

Work in Progress: First-Year Seminar Course, a Steppingstone Course to Strengthen the Engineering Programs in a Minority Institution

Dr. Ramanitharan Kandiah P.E., Central State University

Professor of Environmental Engineering, Department of Water Resources Management, Central State University, Wilberforce, Ohio. He holds a Ph.D. in Civil engineering and a Graduate Diploma in Geographic Information Systems. He is also a registered Professional Civil Engineer in Ohio, certified Professional Hydrologist-Surface Water, Board Certified Environmental Engineer, and Envision Sustainability Professional.

Mr. Krishna Kumar Nedunuri, Central State University

Dr. Nedunuri holds appointment as a Professor at Central State University (CSU) in the International Center for Water Resources Management (ICWRM). He teaches Fluid Mechanics and Hydraulics, Soil and Water Pollution, Water Chemistry, Water Supply, Groundwater, Wastewater Engineering, Streams and Lakes. He is an active member in the area of Faculty Development promoting distance education through video-conferencing and web-based learning. He is one of the fore-runners in adapting inquiry methods into traditional classroom environments at CSU. He earned his Ph.D. in Environmental and Hydraulic Engineering area of the School of Civil Engineering from Purdue University (1999). He got his MS in Chemical Engineering Science (1992) from Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, India. He received his BS in Chemical Engineering from Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India (1986). His main areas of research interest are in flow through porous media, subsurface flow and contaminant transport, phytoremediation, ecological restoration and mathematical modeling of environmental systems.

Dr. Edison Perdomo, Central State University

Dr. Edison Perdomo is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Central State University. His interest include the role of psychological function in the regulation of physiological mechanisms such as cardiovascular and thermoregulations. Additionally, he is interested in cross-cultural differences in learning and communication styles and in studying how psycho-social differences can affect the rate of seeking medical attention and compliance as well as the following of safety protocols in the consumption of food and water.

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Abstract

Transforming from a high schooler to a college first-year student is a challenge for any student for many reasons. This challenge is more intense when the student chooses professional undergraduate degree programs such as engineering due to more stringent program requirements and higher expectations of academic preparedness, particularly in mathematics and sciences. A significant number of students enrolled in a minority institution like a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) are still first-generation college students in their families. Hence, the challenges they have to overcome as the first-year students are greater than their peers. This situation warrants a first-year course that is specifically designed to help the first-year student who intends to pursue an engineering major to successfully navigate their academic life within the campus. The first-year students are challenged with a number of issues including financial management, time management, student advising and alcohol, and drug policies. In this paper, the authors explore how such one section of a course titled *First Year Seminar* (FYS 1101) specially customized for engineering majors and offered at their HBCU institution would address the challenges of incoming engineering first-year student.

Introduction

Transforming from a high schooler to a college freshmen student is a challenge for any student individual for many reasons. This challenge is more intense when the student chooses to major in professional undergraduate degree programs such as engineering than in some other programs due to the more stringent program requirements and higher the expectations of academic preparedness, particularly in mathematics and sciences. A significant number of students, who are enrolled into a minority institution like a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) are still the first generation college students in their families [1, 2]. Hence, the challenges they have to overcome as a first-year engineering student are greater than their peers. Students are not prepared to enroll into the right set of pre-engineering courses and persist due to their lack of prior preparedness in high school math, physics, chemistry, and English [3,4,5,6]. Gateway courses have been recognized as one of the major barriers to earning a STEM degree [7]. The number of times pre-requisite courses can be offered particularly every semester and in summer is also limited in small schools. Our own research on HBCUs with a student enrollment of 3000 or less has shown that about 50% of schools that carry engineering programs offer gateway courses such as Differential equations, Statics or Dynamics only once in a year with no offerings in summer. Failure to take or pass the right pre-requisites will result in either delaying their graduation or overloading of courses in junior and senior years. Students are also not familiar with tutoring and mentoring services available at the university, college, and most importantly at the engineering departments and depended heavily on faculty support and mentoring [8,9] Students do not have the adequate knowledge of engineering in general or more specifically their engineering discipline of choice. Lack of early contact with role models in engineering has contributed to lack of inspiration and as a consequence of attrition of students in engineering programs during the student transition from first-year to sophomore [4, 10, 11, 12, 13]. Whereas

