were your expectations of the Alpha Program?
    - i. Did the Program meet those expectations?
    - ii. Has participating in the Alpha Program helped you with other courses? How?
    - iii. How would you describe the quality and level of learning in your Alpha class in comparison with other classes at Loyola?
    - iv. Describe the influence Alpha had on your academic performance this semester. Writing? Critical thinking/analytical skills? Discussion skills?
    - v. How was the Jesuit tradition woven into your Alpha class?
  - c. Why did you decide to register for the Alpha Program? Why Alpha and not one of the other first-year programs?
- IV. FACULTY/ADVISORS (15 min)
  - a. Let's talk about your Alpha professors for a few minutes. How would you describe your relationship with your Alpha professor?
    - i. Compare this relationship to your relationships with non-Alpha professors. Do you think the relationship was different than your non-Alpha friends' relationships with their professors?
  - b. Tell us about your advising experience.
- V. ACTIVITIES/SOCIAL (15 min)
  - a. What types of activities did you do during the fourth hour? Which were the most meaningful? Which were not so meaningful? Why?
    - i. Community service (if not already mentioned)
  - b. Did you attend any of the Jesuit dinners? If yes, what did you think of them?
  - c. Did Alpha influence your transition to college life here? Do you think this transition was different than what your non-Alpha friends experienced?
    - i. Did the Alpha program help you feel "connected" at Loyola? Did it help you make connections with friends, the college, the larger community, etc.?
  - d. Why did you choose not to reside in the Alpha House?
- VI. CLOSING (15 min)
  - a. What are your thoughts about making a first-year program required for all first-year students?
  - b. 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?

- 
- c. Now, before you leave, I want you to do one last thing. Write down for me the best and worst aspects of the FE 100 program. Imagine you could let those involved in the program know what should be kept as is and what should be changed and write those things down.

## Appendix C: Alpha Faculty Questions

Dear Alpha Faculty Name,

As a faculty member teaching an Alpha course, your feedback is important as we plan for a new cohort of Alpha students next year. In the past we've attempted to gather faculty together for group discussions about the program but we found that, because of challenges with scheduling and availability, we were only hearing from a small segment of the faculty. This year, in an effort to hear from all of the Alpha faculty, we'd like to get your written feedback on a few focused questions. You can simply reply to this email with your comments. Responses will remain confidential and no responses will be linked with any names. If you would prefer to submit your feedback anonymously, you can print your responses and send them via campus mail to Jen Annulis, Coordinator of First-Year Research, in Xavier Hall 105a.

Your comments to the following questions will be combined with the feedback that we have received from Alpha students during focus groups and will be used for program planning to ensure that the Alpha program is a distinctive high-quality, first-year experience for Loyola students. Thus, your participation is extremely important to us.

1. In what ways is the Alpha program meeting or not meeting the expectations that you have as a faculty member teaching in the program?
2. How would you describe the Alpha students in your class relative to non-Alpha first-year students you may know? Do you notice a different level of intellectual growth in your Alpha students as compared to students you teach in other first-year classes?
3. In what ways, if any, is your relationship with the Alpha students you teach and advise different from your relationships with other first-year students?
4. In your conversations with colleagues at other institutions, have you learned about aspects of their first-year programs that Loyola should consider adopting?

**Please submit your responses no later than Friday, March 23rd.**

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact either one of us.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ilona McGuiness  
Dean of First-Year Students and Academic Services  
[imcguiness@loyola.edu](mailto:imcguiness@loyola.edu)  
x 5547

Jennifer Annulis  
Coordinator of First-Year Research  
[jdannulis@loyola.edu](mailto:jdannulis@loyola.edu)  
x 2975