

FIRST YEAR PROGRAM
History of Assessment
December 2007

General Overview:

The First Year Program has had a documented philosophy and goals statement that has provided the unifying learning goals for the program since its inception. That statement has gone through about four or five major revisions during the life of the program with the last resulting in the current First Year Program Philosophy and Goals Statement which was voted into effect in the spring of 2006.

The major indirect assessment measure in the FYP and FYS has been student evaluations. In addition, a review of syllabi is conducted by a peer review committee for both the fall and spring courses. This fall we added an additional review of all syllabi by a committee comprised of the Associate Dean of the First Year, the Director of Research Instruction, the Director of the Munn Writing Center and the Director of the Rhetoric and Communication Program. Direct assessment has occurred primarily through portfolio review; the nature of this review has changed over the last several years.

Most Recent Changes to the Philosophy and Goals Statement:

The major impetus for the current revision of the Philosophy and Goals statement came from initiatives on campus, in particular the Oral Communication Institute and the Rhetoric and Communication institute, which led many faculty teaching within the program to view their work in very different ways. New faculty teaching within the program also brought new ideas, and the dissatisfaction with the checklist approach to program goals was growing. The process of revision began in May 2004 and was largely completed in the spring of 2005 with some colleges “trying on” the new Philosophy and Goals for their colleges during that academic year. In Spring 2006, it was adopted as the program’s statement for all colleges.

The current Philosophy and Goals Statement differs from the old in two significant ways. First, it outlines a set of learning goals for FYP and FYS courses—goals that could be fulfilled in a variety of ways. The document then articulates six philosophical foundations to the work that frame the context for these goals. In addition, the program no longer has a separate statement about residential living but incorporates the goals for that component of the program within the single Philosophy and Goals statement. Second, a second document was created that provides a set of best practices for teaching within the FYP and is quite detailed about the pedagogy of rhetoric-rich communication skills instruction. This document was originally part of the revised Philosophy and Goals Statement but was perceived as too prescriptive.

History of Indirect Measures of Learning Goals:

The Professional Standards Committee evaluation forms are administered in all FYP and FYS classrooms, but we also administer our own evaluations forms that reflect the special learning goals of the FYP. One closed-ended form asks questions about the college as a whole and has

undergone only minor changes since the fall of 1995 because these forms reflect general learning goals for the FYP that have not changed, such as whether the climate of the class was conducive to learning and whether the variety of perspectives provided by the different professors helped the students to develop a richer understanding of the course material. In addition, the students are asked two open-ended questions, which also have not changed during this period. The first asks them about the strengths and weaknesses of each faculty member and how they function as a team, and the second asks them which aspects of the FYP had the strongest impact on them and why.

On the other hand, the instructor-specific, closed-ended form was changed in 1998 to focus more on communication skills. In 2004, this form underwent a significant change, reflecting the program's increased interest in learning goals and changes in pedagogy—changes that occurred at about the same time the program began its revision of the Philosophy and Goals Statement that resulted in the new version. The forms have not changed since that time and now include questions about “significant class time” on writing, speaking and research, “useful verbal and written feedback” (rather than “comments”), learning from other students and help with “academic planning”. In Fall of 2006, two questions were added that ask students how often they have visited their mentor and how much the mentor has contributed to their learning.

In Spring 2001, the FYS became the stand-alone, individual-instructor course, and for the first two years, the existing spring semester evaluation forms were adopted for a single professor. Some additional questions regarding learning to cite materials were added in Spring of 2003, but the closed-ended questions have remained substantially the same. The open-ended evaluations did change substantially, however, in the Spring of 2002 reflecting much more directly the learning goals for the FYS clearly delineating four major areas of learning—reading, writing, speaking and research.

Another indirect assessment has been the syllabus review process. Every summer FYP teams are part of a 3 or 4 person team that reviews each other's syllabi to provide feedback on strengths and weaknesses with the Philosophy and Goals Statement as the context; for the spring FYSs, groups of 3-4 faculty are part of the peer review which is more likely to occur electronically given the short span of time in which it must occur. Prior to the adoption of the new Philosophy and Goals Statement, this review was in part a counting exercise—did each of the teams indeed have three writing projects, two oral communication projects, etc.? Since the adoption of the new Philosophy and Goals Statement, teams have been asked to provide a cover letter outlining how their syllabus reflects the goals. Unfortunately, the syllabus review process has been quite variable, with some groups finding it extremely useful and others finding it perfunctory at best. This variability is not unexpected as sometimes the review is difficult to conduct due to summer travel schedules and sometimes it is a review of courses that have been taught many times before. In addition, the outcome of that review was never thought of as assessment per se in the past, and hence the reports that were sent to the Associate Dean following the peer review, as well as the Associate Dean's notes of his own review of the syllabi, were not retained. The Syllabus Review Committee (SRC), discussed in the general overview above, was added as an additional layer of review as a result of the variability in quality and helpfulness of the peer reviews. In light of the general education curriculum assessment and the new SRC, the reports of the peer reviews and the Associate Dean's report from the SRC have been retained.

