

The First Year Forward (FYF) Learning Committee charges included:

1. Inventory the stated learning goals for all ASU students and for first-year students in particular.
2. Suggest changes to the existing or identify additional first-year student learning goals – objectives that should be seen as “common” and applicable to multiple courses and programs and supported both inside and outside of the classroom.
3. Identify the central administrative units (including key actors) involved with the important curricular/co-curricular learning opportunities offered to first-year students.
4. Identify current practices used to evaluate achievement of student learning goals.
5. Provide recommendations on ways to enhance student learning, strengthen the connections between first-year learning goals and curricular/co-curricular experiences, and improve methods of assessing the scope and extent of student learning.

The FYF Learning committee addressed these charges in a variety of ways, utilizing targeted data collection efforts, committee discussions, and committee member experience and expertise. The committee’s response to the majority of these charges are found in the recommendations section of this report. We focused more explicitly on charges 1, 4, and 5. For charge 1 and 4, the committee conducted a survey of instructors/coordinators of first-year seminar (FYS) courses and high-enrolling first-year general education courses. The results are summarized in Section 2 of this report, with further detail found in Appendix A. The committee’s response to charge 3 is reflected in both of the committee-generated surveys as well as the final recommendations. With respect to charge 2, the committee identified the need for common learning goals and objectives and our final recommendations call for further collaboration among those who can provide innovative practice ideas, as well as suggest mechanisms through which that could happen. The committee felt that at this point in time, there was not sufficient data to actually identify the common goals that should be applicable to most first-year courses.

This report provides an overview of the committee’s efforts and is divided into three sections:

1. Committee Work: The actual tasks and activities we engaged in as a committee.
2. Committee Observations: What we observed and found as a result of those tasks and activities.
3. Committee Recommendations: Our suggestions for moving forward, based on our observations and deliberations.

## SECTION 1: COMMITTEE WORK

After the November 3, 2014 First Year Forward (FYF) kickoff meeting, the Learning committee met once monthly from November 2014 through March 2015. In addition to attendance by the two co-chairs and CLAS Dean’s Office staff member at each meeting, over half of the committee members were present at all five of the meetings, with the majority of meetings yielding attendance by three-quarters of the committee. After each meeting, discussion notes and any other relevant materials were sent out to the full committee for review via email.

At the initial Learning committee meeting in mid-November, the committee reviewed the charges set forth by the FYF initiative and decided to address several of them by collecting additional data from CLAS departments/units. During this meeting, the committee developed two data collection instruments that would be used to gather information on existing learning goals for, and experiences of, CLAS first-year students. These two instruments were: (1) the “Course Learning Objective Survey” regarding learning goals, evaluation of these goals, and specific strategies for academically underprepared first-year students (sent via email to instructors/departmental representatives for First Year Seminar—FYS—courses and high-enrolling first-year courses, Appendix A), and (2) the “FYS Student Survey” which asked current Fall 2014 students in these courses about obstacles encountered and resources utilized (administered in-class to students from sampled Fall 2014 CLAS FYS courses, Appendix B). These committee-developed surveys focused on different areas of the first-year experience than the Gardner Institute Student and Faculty/Staff surveys. They were developed as a centralized and systematic mechanism to obtain course-specific information (i.e., course learning goals, assessment goals, instructional strategies) for this particular subset of courses (i.e., FYS and high enrollment courses), as well as specific student feedback from FYS courses. Through committee discussion regarding the development of these instruments, the committee was able to further clarify their charges and role in the overall FYF initiative.

At the December meeting, the committee developed an analysis plan for each of the two committee-developed surveys, which were administered in late-November. This included breaking into four subcommittees of 2-4 people each to analyze the qualitative responses for specific questions on the Course Learning Objective Survey (from 49 courses) and the co-chairs analyzing the paper/pencil responses of the FYS Student Survey (276 responses). The committee also discussed the Gardner Foundations of Excellence (FoE) website, as well as a publication out of Utah State University on FYS courses and student success.

Between December and January, the co-chairs and each subcommittee completed their respective analyses by developing and using coding schemas. At the January meeting, each subcommittee presented their findings to the full committee and the co-chairs presented their analysis from the FYS Student Survey, as well. Several themes of challenges emerged during this discussion that were later addressed in the committee’s recommendations. Specifically, the disjointed nature of FYS course objectives, instructor training/preparedness, and delivery across units, issues with relevance of the course to the student’s major, and concerns about student attendance and commitment to the course were topics of committee focus. The committee also used this midpoint-meeting as an opportunity to re-review the committee’s charges to ensure they were on-track to complete work in the allotted FYF initiative timeframe.

