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

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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 two student focus groups and from faculty written feedback.

2008-2009 Alpha Student Focus Group and Faculty Feedback Report

Introduction

During their first semester, students in Loyola's Alpha Program enroll in one small, seminar-style course taught by some of the College's best faculty and scholars. The faculty member also serves as Core advisor to the students in that class. Students choose their Alpha class from a wide range of disciplines such as Computer Science, Fine Arts, Mathematical Sciences, and Sociology. There is an extra class meeting, known as a fourth hour, each week which allows students and instructors to further explore and discuss course-related issues. Also, the fourth hour is used for out-of-class experiences designed to complement the seminars, like going to the theatre, visiting museums, and exploring new food and cultural experiences in Baltimore and surrounding metropolitan area.¹

Students enrolled in the program have the option to live in Alpha House (apartments on the sixth floor of Campion Tower or doubles-style living on the first floor of Flannery O'Connor Hall), with other Alpha students. Choosing this option allows students to be a part of a living-learning community. Each month, an Alpha faculty member will host an event in Alpha House. Also, students will engage with each other in community service, Jesuit values dinners, and a trip to New York City, just to name a few.¹

In 2008, there were 316 students (30% of the incoming class) who participated in the Alpha program; 86 of these students lived in Alpha House.² There were 21 faculty members in 17 different courses who taught Alpha students.

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 to a group of students who did not participate in one of the four programs and pursued the general academic program. In addition, faculty and instructors teaching in the programs were e-mailed 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, Honors, and General studies can be found in separate reports available from the Office of First-Year Research.³

Methodology

Two discussion groups were formed because Alpha students can have two different experiences by nature of engaging in the living-learning community or not. The fall focus group comprised students who were engaged only in the Alpha program whereas the spring focus group comprised students who took Alpha in the fall and were engaged in the Alpha House living-learning community too. The goal was to have between 8 and 10 participants at each meeting. For the Alpha discussion group, five sets of 25 students were randomly selected from the pool of eligible students and invited via e-mail to the session. For the Alpha House discussion group, two groups of 25 students and one group of 10 students were randomly selected and invited (See Appendix A for a sample

¹ <http://www.loyola.edu/fyp/alphaprograms.html> Accessed May 7, 2008.

² There are 20 students who did not enroll in an Alpha course but are members of the Alpha House living-learning community. These students were not included in the population from which we sampled since we were interested in those students who engaged in both Alpha and Alpha House.

³ <http://www.loyola.edu/IR/Students/First-Year%20Research/First-Year%20Research%20Tools>

invitation). Invitees were selected randomly from all Class of 2012 Alpha students who were not participating in the Educational Intentionality Study that began fall 2008.¹

The focus groups were held on December 10th (Alpha) in the fourth floor conference room of Flannery O'Connor Hall and February 17th (Alpha House) in Campion Towers, room 115; both focus groups were conducted from 5:00 – 6:30 p.m. Invitees were notified that dinner and two movie tickets would be provided to all participants. For the Alpha focus group, nine students accepted the invitation and six of these students attended the discussion. For Alpha House, 11 accepted the invitation and seven attended the discussion. The focus groups were 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, 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 and Appendix C for discussion guides.)

The Alpha group comprised three women and three men representing six different Alpha classes from five different discipline areas. The Alpha House discussion group included four women and three men, and represented five different Alpha courses from four different discipline areas. There were two participants who lived in Flannery O'Connor Hall and five who lived on the sixth floor of Campion Tower.

Instructor feedback about the Alpha program was collected through an e-mailed questionnaire. Instructors were sent an invitation from Dr. Ilona McGuiness, Dean of First-Year Students and Academic Services, and Shannon Tinney, asking them to send in their responses to a select number of questions about their experiences in the program (see Appendix D). Student instructors were offered an incentive of two free movie tickets for their participation. All instructors were e-mailed the questionnaire before winter break on December 22, 2008. Three reminders were sent to faculty members to encourage participation.² All instructors were given a month to respond (January 23, 2009), 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 e-mail to submit their replies. Thirteen faculty members provided feedback; one anonymously submitted a response via mail.

¹ 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 research efforts.

² Reminders were sent on January 7th, January 13th, and January 20th of 2009.

Executive Summary

Motivations and Intentions

- ◆ Participants chose the Alpha program because they wanted to take a small, seminar-style class in a discipline area of interest that would be academically rigorous and intellectually engaging.
- ◆ Students chose not to participate in the Alpha House living-learning community because they wanted to “branch out” by having friends inside and outside of the Alpha program, and thought that by *not* being part of a living-learning community they would be more motivated to get out and meet new and different people.

Expectations and Outcomes

- ◆ The majority of participants expressed that they found a sense of community among their peers and faculty in the Alpha class, formed a core group of friends from their experiences, and were challenged to think in new and different ways that they had never done before.
- ◆ Alpha courses helped participants with other courses and influenced their first semester academic performance through practicing and developing their critical reading, writing, speaking, and analytical skills.
- ◆ Students learned how to communicate with professors, study with peers, and develop time management and test-taking skills.

Characteristics of the Alpha Students

- ◆ Faculty perceived Alpha students as more engaged in class, more interested in the material, more motivated to tackle course material, and more willing to ask questions than the non-Alpha students they taught. Further, a sense of community developed among students with the formation of strong social ties to peers and faculty through program membership that facilitated a trusting and supportive classroom culture.
- ◆ The majority of faculty respondents thought Alpha students were more intellectually curious than other first-year students. Some faculty qualified this by saying they thought these differences in intellectual curiosity weren't necessarily ascribed to the individual; rather, faculty perceived that the culture and structure of the Alpha course facilitated this.
- ◆ Based upon faculty responses, students matured both intellectually and socially over the course of the semester; still, it is unclear the specific factors influencing this development.

The Jesuit Tradition

- ◆ Participants saw the Jesuit ideals woven into their Alpha and Loyola experiences through engaging in service-learning and community service, participating in reflection exercises, having Jesuits as professors, practicing rituals that enforce that Honor Code, and interacting with the Jesuits who are very visible on campus.
- ◆ With regards to the Jesuit dinners, several students had difficulty making a connection between those experiences and the Jesuit ideals; still others saw the ideals of *cura personalis*, shared community, and self-respect and respect for others as embedded lessons in those experiences.

Advising

- ◆ Common responses about students' advising experiences were: their Core advisors were very helpful in planning their schedule and sharing opportunities that students may be interested in pursuing; they were good sources of information; and they were very responsive by answering questions or finding information to aid students in decision-making and problem resolution.
- ◆ Students and Core advisors reported that the relationship between them is more personal and closer because the professor is also the students' advisor. A few advisors commented that this greater level of comfortableness facilitates students' help-seeking behaviors and their willingness to discuss more sensitive or difficult issues with their advisors.

Activities and Social Experiences

- ◆ Students were positive about the variety of out-of-class and cultural excursions in which they participated.
- ◆ With regards to the fourth hour, students often engaged in interactive activities that allowed them to understand themselves better and get to know their peers.
- ◆ Activities and excursions that were most meaningful to students included those where they got to interact with different groups of Alpha students, get to know their classmates better, and engage with the professor outside of the class and learn about common interests.

New Ideas

- ◆ Both discussion groups felt the campus lacked school spirit. Suggestions offered to combat this were for the College to organize a fall homecoming or for the college to co-sponsor more events with colleges and universities in the local area in order to generate interest and attendance.
- ◆ Concerns about diversity arose in the discussion and students emphasized that more could be done to cultivate a sense of unity on campus. Although students felt a sense of community on a small scale, they did not perceive a sense of unity on campus where a culture of diversity was embraced and appreciated in its broadest sense.
- ◆ Students from the Alpha discussion group expressed desire for at least one food option that would be open late at night. They also questioned if they were getting the best value for the price in terms of campus food options or if a cafeteria-style meal plan would be a better option.

Detailed Findings

Motivations and Intentions

Participants in both discussion groups had similar reasons for selecting Alpha as their first-year program. Several students were attracted to the Alpha program because they could take a small, seminar-style class in a discipline area of interest, possibly in their intended major. For example, one student considered the Alpha course “like a starter class” so that she may begin to learn about her major of interest. Another student was interested in becoming a lawyer and his Alpha course affirmed that career interest. Students also chose this seminar-style class because they wanted to be engaged in a course that was more academically rigorous and challenging and more intellectually engaging. One student thought that the Alpha program would help with the college transition; current students recommended the program to her for this reason. In addition to wanting a seminar-style class, another student said that he wanted the “best living situation” on campus; he chose to be part of the Alpha House on the sixth floor of Campion Tower.

Not all participants thought the apartment-style living options were ideal for them. Three of the six students from the Alpha discussion group voiced they did not select Collegium because they did not want that living option. Participants voiced other reasons for not choosing a living-learning community option. First, students wanted to “branch out” by having friends inside and outside of the Alpha program; they thought being part of a living-learning community would prevent them from doing so. Moreover, participants thought that by not being part of a living-learning community they would be more motivated to get out and meet new and different people; students wanted to take on this challenge.

Expectations and Outcomes

Participants from both groups had a positive experience in their Alpha classes. By nature of the seminar-style class structure of the Alpha program, participants expected in-depth coverage of course material where professors would be intellectually engaged in an academically rigorous environment. Likewise, participants expected to be actively engaged in class discussions and get to know their fellow classmates and professors well. For some students, their actual experiences lived up to—and even surpassed—their expectations, but for others it fell short in some instances. For example, three Alpha House students who took the same fall semester course in a Social Sciences discipline expressed their professor was “really good at directing conversation” while a peer noted that the class was “awesome” because it was “very current”, relevant, and he saw the direct application of what he was learning. Contrarily, others did not have similar sentiments. One student taking a class in the Humanities said, “I thought it would be a bit harder than what it was” while another student expressed that “conversation in her class was stagnant.” Here, the student perceived that the professor’s demeanor in the classroom inhibited discussion, in that, if the professor didn’t agree with what students voiced in class they got “shot down”. Of note, this student later shared that her professor used the fourth hour to arrange small discussion groups in order to facilitate students becoming comfortable with each other and to encourage discussion during class in general. Ultimately, the majority of participants expressed they found a sense of community among their peers and faculty, they formed a core group of friends from their experiences, and they were challenged to think in new and different ways.

Participants were invited to consider how their Alpha course was different from other courses taken the first semester in terms of the quality of learning they experienced. A few students noted that it depended upon the professor and the students—the

classroom culture. One student thought that his Alpha class was only different because of the passion students had for the material. Another student shared that students in his class had to take Calculus as a prerequisite which facilitated a more in-depth treatment of the course material. Since everyone had a working knowledge of Calculus, the class could delve into theorems and proofs to understand the underpinnings of what they were studying.

Participants shared the ways in which they perceived their Alpha courses had helped them with other courses and influenced their first semester academic performance. For a couple of students, they explicitly stated that their Alpha class helped them to realize that they were going down the right path with regards to an intended major. Several students in both discussion groups thought that their reading and writing skills had improved. Students expressed learning how to: engage texts, consider presented arguments, be more creative through reflection, and become better at expressing their thoughts. One student described the improvements she saw in her reading and writings skills, and how that has benefited her this semester.

[The] dynamics of writing that I learned in my literature class helped me a lot...in my Writing class now. I feel that I am a better writer because of it and I feel I am a better reader because of it, because I see things differently and I analyze things differently. I learned to be engaged in works that I am not necessarily interested in.

A few students noted that their Alpha classes reinforced skills that they already had—writing, reading, speaking, and critically analyzing—through consistent practice.

One student shared that she learned how to approach faculty members and learn performance expectations, in addition to learning strategies for studying, completing homework, and test-taking. In high school she rarely conversed with teachers outside of the classroom and this was a challenge for her during the first semester. She learned how to talk to her Alpha professor and, by doing so, learned faculty members' expectations. Her Alpha professor also helped her organize her schedule to learn how to get everything done. Certainly, having one's professor as one's Core advisor was valuable in terms of feeling that the faculty member was approachable and in forming a comfortable and collegial relationship.

Perhaps one of the highest compliments a faculty member can receive is a student wanting to take another class from her/him a subsequent semester. In the Alpha discussion group, two students noted that they were taking another class the spring semester with their Alpha professors because they loved them so much. One of these students added that many of her classmates from the fall were going to join her next spring as well. A third participant mentioned his professor was organizing a trip in the spring for his Alpha peers to visit the Supreme Court.

Alpha House participants discussed their experiences as members of a living-learning community. One young man stated that having the same people in his class as on his residential floor "turned out to be awesome". For example, he and peers who took similar classes with different professors would cross-reference notes and textbooks to gain a different perspective from another professor teaching the same course. Students also mentioned that living on the floor made it "really convenient" to form study groups, and this behavior continued in the spring semester. Another student met a lot of friends who

were in his other classes in Alpha House, and the conversations they had on the floor spilled over into their classes and vice versa.

Based upon interactions among those in the Alpha House discussion group, there seemed to be a tighter bond among Alpha House students in Campion Tower compared to those residing on the first floor of Flannery O'Connor Hall. One resident in Flannery O'Connor said that while his floor was very open and "hung out" often, he did not know everyone on the floor, perhaps because of structural barriers; a security door divides the first floor of Flannery O'Connor Hall. He spent a lot of time on the sixth floor of Campion too. Another participant who lived in Flannery O'Connor Hall shared that she only knew a couple of people on her Alpha floor. Conversely, the five discussion participants from the sixth floor of Campion knew each other very well (a couple being apartment mates), shared inside jokes, and made hand gestures to each other denoting "C-6" for Campion, sixth floor. All of these behaviors demonstrated that a close-knit relationship had formed among these students. One student noted that this closeness contributed to engaging in a lot of activities because his friends influenced this engagement, for instance Gospel Choir, or that he went to events to support his friends. Students described that one of the drawbacks to living in a larger community is that smaller groups can form. A couple of students mentioned that the various social activities that Alpha House had were not attended by all, so not everyone could get to know each other. One of these students only knew her side of the sixth floor and mentioned that there were a "couple of people who are kind of clicky," such that they kept to themselves; she wished she knew them.

Characteristics of the Alpha Students

Faculty members were invited to describe their Alpha students relative to non-Alpha first-year students. Compared to non-Alpha students, faculty perceived Alpha students as more engaged in the class, more interested in the material, more motivated to tackle course material, and more willing to ask questions. With regards to group dynamics, faculty members perceived a sense of community among students where social bonds were developed among students through program membership that facilitated a trusting and supportive classroom culture. This classroom culture made students feel more comfortable with each other and facilitated better classroom engagement.

Additionally, faculty members were asked to consider if they noticed a different level of intellectual curiosity in their Alpha students as compared to other first-year students they taught. Eight out of thirteen respondents thought Alpha students were more intellectually curious than other first-year students; for instance, they were more willing to take "risks" when asking questions or offering thoughts in a discussion compared to other students. Four out of those eight respondents thought these differences in intellectual curiosity were not necessarily ascribed to the individual; rather, faculty perceived that the culture and structure of the Alpha course facilitated the development of these characteristics in students over the course of the semester.

Finally, faculty members were asked if they noticed a different level of intellectual growth in their Alpha students as compared to other first-year students they taught. Generally, faculty members did not notice a different level in intellectual growth, with several noting that they had no basis for comparison. Of those who had an affirmative response, three faculty members provided explanations for the ways they perceived their Alpha students had a different level of intellectual growth than other first-year students:

Alpha faculty #1:

I certainly have seen a more steady improvement of writing skills. It's hard to judge intellectual growth over one semester—a lot of new things are happening

to first-semester freshmen—but I have seen students become more aware of the need to back up their views with evidence—to ground their interpretations in the material of their texts.... I also think the quality and collegiality of argument between competing views improved over the course of the semester.

Alpha faculty #2:

One type of intellectual growth that seems different is that they seem to connect more of what we are doing with their own personal and spiritual development and with the college's mission as a whole. I think it is because these aspects are directly addressed more than in my other core courses. One difference I did notice was in students living in Alpha housing [AH] and those [who did] not. I wish all Alpha students were on Alpha floors. Not necessarily all on the same one but I think it makes sense to make the living component an automatic part of it. I had several students who didn't opt for AH but who were assigned to it anyway and they liked it and thought it was beneficial. They don't really know enough about housing options to understand the differences and benefits of AH.

Alpha faculty #3:

I have the advantage of teaching the same students for a second semester class if they choose to do so, thus seeing them in a different setting than the Alpha class proper, and mixed in with other first and second year non-Alpha students. I can't say that the Alpha students have necessarily retained more information than the others, but they are in general more sophisticated in their understanding of how to approach their work, how to converse in class, [and] how to write assignments. They are also on average seemingly more open to the world and to learning than the average non-Alpha student. But again, it is hard to gauge—it is a very unscientific impression.

There is some anecdotal evidence that students do intellectually and socially mature over the course of the semester from faculty members' perspectives; still, it is unclear the specific factors influencing this development.

The Jesuit Tradition

Participants described the ways in which they saw the Jesuit tradition woven into the Alpha experience and in their experience at Loyola, in general. By nature of the focus of the course, a couple of students saw an immediate link between their Alpha experience and the Jesuit tradition. One student was engaged in a service-learning course while another student was enrolled in a course that focused on issues of social justice.

There were faculty members who incorporated reflection exercises into the curriculum. At times reflection occurred through a group process. For example, two participants noted that the fourth hour was often used to engage in discussions about campus life. For one of these students, he often found that this was where the Jesuit ideals were elucidated. This student went to a Jesuit high school and thought his college experience was better because faculty were not talking at students; rather, an intellectual discussion ensued where everyone would discuss the Jesuit ideals and engage in reflections through writing exercises too.

Some students had Jesuits as professors that helped them to see the Core values in everyday life and understand them better through activities. For example, a young man shared that his class engaged in community service at Christo Rey high school and participated in a food drive. His professor brought the Core values into class everyday by saying a prayer. Before tests students had to sign a sheet with the Core values and a blessing was performed. Cheating was not an option—everyone was placed in different parts of the room.

Almost all students noted “not cheating” as a big focus and that was how they saw the Jesuit ideals woven into their Loyola experience, in general. Participants explained the custom of signing the Honor Code on all work. A couple of students commented that because signing the Honor Code had become an automatic behavior, like signing one’s name, the meaning behind it had been eroded through the routinization of its practice.

A couple of students noted that the Jesuit ideals were woven into their Loyola experience through interactions with the Jesuits and their presence on campus. One student noted the difference she saw between her interaction with priests and nuns at her Catholic high school and now at Loyola. She explained:

[The] Jesuits are down to earth....they are so chill. I’ve never experienced that before. It gives you a different perception of the Church in general, like, because they are representatives of the Church [and] that it [the Catholic Church] doesn’t have to be something rigid and, you know, something that you don’t enjoy. The Jesuits here are a perfect example of that. Like, they live life to the absolute fullest and they are wonderful people and we love talking with them and they are very realistic.....So, like, I feel like they are a good example.

With regards to the Jesuit dinners, not all students were able to attend them because of scheduling conflicts with other classes. One student shared that because she couldn’t attend most of them she made dinner in her apartment and invited her Alpha peers. Several students’ comments illustrated that they had difficulty making a connection between attending the Jesuit dinners and Jesuit ideals. Still there were a couple of students in each discussion group who could relate their experiences at the Jesuit dinners back to the Core values and ideals. For instance, one student commented that

her professor shared that the dinners are a good example of *cura personalis*—the development of the whole person—because attendees are exposed to various topics that encourage one to open one’s mind about new things and to learn new things. Another student thought that the ideals and values were implicitly woven into the dinners, in that one learned respect for self and others. One participant summed up his thoughts on the Jesuits dinners when stating that “it [engaging in the Jesuit dinners] really drove home...[that the] Alpha program creates a sense of community.”

Advising and Student-Instructor Relationships

Students spoke positively about relationships with their Alpha professors, who also serve as their Core advisors. They noted that their Core advisors were very accessible and that the relationship could be described as personable, close, and embodying a genuine care for the student and her/his interests. Common responses about their advising experiences were: their Core advisors were very helpful in planning their schedule and sharing opportunities that students may be interested in pursuing; they were good sources of information; and they were very responsive by answering questions or finding information to aid in decision-making and problem resolution. In both discussions, participants noted that some of their non-Alpha friends had dissimilar advising experiences in terms of accessibility and developing comfortable and productive relationships with their advisors.

Faculty members were asked in what ways their relationships with the Alpha students differed from their relationships with other first-year students they taught. A few respondents noted that a stronger bond forms between faculty and students since the faculty member serves a “dual role”—both as professor and advisor. For instance, one professor exchanges letters before students come to campus so s/he has a sense of who they are and what they’re interested in. Likewise, another respondent noted that s/he tries to get to know advisees on a more personal level and students also get to know other facets of the faculty member. A number of respondents noted that the relationship is more personal and closer because of being their students’ advisor. A couple of faculty commented that this greater level of comfortableness facilitates students’ help-seeking behaviors and willingness to discuss more sensitive or difficult issues with their advisors. Aside from the advising relationship, the bond formed between faculty and students also facilitates a more comfortable classroom environment. One faculty member explained it this way, “This past semester I developed a great relationship with my Alpha students. Before class they would chat with each other and with me. In my other...class things were much quieter and more business-like.”

In some instances, a challenge for faculty members and students was maintaining the boundary between personal and professional relationships, as that was related to being objective and treating these students similar to others. Two faculty members described it this way:

Alpha faculty #1:

The advising is more personal. I know more about them which is sometimes good/helpful and sometimes less so. It is more than just the academic advising that characterizes non-Alpha students. Sometimes this can create problems in the class—e.g., they think I should be more lenient in grading or class policies— or sometimes it is more effort to maintain a professional distance needed for

grading. Because I know them and they know me more, they are more likely to cross lines or 'test' me than other FY [first-year] students. When grades come out, they are more likely to challenge or request reviews than in other core classes with FY students.

Alpha faculty #2:

I have a very close relationship with the Alpha students. I know them in a very different way. I tend to be more patient, less objective, more understanding, [and] more lenient with the Alpha class.

Ultimately, a few faculty members commented that long-term relationships were more likely to form with their Alpha students than with other first-year students that they taught such that they were more likely to be asked to write letters of recommendation and keep in touch with students over their tenure at Loyola.

Activities and Social Experiences

Participants were positive about the variety of out-of-class and cultural excursions in which they participated. With regards to the fourth hour, students often engaged in interactive activities allowing them to understand themselves better and get to know their peers. For example, one student noted that the fourth hour was "like a therapy session" where the class engaged in conversations about their transition to college. Some participants also shared that their professors walked them through the scheduling process where they developed schedules and prepared for registration. A couple of students said they watched films pertaining to the studied subject matter and engaged in a class discussions about them. For one student, fourth hour activities consisted of her classmates sharing work with each other to provide critical feedback to peers.

Most evident was that students focused on experiences where they had an opportunity to engage in new learning experiences and to develop relationships with their peers and instructors; they found these experiences most meaningful. For example, one class went to Chinatown in Washington, D.C.; this same class also visited a garden to sketch flowers. A few students shared that their Alpha class paired up with another to visit the Baltimore Zoo and share a meal at a sushi restaurant. Students enjoyed the opportunity to interact with another group of students. Finally, another student shared they went to the Spy Museum with another Alpha class. This student particularly enjoyed this trip not only because he is interested in cryptology, but also because the professor was so enthusiastic and just as excited as he was to explore the museum.

Feedback from the faculty survey revealed the positive aspects of the fourth hour from their perspective. Two faculty members noted that fourth hour activities facilitated social integration of students and group cohesion, as well as strengthened the relationship between faculty and students. Another faculty member thought the fourth hour provided time for students to learn more about Loyola and Baltimore too. One faculty member noted that the fourth hour "coupled with [the] small class format allows for more in-depth coverage of material [sic] and being able to teach vs. just introduce concepts." Coupled with the student comment above, there is evidence that the fourth hour enabled faculty to provide a more in-depth treatment of the course material.

New Ideas

Participants shared their perspectives on Loyola's sense of community and ways in which it could be improved. Both discussion groups felt the campus lacked school spirit and provided examples to illustrate this, including frequently seeing students wearing t-shirts of other colleges and universities instead of Loyola, low attendance at college-sponsored events, including sporting events, and a lack of commitment from their peers to join them at these events. In the Alpha discussion group, students connected school spirit to athletics, and in reflecting upon their high school experiences, suggested that the College organize a fall homecoming. Another student in the Alpha House group suggested that the college co-sponsor more events with colleges and universities in the local area in order to generate interest and attendance.

A couple of Alpha participants felt like the campus was deserted on the weekends because a certain proportion of students religiously go out, engaging in the City's bar and nightclub scene. For instance, one student indicated that he and his roommate (who does not participate in the bar scene) were looking for something to do at 9 p.m. on a Saturday night. They wanted to go to the FAC, but it was closed; luckily, an Options event was going on and they participated in it. Still, he thought there were not a lot of options for students on the weekends who do not drink. Another participant noted that her roommate is involved in the Best of Baltimore and is always out and about. A third participant shared that she would be off campus with friends on the weekends exploring the city. Although there are alternatives to the City's bar and nightclub scene, a minority in the focus group questioned what could be done to create a greater sense of community on campus in this context.

Alpha House participants engaged in a discussion about campus diversity with regards to cultivating a sense of unity within the community. One young woman began by saying, "I would like to see more acceptance of people's thoughts and unity." She continued by noting that diversity is made out as "a big deal" on campus but clearly there is a problem because the community endorsed a Unity Pledge this year. The facilitator asked for suggestions for the types of things could happen to foster a sense of unity where there was acceptance of others' thoughts and opinions. A conversation unfolded among several of the participants where they struggled to come up with concrete suggestions, but expressed that they would like to see activities and events that celebrated diversity in its broadest sense, as there tends to be a focus on race, ethnicity, and background. Another young woman shared:

Well, one example is on Loyola's campus we do things for Black History Month, just one example, but I feel like it's not, um,...not as impacting as it could be...I feel like we do have sponsored events and they are wonderful, but feel like...you can't make people come to them, but at the same time I just wish it was emphasized more or made a bigger deal...Like just events about not just diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, or background, but diversity like...in ideas and things we bring to the school...I don't feel like we do as much as other schools do.

This participant explained that one of the Jesuit ideals is to embrace diversity, but she did not feel that Loyola does that as well as other schools. She expressed that valuing and celebrating diversity goes beyond “diversity events”; it is about teaching people how to engage with each other and learning how to accept and respect different experiences and opinions. In agreement, a young man, who went to a racially and ethnically diverse private high school, commented that he did not feel like Loyola was diverse, and went on to say that the College tries to “compensate” for its lack of diversity by saying there is a lot of diversity. Moreover, this participant thought that there is a certain “political correctness that exists in the school that seems extreme” such that multiple perspectives on issues/topics tends to be discouraged. Overall, the collective sentiment was that this is an area for improvement at Loyola. The College needs to: teach students about diversity in its broadest sense, develop ways in which to engage the community in thoughtful discussions where multiple viewpoints can be expressed, and create unity among various interest groups instead of factions.

Some students from the Alpha discussion group expressed a desire for at least one late night food option on campus. Although Primo’s is open until 11 p.m. there is limited choice as the evening wanes on. Students talked about walking over to York Road to go to McDonald’s, or other fast food restaurants. Two participants shared experiences where oneself or a friend had done this, and was pulled up to by a Baltimore City Police Department officer patrolling the area. The officer admonished them for walking this area of York Road at night, asked them to get into the police car, and escorted them back to campus. Additionally, there was a suggestion of a “mess hall” with cafeteria style options. There was the sentiment that “the food system is ripping off students”; students perceived that they were not receiving a good value for the price in this respect.

Faculty members were asked to consider conversations with colleagues at other schools, and asked to offer suggestions for what Loyola could adopt and/or integrate into its first-year programs. The current issue of devising a plan for and implementing a mandatory first-year living-learning community for all students was at the forefront of some respondents’ minds. Of the handful who offered comments, they expressed support for and against a mandatory first-year experience, as well as offered opinions with regards to how they believed that experience should be structured and who should be involved. Two faculty members favored a topical seminar style class like Alpha with the 4th hour activities involving student development staff. Contrarily, one faculty member advocated for the model to stay as is and not become folded into a comprehensive model that would include Student Development staff. One faculty member suggested that first-year seminars be limited to 12 students so that more individualized attention could be given to students like what is done at Fairfield University, Dickinson College, and Colby College.

Summary

Participants chose the Alpha program because they wanted to take a small, seminar-style class in a discipline area of interest that would be academically rigorous, intellectually engaging, and where they could begin exploring areas of interest. In addition to these things, many students also formed a group of friends and benefited from having a professor who was also their advisor. Generally, students were satisfied with their Alpha experience. A component unique to the Alpha program—the fourth hour—facilitated various in-class and out-of-class experiences where students could delve deeper into course material, interact with other Alpha groups, get to know their classmates better, and engage with their professors outside of the class and learn about common interests. Clearly, one of the benefits of a first-year program is having a faculty

member serve in the dual role of professor and Core advisor. Both faculty members and students benefited from this arrangement. Faculty members felt that they benefited from this relationship because students viewed them as trusted resources who knew them well. Students found the arrangement mutually beneficial as they could access good sources of information to help them plan schedules, learn about opportunities, and collaborate with their advisors to develop solutions to issues they may be having.

A recurrent theme in the discussion with the Alpha and Alpha House students was that an area for improvement at Loyola is cultivating a sense of unity and community. Although students felt a sense of community on a small scale, they did not perceive a sense of unity on campus where a culture of diversity was embraced and appreciated in its broadest sense. Further, students expressed a lack of school spirit and desired more activities and events that would attract students to stay on campus during the weekends.

Appendix A: Alpha Focus Group Invitation

Subject Line: An Alpha Program Special Invitation from Dean McGuiness

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 opinions about the program.

The Office of Institutional Research is holding a discussion group from 5:00 to 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, December 10th in the 4th floor conference room of Flannery O'Connor Hall.

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 an Alpha student will help the College know how to improve the program 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 Tuesday, December 2nd to be a member of the discussion group.

Please join us! We look forward to seeing you on December 10th.

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

Note: Reminder communications were modified slightly for the spring focus group of Alpha students who also resided in the Alpha House living-learning community.

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. Digitally recorded (no full names used)

- II. SELF-INTRODUCTIONS (3 min)
 - a. Name
 - b. Which Alpha class they are in
 - c. Which dorm they live in

- III. EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES (10 min)
 - a. We're new to Loyola, describe the Alpha Program to us. How has the Program been this semester?
 - b. Why did you register for the Alpha Program? Why Alpha and not one of the other first-year programs?
 - c. What were your expectations for the Alpha Program? (What did you hope to get out of it?) How has the program met those expectations?

- IV. OUTCOMES (10 min)
 - a. How has participating in the Alpha Program helped you with other courses?
 - b. How would you describe the quality and level of learning in your Alpha class in comparison with other classes at Loyola?
 - c. Describe the influence Alpha had on your academic performance this semester. Writing? Critical thinking/analytical skills? Discussion skills?
 - d. How was the Jesuit tradition woven into your Alpha class? How about your experience at Loyola in general?

- V. FACULTY/ADVISORS (15 min)
 - a. Let's talk about your Alpha professors for a few minutes. Describe your relationship with your Alpha advisor.
 - i. Compare this relationship to your relationships with non-Alpha professors.
 - ii. How is the relationship different than your non-Alpha friends' relationships with their professors?
 - b. Tell us about your advising experience. (Probe: How have you worked with your advisor?)

- VI. 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? (Probe: Community service)
 - b. Did you attend any of the Jesuit dinners? If yes, what did you think of them?
 - c. How did Alpha influence your transition to college life? Do you think this transition was different than what your non-Alpha friends experienced? How so? (Probe: 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?

VII. 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 to you 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?

Appendix C: Alpha House 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 and Alpha House
 - 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. Which Alpha class they are in
- III. EXPECTATIONS (10 min)
 - a. We're new to Loyola, describe the Alpha Program to us. How has the Program been this semester?
 - b. Why did you register for the Alpha Program? Why Alpha and not one of the other first-year programs?
 - c. What were your expectations for the Alpha Program? (What did you hope to get out of it?) How has the program met those expectations?
- IV. OUTCOMES (10 min)
 - a. How has participating in the Alpha Program helped you with other courses?
 - b. How would you describe the quality and level of learning in your Alpha class in comparison with other classes at Loyola?
 - c. Describe the influence Alpha had on your academic performance this semester. Writing? Critical thinking/analytical skills? Discussion skills?
 - d. How was the Jesuit tradition woven into your Alpha class? How about your experience at Loyola in general?
- V. FACULTY/ADVISORS (15 min)
 - a. Let's talk about your Alpha professors for a few minutes. Describe your relationship with your Alpha advisor.
 - i. Compare this relationship to your relationships with non-Alpha professors.
 - ii. How is the relationship different than your non-Alpha friends' relationships with their professors?
 - b. Tell us about your advising experience. (Probe: How have you worked with your advisor?)
- VI. 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? (Probe: Community service)
 - b. Did you attend any of the Jesuit dinners? If yes, what did you think of them?
 - c. How did Alpha influence your transition to college life? Do you think this transition was different than what your non-Alpha friends experienced? How so? (Probe: Did it help you make connections with friends, the college, the larger community, etc.?)
 - d. What has your experience been like living on the Alpha House floor? What are the pros/cons of living on the floor?

- e. What types of activities do you do with your Alpha House group? Which were the most meaningful? Which were not so meaningful? Why?
- f. How has living on the Alpha House floor contributed to your academic experience?

VII. 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 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?

Appendix D: Alpha Faculty Questions

Subject Line: An important message from Dean Ilona McGuiness

Dear Alpha Faculty Member,

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 an effort to hear from the entire Alpha faculty, we'd like to get your written responses to a few focused questions. You can simply reply to this e-mail with your comments. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. Responses will remain confidential and no responses will be linked to any names. If you would prefer to submit your feedback anonymously, you can print your responses and send them via campus mail to Shannon M. Tinney, Associate Director and Coordinator of First-Year and Retention Studies in the Office of Institutional Research, Xavier Hall 109.

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?
 - a. Do you notice a different level of intellectual curiosity in your Alpha students as compared to students you teach in other first-year classes?
 - b. 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, January 23, 2009.

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 x5547
Dean of First-Year Students and Academic Services
imcguiness@loyola.edu

Shannon M. Tinney x2617
Associate Director and Coordinator of First-Year and Retention Studies
Office of Institutional Research
smtinney@loyola.edu