most bridge or first-year programs or courses at HBCUs focus on reducing the gaps in their academic preparedness, programs designed to maneuver through the curriculum and seek inspiration and counseling from faculty/peers though better than PWI is still limited [14] and warrants further study and implementation. These challenges are also summarized below in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges faced by incoming first-year engineering students at minority institutions

Challenges	Support from the related work by researchers in the open literature
First generation students	Ceglie and Settlage, 2016, Palmer and Maramba, 2015
Lack of prior preparation to succeed in introductory STEM courses	Gasman et al., 2017; Ro and Loya, 2015; Chang et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2010; Eris et al., 2007;
Access to mentoring and advising	Kendricks et al., 2013, McCoy, Luedke, and Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Hurtado et al., 2011
Lack of role models	Chang et al., 2014, Litzler, Samuelson, and Lorah, 2014, Bayer, 2012, Good, Halpin and Halpin, 2001, Maton, Hrabowski III, and Schmitt, 2000

This situation warrants a Freshmen course that is specifically designed to help the freshmen who intend to pursue an engineering major to successfully navigate their academic life within the campus. In this paper, the authors explore how such one section of a course titled *First-Year Seminar* FYS 1101 specially customized for engineering majors and offered at their HBCU institution would address the challenges of incoming engineering freshmen.

While the original course FYS 1101 is an established general education course at the university, it has been taught without any specific focus on the students' selected majors. In addition, this course was mainly taught by the academic staff, not the regular faculty. While the original course only introduced few aspects of the university such as its history and the history and mission of HBCUs, university legacy, campus life, campus resources, understanding majors and careers, academic requirements, student responsibilities, and financial management, it was not completely tooled to handle some issues pertinent to engineering disciplines.

In 2016, the authors received an S-STEM Grant from NSF (*Undergraduate Scholarships for Excellent Education in Environmental Engineering and Water Resources Management (USE4WRM)*) to address the challenges being faced by first-generation minority students in engineering programs and to improve recruitment and retention of financially deprived students with high academic credentials who would pursue their undergraduate degrees in Environmental Engineering or Water Resources Management. Since Fall 2016, the authors have taught a session of *FYS 1101* for these majors as a part of reducing the gaps in getting to know about field-related topics such as selecting faculty advisors, following curriculum maps to ensure passing of pre-requisite courses, and other engineering specific requirements and scholarship, engaging in undergraduate engineering design and research, ethics in engineering profession and acquiring industrial experience through internships.

Institution: The authors' institution, a land-grant institution, is a Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the U.S. It is composed of 95% African-American student population and 59% of pupils from families with incomes below the poverty level as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. This institution accommodated 8.5% of all undergraduate African Americans (including the students from neighboring states) at 4-year public universities in its state [15]. The Department of Water Resources Management (DoWRM) in the College of Engineering, Science, Technology, and Agriculture (CESTA) houses the undergraduate academic programs, Environmental Engineering (ENE) and Water Resource Management (WRM). The WRM program, one of the first of its kind in the U.S. was established by the state in 1987. The ENE program is the only ABET accredited environmental engineering program among all HBCUs that offer a bachelors degree in Environmental Engineering.

USE4WRM: The institution received the NSF grant USE4WRM in Fall 2016. This grant intends to fulfill the following three objectives to enhance the educational opportunities in WRM and ENE for potential students from low-income communities. 1. Increase the enrollment numbers and the academic preparedness of the ENE-WRM majors selected from the low-income communities; 2. Increase the retention of the ENE-WRM majors in the low-income community at CSU; and, 3. Increase the career and graduate school opportunities to the ENE-WRM graduates.