Between January and February, committee members were asked to independently review the Gardner Institute Faculty/Staff and Student survey results/reports as an additional source of data. The co-chairs prepared a summary of findings for these surveys, as well (Appendix C). It was at this point in the process that the committee began to shift its focus to making recommendations: Each committee member was asked to develop at least one recommendation based on all of the data collected, reviewed, and discussed as a part of the FYF Learning committee work. Committee members were encouraged to also use their own experience and expertise as they considered possible recommendations. A template to record recommendations and their “source” was created and distributed for committee use (Appendix D). These committee recommendations were compiled and loosely organized into categories for an initial review at the February meeting.

At the February and March meetings, the committee worked to revise and refine their recommendations, as well as discuss any areas of the committee’s charge that had not been extensively covered up to that point.

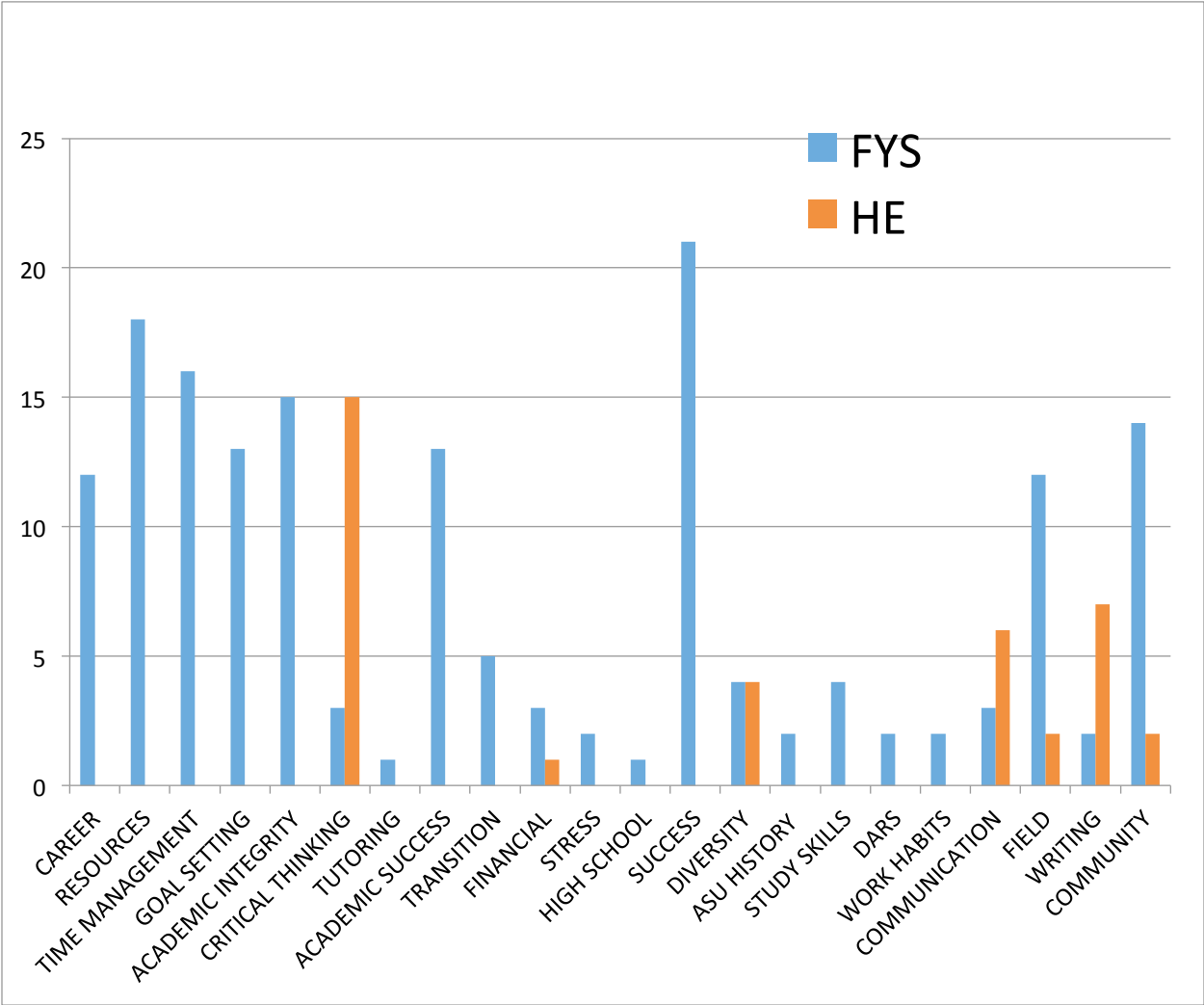
Between March and April, committee members reviewed and provided feedback on the final set of recommendations, as well as on this committee report.

