
■ **2006-2007 FE 100 Student Focus Group
and Instructor Feedback Report**

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LOYOLA
COLLEGE IN MARYLAND

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

2006-2007 FE 100 Student Focus Group and Instructor Feedback Report

Introduction

The FE 100 course at Loyola College is a one-credit elective for first-year students that is designed to help them transition to college life. The course meets once a week and involves off-campus outings, in-class discussions, and guest speakers and workshops. Course topics include such things as student leadership, time management, diversity, Jesuit spirituality and education, and choosing a major. The course is taught by a three-person instructor team: one faculty member, one administrator, and one student instructor. While there are usually a few short writing assignments required over the semester, grades are not assigned; the course is designed as a pass/fail course.

In 2006-2007, there were 158 students (17% of the incoming class) who participated in the FE 100 program. In addition, there were another 63 students who took FE 100 as part of their Collegium program requirement. There were 16 course sections of FE 100 offered. 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 FE 100 students and instructors only. Results from the Alpha, Collegium, and Honors studies can be found in separate reports available from the Office of First-Year Research.

Methodology

The feedback from the FE 100 students was collected by holding two discussion groups: one towards the end of the first semester and one in the second semester. The goal was to have between 8 and 10 participants at each. To achieve this objective, between 40 and 50 individuals were invited via email to the two sessions (See Appendix A for a sample invitation). Invitees were selected randomly from the Class of 2010 FE 100 students. Students taking FE 100 as part of their Collegium requirement were not included.

The focus groups were planned for November 30th and March 21st from 5:00 to 6:30. Invitees were notified that dinner and two movie tickets would be provided to all participants. Six students indicated that they would participate in the first focus group but only four students attended the discussion. That focus group was facilitated by Jennifer Duffy Annulis, Coordinator of First-Year Research and Terra Schehr, Director of Institutional Research. For the second group, nine students replied that they would participate but only eight attended. That focus group was facilitated by Jennifer Duffy Annulis, Coordinator of First-Year Research and Chinara Brown, Administrative Assistant. 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.)

Instructor feedback about the FE 100 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. Instructors 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). Student instructors were offered an incentive of two free movie tickets for their participation. All instructors 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. Six faculty, ten administrators, and nine student instructors provided feedback.

Executive Summary

Expectations and Outcomes

- ◆ Students associate FE 100 with learning about campus resources, getting to know Baltimore and, to a lesser extent, adjusting to college.
- ◆ While many students find FE 100 helpful, some students expected the class to have more interaction, discussion, and out-of-classroom activities.
- ◆ Instructors believe FE 100 is effective at introducing students to college life and helping them develop relationships with the instructor team.
- ◆ Some instructors feel that there are too many topics to cover in the program and wish there was more time for out-of-the-classroom activities.

Characteristics of the FE 100 Students

- ◆ Many instructors note that their students did show growth over the course of the semester, becoming more vocal and more comfortable with one another.

FE 100 Topics

- ◆ Students had a wide variety of opinions about which topics they liked best.

The Jesuit Tradition

- ◆ Students expressed mixed experiences and ideas when discussing the Jesuit tradition at Loyola and in the FE 100 program. Some students equate “Jesuit-ness” with prayer, while others see evidence of the Jesuit tradition and values in the curriculum.

Advising and Student-Instructor Relationships

- ◆ Most students spoke positively about their advising experience. For some, the relationship is more open because there is no grade at stake. Others spoke about their faculty instructors being able to advise them well and make good recommendations because of the relationship they had developed through class.
- ◆ For the most part, students had good things to say about their administrators and student instructors.

Activities and Social Experiences

- ◆ A wide variety of activities were mentioned and included tours of Baltimore, hikes, community service, and dinners out. Students enjoy getting out of the classroom for activities.
- ◆ Responses were mixed as to whether FE 100 helped students adjust to college life. Some said it definitely helped them to meet more people, to get off campus, and to adjust to college overall. Others enjoyed it, but didn't think their first-semester experience would have been very different without the course.

