The FY Connection

A Glimpse at the First Year Programs at SUNY Potsdam.

Meet the Coordinators:

The Director of First Year Transitions, Louise Tyo, is housed in the college's Student Success Center and focuses on the academic and social needs of all first year students. She is responsible for planning a Summer Orientation program for incoming first year students and coordinating multiple sections of the one-credit First Year Success Seminar (FYSS) course. Other tasks include coordinating the Spring/Fall Transitions Conference for transfer students - workshops that explore programs, services, and technologies for this special group; organizing the annual author's visit to the campus for the Common Reading Program; and offering professional and leadership opportunities for students to earn academic internship credit as BEAR Bus Break Coordinator, as a FYSS Teaching Assistant (TA) or as an Orientation Leader (OL).

Oscar D. Sarmiento, Associate Professor in Modern Languages. As the director of the Learning communities program, he is in charge of developing and promoting First Year Interest Groups (FIGs) at SUNY Potsdam. FIGs are thematic clusters of courses that first years students take together for one semester. The director encourages faculty participation in the activities of the program and the semester clusters; he coordinates the course scheduling with the Registrar at the college; offers faculty development workshops and planning retreats; maintains and periodically updates a web site and publishes occasional program brochures, manuals or newsletters. The director also works with Learning Community instructors to develop classroom test assessment methods; engages in long-term program planning; and maintains links to national Learning Communities professional organizations.

The Assistant Director is Annette Robbins and she is responsible for the ongoing development and enhancement of the educational program within the residence halls. She coordinates student and staff leadership development through organizing various training programs including RA/Mentor Fall, Spring, In-service, and Pre-Service Training. In addition, the Assistant Director organizes ongoing appreciation events and provides development opportunities for student leaders and staff. She oversees staff programming, develops programming resources and organizes large-scale campus programs. The Assistant Director coordinates the First Year Experience (FYE) program and is responsible for FYE staff training and development, large-scale program planning and the Residential Fellows program.

Our Mission:

SUNY Potsdam’s First Year programs provide a collaborative opportunity for first time, traditional age students to make meaningful connections with peers, faculty and staff through academic and residential communities. The academic component connects courses from separate academic disciplines, creating First Year Interest Groups (FIGs), or thematic clusters of courses, most of which include a one-credit course, or First Year Success Seminar (FYSS), developed specifically to give students an accelerated academic and social transition to SUNY Potsdam. Intellectual life is enriched by creating a social context for learning, promoting interdisciplinary learning, encouraging explicit curricular connections and providing an integrated and interactive learning environment. The First Year Experience (FYE), the residential component, offers a welcoming, student-centered and academically focused experience that promotes awareness of and involvement in campus activities and leadership development. Our residential communities provide educational and social programming focused on helping students successfully transition into college life. These communities offer healthy opportunities for social interaction, empowering students to create relationships in a supportive learning environment.
First-year Interest Groups (FIGS)

Learning Communities

1977  Fall semester: 120 students enter the “School-Within-A-School, a four-year sequenced program of studies. According to the brochure distributed, one of the goals of the program is: “...synthesis and integration of knowledge rather than [...] the accumulation of 120 (major, elective, and general education) credits.”

1994  The Adirondacks Coordinated Environmental Studies awarded a $104,000 FIPSE/NEH/NSF grant to develop interdisciplinary course work for first year students.

1997-1999  SUNY Potsdam applies to participate in the two-year National Learning Communities Dissemination Project. SUNY Potsdam is one of 21 schools selected from 56 participants.

2000  Position of Learning Communities Director is supported at half-time replacement for a senior faculty. The Director, Dr. John Omohundro (Anthropology), is guided by a committee board of seven faculty.

2001  SUNY Potsdam hosts the National Learning Communities Open House in fall. Event showcases best practices for other institutions in New York. It is funded by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

Network of colleges/universities interested in learning communities develops. SUNY Potsdam participates and thus becomes a founding member of the Atlantic Center for Learning Communities (ACLC).

2002  After an initial development stage, the Learning Communities program reaches a significant level of presence at SUNY Potsdam: In fall semester more than 70 instructors teach 700 first year students in 24 learning communities; in spring semester about 7 to 9 learning communities are offered.

2003  SUNY Potsdam participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement. In fall semester; 55% of the first year students and 32% of seniors indicated that they will participate in learning communities.

2005  Offered 23 FIGS, enrolling 258 of the 524 eligible (non-Crane, non-childhood education) students or 52% of eligible students.

2006  Pre-registered 150 (40%) of eligible incoming first year students into FIGS by June 1 through Orientation web site.
First Year Success Seminar (FYSS)

1999-2000  Collaborative efforts are made to enroll all students living in the First Year Experience (FYE) residential program enroll in FYSS. Upper class student mentors (Academic Peer Mentors) who live on the floor with the first year students become Teaching Assistants for the FYSS instructors. Instructors for residential FYSS course are faculty/staff who also serve in the role of Residential Fellows.

2001-2002  Continued collaboration with the Residence Life Office and new collaboration with the Director of Learning Communities to implement FYSS with the First Year Interest Groups (FIGs). 20 sections of FYSS are successful.

2003-2004  In order to serve students who are not signed up for the FYE program and/or FIGs that do not have an FYSS class in the cluster, 4 free-standing FYSS sections are offered. There were twenty-two sections that are successful this academic year.

2004-2005  Twenty sections are offered, 18 sections filled.

2005-2006  Students can now sign up online for FIGS with FYSS and housing on the FYE residential floors. As a result, there was an increase in FYSS sections. A total of twenty-one sections are successful for this academic year. The FYSS Common Reading program is implemented in which students receive a free book at orientation and then attend the author’s presentation in the fall. The book title is “How to ZING! Your Life & Leadership” by Nancy Hunter Denney.

2006-2007  All three programs continue to grow and make appropriate changes to meet student needs. Twenty-two sections are filled with twenty-three instructors and twenty-nine TA’s participating in the program. The second year of the Common Reading program was also a success. The book title is “Journey from the Land of No: a girlhood caught in revolutionary Iran” by Roya Hakakian.

FYSS Learning Outcomes:

1- Students will understand academic policies; be prepared for academic advising/course selection and registration; and be aware of academic support services available.

2 - Students will be exposed to a variety of aspects of campus life at Potsdam and become integrated into the college community.

3- Students will be provided the opportunity to critically reflect on their own personal development throughout the semester.
SUNY Potsdam’s First Year Experience (FYE) program began in 1989. This program has 3 major components; Residential, Academic, and Programmatic that work together to promote student success by helping create connections for students to peers, faculty/staff, support services and, ultimately, the college as a whole. The entire program is structured to help students more easily find their niche within the institution and feel a part of the college community.

**RESIDENTIAL:** Originally housed in Draime Hall, the FYE program grew quickly through the years and is now housed in Bowman East and Bowman West. Approximately 300 students live in our program on 15 floors. Each building has a professional live-in Residence Director. Each of the 15 floors has a Resident Assistant and Academic Peer Mentor. Mentors offer students informal guidance on academic areas such as advising and registration. They also work with the RAs to plan social and educational programs.

**ACADEMIC:** The academic component promotes students making connections with faculty/staff. Each aspect of this component represents a strong collaboration between academic and student affairs staff. The Residential Fellows program currently has more than 40 faculty/staff dedicated to offering support, guidance and friendship to our first year students. Our Fellows are able to serve as a resource while interacting with the students in their own environment: the Residence Halls, through educational and social programs. Fellows may also serve as FYSS instructors as well as academic advisors to undeclared first year students.

Two other academic focal points are FYE’s collaboration with the First Year Success Seminar and Freshmen Interest Groups. Each floor in FYE is affiliated with an FYSS and/or FIG. In addition to our FIG areas, we have floors that are designated “special interest living areas” for those interested in all aspects of the Arts as well as students in the Honor’s program.

**PROGRAMMATIC:** This component promotes student connections to peers and support services at the college. Our programming goals encourage education and exposure to new ideas, assists students in making friends, and provides opportunities for students to get involved on campus and in the community. A focus in programming is on transition. Examples of programs being offered include: healthy choices (alcohol and drugs, acquaintance rape, nutrition, fitness), stress and time management, diversity and personal values development to name a few. We also provide large scale programs that allow students to see the world beyond the Potsdam campus. Annual trips to Ottawa, Titus Mountain for skiing and tubing as well as Lake Placid are our most popular. Sibling’s weekend allows our students to invite their younger family members to visit them and enjoy special programs designed to have fun and be creative.