

Anderman Faculty Fellows Project Report 20 – 21

“What is it about first-years?”

Description:

The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has been “studying the structure and administration of high-impact practices in the first college year for three decades.” This project seeks to add to the conversation about high-impact practices in first-year classrooms by adding the perspectives of instructors in the University of Colorado Residential Academic Programs (RAPs). These instructors have focused on first-year students in a variety of academic disciplines. Because the RAPs are living and learning communities RAP instructors are intimately familiar with the needs of first-year students in and out of the classroom. The project consisted of four, hour and a half long focus group with 25 instructors and 2 program coordinators who specialize in first-year education. The result was a list of seven (7) items classes need to contain, twenty (20) recommendations for faculty, and sixteen (16) descriptors of first-year students. The results will be included in a new RAP faculty/instructor of first-year student handbook that will be posted on the RAP FLC and Canvas pages.

Background and context:

In May of 2019, CU Boulder Provost Russ Moore accepted the report of the First Year Experience Transition Committee. The report focused on ways to provide all CU students a common “Student-Centered Approach to Learning” (FYE, 3). The report focused on ways to expand available living and learning experiences on campus so that all first-year students could participate. The new FYAEs were to provide co-curricular activities and provide an academically supportive climate. Students also would take a one-credit hour transition course, CU 101, that would be “seamlessly linked” with Student Affairs’ Residential Experience curriculum (ResX). Most importantly, all students were to take two small (<25 students) academic courses (one in the fall and one in the spring) that would “launch students for academic success” (FYE, 11).

In the Fall of 2017, the Office of Undergraduate Education (OUE) created First-Year Seminars (FYSM) as a way to provide, high quality, low size (<20), academically rigorous courses to students that would facilitate the transition to college outside the University’s existing Residential Academic Programs (RAPs). RAPs at CU Boulder are living and learning communities that provide co-curricular activities and small courses for students living in specific residence hall. The College of Arts and Sciences has seven RAPs, in which students take two courses a year (one in the fall and one in the spring) in their residence halls. The courses are all taught by instructors, senior instructors, or tenure-track faculty (no Graduate Part-time Instructors are permitted to teach in the RAPs). In 2019-2020 the A&S RAPs served ~2,300 first-year students. Because of limitations in access to these programs the FYSM sought to expand the reach of first-year specific program beyond residence halls. In the Fall of 2018, the program had 48 courses with a total enrollment of 806 students (FYE, 7). In the Fall of 2020, the primary participants in FYSM were from the Program in Exploratory Studies. This OUE program housed ~2,800 students; 1,553 of whom were in Exploratory Studies—XXES (Program, 10).

FYSM faculty participated in an annual training on best-practices in teaching first-year students. In the Fall of 2019 training, faculty were instructed about resources on campus including Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS), Disability Services, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) Guidelines, the Division of Student Affairs Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution processes, and COVID-19 procedures and protocols.

Faculty were also given information about how to interact with their students. The Program in Exploratory Studies reported that Gen Z students want mixed media and visually stimulating messages, flexibility, collaboration and human connection, “snack media,” and feedback. Given the limits of the COVID-19 era recommended ways for faculty to provide these features was to use the app PlayPosit, to include polls in zoom, use video instruction, chats in zoom, zoom office hours, and early and regular communication (Program, 14). Faculty were encouraged to “say it out loud.” According to the presentation notes “We can counteract self-perceptions that stunt student learning by helping students to understand that intelligence is not fixed and can be developed. Many first-year students, especially those from underrepresented populations, need to hear that they belong at UC and can succeed. Learning can be hard but it’s not impossible” (Program, 15). Faculty were further encouraged to help students understand and adjust to what time management would look like in college, as opposed to college.

In previous training sessions more attention was paid to faculty expectations in the FYSM classroom. Faculty were encouraged to include semester-long or capstone projects, group projects, iterative work, and early points of grading and assessment. Experienced FYSM faculty gave presentations on some of their active engagement techniques in the classroom. There was, however, no systematic explanation of what faculty need to provide for first-year students.

This project seeks to expand both the existing FYSM resources on teaching first-year students and to clarify how faculty might “launch students for academic success” as outlined in the FYE Transition Committee Report. Furthermore, the project seeks to provide a guide for faculty new to teaching exclusively first-year student classes, particularly in the RAPs. To do so, the project had five, hour and a half long focus groups on teaching first-year students. Twenty-seven (27) faculty, primarily existing Residential Academic Program (RAP) faculty, participated. Together they reported on what they have found are the most important elements of a first-year classroom and how best to support the student transition to college.