First-Year Seminar Course

In the period of 2016-2018, two First Year Seminar (FYS) courses were offered at the authors' institution. The first FYS course, FYS 1101 is a one-credit hour mandatory General education requirement course usually offered once in a year for every incoming first-year student irrespective to the student's major. It is designed to help first-year students make a successful academic and social transition to the institution. It focuses on study skills, time management and library use, and the history of the institution. The knowledge acquired in FYS 1101 is expected to assist the students in maintaining a healthy balance in your physical, social, and mental lives, in mastering the values of civility and respect, and in completing courses, programs, and graduation requirements. The second FYS course, FYS 1102 is designed for the first-year students who are in the academic probation at the end of the first semester to improve their academic skills.

While FYS 1101 was serving well for the general academic success of the students, in the capacity of the faculty advisors for the WRM|ENE students, the first two authors had observed by 2015 that there were few gaps relevant to STEM area in the academic success that should be filled for the better orientation of the STEM students. These gaps included covering the topics such as the choices of the right courses based on their prior knowledge in mathematics, physics, and chemistry, especially the pre-requisites. Lectures were designed to communicate the importance of selecting the right courses, following a curriculum map, and a necessity to adhere to the cohort students entered so they can graduate on time and without overloading towards the last couple of years into graduation with excessive course loads. The lecture topics were followed by practical assignments where students must meet with their faculty advisor/mentor to go through an advising/ mentoring session. Engineering faculty advisor (mentor)-student matching was done ahead of time for the research student identification purposes, dissemination

of the information about scholarships and internships, and the introduction of research and tutoring resources. Early identification of mentors in STEM fields has proven to be an effective way at HBCUs to retain students and allow them to graduate on time [16]. The authors have taught an FYS 1101 class in each fall between 2016 and 2018 and Summer 2018 (in which there were ten pre-selected summer bridge STEM students in the class) mainly for the STEM majors. Each fall semester FYS 1101 is offered in twenty sessions, with assigning one session for STEM majors (FYS 1101-STEM). The STEM majors in these sessions came from Environmental Engineering, Manufacturing Engineering, Water Resources Management, and Sustainable Agriculture programs.

The syllabus has been continuously enhanced with various topics such as the use of the library and digital database, academic integrity, ethics and professionalism, and sexual harassment and its implications.

FYS sessions have used a traditional method of introducing students to campus living and academic preparation with a recommended textbook. The authors supplemented the textbook with PowerPoint presentations that directly addressed the challenges faced by the first year engineering students. Topics such as understanding check sheets and navigation through academic maps were introduced and assessed. Nice audio/visual presentations on typical advising/mentoring sessions were added to the conventional lectures. Presentations also included knowledge of water resources and environmental engineering disciplines and career opportunities in these fields. News articles on emerging issues on water and environmental issues have been included. Invited presentations from current majors in their junior and senior years, graduates who are working in environmental engineering, design firms, and our alumni have been the highlights of enhanced FYS sessions.

The course helped the faculty in identifying potential undergraduate research assistants and engineering student apprentices ahead of time while helping the academically struggling students with the necessary guidance, both of which have increased student retention during critical attrition period of transition from first-year to sophomore. Engaging students in hands-on design activities and in undergraduate research early on in their degree attainment has proven to be effective in sustaining their interest in the field. In an NSF study conducted at an HBCU in STEM fields, students ranked undergraduate research/internships as having the largest impact on professional preparedness for a STEM career and/or graduate studies [4,16]. The authors also invited seniors into classes and graduate engineers using technology to serve as mentors for first-year students to ensure their smooth transition into the campus life, to inspire and motivate them towards water resources and environmental engineering disciplines and to be able to handle rigorous engineering curriculum.

The authors have started making changes to the curriculum in the fall of 2016. The enhanced curriculum was piloted in the fall of 2017. A formal survey was given to students in the fall of 2018. Two questionnaires, one by the Office of Retention that supervises the First Year

Experience and the other by the authors were used to assess the success of the course in addition to the classroom assessment.

