

WASHINGTON CENTER

## Freshman Interest Groups at the University of Washington: *Building Community for Freshmen at a Large University*

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This fall marked the third year of Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) at the University of Washington. Based on a model of academic learning communities, the UW FIG program has evolved into a highly successful experience for students, peer advisers, and faculty.

### **The Freshman Interest Group Model**

FIGs generally consist of 20-25 incoming freshmen who form a community by taking a cluster of courses that provide some curricular coherence. For example, students might enroll in a cluster entitled "The Individual and Society" that involves a sociology class, a speech class, and an English class. Or, they might choose a pre-science/pre-engineering cluster with courses in math, chemistry and English composition. Typically, at least one course in the cluster is a small class in which only the students in the FIG group are enrolled. The other courses may be larger lecture courses where FIG participants comprise only a fraction of the students taking the course but where the members of the FIG are all in the same discussion section.

In addition to enrolling in the same cluster of courses, students in each FIG meet periodically for discussion facilitated by an upper class peer adviser. These meetings provide opportunities for the freshmen to share their knowledge, vent their fears, learn about university resources, establish friendships, and develop a supportive learning environment. Occasionally faculty members teaching the FIG courses attend the meetings of the students and peer advisers as a way of increasing student-teacher interaction.

### **FIGs at the University of Washington**

At the University of Washington, as at the University of Oregon where FIG's originated, FIGs were instituted because of concern about the freshman experience. Each fall approximately 3500 freshmen begin academic careers at the University of Washington. Although the majority of these freshmen are from the top one-third of their high school's graduating class, they embark on their academic careers with fears and uncertainties about attending a large university. Being "just a number" without a personalized identity or feeling overwhelmed by the academically competitive environment are common concerns for freshmen.

In 1987 an ad hoc College of Arts and Sciences committee of faculty and administrators, meeting to address such needs of freshmen, recommended a Freshman Interest Group program. David McCracken, then Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, responded to the recommendation by establishing a small number of clusters on a trial

basis during Autumn Quarter, 1987. As a result of these initial efforts, the various components of the UW FIGs program evolved.

### **Administration of UW FIGs**

During its initial year, the UW FIGs program was administered through the College of Arts and Sciences and coordinated almost entirely by David McCracken. David enlisted the help of the Central Advising Office to select peer advisors and the Center for Instructional Development and Research (CIDR) to train peer advisors and evaluate the first year of the program. In its second year, the program was administered by the newly-appointed Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, Frederick Campbell.

As of 1989-90, Campbell is assisted in the Freshman Interest Group program by Ken Tokuno, Director of Special Undergraduate Programs. The logistics of an expanded program in the second year required additional time devoted to management and coordination, and Claire Sullivan, a Ph.D. graduate student in speech communication and a CIDR staff consultant, was subsequently hired as the program coordinator.

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*University of Washington Freshman Interest Group Student*

### **Freshman Participation in the FIG Clusters**

The clusters in the UW program have included a variety of tracks of interest to freshmen, ranging from pre-law or pre-business administration to pre-engineering/ pre-science or origins of Western civilization. During the first year of the program, students learned of the various options when they met with their advisors to prepare for registration. For the second year, flyers announcing the FIG program were mailed in freshman packets of information shortly after freshmen were notified of their acceptance into the University. Additional flyers were distributed at New Student Orientation during the summer months, and students wishing to register for a cluster selected one during summer pre-registration sessions.

In the first year of the program, 83 students enrolled in four different FIG clusters during autumn quarter. The second year of the program, which also took place during autumn quarter, consisted of eight clusters with nearly 200 students enrolled. The third year, Fall 1989, nearly 400 students enrolled in 20 freshman interest groups.

Reasons for participating in the UW FIGs are varied. Some enroll for the academic benefits, others for the friendships and social support. Some enroll simply to expedite registration in popular courses. These differences in students are encouraged since the program tries to reflect student diversity in terms of academic achievement, social skill, gender, and ethnicity. Students who choose the FIGs program seem to appreciate this opportunity to learn from others both similar to and quite different from themselves.

### **Peer Advisors for FIGs**

Peer advisors for the UW FIGs Program are upper class students chosen on the basis of their leadership, their academic interests, and their knowledge of the university community and its resources. They assume important roles in the program, functioning as facilitators of discussion sessions, as resources to provide support and information, and as liaisons between the students and faculty who teach FIG courses.