Desired Result:

As the associate director (and current acting director) of the Philosophy, Arts and Culture RAP (formerly the Farrand RAP), I have had the opportunity to work with a range of faculty in the RAPs. While some are successful, others struggle. For instance, an experienced and acclaimed faculty member from the English Department was horrified by working in the RAP and swore she would never return. She reported to the English Department that RAP students were disrespectful and lazy. She resented teaching students in their pajamas and did not think they should eat in class. She found them unprepared and uninterested. They sought to leave her class. A history instructor complained that although he had taught the course multiple times, his

RAP class was remarkably uninterested and unconnected with the material. He did not want to teach again in the RAP because he could not figure out how to engage the students. The students stopped attending class. A sociology instructor struggled with the students' lack of preparation and inability to engage in meaningful argument and. Students perceived him as elitist and detached and routinely complained about his teaching. All three of these faculty members are dedicated and devoted teachers who thrive in mixed-level classrooms. What is it about the all first-year student classroom that is so different?

This project began as a desire to **provide a handbook for new RAP faculty** that would prepare them for the complexities of teaching classes of only first-year students and prevent such unhappy teaching situations.

Outcome:

The focus groups discussions focused on the following aspects of excellence in teaching first-year students.¹

The class needs to:

- o Be a community
- o be a safe place to fail
- o use a range of teaching modalities/active learning
- o help students find their academic voice
- o give students opportunities to practice meta-cognition
- o provide access to campus resources
- o connect students to the University

Faculty need to be:

- o Flexible
- o Patient
- o Non-combative
- o Open
- o Authentic – acknowledge their own human flaws
- o Receptive to students interests and concerns
- o Present in class so that you can grab the teachable moments
- o Willing to learn from students

Faculty also need to:

- o Identify as educators not evaluators
- o Think about the whole student not just the content they are teaching
- o Address the fact that students all feel insecure/impostor syndrome
- o Listen closely and empathetically

¹ The aspects are ranked by the number of times they were discussed in the group from highest to lowest. A complete description of each category and examples for each are provided in the appendix.

- o There is a dramatic spectrum of academic competency, study skills, social skills
- o Help students find a passion – don't forget they are just starting to explore.
 - Don't be discouraged, however, if they don't respond to your subject with the same passion you do
- o Create an environment where students can trust them
- o Attend RAP events with students
- o Remember that content is secondary but still have commitment, dedication, and passion for the content
- o Empower students by giving them some choice
- o Know they have a privileged position to shape the students' educational passions

Faculty need to know that first-year students are wonderful because they:

- o are ready for new ways of learning
- o aren't jaded/ they are glad to be there (or aren't as jaded as upperclassmen).
- o have potential to be passionate
- o are generous and patient teaching each other
- o are generous and patient helping faculty with technological problems
- o are generous and patient if faculty treats them as adults with their own minds and spirits
- o are enthusiastic. (We have the opportunity to take advantage of their enthusiasm.)
- o don't resist being active learners if the community is there for them

Students need help with

- o chasing the "one right answer"
- o moving away from fixation on grade
- o identifying where they need support and accommodation
- o knowing what they want or what excites them instead of just what they "should do"
- o learning the importance of reading the feedback on assignments. Too many students just look at the grade without learning from the process so that they can improve their next assignment.
- o rote learning
- o email communication
- o time management

The following people participated in the focus groups: Sharon Adams, Tyler Alpern, Elizabeth Anderman, Mike Barnett, Stephanie Barnheizer, Cathy Comstock, Bert Covert, Laura DeLuca, Kristen Drybread, Carl Hager, Nicole Jobin, Carmen Jura, Jennifer Klein, Donna Louie, Laura MacDonald, Aous Mansouri, Bird Marathe, Janet Robinson Carlo Salvinelli, Jennie Shwartz, Michele Simpson, Marshall Smith, Doug Snyder, Andrea Straccia, Evan Thomas, Andrew Wilson, Mike Zerella

Next steps:

Next steps for the project include circulating the list to new faculty members. I would also like to ask RAP faculty and FYSM to rank the findings. Furthermore, I would like to collect more examples of faculty assignments/exercises/in class activities that pursue these pedagogical aims. I would like to integrate some of the information I learned in the ASSETT Faculty Fellows program into the ongoing conversation about what first-year students need – particularly universal design, learning goals, outcome setting, and active learning assignments. I would like to include a section on what students come from high school prepared to do – this would include a description of high school syllabi, high school Learning Management Systems, and high school rubrics. Finally, I would like to do focus groups with high school faculty that articulate what they think college students need to be prepared to do.