Assessment

The objective of the assessment is to verify if students have benefitted from the supplemental information such as presentations and additional lecture topics that were provided to the students by the authors. It is necessary to assess whether the new knowledge has addressed the challenges of first-year engineering students and allowed the engineering programs to increase retention of their students.

The effectiveness of transforming the first-year seminar for STEM-focused sessions was assessed using multiple surveys such as teaching and class participation surveys for the students, survey during the final examination, and a first-year seminar survey which are discussed in greater detail below. The goal of assessments was to verify whether the modifications made to the FYS curriculum for engineering students has resulted in improving their retention during their first year and also during the transition from the first year to sophomore year.

Table 2 shows the session statistics for FYS 1101-STEM for the study period 2016-2018.

Table 2. Session statistics for FYS 1101-STEM for the period of 2016-2018

Session	Class size	WRM/ENE majors	USE4WRM Scholar
Fall 2016	27	6	4
Fall 2017	28	6	1
Summer 2018	10	1	1
Fall 2018	48	6	1

All the four STEM-focused sessions were enhanced with the guidance to the students to meet one of the faculty members in their major fields and accessing the library and other research resources. In Fall 2018, three questionnaires, one by the Office of Retention that supervises the First Year Experience and the others by the authors will be used to assess the success of the course in addition to the classroom assessment. The authors used their classroom questionnaires (*Teaching and Class Participation Assessment* and *First Year Seminar Survey*) and the final examination survey results for their assessment of the course that is presented in this paper. The instructors have used weekly assignments, term paper, and two mid-term exams to assess students' learning of topics covered in the class. The recommended textbook for the course was "*Creating Personal Success on the Historically Black College & University Campus*" by Hill and Fiore [17]. The authors also used the institution's Student Handbook as a reference book for the class.

Teaching and Class Participation Assessment: This semester end assessment mainly targets to assess the effectiveness of teaching components and the methodology. Appendix-A provides the questionnaire, *Teaching and Class Participation Assessment*.

Final Examination: This semester end assessment survey evaluates whether a student has recognized the value of seeking assistance and mentoring from his/her major advisor or professor

within the major. Appendix-B provides the final examination survey questions, *Final Examination*.

First-Year Seminar Survey: This semester end assessment gathers the information from the students on how various topics help individual students and what other topics they expect to include in the course together with the basic demographic data of the students. Appendix-C provides the survey, *First Year Seminar Survey*. Question 11 lists the topics taught in the course by the instructor and the external guest speakers.

Findings from the Assessments

Teaching and Class Participation Assessment:

A preliminary assessment was conducted to find whether supplementing the traditional FYS textbook with additional presentations, audio/visuals, and news articles by the instructors, peer students, graduates, and alumni have proven to be useful. As discussed before, these presentations covered topics related to the challenges faced by the first-generation and minority students entering engineering programs at HBCUs.

In general, three topics, Drug & Alcohol Policy and Sexual Misconduct Policy were found the most interesting topics from students' responses. The Mission and Vision of the institution and the selection of the institution were found least interesting. Figure 1 summarizes the responses to the use of various tools used in teaching. The students have overwhelmingly found the supplemental classroom powerpoint presentations helped them in learning. This was followed by learning from the articles on various topics and audio/video clips. The students also overwhelmingly found the online course management tool, Schoology helpful as the reference source for the class notes, external links to related news media and articles, and assignments.

