

A Brief Overview of Research on First-Year Seminars

Nolan Schultheis (00:05):

Welcome to the Center for Engaged Learning special series on first year seminars featuring guest hosts from the Elon University Masters of Higher Education Program.

Lucy Sneader (00:18):

In this episode from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. We'll discuss first year seminars and the research behind them. Hi, I'm your host, Lucy Sneader. Did you know that first year seminars can increase student retention by an impressive five to 15% when effectively implemented? According to research by Butler and the research group, a well-designed first year seminar program isn't just a bonus. It's a game changer for keeping students enrolled and on the path to graduation. But what does effectively implemented actually mean? It means creating seminars that engage students, incorporate active learning, and provide targeted support. These elements ensure that first year seminar programs are more than just introductory courses. They become foundational experiences. Of course, delivering such an impactful program isn't without its challenges. One of the most common hurdles in running a successful first year seminar according to Board Elon and the research group, is ensuring interdisciplinary faculty involvement.

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Bringing in faculty from different disciplines adds richness to this program, but can be difficult to coordinate. Another challenge is aligning learning outcomes with meaningful assignments that truly reflect the seminar's goals. And let's not forget the importance of fostering authentic community building among students, a key element to creating a supportive and connected learning environment. The benefits of overcoming these challenges, however, are immense first year seminars play a critical role in helping students acclimate to college level courses. As Jajairam's research highlights, these seminars provide students with the skills and confidence they need to succeed, not just in the moment, but in their future academic pursuits as well. When students feel equipped and empowered during their first year, the positive ripple effects can be seen across their entire college journey. One crucial strategy for achieving this is building academic self-efficacy. According to McBride and their research group, effective first year seminars should intentionally incorporate methods that help students believe in their own ability to succeed.

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This might include scaffolding, challenging tasks, providing frequent and constructive feedback, and celebrating small successes along the way. Academic self-efficacy lays the groundwork for persistence and achievement throughout a student's education. Equally important is addressing the specific needs of students in these seminars. Olson's research underscores how tailoring first year seminar programs to individual needs helps create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. And when students feel seen and supported, they're more likely to stay enrolled and excel. To tie it all together, let's turn to a report from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. This survey of nearly a thousand US graduates revealed that while 80% found their college experience rewarding, and 83 felt it was worth the cost, only 47% had meaningful mentoring relationships with faculty or staff, and 30% reported lacking a mentor entirely. First year seminar programs can bridge this gap by introducing students to practices like reflective learning, real world applications, and opportunities for mentorship. These connections with peers and faculty create a sense of belonging and lay the foundation for long-term

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success. So whether it's boosting retention, fostering academic self-efficacy, or helping students develop meaningful connections, first year seminars are essential pieces of the puzzle for student success.

Nolan Schultheis (03:49):

This series is produced by Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning. Learn more about first year seminars and other engaged learning topics at www.centerforengagedlearning.org.

Lucy Sneader (04:03):

Come back for our next episode where Lauren Feeley discusses the impact of first year seminars on first generation undergraduate students.