ASSETT faculty fellows:

Being part of the ASSETT faculty fellows allowed me the space and time to reflect on my own teaching. It gave me language for some of my own pedagogical practice and encouraged me to expand my thinking about what I am doing. It got me excited to think about the ways that faculty in the RAPs already engage in many of the best practices we studied but also excited to think about ways to help faculty access the information at a deeper level. RAP faculty take for granted that we know that first-year students are different, but we never take the time to articulate those differences. By articulating those differences, we can combine what we know with best practices that ASSETT has identified. This will make all of us better instructors.

Moving forward I'd like to get some of the highlights of the faculty fellows presentations integrated into the RAP Faculty Forums. These monthly meetings give RAP faculty an opportunity to share what is going on in their classrooms. They are a great way to share information and a place where RAP faculty's pedagogical knowledge is appreciated. If we can figure out a way to maintain that feeling the faculty will continue to be open to expanding their own pedagogical practice.

I am grateful for the experience and for the support of the group.

Work Cited:

“First-Year Experience Transition Committee Draft Report” March, 2019.
https://www.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/attached-files/fye_transition_committee_report_appendices.pdf (visited May 31, 2021)

“Program in Exploratory Studies FYSM Faculty Training Fall 2020” PowerPoint.

Appendix:

Summary notes from the five focus groups. “What is it about first-years?”

The class needs to be a community

- Create connection/relationship with faculty
 - The faculty member should be “Someone who knows who they are”
 - Students need to feel “valued, known, and understood”
 - One faculty member has a first assignment where they share their personal stories and concerns (even in a class of 100). The faculty member then uses this information as a starting point for in person meetings with students (yes, all 100 of them, twice!).
 - Create a getting to know you form or have 10 “getting to know you questions”.
 - Create a google survey – where they are from, where they graduated from high school, how many history classes? Any European? What is your preferred learning style? Share out some of the answers to the class anonymously
 - Have some kind of personal writing experience
 - Connect personal subjects to writing
 - Class openers
 - “What is your super power?”
 - “What did you do to feel better this week?”
 - Have one on one meetings – a few faculty members used the flexibility of zoom meetings to schedule 20 minute meetings with each of their students (some of the meetings were during class time). Students appreciate the one on one time.
 - Give them the option of what to talk about and when (let them self-triage)
 - When they share in class it is important to warn them beforehand
 - One faculty member found that students were surprised by what they shared being more raw than they expected.
- Participation is critical and needs to be reflected as such in syllabus
 - One faculty member has Ubuntu buddies – this is someone to connect with on a regular basis in class. This peer does peer reviews, and group discussion.
 - Help them make social connections by having at least some consistent groups so that they can build familiarity

- Provide clear expectation and ask for specific deliverables while in break out rooms or small groups. Don't rely on them to have meaningful conversations.
- Be authentic
 - Some faculty talk with students about their own undergraduate experiences to show how college is a process
 - Some share their own low GPAs
- Understand that they are human beings with a wide set of interests and needs
 - Acknowledge how important life outside the classroom is to them.
 - Let them have a space to talk calmly about their roommates and all the other issues they are coping with
 - The classroom should be a space where faculty sees that students are multi-dimensional. Talk about how they are balancing all the different things in their life.
 - Make the content relate to their lives – or show them the ways that it might
 - Their lives are in chaos and they often need help navigating the experience
 - Exercises in empathy (see Comstock assignment)
- They are very connected to their families. If their parents are on board the students will give it their all.
 - One faculty member reported that the thing she will miss about remote teaching is the ability to interact with their larger lives. She invited parents, siblings and friends to join the class conversation and found it very productive.

Practice meta-cognition

- They can embrace the idea of being independent thinkers in charge of their own learning but don't assume that they are ready to do this or know how to do this.
- Work on the difference between academic and personal self-awareness
 - Use the personal as a way to build into academics. The personal is the bridge to the academic
- Model meta cognition by explaining your pedagogy and why you are doing the class or assignment the way you are
- Examples:
 - Half way through the semester have students write suggestions for incoming students (do on butcher paper)
 - Ask on each assignment what knowledge they have gained?
 - After a test ask them to honestly answer how much they studied and how much they wish they had studied.
 - Ask them to give themselves the grade they think they'll get.

