

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, public universities face the challenge of providing students with a high quality education while state allocations continue to shrink. In addition, universities are increasingly asked to provide evidence of performance (output) to justify academic expenditures. The UNC system and East Carolina University are no different. There is evidence that well-designed programming for first-year students, including first-year seminars, can have substantial positive influence on several key performance indicators, including retention, persistence, and graduation rates.

Because of this renewed focus on performance measures and the impact of first-year initiatives on both freshman-to-sophomore retention rates and student success, Provost Marilyn Sheerer assembled a committee of student affairs staff, academic advising staff, and faculty (the UNIV 1000 committee) to study first-year seminars. The committee was asked to identify the various models for first-year seminar courses; review the successes, failures, and issues with the current ECU first-year seminar course (COAD 1000); choose among existing models or develop a new seminar model to meet the needs of ECU students; specify objectives and learning outcomes for the optimal ECU first-year seminar; consider whether or not the content of the recommended first-year seminar requires more than one course; describe the resources needed to deliver the recommended first-year seminar; and provide other relevant information about implementing a required first-year seminar at ECU.

This report details the committee's work and recommendations. The committee concludes that first-year seminars can be an effective way to introduce students to college life and can have a positive effect on standard performance measures. When done well and formulated as an integrated part of the first-year experience, first-year seminars can also result in significant positive improvements in students' academic abilities and preparation for the rest of college. It is clear that the expertise of many groups (including faculty members, student affairs educators, advising center and tutoring center staff, and others) is critical to successfully educating the whole student. The committee was unanimous that it is crucial to have a coherent, integrated, and unified approach to the first-year experience that involves the collaboration of all the relevant parties.

The available data made it extremely difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the effectiveness of ECU's current first-year seminar (COAD 1000). This is because (1) in most of the data sets, the sample size is small relative to the total number of first semester freshman, (2) the sampling strategy (questions asked) does not allow for analysis of causation, and (3) standard forms of assessment have not been performed on this course.

The committee did not reach an agreement as to a specific model for the first-year seminar that would be best for East Carolina University and our students. Some committee members proposed to replace the existing optional seminar (which follows the extended-orientation model) with a required faculty-taught hybrid course that provides coverage of the study skills and acclimation to campus issues that are the primary focus of the extended-orientation model in the context of an academic discipline-based or interdisciplinary focus that is also intended to

promote academic engagement. Other committee members wanted to continue use of the existing extended-orientation model with the option for students to take the faculty-taught hybrid course.

The committee's recommendations offer a path forward for utilizing the first-year seminar to improve key performance metrics while also emphasizing academic engagement, introducing students to the life of the mind, and promoting student success through enhancing the students' engagement in campus life. The committee recommends that ECU take the following *next steps* toward an integrated first-year program:

1. ***Pilot several academic/hybrid seminars, along with the currently offered COAD 1000 course (with minor modifications as highlighted in this report), during the fall 2012 semester.*** Under any future scenario, it will be necessary to continue teaching multiple types of seminars as we transition into the final first-year seminar model or models.
2. ***Ensure that all first-year seminars have the following underlying objectives:***
 - *to help students become oriented to the intellectual life,*
 - *to assist students with life skills,*
 - *to engage students in university and academic life, and*
 - *to provide opportunities for active academic engagement from the first course at the university.*
3. ***Immediately begin a robust, longitudinal study of the effectiveness of first-year seminars at ECU.*** All sections of both the pilot academic/hybrid seminar and COAD 1000 should be assessed in a manner similar to other courses on campus, and a controlled longitudinal study of the seminar program (based on well-defined outcomes/objectives) should be undertaken. Participation in the Pirate *CREWS* project would facilitate development of high quality assessment and evaluation instruments and appropriate use of the resulting data.
4. ***Begin in the fall 2012 semester, the process of review of the models proposed herein and of the curriculum implications of requiring a first-year seminar of all incoming students.*** The UNIV 1000 committee offers this report as a starting point for that review and welcomes the opportunity to continue to participate in the important campus-wide discussion and decision-making. Because these are curricular proposals, this process must proceed through the existing curriculum review and implementation procedures as overseen by the Faculty Senate. A challenging first-year seminar that achieves the objectives outlined above would benefit all students; however, many degree programs leave students with no free electives that would allow for the additional requirement of a multi-credit first-year course. Creative solutions to this problem could involve a reassessment of program requirements, the use of existing course designations, and other issues that are within the purview of the faculty.
5. ***Before mandating that all students take a first-year seminar, a campus-wide decision must be made whether to offer a single or multiple seminar models.***