Spotlight Series

UW-Madison’s FIG program: From Seed to Fruit
How UW-Madison’s FIG program used holistic assessment to expand and improve the first-year experience

In the fall of 2001, the University of Wisconsin offered four pilot First-Year Interest Groups. The FIGs served 75 students and were led exclusively by faculty from the College of Letters & Science.

Fast forward through the decade and the growth is obvious.

During the 2010-11 school year, over 900 students took part in 52 FIGs, and many freshmen were so enthusiastic about the program that they enrolled in more than one. Faculty from nearly every school and college across campus participated.

FIGs director Greg Smith credits the assessment model he and his staff used to evaluate the program with allowing them to successfully expand it.

Validating the FIGs Program

The first step in the assessment, according to Smith, was to find out and demonstrate what the program was actually accomplishing.

Smith says that in order to paint the most complete picture of the impact FIGs were having on students and faculty, every stakeholder’s perspective needed to be included in the analysis.

Some of the data he collected was quantitative.

Smith found that FIGs students have consistently outperformed their non-FIGs counterparts academically. FIGs students have posted a higher cumulative first semester GPA than non-FIGs students every year since the program’s inception. During the fall 2010 semester, 80 percent of FIGs students posted a 3.0 GPA or better, while just 66 percent of non-FIGs students achieved that benchmark.

This is impressive, especially considering that many FIGs students have traditionally come from backgrounds that suggest a lower level of college readiness than those of non-FIGs students. FIGs students generally come to Madison with lower average ACT scores. They are also more likely to be minorities or first-generation college students.

Nevertheless, even as the coursework gets more difficult, FIGs students continue to prosper.

After seven semesters at UW-Madison, 83 percent of FIGs students had a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or better, while just 75 percent of non-FIGs students could say the same thing.

So, why do FIGs students not only meet, but consistently exceed, expectations?
To answer that question, Smith decided to analyze some qualitative data.

He conducted interviews, surveys and focus groups with faculty members, students and administrators.

The students cited the peer bonding that often takes place within a FIG as one factor in their academic success. By forming study groups and teaching each other, FIGs students have a responsibility to one another, and that makes them less likely to cut class or fall behind on work.

Students also responded that the opportunity to form a personal connection with a professor and study in an integrated curriculum helped them perform better.

**Shaping the Practice**

Once Smith was confident that he had thoroughly collected all available and relevant data, the question became how to leverage it to strengthen the FIGs program.

Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis had clearly shown that FIGs had a positive effect on both the students and faculty members who participated in them.

As a result of gathering and, most importantly, sharing that data, Smith was able to obtain additional funding for the program from the Madison Initiative for Undergraduates. One of the chief goals of the MIU is to create “more opportunities for interaction with faculty” and support “curricular and pedagogical innovations.”

The MIU funding helped the program expand to every school and college that offers undergraduate majors. The increased enrollment allowed for the creation of honors FIGs and helped the program double its offerings over the last two years.

By documenting the profound impact FIGs have had on minority and low-income students, both academically and socially, the program was able to form partnerships with campus organizations like the Center for Educational Opportunity, PEOPLE and First Wave.

FIGs established a bi-weekly discussion group for its faculty, focusing on pedagogy and student development, and also enhanced its faculty orientation programming.

Soliciting stakeholder input allowed Smith to validate the program’s effectiveness and find opportunities for improvement and growth.

**Learning for the Future**

As FIGs have blossomed, new questions have emerged that require restarting the process of data gathering and analysis.

Specifically, Smith wants to determine the effect of FIGs’ integrated curriculum on the way students learn. He also wants to look more closely at the impact the program is having on minority students. Lastly, Smith says he will begin gathering data that shows how FIGs are influencing students’ choice of undergraduate majors.

The assessment model used to evaluate the FIGs program is, thus, continuous and cyclical. The data Smith collects to answer his new questions will be used to further shape the program.
Using the University

Smith made clear that one person does not just sit down at a desk and conduct a thorough assessment of a large and complex program. Rather, he took advantage of the breadth of expertise offered at UW by enlisting the help of other professionals on campus.

He contacted statisticians to learn about how to collect and accurately represent data. He asked the UW Survey Center for help writing questions that would elicit honest and accurate responses from students and faculty members. He met with Office of Quality Improvement staff for advice on how to conduct focus groups.

Smith said one of the most important things to remember when beginning a large assessment project is that there are people throughout the university who are able and willing to help.

To learn more about FIGs, visit [http://figs.wisc.edu/](http://figs.wisc.edu/) or contact Greg Smith at (608) 263-6504 or glsmith2@ls.wisc.edu.

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