

Formative and Summative Assessment of a First-Year Experience Program

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Founded in 1874, Colorado College is a highly selective liberal arts college with a deep commitment to academic rigor. The CC Block Plan divides the academic year into eight three-and-a-half week segments known as Blocks. Students typically take, and faculty members teach, one Block at a time. Colorado College instituted its First-Year Experience (FYE) Program in 2000 and has assessed its success since that time. The FYE consists of a single two-Block course or a pairing of two related courses, taken during the first two Blocks of a Colorado College student's first year. In addition to introducing material from one or more disciplines, the FYE Program includes a number of academic components and goals (a substantial writing component and a research project; introduction to Colorado College's academic resources; a challenging and rigorous academic experience; the development of critical reading and analytic thinking skills; support in developing a liberal arts mindset). Two of the six goals are presented below.

Goal 1. FYE Courses provide a challenging and rigorous experience that requires students to:

- Pursue work at a higher academic level than previously experienced
- Explore previously encountered material from one or more new perspectives
- Encounter new material, new issues or new fields of study
- Engage issues that do not admit of a single easy answer
- Engage issues from perspectives that may challenge students' perspectives and values
- Participate extensively in class discussions
- Meet the professor's expectation of high-quality work as laid out in grading criteria and assignments
- Dedicate extensive time, energy, and commitment
- Engage in independent work, both in and outside of class

Goal 2. FYE Courses encourage students to develop liberal arts skill-building, specifically critical reading of texts (including, but not limited to, books) and analytic thinking, evident in:

- Finding and assessing thesis statements and arguments
- Finding and weighing evidence
- Developing close reading strategies
- Engaging in a dialog with a text
- Forming one's own arguments
- Establishing connections within a text
- Applying concepts or perspectives of one author to another author's text or idea
- Synthesizing multiple materials to develop new ideas
- Evaluating, or using various criteria to judge the merits of an argument or claim
- Identifying and managing contradictions within materials
- Effective written expression, with a focus on improvement from baseline abilities
- Effective spoken/oral expression, with a focus on improvement from baseline abilities

FYE Survey

Since the inception of the FYE, an end-of-course survey has been used to determine the program's success. The survey incorporates questions about course quality and classroom experiences, students' academic advisors, and the FYE student mentors, among other topics. Questions are developed and refined by the Institutional Research Office (IR) and the FYE Committee, which includes faculty members, students, and student affairs representatives. In fall 2006, goals for the FYE program were operationalized; since then the FYE survey has been refined several times in order to accurately assess the degree to which Colorado College's "first course" is meeting the established goals. Three sample 2006 survey questions are presented below.

How often did you take part in the following activities during your FYE?	Once a Day	Several Times a Week	Once a Week	Twice a Block	Once a Block	Did not Take Part
Felt Engaged During Class						

To what extent did your FYE address complex issues or topics where answers are ambiguous?	To a Great Extent	To a Moderate Extent	To a Minor Extent	Not at All
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Did your FYE professor challenge you to do your best work?	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Very Little
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Formative Assessment

Over time, we found that it was crucial to develop mechanisms of formative assessment of the FYE program that would ensure success in meeting program goals while guaranteeing faculty autonomy in course development and teaching. Our solution was to rely on the commitment of faculty teaching in the program. IR had already been producing an annual executive summary of survey findings, along with summaries and analyses of quantitative findings and a thematic summary of comments. We began to create a customized report for each FYE professor in which his or her course data were presented alongside data from the relevant division and from FYE courses as a whole. Sample faculty report findings matching the above questions are presented below; all data are fabricated but are similar to actual data.

How often did you feel engaged during FYE class meetings?

	Mean	Never (0)	Once/Block (1)	Twice/Block (2)	Once/Week (3)	Several Times/Week (4)	Once/Day (5)	% Responding
Course Responses	4.73	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.7	73.3	93.8
Division Responses	4.45	0.0	0.0	1.4	5.6	39.4	53.5	97.3
Overall Responses	4.44	0.2	0.5	1.0	4.7	40.7	52.8	99.3

To what extent did your FYE address complex issues or topics where answers are ambiguous?

	Mean	Not at All (0)	Minor Extent (1)	Moderate Extent (2)	Great Extent (3)	% Responding
Course Responses	2.81	0.0	0.0	18.8	81.3	100.0
Division Responses	2.66	0.0	2.7	28.8	68.5	100.0
Overall Responses	2.46	2.5	9.9	27.3	60.3	99.5

Did your FYE professor(s) challenge you to do your best work?

	Mean	Very Little (1)	Sometimes (2)	Most of the Time (3)	% Responding
Course Responses	3.00	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0
Division Responses	2.81	1.4	16.7	81.9	98.6
Overall Responses	2.76	2.7	18.6	78.7	98.8

Once FYE professors receive their individualized reports, they compare their results to those of other professors teaching FYE courses in the same division and more broadly across the College. The comparison allows them to determine where their classes are successful and where they need to rework their FYE course to better meet FYE goals and to engage, challenge and support their students.

FYE Workshop

FYE professors are also invited to use their individual reports to generate topics for the annual Colorado College FYE workshop. This workshop serves as a course development opportunity as professors gather to learn from each other, students, and experts in the study of teaching and learning. Topics routinely include areas in which FYE professors seek improvement following their review of their customized reports. 2007 FYE faculty workshop activities included presentations and conversations on:

- Meeting the challenges and implications of the FYE survey data
- Gender and minority differences: what professors need to know
- How to characterize and design research projects for students in the FYE program
- How to bring faculty and students together across different FYE classes
- How to develop sequenced writing assignments and build in opportunities for paper revisions
- FYE student reading abilities and opportunities for improvement

Professors revise their FYE courses following the retreat and the cycle begins anew. Faculty advisors not teaching FYE courses, student mentors, librarians, Writing Center staff, and others also use the FYE survey findings to improve the work they do with FYE students.

Over time, as the FYE survey, analysis of the survey, and the FYE retreat have developed, evidence suggests that FYE courses are meeting FYE goals more successfully than at its inception. For example, of 73 FYE goal-related survey findings, 45 (62%) showed improved student rating between 2006 and 2007. We interpret this outcome as evidence of project effectiveness. Academic departments, the library, the Writing Center, and other campus entities can increasingly assume that students are better prepared for college life following the FYE course.

Summative Assessment

While preparing our self-study for a recent re-accreditation, it became clear that Colorado College needed to demonstrate that the FYE program was effective in supporting the College’s five student learning outcomes. These outcomes are:

- To graduate “women and men with the mental agility and the skills of critical judgment, persons who have learned how to learn,”
- To confront “students with unfamiliar perspectives and new possibilities of thought and action” and to “explore with them the complexities of the natural world, the achievements of the human past, and the urgent social and moral issues of the present,”
- To teach students “how to recognize relevant evidence in various fields of inquiry and how to weigh that evidence,”
- To teach students how “to read carefully, think critically, reflect thoughtfully, and express their ideas effectively, with precision and grace;” and
- To encourage students in a “personal quest for a worthy vision that can inspire both action and hope and will enable them to help create a more humane world.”

In response to this need, IR developed a mapping system tying survey results to the above student learning outcomes as well as to FYE goals. Because the survey includes both open-ended and closed-ended questions, the mapping system covers qualitative and quantitative data. An example from each mapping document appears below.

<u>General FYE Goal</u>	<u>Specific FYE Goal</u>	<u>Student Learning Outcome</u>	<u>Quantitative Findings From 2006 FYE Survey</u>
Challenging/rigorous experience in class	Engagement with issues that don’t admit of a single easy answer	Confront “students with unfamiliar perspectives and new possibilities of thought and action”	87.6% felt their FYE addressed complex issues (or topics where answers were ambiguous) to a moderate (27.3%) or great (60.3%) extent

<u>FYE Survey Question</u>	<u>Answer Category</u>	<u>General FYE Goal</u>	<u>Student Learning Outcome</u>	<u>Number of Mentions</u>
What were the most effective methods used by your FYE professor(s) to get and keep you engaged during class sessions?	Class discussions	Challenging and rigorous experience requiring students to participate extensively in class discussions	Confront “students with unfamiliar perspectives and new possibilities of thought and action;” teach students how “to read carefully, think critically, reflect thoughtfully, and express their ideas effectively, with precision and grace”	84

Almost all of the FYE academic goals mapped effectively to CC student learning outcomes, such that the positive findings from the survey demonstrated not only that FYE courses were meeting FYE goals but that they were also supporting Colorado College’s general education student learning outcomes.

Survey Fatigue

Like many other colleges, Colorado College administers a number of nationwide surveys (National Survey of Student Engagement, CIRP Freshman Survey, College Senior Survey, HERI Faculty Survey, HEDS Alumni Survey) as well as various in-house surveys. The IR Office has determined that new students are particularly targeted, between Admission Office pre-matriculation surveys, the CIRP Freshman Survey, and the surveys developed by senior thesis research students, who are often very interested in the perspectives of incoming students. Moreover, the FYE survey is administered slightly before the end-of-FYE course evaluation. It is surprising therefore that neither professors nor administrators have requested that the FYE survey be discontinued in the face of clear survey fatigue among new students (and among professors). The only explanation that has been raised is that the College as a whole values the FYE program and understands the importance of the survey in improving the program, and so is willing to grant the FYE survey room on the survey list and support in (so far) perpetuity.

Potential Value for Other Colleges

We offer these assessment mechanisms to any colleges that might find them useful. Based on our experiences, these approaches may have two benefits for others:

1) Flexibility: The FYE survey and its various analytic tools can be adapted for any college or university professor or administrator seeking to expand his or her assessment toolkit, whether at the course, department, unit, program, or institutional level.

2) Potential for Overcoming Faculty Resistance to Assessment: At Colorado College, as at many other schools, faculty resistance to the language and some of the practices of assessment is common. In contrast, while some FYE professors at Colorado College have responded to their individual survey reports more vigorously than others, almost no professors who teach in the program have resisted use of the survey, and none of the professors who do distribute the survey

have resisted the survey findings, either generally or at an individual level. The relative comfort with this particular assessment mechanism may be due in part to the non-coercive nature of the project, as professors can choose to use class time to administer the survey or can have students complete it at home and bring it back in, which maximizes flexibility for the professor. It also appears that faculty members find direct comparisons between their students' responses and the responses of all students relevant in a more direct way than surveys that compare our students to students at other institutions (for example).

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