SECTION 2: COMMITTEE OBSERVATIONS

Course Learning Objectives Survey

Data were collected from a committee-generated survey of instructors of high enrolling first-year courses and first-year seminars. The purpose of this survey was to systematically collect information on learning objectives for all courses included in the committee’s purview: high-enrolling and FYS courses. The Course Learning Objectives survey was sent out to directors/instructors for 49 courses (27 FYS courses and 22 high-enrolling courses including those on the Gardner FoE inventory). These 49 courses represented 18 academic units within CLAS. We received information for all 49 courses for a 100% response rate. Instructors were asked five open-ended questions about learning objectives, instructional practices, assessment measures, and efforts to reach low CI students (See Appendix A).

Instructors reported some similar types of learning objectives for first-year seminars such as academic success, resources available to students, goal setting and time management. There was even less commonality among responses for the high enrolling first-year courses and very few commonalities between the two types of courses (See Table below).



When asked about whether learning objectives varied for within-major or outside of major students, instructors reported uniformly that there were no differences in learning goals for the different populations of students. Among the FYS courses, we did not find this surprising since many of them are specifically built for students in that major and many of the generic skills are transferrable to any major (e.g., time management, goal setting).

We asked about instructional practices in these courses and found that FYS and high enrolling course instructors utilize small groups to a large extent, though 90% of high enrolling courses use the traditional lecture format. FYS courses tend also toward the use of Blackboard and PowerPoint presentations, the latter to a greater extent than high enrolling courses. Instructors of high enrolling courses reported to use online or hybrid platforms in about a third of all cases.

The means of assessment were similar across both types of courses. Both use concrete outcomes such as frequency of checking Blackboard, using myASU and participating in class. Both used various types of exams, quizzes, and writing assignments. Both assessed verbal communication skills.

Finally, instructors were asked what practices were in place that target low-CI first-year freshmen; students for which we see lower retention and academic success rates. Half responded that their academic advising teams were responsible for those types of support services. A third reported that their unit did nothing for that student population. This lack of organized practices for students in this category is reflected in our committee's recommendations.

### **FYS Student Survey**

Data were collected from a committee-generated survey administered to students in first-year seminar (FYS) courses. The purpose of this survey was to get feedback from current CLAS FYS students. FYS courses were targeted since the FYS is a required course for all first-year students, making this an ideal way to impact students' first-year experience. Thirteen CLAS units administered the survey to 351 students (some course instructors administered the survey to more than one section of the course). The response rate was 79% (276 students). The questions were all open-ended (See Appendix B).

In response to the question about what their biggest surprise at ASU had been, students offered a variety of what might be considered common responses. For example, they commented on the size of the university and the degree of diversity in the student body. Some of the responses that stood out were their focus on making friends and roommate issues. They reported difficulty with time management and taking responsibility for their own learning. They also mentioned that the level of difficulty in their classes was different than expected, in both positive and negative ways. Finally, some noted that there were many clubs and organizations while others reported that they found it difficult to find such opportunities.

When asked about challenges faced in their academic programs, students again noted difficulty with time management skills and a general lack of self-motivation. Some, presumably international students, reported language barriers and many reported feelings of homesickness and loneliness. We found this type of response revealing since the question was about academic learning challenges.

Those students who responded to the second question were asked how they dealt with the challenges. A sizeable minority reported not seeking assistance and working things out on their own. Many found assistance through the first-year success coaches. Students reported positively on their experience with that program. Students also responded that they sought help through tutoring yet their experiences were split with about half reporting a negative encounter and/or delays in assistance. Academic advising and faculty assistance was also high on the list of successful help received by students.

With regard to personal and social issues students are encountering in their first year, culture shock, homesickness and loneliness again were prominent responses, particularly for out-of-state students. Many students reported that balancing their academic and social lives was proving to be a challenge. Perhaps related to time management, finding a balance was reported to be an obstacle to their success.