History of Direct Measures of Assessment:

The major strategy for direct measure of the learning goals for the FYP and FYS has been portfolio review because all students create a portfolio of their work in the fall and the spring. Following the creation of the Supplement Writing Instruction Program, the FYP began a process of evaluating portfolios of concern from the fall semester FYP courses to identify students who might need the supplemental instruction. These portfolios were evaluated using the rubric developed in the summer of 2000 by analysis of a large group of randomly selected portfolio and applied for the first time to a group of portfolios of concern in January of 2001. The guide provides a list of positive features of student writing and then a 6-point scoring scale based on the level to which those goals were achieved in the portfolio. Portfolios receiving a 1 or 2 indicate that the student is in need of supplemental instruction. This review of portfolios of concern does not provide a full picture of how well the program is meeting its learning goals because these portfolios represent the students who are failing to meet the goals of the program as assessed by their instructor. However, the small number of portfolios of concern that have been received by the FYP office in the last few years is a positive indicator of success in meeting program goals.

Portfolio review in the spring semester is most useful for assessment purposes. Since 2002, FYS faculty have been asked to submit the portfolios of one or two students chosen at random from the roster of their FYS. These portfolios have been read by typically two readers during the early part of the summer and scored using a 4-point rubric based on the learning goals for the FYS. Although it is unclear which summers since 2002 this review has occurred, data are available from the summers of 2005 and 2007. In the summer of 2005, 70 portfolios were reviewed (i.e., two from each FYS) and were read by a single reader. The average across all of the portfolios was 2.64—i.e., between *fair* and *good* according to the rubric—and the median was a 3. In the summer of 2007, 35 portfolios were reviewed (i.e., one from each FYS) and were read by two readers. The average score was 2.31—once again between *fair* and *good*—and the median was a 2. No portfolio was assessed as a “4” in the summer of 2007, whereas 8 were assessed as a “4” in 2005. The difference might be a real difference in the quality of the portfolios review and/or it might be accounted for by the differences between the process of the two assessments (i.e., 2005 had a more representative sample but 2007 had a more reliable methodology).

Finally, in the spring of 2004, the Will O’Brien First Year Research Prize was established, in memory of a student who died during the summer of 2003 after his first year at SLU. FYS faculty submit projects they feel are worthy of recognition, and these papers are reviewed by the Associate Dean for the First Year, the Director of the Munn Writing Center and the Director for Research Instruction. Three winners are chosen who receive a cash prize and are recognized at the Honor Reception that occurs during the Friday of Family Weekend in the fall semester. Similarly to the portfolios of concern, this competition provides information about performance at the extremes of the continua. The number of projects submitted for the competition has ranged from 8 submissions to 17 over the four years of the competition.

Future FYP/FYS Assessment:

Beginning this spring 2008, the FYP will consider a more systematic assessment process through the development of a pilot assessment project. This project may focus on the spring semester because of the history of having conducted a systematic portfolio assessment in the spring and the ability to build upon the current assessment practices. This spring an FYP Assessment Committee will be convened that will include a group of faculty teaching within the program, the Associate Dean of the First Year, the Director of the Munn Writing Center, the Director of Research Instruction and the Director of the Rhetoric and Communication Program. The goal for this committee will be to develop a plan for a pilot program that will be shared with the full FYP faculty, revised and then implemented as soon as possible. We will then take what we learn from the pilot project to move forward toward a more comprehensive and sustained assessment plan for the program.

Although the plan for assessment will be developed by the committee, some reflections upon the above portfolio process that might be useful for the committee to consider are offered. First, the methodology of portfolio assessment can affect the data in meaningful ways. A robust methodology—i.e., a representative sample with a reliable process of multiple readers—is needed to feel confident about our results. Second, to allow trends to be observed, we need multiple data points (at least three) over a period of time. The seeming decrease in quality of portfolios, even if not accounted for by the differences in assessment process, cannot constitute evidence of a trend. We need additional data. Third, we need to return to some form of portfolio assessment from the fall semester that is not just of portfolios of concern, whether that is part of the pilot project or a component of a larger assessment plan. The portfolios provide such a rich opportunity for program assessment we should take advantage of this opportunity. Therefore, we are asking FYP faculty to submit the portfolios of two randomly selected students from each FYP college (one per faculty member) at the conclusion of the fall semester.