To prepare the five peer advisors for these roles during the first year, Don Wulff and Jody Nyquist from CIDR developed a systematic training program that could be pilot tested. The training consisted of a three-hour session before classes began and weekly sessions with the peer advisors throughout the quarter. The training sessions provided background information on the philosophy and purpose of learning communities, the role of the peer advisor and expectations for fulfilling this role, design of plans for cluster discussions, and potential issues and problems in leading discussions and fulfilling the peer advisor role. In addition, small group, interpersonal leadership, and information-processing theory was incorporated to assist peer advisors in developing the skills needed to facilitate discussion and activities within their groups. During the second year, Claire Sullivan provided the training, using feedback from the pilot program to assist her in adapting and expanding the sessions to meet the needs of the ten peer advisors.

### **Faculty and Teaching Assistants (TAs) for FIGs**

Faculty and TAs become involved in the UW FIGs program when they teach a course or discussion section which has been selected for inclusion in a FIGs cluster. Although students and peer advisors often invite faculty to special sessions or events, the level of faculty or TA involvement beyond the classroom is determined by the instructors themselves. In the past, faculty who attended weekly meetings with the students and peer advisors talked about their own research and undergraduate experiences, or answered student questions about course material, grades, or exams. The most successful student-faculty interactions, however, have often been informal--going out for pizza together and/or talking about the instructors' own undergraduate days.

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*University of Washington Freshman Interest Group Student*

### **Initial Autumn Quarter FIG Meeting**

During the first year of the program, freshmen initially met their instructors on the first day of classes and had their first meeting with their peer advisors during the latter part of the first week of classes. Feedback from the first year of the program suggested that it would be more useful to introduce students, faculty, and peer advisors to each other before the first day of classes in the fall. Consequently, in the program's second year, the FIG kick-off took place on the Sunday afternoon before classes began. Everyone involved in the second year of the FIGs program was invited to attend, and over 100 administrators, faculty, peer advisors and students participated in this event. Although a portion of this inaugural meeting concerned the FIGs program and those involved in coordinating it, much of the time was devoted to individual FIG cluster meetings. This opening meeting was key: it helped form initial bonds within the clusters and gave participants an idea of the larger scope of the program. Freshmen, especially, indicated that they felt more comfortable knowing the faculty, peer advisors, and some of the other people in their FIGs before attending the first day of classes.

### **Weekly Meeting of Freshmen with Peer Advisors**

Weekly meetings of freshmen with peer advisors explicitly address the needs and concerns of freshmen in each cluster. During these meetings, peer advisors have been especially successful in leading discussions on study techniques, registration procedures, choosing a major, student life at UW and campus involvement. The meeting times have also included campus tours of facilities, including the libraries, computer centers, counseling center, campus art galleries and the intramural athletic center. As a result of these weekly meetings, some groups have become active social groups, going to movies and campus productions together. Just as important, these strong ties carried into the academic realm, as students formed study groups, often dividing up studying responsibilities, sharing notes and offering critiques of each others' work.

### **Feedback on the UW FIGs program**

During UW's first year of FIGs Robert Abbott, Donald Wulff and Jody Nyquist at the UW's Center for Instructional Development and Research designed an evaluation of the program. The approach involved obtaining feedback from students at midterm, and using that feedback to develop items for a questionnaire administered at the end of the first year. They also established a method for obtaining longitudinal data about the effects of the program. Using the feedback from the first year, Claire Sullivan continued assessment of the program into the second year, both drawing upon and expanding the initial assessment measures.

Although it is too early to determine the long range impact of UW FIGs assessment for the first two years has been very positive. All five of the peer advisors in the initial program "strongly agreed" that the program should be continued, and 100% of the faculty interviewed either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the program should be offered to freshmen in subsequent years.

Students, peer advisors, and faculty cite many benefits to the program. When freshman participants were asked to identify the strengths of the FIGs program, their comments suggested that through FIGs they had obtained help with their classes, developed supportive friendships, gained information, increased interest in their classes, and adjusted more readily to the university. As one student explained, "It helped me prepare my work without procrastinating so much. I have found resources other than books or teachers on which to call for help or vent my frustrations. The other FIG members have been very supportive throughout the quarter. Everyone is very caring and understanding."

Another FIG participant commented, "I really feel as though my FIG group is a family unit. We are all feeling the same stress, the same pressure, and, because of that, we are able to deal with anxiety together." Another suggested, "It's helped me so much! I've made some great friends and studying with these people all quarter has benefitted my grades immensely. Also the linked classes have been much more interesting than three totally different, separate classes."

Focusing on the kinds of information that helps in adjusting to university life, another student said, "Freshman Interest Groups provide a valuable experience. Entering freshmen meet informally with a peer who is familiar with the university. I believe this gives them an edge on other students. FIGs present opportunities to learn the essentials of campus life and make friends who share similar interests. With the network established in the FIG groups, a university as large as ours becomes suddenly more manageable and friendly."