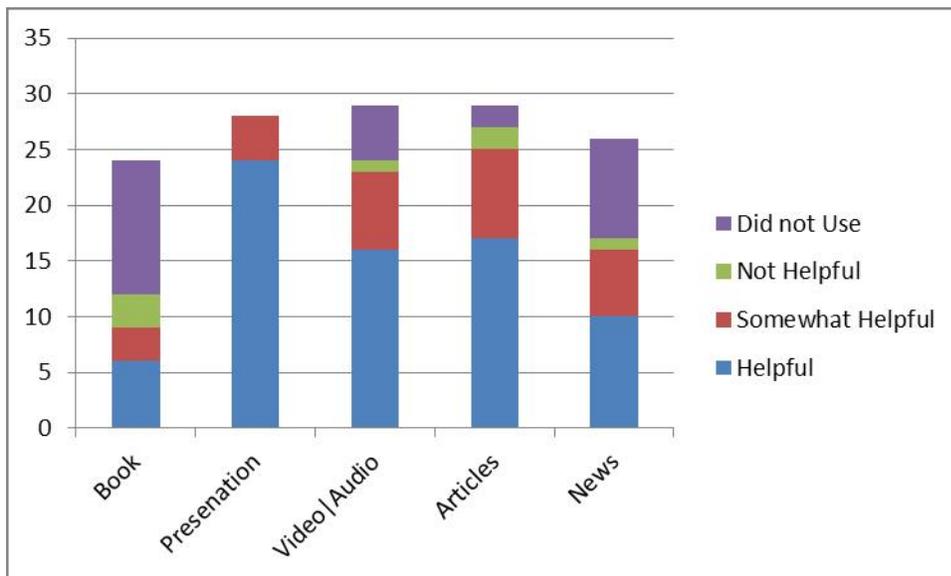


Figure 1. Student responses to the use of educational resources in Fall 2018 FYS 1101 class

Final Examination: Out of 31 students who responded to the survey questions in the final exam, 30 students were able to register into right courses for the next semester (Spring 2019) as the

full-time students with the help of their professional advisor or faculty advisor; 29 students responded stating that they could meet with their faculty advisors and one student responded that the student was still an undecided major. However, among these 29 students, almost half of them are not specific about how the faculty advisor helped them academically.

First-Year Seminar Survey: The responses for this survey on the impacts of the course topics (Questions 1-10) showed that the topics such as Drug & Alcohol Policy and Sexual Misconduct Policy were found the most helpful ones. Figure 2 shows a summary of the responses to the impacts of the topics. The lecture on guiding student social life yielded the least impact on the students.

The responses on the 11th question in the Survey on the rankings of the topics supported the findings from the Questions 1-10. They confirmed that the majority of the students benefited from the guest lectures on the Drug & Alcohol Policy and Sexual Misconduct Policy, and the students were least interested in the lecture of Student social life.

In addition, the students also suggested some alternative topics that they thought more useful than some of the least interesting topics. These alternative topics include career service, self-help, budgeting, and extended discussion on faculty advisors and time management.