Instructor Team Relationship

- ◆ Most instructors had positive things to say about the team relationship. Frequent contact and communication seem to be key in making the experience work. The collaboration seems to work particularly well when the instructors already know each other or have worked together before.

New Ideas

- ◆ Students don't believe that a first-year program should be mandatory. Students want to be in class with others who truly want to be there. They also think that being required to participate in something extra (i.e. a first-year program add-on like FE 100 that is not an academic course) could possibly make students feel overwhelmed in their first semester.
- ◆ Instructors had varied recommendations like housing the students together, making FE 100 mandatory, or covering some topics in plenary sessions to free up class time for other topics that might require more discussion, time, and attention.

Detailed Findings

Expectations and Outcomes

Participants associated FE 100 with learning about campus resources, getting to know Baltimore and, to a lesser extent, adjusting to college. One person likened it to an extended summer orientation. Another student said, "It pretty much covered everything you would need to know as a first-year student."

Expectations were not met for all the students. While some said the class helped them meet more people, others said they didn't get to know the people in their class at all. Some students thought the course was going to be more fun, interactive, or discussion-oriented than it actually was. Even one student whose class participated in a lot of out-of-the-classroom activities, expected more activities than she experienced.

Many of the instructors felt that the program is meeting expectations in that it provides students with an introduction to college life and an opportunity for students to develop relationships with their instructors. Several indicated that they developed a good relationship with or were able to serve as a mentor to their students. One student instructor said, "I believe that being an instructor, the students valued my opinion more than they would have if I was just another junior urging them to get involved." Several instructors (mostly administrators) expressed how difficult it was to try to fit all the FE 100 topics into the semester. For example, one administrator said, "I think my main challenge was trying to fit everything into one semester.....I felt like I was rushed and that I didn't have enough time in the class to go over all that I wanted to go over." Some also felt they didn't get the students off campus enough. Another common theme that came up was class dynamics and the effect they can have. Some spoke of students who seemed like they didn't want to be there or stopped showing up for class. Others spoke of challenges with an all-Collegium section or an all-athlete section. However, there were others who talked about the enthusiasm of their class and their students' growth throughout the semester.

The reasons for choosing the FE 100 program were varied. Some students signed up because they wanted to get to know Baltimore and Loyola better. One student indicated that she wanted to pick something that would help her adjust to college life without requiring a lot of extra work on her part. Some said it seemed like an easy way to earn an extra credit and two athletes said they were personally contacted and asked to join.

When asked if there were academic benefits to being in the program, most students said "no." However, one student said that her class had a visit to the writing center which ended up being helpful to her. Another student had to write a paper on gender issues for another class and the coverage of that topic in his FE 100 class was helpful for that assignment.

Characteristics of the FE 100 Students

In speaking about their FE 100 students, many of the instructors indicated that they changed over the course of the semester, becoming more comfortable and more vocal. As one student instructor observed, "Most were shy with me in the beginning, but by the end many were talking with me, asking me questions about how to get involved, and what could they do to make a difference at Loyola." Another said, "I have noticed the students growing emotionally throughout the year. Many have faced difficult situations and handled them very maturely." Instructors observed students opening up more as the semester progressed. One professor, however, noted that "we failed to get 'buy in' from the male students."

FE 100 Topics

Students were asked to speak about the most and least helpful topics covered in their FE 100 sections. Opinions were varied. There were several who liked the career development and study abroad sessions. Several people mentioned a presentation by Father Rossi as being enjoyable. Relaxation and mental health were also viewed positively by some. Opinions on the diversity topics were mixed. Students from one section of FE indicated that the diversity topic was overdone in their class; in fact, they said it was all they talked about. Students from another section said they saw a deep and serious presentation about diversity but were then disappointed when there was not a lot of class conversation about it afterwards.

Some of the students seemed to enjoy having student panels come to class to present. One panel in particular was comprised of students who had gotten involved in different areas of campus life speaking about leadership and getting involved.

A few unique class exercises were mentioned. One student described an exercise in which students sat in a circle and discussed how their freshman year was going so far. She said this was excellent as it let students see that a lot of them were experiencing the same things. Another student said they wrote letters to themselves about goals they wanted to achieve in their first semester. The letters were mailed at the end of the semester and allowed students to see how much they were able to accomplish.

