Freshmen Interest Groups

Historical Perspective
The Freshmen Interest Group (FIG) program began in 1987 as a means of creating small, intentional learning communities within the large university setting. Since their inception, FIGs have linked clusters of Autumn Quarter courses, typically two 5 credit classes, with a seminar offering transitional support.

The number of FIGs rose steadily from 1987, when 4 clusters were offered, peaking in 2002 when students could select from 180 FIGs. Since that time the number of clusters has settled to 165 representing the participation of over 3200 students, or 70% of entering first year students.

Initially, the FIG program was not highly structured and was viewed more as a course registration effort than a program offering transitional support. In fact, it wasn’t until the early 1990s when an instructor training seminar was developed and the courses became accredited reflecting increasing attention to academic and transitional benefits of FIGs.

The courses that make up FIG clusters represent a broad range of academic disciplines and class size. Course clusters have also been linked thematically to appeal to students with varying academic goals.

FIG seminars have incorporated a variety of core elements and content throughout the last 20 years, but they have consistently centered on instruction by a peer.

The extent of structure within FIGs and consistency across the program has also varied. Generally speaking, due to the large number of FIGs and the volunteer nature of the instruction, high levels of structure have been difficult to manage and are viewed as restrictive by peer educators. This structure was most evident in 2001 when all FIGs seminars used a common text and students participated in 3 community meetings during the quarter. Feedback following that quarter led to the current model that pairs in class experiences with several themed excursions: intellectual, arts, and interest. A common book excursion will be added in for autumn 2006. In addition, students will complete a research and discovers project with the UW Libraries as well as an online portfolio documenting their academic and co-curricular experiences throughout the autumn quarter.

Administration
Initially, administration of the FIG program was incorporated into a portion of the responsibilities of one FTE, but increasing complexity in the program and greater numbers of FIGs necessitated additional support. At its largest, a staff of two professionals, two graduate students, and a student worker coordinated FIGs; however, more recently the staff has been reduced back to one FTE with student support. Current sentiment is that the program is understaffed and plans are in place to add a significant portion of a second FTE in support.

Peer Leader Selection and Training
The FIG seminars are facilitated by a single peer instructor, called a FIG Leader. FIG Leaders are recruited each winter. Recruitment often yields over 300 rising sophomores, juniors and seniors for the 180 positions. Each spring, the candidates enroll in a training seminar, General Studies 470, where they receive instruction in teaching methods, learn about campus resources, participate in all of the class excursions, and develop their lesson plans for the following fall.

Final offers for the 165 FIG Leader positions are offered at the end of the training seminar. During the Autumn Quarter while instructing the seminars, the FIG Leaders participate in second seminar that meets bi-weekly. The autumn seminar offers support and feedback to the instructors and helps to facilitate consistency and accountability across the program.

Program Finances
The FIG program, by design, impacts a large number of entering students with minimal financial commitment. Beyond administrative costs in salary and benefits, the program costs less than $10000 annually. Recruitment and training amount to less than $3000 annually and costs associated with course instruction are limited to the copying costs for instructional materials. The small amount remaining is dedicated to an appreciation event for the Leaders.

FIGs Now and in the Future
- Becoming part of FYP Learning Communities
- Increased partnerships with campus resources – librarians, advisers
- Common Book