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*University of Washington Freshman Interest Group Instructor*

Peer advisors are also very positive about the FIGs experience. One peer advisor suggested that he had "gained hands-on experience as a leader of a small group...(and) new skills and subtle points about interacting with others." Another said, "Personally I gained valuable insights into the working of the university. I was able to get information about things I had always wondered about. The experience of leading a group discussion and being responsible for it gave me new appreciation of the teaching profession." A third focused on the sense of personal satisfaction: "It was a great learning experience--especially for small group interaction and leadership. I really liked the students I met and I hope I contributed something to their college experience--- that makes me feel good in itself."

Finally, one advisor focused on the friendships that freshmen developed during their FIG experience: "When I was walking out of the first session, three of the guys were talking like they'd known each other for ten years. I asked if they knew each other before coming to the UW and they said no, that they met in the FIG. This is the most important thing

about FIGs...meeting other freshmen and getting to know them in a situation where most barriers are broken down.”

Faculty also see benefits in the program. Typical comments suggested that faculty observed the effects of FIGs in class attendance, group support/cohesiveness, class participation, and quality of students' work. When talking about the effects of the program, one instructor said, “The most immediate effect is that they all showed up every day. It was like they felt more responsibility to me and to each other.” Another noted differences in how students related to one another, saying, “They seemed to show considerable mutual support. If one did poorly on a quiz, you might hear others coaching, i.e., ‘This is what you have to study next time,’ or ‘These are the kinds of questions he will ask...’” Still another, reported that “They did lots of sharing outside of class. For sure, it was one of the most cohesive classes I’ve ever had.” When asked to identify the effects of the program, another reported that “They [students in FIGs were better prepared. Before and after class, they were often organizing study groups.” Finally, one instructor said, “They were a lot more together and enthused. They were the first group I ever had who formed a study guide for the final. They were more confident and interested. As a result I gave more 4.0's than ever before.”

### **Future of the UW FIGs Program**

Because the UW adaptation of learning communities has been positive for the participants, all facets of the program are expanding. The FIG staff are making efforts to inform all incoming freshmen about the positive academic and social benefits of the program. Admissions counselors distribute flyers and introduce the program at Washington state high schools; high school counselors and parents receive information about the program through UW publications; and a brochure has been developed for mailing to all incoming freshmen. In addition, the number of clusters being offered increased to twenty in Autumn Quarter, 1989, with plans under way to incorporate winter and spring quarter FIGs as well. Also, student diversity in FIGs is expanding, through additional efforts to include UW student athletes and students involved in the Equal Opportunity Program (Office of Minority Affairs).

Finally, interest in Freshman Interest Groups now extends beyond the UW campus. Requests are growing, for information about implementation and evaluation of the FIGs at UW. Despite the increased coordination and effort required by the growing program, we continue to view it as a worthwhile venture that contributes significantly to the quality of undergraduate education at the University of Washington. Freshman Interest Groups are low-cost, and simple to assemble. They provide a learning community model that is adaptable to almost any undergraduate setting.

For additional information on Freshman Interest Groups, contact: Claire Sullivan at (206) 543-2551 or Ken Tokuno, Director of Special Undergraduate Programs at (206) 543-5340.

## **Sample Freshman Interest Groups at UW**

### **Pre-Law**

Political Science 202: Intro to American Politics  
Philosophy 114: Philosophical Issues in the Law  
English 198: Interdisciplinary Writing/Social Science  
+ FIG Discussion Group with peer advisor

### **American Civilization**

History 201: Survey of the History of the United States  
Speech 103: Interpersonal Communication  
English 267: Intro. to American Literature  
+ FIG Discussion Groups with peer advisor

### **Pre-Business Administration**

Math 156: Application of Algebra to Business & Economics  
Psychology 101: Psychology as a Social Science  
English 12 1: Composition: Social Issues  
+ FIG Discussion Group with peer advisor

## **What do Freshman Interest Groups Cost?**

Remarkably little. University of Washington Associate Dean Fred Campbell says that you can start on a shoestring, and then decide what to spend on them. At UW, FIGs started with only a Graduate Teaching Assistant and about \$2500 for promotional materials and supplies. The graduate teaching assistant had responsibility for promoting the program and recruiting and training the peer advisors. As the program expanded, the University developed a more extensive support system for freshman programs as a whole and appointed a Director of Special Undergraduate Programs, Ken Tokuno, who spends about one third of his time administering the freshman interest group program.

University of Oregon freshman interest groups, coordinated by Jack Bennett in the Office of Academic Advising, are also run at minimal expense. Their budget is as follows:

\$3400 for FIG brochures  
\$200 for peer advisor training manuals  
\$100 for a survey of FIG students and two student positions (an undergraduate and a graduate)