As was the case in the previous question about assistance with hurdles to learning, students reported that the first-year success coaches were very helpful. Many did not seek help or found some support from friends.

### **Gardner Institute Student and Faculty/Staff Surveys**

Data were collected from approximately 560 ASU students and, in a separate survey, from ASU administrators (N approximately 44), faculty (N approximately 204), graduate student TAs (N approximately 70), professional staff (N approximately 80), and technical staff (N approximately 9). A copy of a report based upon the results of these two surveys appears at the end of this document as Appendix C. Ahead, we summarize the highlights of the findings that provided the impetus for several of our recommendations.

### ***Gardner Institute Student Survey Findings***

- Students were asked about the appropriateness of their most recent course in terms of the level of academic preparation with respect to (a) reading, (b) writing, (c) library, (d) computing, and (e) math. The response options ranged from “too difficult” to “too easy”. Students reported that math was the domain in which students were least likely to say that the course was “just right” (51%). Interestingly, 27% of the student felt that the course was “easy/too easy” and 22% felt that the course was “difficult/too difficult.” Thus, there is substantial variability in the ratings of the level of academic preparation with respect to math.
- Ratings of the quality of the course/instructor were disaggregated by academic units. We identified three academic units that were above average in terms of student ratings of the quality of the course/instructor and three academic units that were below average. Next, we identified the questions that contributed the most to distinguishing between the low and highly rated academic units. These questions were: course material valuable, instructor helped me learn the material, encouraged to ask questions in class, and participation in out-of-class events encouraged. There could be many underlying reasons for these differences across units. Therefore, it may worthwhile to have instructors from highly rated units engage in a dialogue with instructors from low rated units to learn more about instructor selection, training, development, evaluation, and the general instructional practice in the unit.
- Two items stood out in terms of relatively poor ratings of quality—(a) instructor provided individual attention, and (b) participation in out-of-class events encouraged. Forty-six percent of the students indicated that instructors provided individual attention “often” or “always” and forty-seven percent of the students indicated that participation in out-of-class events was encouraged “often” or “always.”
- Students were asked the extent to which they understand the institution’s intended learning goals for the first year of college. Thirty-nine percent of the students reported that their understanding of the institution’s intended learning goals for the first year of college were “moderate”, “slight”, or “not at all.” This percentage indicates that the institution has more work to do to ensure that all first-year students understand ASU’s learning goals.

### ***Gardner Institute Faculty/Staff Survey Findings***

- Because of parallel questions asked on the faculty/staff and student surveys, it was possible to compare the ratings of the two groups on questions pertaining to the quality of the course/instructor. For four items the discrepancy in the mean ratings were .58 or higher. Students reported higher ratings than faculty/staff for the intended learning goal than faculty/staff whereas faculty/staff reported higher ratings than students for (a) academic expectations are clear to students, (b) students are encouraged to ask questions, and (c) students feel that instructors are available outside of class. It is important to address the magnitude of these discrepancies on ratings of the quality of the course/instructor.
- Ratings of the quality of the course/instructor were disaggregated by type of respondents (administrators, staff, faculty, and graduate student instructors). The ratings of graduate student instructors were much lower on several items including: (a) understand institution's intended goals, (b) instructors effectively manage student behavior, (c) instructors communicate early with students performing poorly, (d) students are encouraged to participate in out-of-class events, (e) instructors are available outside of class, (f) instructors have specific learning goals, and (g) instructors document student learning goals. These differences raise questions regarding the efficacy of using graduate students as lead instructors in first-year courses.

### **SECTION 3: COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The table below contains the Learning Committee's final set of recommendations per our charges for the First Year Forward project.

