



# Working with First-Year Students

Engaging Evidence to Improve Learning

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## Sample of an Evidence-Informed Campus Initiative

Based in large part on our NSSE results and our enrollment patterns, in April 2004 Connecticut College voted on a new General Education program that included first-year seminars (FYs). The CTL began workshops to support faculty teaching those seminars. After the results of our first-year data from the Wabash National Study, we began to incorporate that data about student experiences into our workshops and discussions.

Last year we ran a workshop geared towards all faculty teaching first-year students in general, not only FYs. Because of faculty interest, the workshop was followed up with a study group, led by CTL Faculty Fellow Abby Van Slyck. Faculty read *Teaching First-Year College Students*, by Bette LaSere Erickson, Calvin B. Peters, & Diane Weltner Strommer (Jossey-Bass, 2006) and agreed to try at least one new teaching method or idea mentioned in the book, with follow-up meetings to share their changes in practice and discuss the results.

Following are the documents related that most recent series of workshops, including a draft of an article in our upcoming CTL Newsletter that highlights the work of three participating faculty.

## Initial Workshop May 2010 Camp Teach & Learn

### **Teaching & Challenging Our First-Year Students: FYs, Introductory Courses, & Beyond**

Tuesday, 25 May: 1:00 PM to 3 PM; lunch served at noon.

This year we have expanded the topic of our annual workshop to go beyond First-Year Seminars. We will bring together both experienced faculty and faculty new to the FYs Program to discuss a variety of topics, including designing courses that both challenge and support first-year students, helping them make the academic transition from high school to college, effectively using writing and discussion, and advising. Experienced faculty will talk about what surprised them most about teaching first-year students, what they thought they did that was most effective, and what they plan to do differently next time. *Discussants include Anne Bernhard, Simon Feldman, Leo Garofalo, Leah Lowe, John Nugent, Andrea Rossi-Reder, Steve Shoemaker, Abby Van Slyck, & Stuart Vyse.*

## Reminder & Invitation to All Faculty for Follow-Up Discussion & Reading Group in August 2010

**From:** Abigail Van Slyck [mailto:[aavan@conncoll.edu](mailto:aavan@conncoll.edu)]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 23, 2010 10:03 AM  
**To:** 'nssew@conncoll.edu'  
**Subject:** for allfac: Teaching First-Year Students: A Support Group

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to extend an invitation to those of you who will be teaching 100-level classes or other classes with high enrollments of first-year students.

The idea is to start a support group of sorts for faculty teaching first-year students in the fall, especially, but also in the spring. The idea is simple: if you say yes, the CTL will send you a copy of *Teaching First-Year College Students*, by Better LaSere Erickson, Calvin B. Peters, and Diane Weltner Strommer. In return, you agree to read the book over the summer and to meet twice next semester to discuss it. The first meeting will take place at lunchtime (11:45 am – 2:30 pm) on Wednesday, August 25, when we will trade drafts of our syllabi and discuss how each of us plans to implement at least one idea from the book. We will then meet again in late October/early November to see how things are going. The CTL will provide lunch (or breakfast) for both meetings.

As you contemplate this invitation, let me mention that I reviewed the book for the inaugural copy of the CTL newsletter (pdf attached). I wanted to read the book because I was about to teach AHI 123: Architecture, 1400-Present for about the 14<sup>th</sup> time in my career. When I designed the course, lo these many years ago, I was focused on covering the material; this time I wanted to think more systematically about how to reach first-year students. I found the book very, very useful—full of concrete strategies that I could adapt to my class without starting from scratch in terms of course design. In fact, the ideas helped me save time in class and produced better results in terms of student learning. And, I didn't have to read the whole book to get a lot out of it. I dipped into chapters on topics that seemed most applicable to my class.


So, I hope you are rested enough to find this invitation appealing. Please contact me if you want to know more or if you are ready to sign up. Email is fine, but you should also feel free to phone me at home: 860-599-8928.

Cheers,

Abby

Abigail A. Van Slyck  
Faculty Fellow, Joy Shechtman Mankoff Center for Teaching & Learning

## Invitation to Follow-Up Discussion to those in Reading Group Fall 2010

from **Abigail Van Slyck** <aavan@conncoll.edu>  
sender Sent at 4:18 PM (GMT-04:00). Current time there: 7:00 PM.   
-time  
date Sat, Sep 11, 2010 at 4:18 PM  
subject Second Meeting of the Teaching and Supporting First-Year Students Reading Group

Dear colleagues in the Teaching and Supporting First-Year Students Reading Group,

I hope your semester has started well and that your engagement with *Teaching First-Year College Students* by Erickson, Peters, and Strommer is helping you help your first-year students become the kind of learners you want them to be.

I write to let you know the dates of our second meeting. As you might imagine, there was no time when we could all get together. So, we are offering two different opportunities to have lunch and talk about your experience putting some of the book's strategies into action at Connecticut College. (In fact, it looks like one or two you are not available at either time; I do apologize, but even by offering two different times, we couldn't accommodate everyone's schedule.)

Here are the times:

- Monday, October 25, Hood Dining Room, 11:45 am – 2:00 pm
- Wednesday, October 27, Hood Dining Room, 11:45 am – 2:00 pm

On both days, lunch will be available at 11:45 am and conversation will start around noon. We will end at 2:00 pm (or so).

Please **RSVP** to Joyce McDaniel ([jafra@conncoll.edu](mailto:jafra@conncoll.edu)) by **Tuesday, October 19**. Please, please, please **mention the First-Year Students Reading Group** and let her know which date you would like to attend. (Joyce is managing RSVPs for Talking Teaching and many other CTL events, so it's important to provide complete information in your RSVP.) I am equally serious about this next bit: if you'd like to come to both the First-Year Reading Group lunches, RSVP for both. We would be delighted to see you twice!

As always, if you have questions, please get in touch.

Cheers,

Abby Van Slyck  
Faculty Fellow  
Joy Shechtman Mankoff Center for Teaching & Learning

## Abby's Draft Plan for Fall Follow-Up Sessions

### Teaching and Supporting First-Year Students

Follow-up meetings

October 25 and October 27, 2010

#### Write to participants:

- remind them to come
- ask them to bring artifacts (either 10 copies or email to Joyce)
- explain the plan for the sessions

#### The plans for the sessions:

Lunch until noon

Briefly go over list of topics from last time and explain the idea, namely, to develop a list of topics for us to reflect upon together today. Ideally, these would be related to something new you tried that really worked well or to something new you tried that didn't work so well. If there is something you want to discuss that is not on the list, you will get the chance to add it.

Ask everyone to introduce themselves:

- Name(s) of the class(es) they are teaching with a substantial first-year population
- # of students over all
- # of those who are first-year students
- Issues not on the list (if any) they'd like to discuss further
- Indicate 1 or 2 issues they'd most like to discuss

Then, start with the top vote-getters,

- Ask if anyone tried something new that really worked . (If there is an artifact, share it.)
- Ask others to comment on why they think it might have worked well
- Ask if anyone tried something new that really did not work
- Ask others to comment on why they think it might have worked well

When conversation peters out, move on to the next vote-getter and repeat until we are out of time.

Close with evaluation form.

Follow through with a few people, asking them to write up their ideas for the CTL Newsletter.

I will need:

- Cut up file-folders for names
- Markers
- Easel and big pad of paper
- Evaluation forms for each day (I will send Joyce the forms)