- One faculty member has two students ask questions of the reading at the beginning of class. This provides them the opportunity to reflect on their reading and how discussions work
- Have a journaling assignment where they reflect on what they learn and the value of their work.
- Have them write a one-page story of how they wrote

Show them basic skills

- What is on the syllabus/How to use a syllabus --- the high school syllabi they are used to are just behavioral contracts so students don't know the rich depth of material available on a syllabus.

Use a range of teaching modalities/active learning

- Use small groups/Breakout rooms
 - Be clear on direction for what product of small groups should be
 - Help them be responsible for each other
 - In a songwriting class the faculty member gives the students a situation and then asks them to write a chorus and a verse
- Allow time for workshopping
- Canvas
 - Especially during COVID the student reliance on Canvas became especially clear. As they are adjusting to college it is particularly helpful to use Canvas as the one place where they receive information. This helps them adapt faster. In later years it is possible to move away from Canvas but using it in the first year provides students with regularity – one less thing that is changing.
 - Students have put their trust in Canvas. Faculty who don't use it can make students feel ungrounded.
- Provide conceptual scaffolding
 - They might have questions they are afraid to ask
 - Be specific about the discipline specific ways of knowing and praxis
 - For example, define what an argument is, what analysis is, what citation is in your discipline
 - Be aware that until they do what you ask they can't translate your instructions – they need to get their feet wet. Use their first attempts as tools from which they and the class can learn
 - Provide detailed assignments so that they know what is expected of them

- Use subtle scaffolding – if it’s too obvious they resist and do the minimum to meet the scaffolding requirements. Integrate the scaffolding in multiple ways throughout the course.
- Have the low stakes assignments come together into bigger final assignments

The class needs to be a safe place to fail

- How do you recover from failure
- Provide feedback early and often
 - Students who have to wait weeks struggle especially with the transition from high school where they watch their grades on an hour-by-hour basis
 - Low stakes quizzes
 - Shorter writing assignments
 - Syllabus quiz
 - Discussion posts
 - Have respond to each other’s posts. Increases the complexity and shows how they arguing and writing in lower stakes setting
 - Have students present a chapter they have read
 - Have students hand in notes to see what they are absorbing
 - Assign specific note-taking days to each student and post those notes on a class-wide discussion so that all can see. Follow up by discussing value of notes. Show how it’s more than what was on the original slides.
- Examples
 - Use failure as an opportunity to teach study skills.
 - One faculty member models this by having students hand write corrections so that they can learn the value of physical tools in memorizing information.
 - Ask them to self-reflect on how to improve their grade and studying
 - Give them opportunities to earn points back
 - One faculty member has a list of alternate assignments students can complete in order to earn points back. He reported that 50% of students take advantage of the opportunity. It gives the faculty member the opportunity to include material that didn’t fit within the constraints of the syllabus. Thus, the faculty member has the opportunity to enrich the content of the course.

- One faculty member allows students who fail their first exam (20% of the course) to switch their second two exams to being worth 30% each (instead of the original 20% each).
- Give them opportunities to rewrite
 - One faculty member includes opportunities for rewriting in the syllabus so that it is clear from the beginning that rewriting is a feature of the class. Students are allowed to choose which paper they will rewrite. They must meet with the faculty member before they rewrite. In this way they get one on one time with the faculty member, learn about the value of office hours, and touch base about the expectations of the paper in a more detailed way.
- Have iterative assignments
 - One faculty member assigns two presentations. They learn from the first and do much better the second time.
- Use rubrics
 - One faculty member has students grade their papers against the rubric. He then compares his rubric with theirs so that they can understand the rubric.
 - Tell the what an A looks like – they are used to jumping through the hoops on rubrics to get an A. Be clear with them that in college jumping through the hoops only gets you a C. This is a real shift from high school level learning.
- Flexibility on deadlines
 - One faculty member has five (5) due dates. Students are only required to turn in four (4) assignments. It is up to the student to decide which assignment they will skip. This gives them ownership over the assignments and submission.
 - One faculty member assigns eleven (11) response papers. The faculty member will drop five (5) of those assignments. This means that students continue to engage with the material but almost half of the assignments have lower stakes.
 - One faculty member has a two-week window for assignments. Students may turn in the assignment any time during the window. The further from the original date, however, the higher the bar at which the paper will be graded. The idea is that with more time the student should be able to provide better quality work.
- Continuity of course materials

- Make sure that discussion questions and homework problems are like questions on the exams – provide continuity of course materials.
- Give them some choice in their assignments
 - Allow them to pick the texts/songs they are working on
- Importance of Universal Design
 - Provide students multiple modes to access the information
- After first quiz ask if they want study groups. Create the study groups.