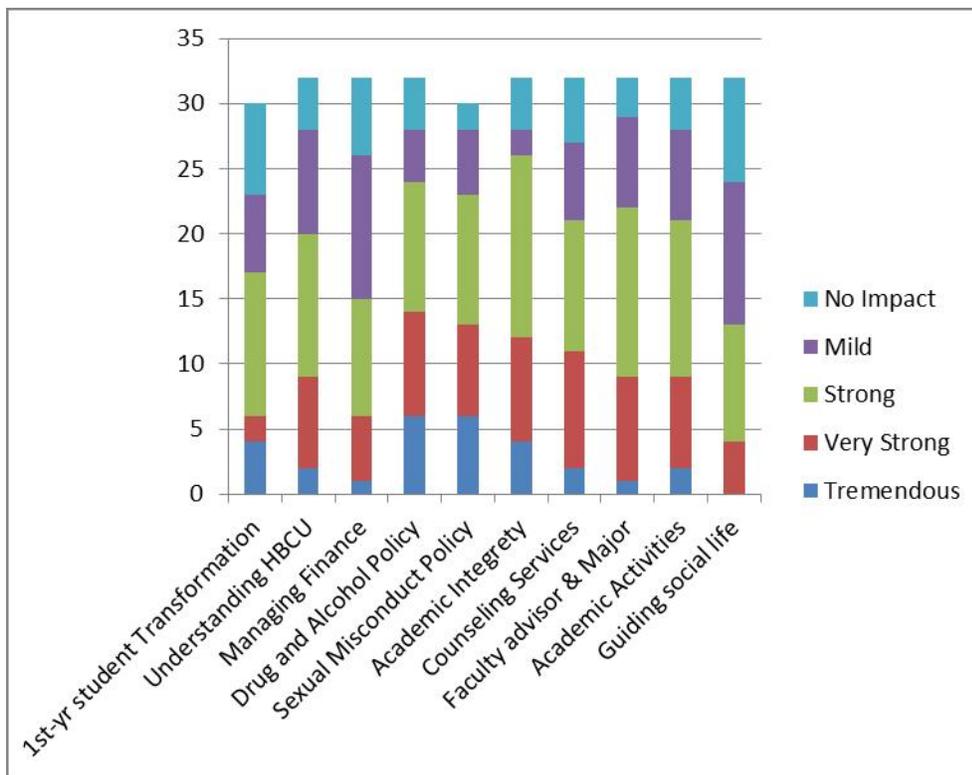


Figure 2. Student responses on the impacts of lecture topics in Fall 2018 FYS 1101 class

Out of 31 students who responded, 14 students thought that the course helped them in handling the issues academically, socially and financially, and 12 students felt that the course did not

provide any information that was new to them or that they could find by themselves through other means. 5 students had the opinion that the course was not useful for the time they spent.

The FYS course helped the faculty for identifying potential undergraduate research assistants ahead of time while helping the academically struggling students with the necessary academic advising, mentoring, and guidance, both of which appear to show an increase in student retention during the critical period of transition from the first-year student to sophomore.

Table 3 shows the retention rates of first-year students in the environmental engineering program. The retention rate is calculated as the percentage of those first-year students entering the fall semester of any year who would be returning subsequent fall of the next year. Both years 2014 and 2015 serve as baseline years for retention. The retention rates gradually increased from 2016 to 2018 while the overall enrollment also showed an increase during this period. It can be argued that the programmatic changes that engineering program has used to address the challenges associated with advising and mentoring through engaging students through FYS class and also through intrusive advising have gradually shown its impact on student retention.

Table 3. Retention of first-year students in the environmental engineering program

Parameter	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
First Year Retention Rates (%)	55%	50%	40%	50%	40%
Enrollment	29	22	21	24	28

Future Plans

In Fall 2018, the university committee for revising First Year Seminar course came up with the new curriculum for a two-credit hour FYS course that will be offered as the mandatory general education course in the place of the existing course. The first author was a member of this committee. This proposed course will incorporate more relevant topics that can enhance the first-year student life experience and academic life. The authors note that the assessments are preliminary and would be continued for two more years until the end of the granting period. Retention rates in other STEM fields will be calculated and their trends compared with other FYS sessions that only use the traditional and recommended textbook. In addition to surveys, authors will also collect and analyze data from the formative assessments (quiz, class exercises, and homework) and summative assessments (mid-term and final exams). This would provide more robust and defensible data for the instructors (authors) to enhance programming for their engineering first-year students with a focus on increasing retention. The authors also would introduce some early appreciation to engineering design, the building of models, prototype testing, and actual implementation of a product/process to first-year students. An innovative way of illustrating Senior Capstone projects targeted on solving real-world water problems and environmental issues will be attempted.

Acknowledgment

The PI and Co-PIs want to thank the National Science Foundation - Division Of Undergraduate Education for the grant *Undergraduate Scholarships for Excellent Education in Environmental Engineering and Water Resources Management (USE4WRM)* (Award #1565049) for the financial support that could help enhance the recruitment and the retention in Environmental

Engineering and Water Resources Management programs and this research. The authors also want to appreciate the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions for improving the manuscript.