There were some students who felt they had to write too many papers for a one credit class. Furthermore, some students were disappointed that they did not receive feedback on their papers. This may have contributed to the perception among some students that the papers were simply “busy work.”

The Jesuit Tradition

A discussion about how the Jesuit tradition was woven into their FE 100 experience or into their experience at Loyola in general revealed mixed experiences and ideas. A few reported that they see the Jesuit mission in the curriculum – specifically in the Core. Another student mentioned an assignment in another class in which she was required to write a paper that, in part, spoke to Loyola’s Jesuit mission and core values. Other students had puzzling views of the Jesuit tradition. One student was “surprised that [she] didn’t have to pray in any of [her] classes” and another associated the enthusiasm of her professors with the Jesuit mission of the College.

Advising and Student-Instructor Relationships

Most of the students in FE 100 have their FE 100 faculty instructor as their advisor and the majority of them thought that worked well. Because a grade isn’t at stake, students feel they could be more open with their FE 100 professors than they could be with other professors. Since the faculty get to know the students and their interests, they were able to help students select courses that would suit them well. One student, however, noted that she feels closer to some of her other professors because she goes to their office hours regularly. Some said their advisor checks up on them, while others noted minimal contact outside of class.

Most described a good experience with their administrator. For example, one student noted that her administrator was from Student Life, so he knew a lot about campus and was able to share a lot of information with the class. One student connected better with her administrator than she did with the faculty member of the instructor team.

For the most part, students had positive things to say about their student instructors. They were very personable and told the classes how to get involved at Loyola. One said

hers strongly encouraged them all to join clubs and organizations on campus. Furthermore, he said that if anyone didn't want to go to their first meeting alone, he'd attend too. There were a couple of students who were not enthusiastic about their student instructor, but they were in the minority.

Activities and Social Experiences

Students discussed the different types of activities that they participated in with their FE 100 sections. A few enthusiastically mentioned the "Duck Tour" downtown and how much they enjoyed it. A few participated in a community service activity, such as working at a soup kitchen and playing wiffle ball with local children. Others spoke positively about a tour of the Jesuit residence. Other activities mentioned included a scavenger hunt, going out to dinner, a hike, a UMBC basketball game, and games at the FAC. Students really seem to like the out-of-the-classroom activities best. As one student simply put it, "Trips off campus were the best."

When asked whether FE 100 helped them feel connected and eased their transition into college, responses were mixed. Some students said it definitely helped them to meet more people, to get off campus, and to adjust to college. One student with roommate problems seemed particularly grateful to have taken FE 100. She said, "I still talk to everyone in my FE class. We're really good friends" and "I really looked forward to going to that class." A few people enjoyed it and said it was helpful but they would have adjusted to Loyola without it. For example, one woman said, "I liked it, I'm glad I took it, I liked the people, but it didn't really make me feel more a part of the school." A few didn't think it affected their transition at all. In fact, one student said nothing would have been different had she not taken FE.

Instructor Team Relationship

The instructors were asked to describe their collaboration with their other two partners. Most used adjectives like "excellent," "great," or "fantastic" to describe it. One faculty member said, "Outstanding – as always, one of my favorite parts of the experience." Frequent contact and communication seem to be key in making the experience work. As one student instructor put it, "Our constant contact really helped us work as a team, and I believe it made the experience better for the kids as well...." The collaboration seems to work particularly well when the instructors already know each other or have worked together before.

A few noted that the student instructors could benefit from additional training. Writing about this, one administrator said, "[The student instructors] need time to process how their interactions with students are meaningful and also how impactful the relationship that they develop with the co-instructors can be." A handful of instructors had a teammate who had to miss classes or activities and that sometimes caused a strain. One student instructor provided a recommendation to "start the planning process earlier and not wait until study day to meet with the other two instructors. It can be difficult at times to coordinate over the summer especially with jobs and vacation."