Help them find their academic voice

Give them permission to say what they think

Connect their work of higher learning to being a person – self-actualization

Provide access to campus resources

- Writing Center
 - Visit writing center
 - Have writing center come to class
 - Give points if a student visits the writing center on an assignment
- Research
 - Work with librarians to help them understand library resources
 - They are shockingly naïve about online research
 - They are surface researchers – need to teach them how to go beyond the first ten hits on a google search. Need to teach them the next steps beyond a simple question search.
 - Library special collections and documents
 - One faculty member uses the library to create primary document research project
 - Use special collections to show the students primary documents
- Emotional supports
 - CAPS
 - OVA
 - SSCM
- Advisors and academic coaching

Connect students to the University

- Offer extra credit or credit for attending university events

- One faculty member offers credit for going to any RAP event even if it doesn't connect to the course content because of the importance of connecting first-year students to the University community

Impostor Syndrome

- Address the fact that they all feel insecure
 - They feel unsafe – both because of social media and because of what is happening in the world
 - Their general fear level is high
 - This means that they are scared to take a chance. They want to get it RIGHT and that pursuit limits them.
 - “Rightly or wrongly, they believe there is something wrong with them.” Know that this is part of their learning
 - Need to help build their confidence/give them permission to say what they think
 - Women in science – female science students really need to be seen, help them feel confident in a male dominated environment
- Do not lower your standards (this increases impostor syndrome) but do make your expectations clear – watch out for the hidden assumptions that are in your assignments. Try to make assignments as transparent as possible.
- Examples
 - Have a weekly check-in. One faculty asks them “when was the last time you felt smart?” (If they aren't feeling smart it will impact their grades)

Appendix B:
Comstock Empathy Assignment

Empathy: The heart of nonviolence

Good for you, good for the world

For this exercise, please choose 1,2, or 3 and work on it actively. Makes notes as to how you fulfilled each step of that exercise and what the effects were.

If you could try out number 4 and also take notes and tell me about that, even better!

- 1) **Develop your empathy by listening intently when someone speaks.**
 - a. This includes waiting until they've finished speaking to formulate your response and respond.
 - b. Considering the speaker's motivations behind what they're saying
 - c. Responding with follow-up questions to further your understanding of the conversation.

- 2) **Try to apply empathy to an ongoing disagreement** you have with a family member, friend or co-worker.
 - Try to imagine the argument from their side
 - Try to recognize whether they have valid arguments, good intentions or positive motivations you may have previously missed.
 - Consider what problems and pains they may be having in their life that is making it difficult for them to be their best self in this case.
 - Express awareness of and sympathy for the needs that may be motivating them

- 3) **Watch and wonder.**
 - a. Put down your cell phone. Instead of checking Twitter or reading articles while you wait for the train or are stuck in a traffic jam, look at the people around you and imagine
 - i. Who they might be
 - ii. What they might be thinking and feeling
 - iii. Where they are trying to go right now.

- b. Are they frustrated? Happy? Singing? Looking at their phones? Do they live here or are they from out of town? Have they had a nice day?
- c. Try to actually construct that which might be happening for them and care.

4) **Make an effort to do considerate things for those around you.**

- a. This means becoming aware of their needs
- b. Considering whether there's any way you can help support those.
- c. Doing it subtly so that they don't feel pitied or obligated

Appendix C:

Donna Louie Community Building Assignment examples:

Personal essay:

To make the class more personal and rewarding, I like to know my students. Write ONE SINGLE-SPACED PAGE (12 pts, Times, New Roman) telling me who you are (e.g., where are you from; what are your interests and hobbies; what are your thoughts on the meaning of a good life, a productive life, and a happy life; with those thoughts in mind, what do you hope to gain in college; what are your strengths and weaknesses that I should know to help you learn better) and why you are taking this class (i.e., what do you hope to learn, how this class may impact you, what are your expectations, and what questions do you have that you would like me to address).

Please take time to reflect about these questions. Grading is based on effort and meeting the requirements.

Mini-review

I also give a weekly "Minireview" (two times a day, once to two times a week) for 30 minutes to disguise my office hours because in the past students rarely come to my Office Hours. However, they will go to these reviews and feel less intimidated, as they are in a group setting. In these reviews, I go over that week's material again by asking them questions, so students have to find the answers in their notes or recall what they have studied/learned. My class is for nonscience majors, so having these weekly reviews further solidify the information.

I've been giving these reviews for the past 4-5 years, and students find them very helpful and improve their exam scores. In addition, students make friends and build community in these small group setting, and I get to build rapport with them.