

Freshman Interest Groups, Autumn 1996: Faculty Survey

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The University of Washington Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program is conducted each fall quarter, and provides incoming freshmen with a bridge between the academic and social world of high school and that of the University. Each FIG is composed of a group of approximately 20 students who enroll in a common set of University classes organized around a central theme, such as People and Politics, International Relations, and Performing Arts. Some of the smaller courses are made up entirely of FIG students, whereas in courses with a larger class size, FIG students comprise a small part of the whole.

The FIG program attempts to facilitate the integration of first-quarter freshmen into the University environment by forming cohorts of students with similar academic interests and, as the quarter progresses, academic experiences. Because students see each other in every class, every day, they develop a familiarity and comfort level with each other that allows more active participation in whatever is going on in the classroom. They are also available, as a group, for instruction and communication outside of the classroom in a way that is not true of students who are not participating in a FIG.

This report briefly summarizes a survey of faculty who taught courses comprising the sixty FIGs offered autumn quarter, 1996. A one-page questionnaire, composed primarily of open-ended questions, was circulated to the 111 faculty members, and 55 (50%) returned completed questionnaires.

INFLUENCE ON HOW CLASS TAUGHT

Instructors were asked to describe ways in which the presence of FIG students influenced the way in which they taught their course. The majority (53%) did not change their course in any way. Other faculty were able to take advantage of positive aspects of the homogeneity and group cohesion of the FIG students. Several (14%) found that the sense of "community" among students made group work more productive and class discussions more fruitful. Others (11%) were able to enrich the content of their own course by relating it to the linked courses. Responses to this question are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
**How did the presence of FIG students influence the way
you chose to teach your class? (N)**

No influence	(29)	Identical schedules complicated planning	(1)
Student feelings of community improved group work and class discussions	(8)	Increased pace of course because students were 'more advanced'	(1)
Focused on FIG theme	(6)	Needed more contact among linked classes	(1)
Slowed pace or changed content of course to accommodate large number of freshmen	(6)	Was able to redesign course incorporating more technology	(1)
Identical schedules facilitated planning	(2)		

INFLUENCE ON TONE / PERSONALITY OF CLASS

As first-quarter entering freshmen, FIG students are in a period of transition between two “campus cultures.” FIG peer groups provide social and academic support to facilitate assimilation to the University campus, and the cohesiveness of these groups can affect student in-class interactions in both positive and negative ways. As shown in Table 2, a large number of faculty (51%) noted that the course atmosphere was more relaxed, and that FIG students felt at ease earlier in the quarter and participated in livelier discussions than did non-FIG students. Other comments (31%) noted that students tended to have too many side conversations especially on shared courses, and they sometimes formed social cliques or reverted to unruly ‘high school’ behaviors. Many faculty noted both the positive and negative aspects as two sides of the same coin.

Table 2.
**How did the presence of FIG students influence the tone of the class,
its personality, and the behavior of other students in the class? (N)**

Livelier discussions / More participation	(28)	Acted more like high school students / Unruly	(4)
No influence / Don't know	(14)	More intelligent / Better prepared	(2)
More distracted / Formed cliques	(13)		

CONTACT WITH FIG STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF CLASS

The majority of faculty had e-mail (87%) or in-person (78%) contact with FIG students outside of the classroom; fewer (34%) spoke with FIG students by telephone (Table 3). Faculty teaching large classes weren't necessarily aware of whether a particular student belonged to a FIG. Relatively few faculty made comments about their contacts with FIG students, but those who did noted that it was 'enjoyable' or 'interesting.' All faculty gave students their e-mail address (N=54) or home phone number (N=1).

Table 3.

During the quarter, did you have contact with any of the FIG students outside of class? (Circle all that apply.) Do you have any comments? (N)

Yes, by e-mail	(48)	No	(1)
Yes, in person	(43)	Don't know if students were from FIG	(6)
Yes, by telephone	(19)		

BASIC STUDY / LEARNING SKILLS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS AT UW

A variety of study and learning skills were identified as critical to student success at the UW (see Table 4). Specific skills named included basic study skills (16%), writing skills (14%), library/research skills (11%), and computer skills (7%), but most suggestions revolved around facilitating the transition from passive to active learning that takes place as students move from high school to the University. The largest number of faculty (22%) cited a need for students to learn to manage their own time; related suggestions included asking questions in class, attending office hours, making contact with faculty and graduate students, forming their own study groups, and 'taking control of their education' (22%).

Table 4.

**Are there basic study or learning skills that you believe should be taught in the FIG program that would be critical to helping students be successful at the UW?
If so, what are they? (N)**

Time management	(12)	Form peer study groups	(3)
Basic study skills	(9)	'Grow up' / use common sense	(3)
Writing	(8)	Attend office hours	(2)
Library / research skills	(6)	Take control of their education	(2)
Ask questions / participate in class	(4)	Critical thinking	(2)
Computer skills	(4)	Make contact w/ faculty / grad students	(1)
Understand univ. vs h.s. expectations	(4)		

USE OF E-MAIL, WEB, AND LIBRARY SKILLS IN COURSE

As shown in Table 5, the majority of faculty (69%) used e-mail in some manner in their courses. Most of these were in the form of individual communications between student and instructor ('24-hour office hours'), although some courses included a type of listproc or listserv. Relatively few (16%) faculty incorporated use of the World Wide Web in their instruction or assignments although several mentioned that students were free to use the web as a resource in their research projects. Library skills were a part of many courses (45%), both as a subject of instruction and as a required base for research projects.

Table 5.

All FIG sections have lessons on the use of email and the World Wide Web/Internet. About half the FIG sections have library instruction. Are these skills used in your course? If so, how do you integrate these skills? (N)

E-mail used in course	(38)	Library instruction used in course	(25)
Indiv communication w/ instructor	(18)	Research required for projects	(10)
Broadcast assignments/info (listproc)	(9)	Gave library orientation	(9)
Student discussion (listserv)	(5)	Research optional for projects	(3)
WWW used in course	(9)	Incorporated some or all in assign's	(8)

SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES WITH FIG STUDENTS

Faculty made relatively few comments about specific experiences with FIG students and those comments that were made didn't fall into a particular pattern. Taken as a whole, the comments had a 'flavor' similar to the descriptions of the tone and personality of the class discussed above.

COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS ABOUT FIG PROGRAM

Most faculty did not respond to this question, perhaps because the majority of concerns had been addressed earlier. Comments centered around providing more information to faculty (about their FIGs) or to students (about differences between high school and college in terms of both social and academic expectations). (See Table 6.)

Table 6.

Do you have any comments, suggestions or recommendations that you would like to make regarding FIGs or the FIG program? (N)

Need more FIGs	(7)	Give students info on expectations	(2)
Faculty need more info about FIGs	(4)	FIG negatives outweigh positives	(2)
Faculty should meet w/ FIG leaders	(3)	Faculty should meet FIG students	(1)
Strengthen academic emphasis	(3)		

CONCLUSIONS

FIG groups are formed around diverse combinations of academic courses which vary in content area, class size and instructional approach. Across the broad range of course types, the overall assessment of the FIG program by participating faculty was almost uniformly positive. A large number of faculty commented that FIG students participated in livelier discussions and seemed more engaged in class than did non-FIG students. Most faculty did not change their method of teaching to accommodate the FIG students, but some were able to focus course content on the FIG theme or change the pace of the course to match the students' academic level. Many faculty also were able to capitalize on the instruction provided by the FIG program in use of e-mail and library resources. Fewer made use of student instruction in use of the Web.

Comments suggested the need for continued focus of FIG resources on facilitating the transition from high school to University, both socially and academically. In some cases, the social cohesiveness of the FIG groups contributed to the exhibition of what some faculty referred to as 'high school' behavior in the University classroom. Faculty noted a need for improved time management and basic study skills, and a better understanding of the differences in academic expectations at the University level as compared to high school.

In general, the goals of the FIG program seem consistent with student needs as perceived by faculty, and there were relatively few suggestions for change or improvement. The program seems firmly on track in regard to meeting its stated goals and the strongest recommendation that can be made may be that staff remain attentive in assessing student needs and tailoring the program to meet those needs.