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Appendices

Appendix – A: Teaching and Class Participation Assessment

1. Which topics did you find the most interesting and the least interesting in this course? Needed, please elaborate.
2. Did you find the PowerPoint presentations, videos|audios, articles and the book helpful? Provide a one-word answer for each. Needed, please elaborate.
Book: Helpful/somewhat helpful/not helpful/did not use the book at all
Presentations: Helpful/somewhat helpful/not helpful/did not use them at all
Videos|Audios: Helpful/somewhat helpful/not helpful/did not use them at all
Articles: Helpful/somewhat helpful/not helpful/did not use them at all
News: Helpful/somewhat helpful/not helpful/did not use them at all
3. How did the assignments help you understand the course and the topics? If they were less helpful, please provide your ideas to make them more pertinent to a student.
4. How did you find using Mondopad|Digital Board|Schoology help in teaching? (in terms of taking and sharing notes, environmentally pollution free replacement for Chalk based teaching, each interactive way to learn with internet and PowerPoint presentation, posting coursework materials and communicating with the instructor)
5. In your student perspective, provide other suggestions to improve the teaching (technologically) that might enhance the future students’ learning process.

Appendix – B: Final Examination

1. What is academic integrity? Provide an example that you have held in this semester as a part of academic integrity.

2. Have you registered for Spring 2019 semester? YES | NO
 If YES, how many credit hours did you register? Who helped you in advising in selecting your courses and in guiding the registration process?
 If NO, state the cause and how do you think that you will resolve this issue

3. As an activity for this course, did you meet with a professor in your intended Major?
 YES | NO
 If YES, How did it help you academically?
 If NO, how do you think a meeting with a professor in your major will help you?

Appendix – C: First Year Seminar Survey

This survey is to assess how much this course has helped you in adjusting to the university environment. Please do not write your name or identification number. This is to assess and improve the course. Be honest in your response.

Demographic Data (Mark all that apply)

- Gender: Male Female
 Major: CESTA COB COE CHAS Undecided
 Classification: First-year Sophomore Junior Sophomore
 Major: _____ Student Type: New Freshmen Transfer Student
 Student Status: Full-time Part-time
 Residency:
 Campus Dormitory Off-Campus Housing Day Scholar (living with parents|guardians)
 Grade Point Average: High School: ____ University: ____
 First Generation University Student: Yes No
 In state Student Out of state Student International Student

Course Related Questions (Mark and Answer to all that apply)

How extent did this course (FYS 1101) help in the following areas at the institution?

1. Impact on transforming from a high school graduate to a university first-year
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
2. Impact on understanding the importance of an HBCU
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
3. Impact on managing your finance at the University
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
4. Impact on understanding and follow the Drug and Alcohol Policy at the University
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
5. Impact on an understanding of the Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Misconduct & Retaliation Policy
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
6. Impact on understanding and adhering the academic integrity, ethics, and professionalism
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
7. Impact on approaching counseling services
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact

8. Impact on identifying the faculty advisor, major and coursework
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
9. Impact on handling other academic activities such as registering for the next semester and scholarships
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact
10. Impact on guiding social life
 Tremendous Very Strong Strong Mild No Impact

(Answer to all that apply; please provide the response as short as possible)

11. Rank the topics that you were taught or given guest lectures from the most useful to the least (Number them)
- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Need for the HBCUs | <input type="checkbox"/> Mission and Vision of CSU |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Management of Individual Finance | <input type="checkbox"/> The Drug and Alcohol Policy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Misconduct & Retaliation Policy | <input type="checkbox"/> Academic Integrity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student Counseling services | <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty Advisor and Major |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other academic activities scholarships Library | <input type="checkbox"/> Guidance for Social life |
12. Provide maximum three topics that you may think would be useful for a first-year to replace three of the topics given in the last query: Rank them accordingly with respect to the above ten topics
- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Add 1: _____ | Replace _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Add 2: _____ | Replace _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Add 3: _____ | Replace _____ |
13. Overall this class
- helped in handling the issues academically, financially and socially
 - provided no new information that I already knew or I can get it on my own through other means
 - was a waste of time and in times confusing and/or misinforming
14. Suggestions to improve this course (the instruction mode, subject and any related issues) for the future: