

Th'Ink Well

Quarterly Newsletter from the Center for Teaching Excellence

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The New Generation of Freshmen: National Profile Fall 2008

Most students in **our newest freshman cohorts** are part of the “Millennial Generation” (born between 1982 and 2002). They have been raised in a cultural environment which has allowed them to become **involved in numerous academic, extracurricular, and service activities** and follow **structured lifestyles** (Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007). They **[over] rely on communications technology and engage easily in multi-tasking behaviors** which reduce face-to-face interactions and shorten their attention spans. The norms of our newest college students concern educators who fear they take a toll on critical thinking skills traditionally associated with the learning process.

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA conducts a Freshman Survey each year which explores the norms of first-time, full-time college students in the U.S. Their most recent report, “**The American Freshman, National Norms for Fall 2008**,” is based on the responses of over 240,000 first-time, full-time students enrolled at 340 four-year colleges and universities within the country. Their findings are instructive not only for what they tell us about Millennial practices, but for what they suggest about the students’ financial struggles and academic profiles.

Some of the **key findings** of the national Freshman Survey of Fall 2008 include:

- ◆ The number of first-year, full-time students attending their first-choice college is declining due primarily to financial concerns. **Over 49% reported that they would get a job in order to meet expenses while in college**, the largest percentage since this question was first asked (32 years).

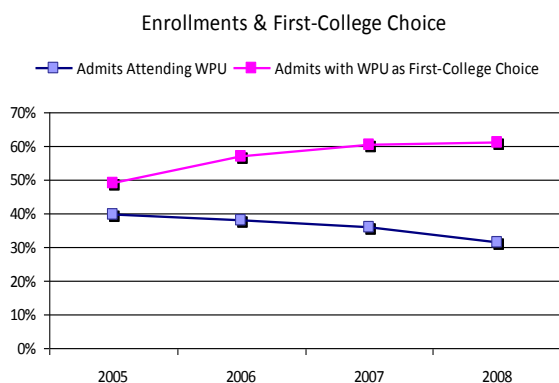
- ◆ First-time, full-time college students have the **lowest level of “college readiness” in the area of biological sciences since 1984**. Only 49.3% of the incoming freshmen completed two or more years of biological sciences in high school; African-Americans, American Indians, and Latinos devoted less years of study to the sciences than Asian and White students.
- ◆ First-year, full-time students rate themselves reasonably high on many of the skills sought by employers for a diverse workplace. All groups appear to have the most **confidence in their abilities to work cooperatively with diverse people** and to tolerate people with different beliefs.
- ◆ First-year, full-time college students are **more politically engaged** than the students of past years. Over 85% reported that they discussed politics in the past year, a level of engagement which surpassed that recorded in 1968, when students were characterized as very politically active.
- ◆ First-time, first-year students increasingly **use the Internet for diverse purposes** (i.e. blogging, reading news, researching), increasingly support “green” initiatives and increasingly give importance to developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

First-Year Students at William Paterson University: Some Challenges

The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (IR&A) at William Paterson University administers an annual survey which offers insights on freshmen cohorts. Some of the findings of the 2008 Incoming First-Year Student Survey and Fact Books published by this office, include:

- ◆ **Nearly two-thirds (61%) of the first-year, full-time students who enrolled in Fall 2008 cited William Paterson University as their first-college of choice.** Over 68% considered "the price of tuition" a very important factor influencing their decision to attend WPUNJ. Approximately nine out of ten *applicants* do not enroll at WPU.

IR&A reports indicate that the percentage of incoming freshmen citing William Paterson as their first-college choice has increased since 2005, while the percentage of *admitted* students who enroll and the proportion of regular admits have declined.



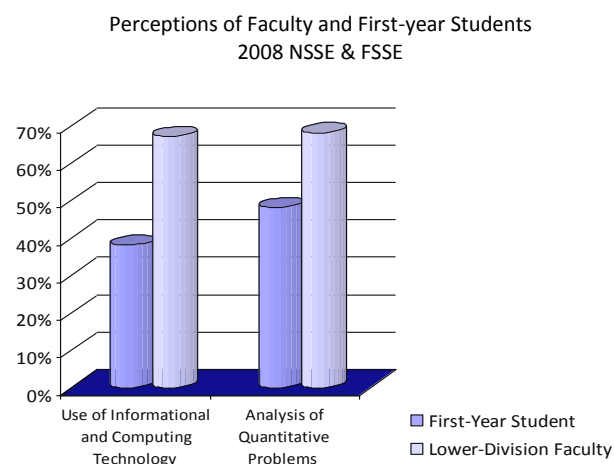
*Which students are making WPU their first-college choice?
Which admitted students decide not to attend WPU?*

- ◆ **Over two-thirds (66.6%) of the first-year, full-time students enrolling at WPU required some form of remediation in Fall 2008.** The majority (60.3%) of incoming freshmen required basic skills course(s) in math and algebra; 26.1% required basic skills in reading, and 10.3% in writing. The average CSAT of incoming freshmen was 993.19 in Fall 2008, and the average class rank 57.98%.

Research studies suggest that high school grades and SAT scores together are significant predictors of achievement in college for all students and for all measures of academic achievement including persistence (Camara & Echternacht, 2000).

- ◆ Over half of the first-year, full-time students of Fall 2008 report they have had major opportunity in high school to develop studying and note-taking skills (55%), skills for recognizing cheating and plagiarism (60%) and for working with people in groups (61%). **Nearly one fifth of the incoming freshmen (22%) report they had little or no opportunity in high school to apply the scientific method, to create and manage databases (56%), and to design and develop web pages (57%).**

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the companion Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) administered at William Paterson in Spring 2008 compared the perceptions of first-year students and faculty concerning educational experiences, activities and efforts. Less than half of the lower-division faculty reported that they structure their courses very much or quite a bit so that students develop in the areas of computing and information technology (38%) and analyzing quantitative problems (48%). However, over two-thirds of the freshmen reported that their college experience contributed very much or quite a bit to their development in the same two areas, computing and informational technology (67%) and analyzing quantitative problems (68%).



*Why such gap between faculty and first-year student expectations?
Should faculty stress areas where students lack preparedness?*

Insights from 2008 First-Year Seminar Students

Mark Ellis, Coordinator of the First-Year Seminar & Maria Villar, Co-Director of the CTE

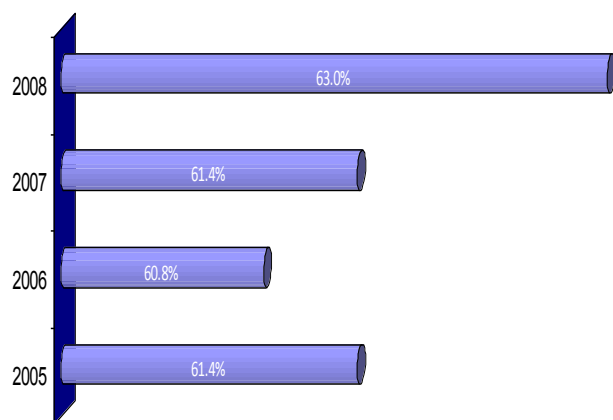
In December 2008, the Office of the First Year Experience and Center for Teaching Excellence conducted two small surveys to explore the academic experience of the 2008 freshman cohort. The ethno-semantic survey completed by over one-hundred freshmen examined students' thoughts about their courses and daily classes. The structured survey completed by over five-hundred first-year students looked into classroom practices, the role of instructors, and the contrasts between high school and college.

Some of the findings of the surveys administered to First-Year Seminar students at the end of Fall 2008 include:

- ◆ **First-year, fulltime-students in Fall 2008 associate more negative terms than positive terms with their daily classes and expect active learning experiences.** A half of the terms associated with classes was negative (e.g. "boring," "long"), and slightly over a fourth (28%) was positive (e.g. "interesting," "fun"). More than half of the freshmen (52%) expected their professors to be "entertaining" and the majority (73%) did not consider "lecturing" their main task.

One year after joining college, nearly one fourth (23.3%) of the Fall 2008 first-year student cohort was no longer enrolled at WPUNJ, and over one third (37.8%) of the 2007 first-year class had left school. Our retention rate is close to the retention rate of other institutions in the moderately selective category (CSAT 990-1044).

Percent of A's & B's in Basic GE Courses



How do students with low-level preparedness earn such good grades?
Given grades, what explains their latter attrition rates?

- ◆ **The Fall 2008 first-year students associate more positive terms than negative terms with their courses and like most of their courses by the end of their first term.** On average, they considered three of their five registered courses "good" and one "bad." The remaining course was a mix, partly good and partly bad.
- ◆ **First-year, full-time students are aware of practices that contribute to academic success.** More than half recognized the importance of attending classes (74%), doing assigned readings (64%), and taking good notes (60%). Surprise quizzes motivated half of them (48%) to prepare for class.
- ◆ **The Fall 2008 freshman cohort is not sure about the difference between high school and college, or the amount of work required for college.** Many perceive increased personal autonomy, more work load, greater opportunity to make friends and meet diverse others, and need to better manage their time. Less than half (44%), however, can say if there is more or less work in college than high school, or differentiate between both educational levels.

Sources:

Camara, W. J. & Echternacht, G. (2000). The SAT I and High School Grades: Unity in Predicting Success in College. The College Board: Research Notes. Retrieved from http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/pdf/rn10_10755.pdf

Elam, C., Stratton, T., & Gibson, D. (2007). Welcoming a New Generation to College: The Millennial Students. *Journal of College Admission*, (195), 20-25. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=7&hid=112&sid=e65fa562-894f-4993-841e-95268b22e332%40sessionmgr114>

Pryor, J.H., Hurtado, S., DeAngelo, L., Sharkness, J., Romero, L.C., Korn, W.S., & Tran, S. (2008). *The American Freshman: National norms for fall 2008*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. Retrieved from <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/pubs/briefs/brief-pr012208-08FreshmanNorms.pdf>

Faculty Voices on Teaching First Year Students

Consider the Cluster Model

Miryam Z. Wahrman, Professor of Biology



I have been teaching first year students (formerly known as freshmen) for over 25 years; for the last 12 years I have been teaching incoming students in Fall semester cluster courses. From my experience, I can report that the cluster course model is a highly effective approach for incoming students for a number of reasons.

First of all, a cluster course is a wonderful way to welcome new students to campus as it integrates them into the university community in meaningful ways. Students in cluster courses more effectively bond with the professors as well as with their classmates, and the university. Since professors and students interact in a variety of educational activities – lectures, trips, multimedia experiences, and other activities, we can get to know each other better. The students feel more accountable to the professors as well as to their classmates. It is hard for students to just disappear in the back of the classroom; they are expected to participate and be a part of the discus-

sions. High risk students can be identified early in the semester and guided towards tutoring or counseling to help them overcome obstacles to effective learning.

Students in cluster courses are introduced to liberal arts/general education in unique ways that involve making connections between disparate disciplines. High expectations for students in cluster courses include regular writing assignments (journals and a term paper), thought-provoking discussions, and other activities that challenge them to think and perform at a college/university level. From the professor's perspective, I have found this type of teaching incredibly rewarding. I like getting to know the incoming students better, and I appreciate all that I've learned from observing and teaching together with talented and dedicated colleagues. It's a win-win situation for students and faculty alike.

Focus on Issues that Relate to Students' Lives

Martin Gritsch, Professor of Economics, Finance and Global Business



Instructors who teach first-year college students may have experienced situations in which they have found it difficult to get students involved in class. New students may question the relevance of a particular course to their major, wonder about the need for general education requirements, or they may be busy with adjustments in their personal life related to their college start.

In my experience, a key for a successful class is to get the students involved in issues that they can relate to that directly affect their lives. For example, one of the best classes in my recent First-Year Seminar class was the one in which we

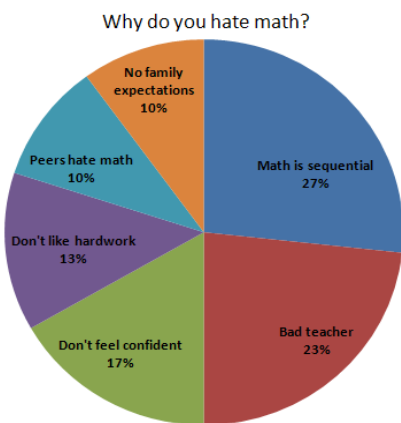
talked about diversity issues and how it impacts students' lives. In that class, a real discussion ensued between students after I provided some introductory thoughts. I did not need to encourage them any further to participate, but instead only moderated the lively discussion. It went into related topics such as state politics (e.g., the Schools Construction Corporation), the welfare system, the weak state support for higher education (and its effect on tuition rates), and college admission criteria (e.g., whether race should be a factor in admission decisions).

In order to engage students in such a manner, I have found it useful to give students an assignment before such a class session. Forcing them to put their thoughts about a topic in writing before a class typically improves the quality of comments during the class discussion.

My Teaching Challenge: Math Phobia

Jyoti Champanerkar, Professor of Math

In a recent visit to a freshman seminar, I was met (warmly) by math phobias with a hatred of math. I tried to tell them how useful math is and several of its many varied applications. Besides, I mentioned that math would help them develop a sense of numbers, estimate quantities, etc., which is very useful on a daily basis. I offered them “tips” on how to succeed in a math class. Some listened out of politeness, while others dozed off. I knew I couldn’t change their opinions in such a short while and I hoped that they wouldn’t pass on their inhibitions to those they influenced.



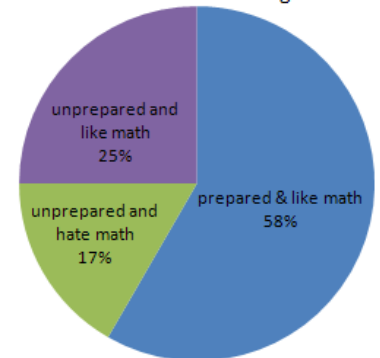
About 27% of all reasons for hating math in this freshman seminar were because math follows a sequential process. This was very surprising for me, because it is the very nature of mathematics and the sciences. They continuously build on what was previously

learned.

Even more surprising was that about 13% hated math because they don’t like to work hard. While I appreciate their honesty, not wanting to work hard is a matter of concern. I for one would not hire someone who is not willing to work hard.

As expected there was a strong correlation between feeling prepared for the math class they were currently in and liking math. Seventy-five percent either felt prepared and liked math or felt unprepared and hated math.

Correlation between being prepared for a math class and liking math.



Although depressing, it was an insightful visit. I have a better understanding of my non-math majors. I still don’t know how to get across to them that everyone ought to have numerical literacy and that mathematical ineptitude should not be a matter of pride.

Teaching Tips for Freshmen Students

A Dozen Tips for Diverse Classrooms

- Remember that your students are freshman, so have realistic expectations. Check the syllabi and assignments given by more experienced colleagues, “pick their brains.”
- While setting realistic expectations is important, you must also share them with your students. Explain your philosophy on tardiness, late assignments, etc. and take the time to learn what your students expect of you as well.
- Take advantage of the technology-training courses your college offers, but don’t feel pressured to use technology for its own sake. Experiment with what interests you, and find the applications that best fit your teaching style.
- Look at the whole experience-including the syllabus, the textbook, and the classroom from your students’ perspective.
- Consider keeping a teaching journal. This is a great way to keep track of your successes and failures, and learn from experience.
- Be mindful of the pressure on students, some of whom have families, jobs, or long commutes.
- Know what services are available at your college to help struggling students.
- Make sure students understand why the subject matter of the course is worth learning, and how it relates to the real world.
- Encourage your students to give you feedback on your teaching.
- If you are concerned about plagiarism, consider increasing the load of in-class work, such as problem sets and essays.
- Develop at least one assignment that requires each student to meet with you, one on one, in your office.
- Identify at least one quality you appreciate in each student, and keep it in mind every time when you come in to class.

Source: Fogg, P. (2007, October 26). A Dozen Teaching Tips for Diverse Classrooms. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Dozen-Teaching-Tips-for-D/1857/>