

First-Year Seminars and First-Generation Students

Nolan Schultheis (00:04):

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.

Lauren Feeley (00:19):

As the previous research and episode two indicates first year seminars offer a variety of benefits for most first year students by helping them develop essential skills for success in college. This is especially true for certain populations of students. In this episode from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning, we'll discuss how first year seminars can specifically impact first generation students. Hi, I'm your host, Lauren Feeley. While there can be some variations of what it means to be a first gen student, the Center for First Generation Student Success defines a first gen student as someone whose parents did not complete a four year college or university degree, because students self-identify as first gen, it can be difficult to know exactly how many college students are first gen, but as of 2018, the Center for First Generation Students Success states that first gen students now make up a third of students enrolled in college nationwide.

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Yet, of those students, only 27% will complete their degrees within four years compared to 59% of students who are not first gen. Identifying these students is crucial because it allows institutions to best support them effectively and increase their overall persistence. First gen students attend two and four year private and public institutions, so they show up in every type of higher ed institution, and they come with a unique set of needs. First gen students often lack familial knowledge of how to navigate complex higher education systems. They also enter college with lower academic self-efficacy and may feel less prepared for college level work. These challenges require additional support, and this is where first year seminars can help bridge gaps. Researchers, Y and Sendell underscore the importance of first year seminars and fostering social and cultural integration for first gen students who need to adapt to unfamiliar environment.

(02:17):

First year seminars offer a primary means of connecting with peers and introducing students to a collegiate academic community. Several studies, including research by Jajjiram and McBride and Dugan, indicate that through targeted interventions and inclusive practices, first year seminars can help ease the transition to college by teaching students, studying strategies, time management, and help build academic self-confidence and fosters sense of belonging. Let's take a look at the study conducted by Joann Olson in 2017 at a small teaching intensive university in Texas within a first year seminar class, the study, 43 first year students, including first gen and non-first gen students, and examine their ability to develop grit and perseverance through two tasks, a challenging puzzle, and a time management exercise. While many students showed tenacity, non-first gen students generally displayed more positive attitudes and persistence. First gen students struggled more, particularly with the puzzle relying on familial strategies instead of exploring new ones.

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However, with guided support, they persevered the study underscores the importance of non-cognitive skills like grit in college, and suggest that first year seminars can help first gen students by providing

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targeted support and assignments to build problem solving and perseverance. Borderline and their research team emphasize that small interdisciplinary first year seminar classes particularly benefit first gen students by introducing close faculty student engagement, and providing robust academic and social support. Learning communities and writing intensive coursework can be especially helpful in providing critical support for first gen students. While first year seminars improve grades and retention, additional programming and mentorship are often necessary to ensure long-term success. Authors Permzadian, and Credé indicate that support should not end with the completion of a first year seminar. Institutions need to sustain interdisciplinary faculty involvement, aligning learning outcomes, and fostering authentic community building within first gen populations intentional course design, ongoing assessment and faculty investment are essential to improve outcomes and create a sense of belonging for first gen students.

Nolan Schultheis (04:57):

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.

Lauren Feeley (05:13):

On episode four, I'll interview Megan a first generation college graduate to talk about her experience within a first year seminar.