	Category	Recommendation	Source
1	FYS Course	Revisit FYS course mechanics, specifically: (a) increase to 3 credits to create a more integrated course in which students and faculty want to invest; (b) coordinate learning subjects in the FYS with a major-specific course in the student's class block; (c) encourage use of low-risk attendance activities in lieu of simply checking for attendance (e.g., provide a "menu" of activities from which instructors choose several to use in their FYS).	Committee experience/expertise, FYS Student Survey, Committee discussions, Learning Objective Survey
2	FYS Course	Revisit FYS course syllabi (across subjects) to ensure they include: (a) standard set of learning objectives, as well as unit/subject-specific objectives; (b) requirement for students to enroll in Spring (or "next semester") courses while enrolled in the FYS.	Learning Objectives Survey, Committee experience/expertise; Gardner Student Survey
3	Instructor-focused	Provide greater instructor training/resources to those who are teaching first-year students, including: (a) an automated email sent to instructors thanking them for their role in the students' first year, containing links to goals, common challenges/strategies, and additional resources; (b) access to a centralized repository for information on student resources (e.g., tutoring centers, mentoring, health, counseling services and related fee structures, syllabus statements, DRC); (c) resources on theories of student learning and transfer of knowledge across disciplines/courses as well as from school to non-school settings; (d) opportunities for instructors to learn instructional strategies for coping with the variability in the academic preparedness of students with respect to Math; (e) peer instructor shadowing opportunities and/or the practice of co-teaching FYS courses.	Committee experience/expertise, Gardner Student Survey, Learning Objective Survey, FYS Student Survey
4	Instructor-focused	Provide interactive opportunities for all instructors of first-year students (faculty, lecturers, GAs, etc.) to develop expertise, including: a. a specific training ("bootcamp") for all instructors of first-year students that includes workshopping and collaboration among instructors and academic advisors; b. opportunities to establish best practices that allow for instructors from units working well with first-year students to interact with those who are struggling; c. a possible exploration into the Honors College for best practices/resources in enhancing the academic success of low-CI students; d. coaching on increasing the relevance of course material to students' lives, prioritizing prompt feedback, and reaching out to students who are performing poorly; e. incentive structures that allow for a FYS course instruction course overload/release for those demonstrating a commitment to excellence and student success.	Gardner Student Survey, Learning Objective Survey

	Category	Recommendation	Source
5	Faculty-student interaction	<p>Increase focus on student and instructor interactions for first-year courses, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. encourage individualized attention for students (e.g., individual meetings, use of Academic Status Reports);</li> <li>b. provide opportunities for faculty and advisor interaction with students in both academic and non-academic/outside-of-class settings;</li> <li>c. reduce the gap between student and faculty perceptions of course academic expectations;</li> <li>d. reduce the use of undergraduate students and graduate student TAs as lead instructors in first-year courses if outcome data warrants.</li> </ul>	Gardner Student Survey, Gardner Faculty/Staff Survey, FYS Student Survey
6	University Resources	<p>Increase the amount/quality of coaching available to first-year students, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. examine/expand the seemingly successful first-year success coach/center model with first-year students;</li> <li>b. require students in FYS courses to meet with their first-year success coach at least twice during the semester;</li> <li>c. require first-year success coaches to become familiar with FYS course syllabi and course structure;</li> <li>d. encourage connection to the student's academic unit through mentoring or pairing up first-year students with upperclassmen in their chosen major.</li> </ul>	FYS Student Survey, Learning Objective Survey, Committee experience/expertise
7	Special Populations (low-CI and academically at-risk students)	Consider implementing college-wide policies that would assign either academic advisors or faculty to mentor low-CI or otherwise academically at-risk students (e.g., first generation college student, CAG students) so that outreach to these students is purposeful and consistently addressed across CLAS units.	Committee experience/expertise, Learning Objectives Survey
8	Special Populations (low-CI and academically at-risk students)	<p>Devote college programming resources to low-CI and academically at-risk students, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. allow faculty who are interested in working with these students to create paid positions for these students;</li> <li>b. develop specific FYS sections that focus on low-CI students or otherwise academically at-risk first-year students. Perhaps create a single integrated "success" course that combines content in the major-specific FYS, UNI 120, and Finance 123;</li> <li>c. expand the number of CLAS units that participate in the CLAS Early Start program, as well as the range of CI scores included (i.e., include 102 and below)</li> </ul>	Committee experience/expertise, Learning Objectives Survey



	Category	Recommendation	Source
9	Special Populations (international students and non-native English speakers)	<p>Increase our focus on first-year international students and non-native English speakers, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. review the support available to these students, particularly in the area of language use/acquisition;</li> <li>b. review admissions language requirements to ensure they are appropriately aligned with the level of English proficiency needed to succeed at ASU;</li> <li>c. provide faculty who are teaching these students with additional training, support, and resources to mitigate challenges due to language or cultural barriers.</li> </ul>	Committee experience/expertise, FYS Student Survey
10	Special Populations (residential hall first-year students)	Ensure that existing student feedback mechanisms (e.g., the ASU Connections Survey) are sufficiently reviewed, disseminated, and acted upon to provide adequate support to students with roommate issues and adjustment issues associated with out-of-state relocation.	FYS student survey