New Ideas

The groups discussed whether FE 100 or a first-year program should be mandatory for Loyola students. The majority of students firmly said "no." One person said that when students are new to college life it is not good to make them take on something that might require extra work and make them feel overwhelmed. In addition, the students want to be in class with others who truly want to be there, not students who are forced to be

there. They noted that quite a few students dropped the class, and they were students who had elected to take it.

A couple instructors thought it might be worthwhile to house FE 100 students together. One person said the course should be required for all first-year students. Other suggestions included spending more time on study skills and time management or adding an academic component to the course. One administrator cited a specific program at Bryant University which requires students in their FE 100 to attend plenary sessions. He suggested Loyola do this to better enable in-depth discussions on specific topics during class time. "I think this [plenary sessions] would be best suited for sessions on Study Abroad, Career Services, and Time Management. While all are important to the Freshman Year, they do not lead to significant debate or discussion in a class setting. This may also free up some time for Jesuit identity, diversity, and white privilege conversations that would take longer to dissect."

Summary

When asked to list the best aspects of participating in the FE 100 program almost all the students mentioned getting off campus; in fact, many said this should happen even more often than it does. Students don't want to passively listen to lectures in this course. They seem to want presentations that are interactive and interesting and elicit good discussion. The majority of students also mentioned their classmates and/or one or all of their instructors when listing positive aspects of the program.

Instructors feel that FE 100 provides a good introduction to campus life and they notice emotional growth in their students as the semester progresses. Most enjoy working with the other instructors and find that communication and frequent contact is the key to success.

A commonly cited negative from both the students and the instructors was the number of topics to be covered in class. Some instructors found it difficult to cover all the FE topics in a meaningful way and students felt that they spent too much time on certain topics in class thereby reducing the amount of time that they had available for more meaningful discussions.

Appendix A: FE 100 Focus Group Invitation

Dear Name,

The College is interested in what students think about their experiences in the FE 100 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 Thursday, November 30th in Room E314 of the Andrew White Student Center. 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 FE 100 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 30th.

Appendix B: FE 100 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 FE 100 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 FE 100 section they are in
 - b. Which dorm they live in
- III. EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES (20 min)
 - a. If we were new to Loyola, what would you tell us about the FE 100 program?
How has the Program been this semester?
 - b. What were your expectations of the FE 100 Program?
 - i. Did the Program meet those expectations?
 - ii. Which FE 100 topics were most helpful? Least helpful? Why?
 - iii. Has participating in the FE 100 Program helped you with other courses?
How?
 - c. Why did you decide to register for the FE 100 Program? Why FE 100 and not one of the other first-year programs?
- IV. INSTRUCTORS/ADVISORS (15 min)
 - a. Let's talk about your FE 100 instructors for a few minutes. How would you describe your relationship with your FE 100 instructors?
 - i. Tell us about your relationship with your student instructor. Was this person a good resource for information? In what ways?
 - ii. Compare relationship with your FE 100 professor to relationships with non-FE 100 professors. Compare it to your non-FE 100 friends' relationships with their professors.
 - b. Was your FE 100 professor your advisor? Tell us about your advising experience.
- V. ACTIVITIES/SOCIAL (15 min)
 - a. Did you participate in Community service (if not already mentioned) with FE 100?
 - b. Did FE 100 influence your transition to college life here? And was this transition different than what your non-FE 100 friends experienced?
 - i. Did the FE 100 program help you feel "connected" at Loyola? Did it help you make connections with friends, the college, the larger community, etc.?
- 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: FE 100 Faculty Questions

Dear FE Faculty Name,

As a faculty member teaching an FE 100 course, your feedback is important as we plan for a new cohort of FE 100 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 FE 100 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 FE 100 students during focus groups and will be used for program planning to ensure that the FE 100 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 FE 100 program meeting or not meeting the expectations that you have as a faculty member teaching in the program?
2. How would you describe the FE 100 students you teach and/or advise and your relationship with them? As the semester progressed, what changes, if any, did you notice in the students (intellectual, social, emotional)?
3. How would you describe the collaboration with the other two instructors? Are there ways to improve the instructor team relationship?
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,

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x 5547

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Note. Questions were modified slightly for administrators and student instructors.