LEAP Wisconsin Assessment – UW-Green Bay Case Study

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1) Briefly describe the action steps and processes behind the specific reform effort. What was the rationale for the change? How did faculty and staff integrate the resources of LEAP into your campus reform efforts? What processes were already in place on your campus(es) in support of this effort? How have you worked to ensure the sustainability of this change?

Our story tells about the development, pilot testing, and ultimately campus-wide implementation of our first year seminar program (FYS).

The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay had a strong first year experience program for many years, but lacked a focal academic component associated with the most effective First Year Experience programs. Our first National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results, from the early 2000s, clearly showed that the institution needed to make some curricular changes to better engage our students. We designed a content-based, three-credit first year seminar course that would meet existing general education requirements, and piloted six sections in fall 2006. Since that time, the seminar program has undergone many transformations. Today, the seminars are courses developed specifically by faculty to serve as First Year Seminar (FYS) classes. Along with its own particular learning outcomes, each FYS has shared learning outcomes that include interdisciplinarity (a university-wide learning outcome at UW-Green Bay), oral and written communication, and information literacy. These infused skills reflect the stated Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) goals. The program also strongly encourages faculty to include co-curricular activities as part of their syllabus and to also engage with the Campus Common Theme (which was also partially inspired by LEAP).

The evolution and expansion of the FYS program resulted from intentional and systematic assessment of learning outcomes and student experiences. The support of Jillian Kinzie, at NSSE, enabled us to use selected NSSE questions throughout the pilot and growth. The engagement and retention gains provided enough evidence to consider making the FYS a requirement for all incoming freshmen. This consideration became an important element of general education reform discussions, as the institution began making plans to change its general education requirements for the first time in over 25 years. The university implemented its new general education requirements in Fall 2014. Those requirements draw heavily from the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs), and the Value Rubric, and include the FYS as a requirement for all incoming freshmen. Although recent budget cuts pose some challenges to
maintaining a program predicated on devoting some of the institutions most qualified faculty to small seminar courses, at this time we have every intention to maintain the FYS requirement within the general education program.

The FYS program has led to expansion of other High Impact Practices (HIPs) particularly directed at underrepresented and first generation students. Some examples include linked courses, an additional class focused on service learning in the spring semester, and intentional tutoring for underrepresented students with STEM fields. This program, the Phoenix Gateway to Phirst-year Success (GPS), has worked very specifically on issues related to high risk populations.

2) Please describe how this specific change effort connected directly with, or was inspired by any of the major initiatives of the LEAP Campaign—assessment, learning outcomes, high impact practices and general education reform.

A number of ways:

- FYS are high impact practices as described by George Kuh and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as practices that have particular benefits to students
- The FYS program, starting from the time when it was piloted, builds significant amounts of assessment into all elements. In addition to collecting and evaluating the information, each year the faculty make very specific adjustments to the programs based on the data. For example, the pilot seminars included a common lesson plan and several days of joint instruction focused around an interdisciplinary problem. This common activity did not produce meaningful gains in students’ understanding of interdisciplinarity, and the faculty eliminated it the next year.
- The FYS program began with and continues to have very specific learning outcomes associated with the class, primarily around “intellectual and practical skills” such as communication and information literacy. Each seminar specifically and intentionally focuses on interdisciplinarity, which begins the process of scaffolding the understanding and application of this approach which is a form of integrative and applied learning.
- The FYS program was ultimately added a required component to our general education program when UW-Green Bay went through its general education reform.

3) Please articulate what difference this work made or is making on student learning and success.

- Increased retention rates (Fall to Fall) for students that took FYS. During the time when the FYS was not required the retention increase ranged from 3%-9%.
- Retention gains continue into Junior and Senior years, and into graduation (Figure 1)
- Increase student engagement as measured by NSSE variables
- Students in seminars had higher first term grade point averages (GPAs)
• High risk populations (underrepresented, Pell Grants, or first generation) saw larger positive impacts on retention, graduation, and overall performance (Figure 1 and Figure 2)

• The GPS program has also shown similar positive benefits to high risk populations. Underrepresented students participating in the GPS for both Fall and Spring show an 18% increase in retention compared to those UR students that did not participate. Their GPAs are also significantly higher, and they have completed more credits.
For UW-Green Bay, the process of developing a FYS program and its implementation represented a critical step for a number of areas related to AAC&U LEAP program and related efforts that continue to be important for our curriculum and our students’ success. These areas include:

- An expansion of our efforts in providing high impact practices and to be more intentional and deliberate in how we provide these practices to our students and ensure that they are accessed by as many students as possible. UW-Green Bay has worked to increase participation in other HIPs including undergraduate research, internships, the implementation of a common theme, and service learning.
- Infusion of LEAP critical skills into the FYS classes.
- Developing assessment mechanisms and using the results to make improvements in an academic program, which also helped to build support around the university.
- A significantly reformed general education program that uses the FYS class as the “on ramp” to a liberal education and also includes a “senior” capstone experience, and the LEAP essential learning outcomes as a basis for the structure of the program.
- A better designed general education assessment plan.
- Linking the FYS program specifically with other HIPs to target at risk students (underrepresented, Pell Grant eligible, and first generation) through the GPS program.

Lessons learned:

- Start with a pilot and try to include faculty/staff that are excited about making improvements to the student experience
- Assess, Assess, Assess. Share data widely (internally and externally). Build your case. Interestingly, we received more interest and “kudos” for our work and its success from outside UW-Green Bay.
- Don’t underestimate the informal faculty/staff development that occurs through these types of projects.
• On the other hand, when expanding, ensure you include some formal faculty development to help bring the rest of campus along.
• Look for opportunities to make connections between programs.
• Be willing and bold to use results to make larger curricular changes.

Supporting Material

• General Education Program Graphic