

**Distinctions in Reported Experience and Learning
between Participants and Non-Participants in the
First-Year Living/Learning Initiative**
as suggested by the
Spring 2000 College Student Experience Questionnaire

The First-Year Initiative Program

The recently launched First-Year Initiative (FYI) offers an enriched social and learning environment for those incoming undergraduates at UNC-CH interested in this new housing program. Participants find unique opportunities to interact with faculty and their peers via weekly dialogue groups that explore various issues in which the students have an invested interest, as well as providing opportunities for community service and various other group activities and special events that foster a familiar, comfortable, yet intellectually challenging arena for stimulating interaction.

Evaluating Possible First-Year Initiative Program Outcomes with the CSEQ

The College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ)¹ offers one possible tool with which to both assess this program and suggest the degree to which the program significantly enriches the experience of those who choose to participate. This questionnaire, completed during the spring of 2000 by a significant and representative sample of the first-year student body,² offers a variety of indices that may be useful to those faculty, administrators, and graduate mentors involved in overseeing the organizational aspects of the FYI program.

Program Impact on Student Interaction with Faculty

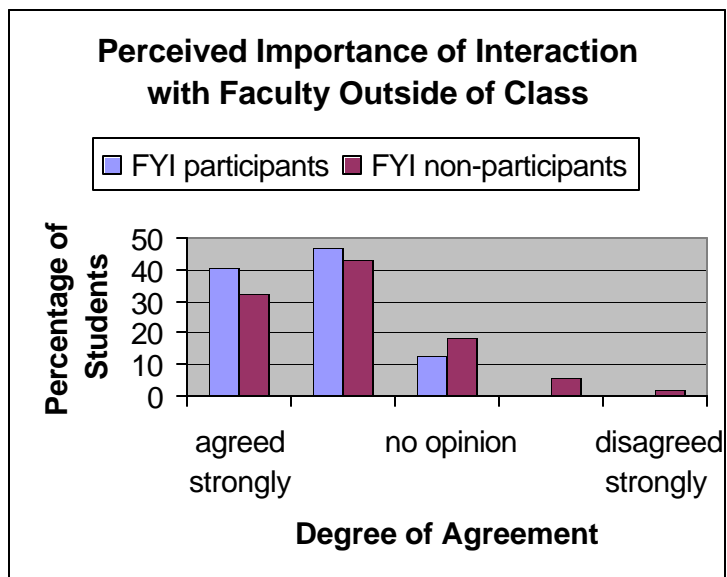
What the CSEQ reveals about interaction with faculty by participants in the FYI program appears quite heartening, as their levels of engagement with and comfort with professors appears

consistently greater—although at times by only small increments—than that of non-participants. 4.8% of participants in the FYI socialized with faculty outside of class “very often,” and 9.7% did so “often,” compared with slightly smaller informal interaction by non-participants, 2.4% and 5.8% respectively. (Let us keep in mind that responses here may refer to socialization with faculty teaching the students’ coursework, not faculty involved in the FYI program—thus the small percentages of interaction even amongst FYI participants.) Similarly, more participants (4.8% “very often” and 21% “often”) interacted with faculty in group settings outside of class than did non-participants (3.4% “very often” and 7.3% “often”). 40.3% of participants “agreed strongly” that such discussion of

issues of interest with faculty outside of class was important, 46.8% agreed somewhat, and 12.9% had no opinion.

None of the participants actively disagreed with the importance of such interaction. 31.2% of non-participants, by contrast, agreed strongly, 42.9% agreed somewhat,

18.6% had no opinion, 5.9% *disagreed* somewhat, and 1.2% *strongly* disagreed. A greater percentage of participants in FYI met with faculty to discuss campus groups and organizations (8.1% “very often” and 9.7% “often”) than that of non-participants (2.4% “very often” and 5.5% “often”). More holistic appraisals of faculty quality and accessibility revealed even greater distinctions. For instance, while the percentage of students who gave faculty the highest quality rating of “approachable” (or a 7 on a 7-point scale) differed little as a factor of FYI participation,



(13.1% of FYI participants, and 13.5% of non-participants), those who gave the second-highest rating differed substantially: Only 30.3% of non-participants gave faculty a rating of “6,” while 52.% of FYI participants awarded faculty such a score. While such data might suggest a stronger intrinsic affinity towards faculty on the part of the participants, it also likely reflects an appreciation of the extra opportunities for such interaction with faculty provided by the FYI program.

Program Impact on Intellectual Climate

The FYI program also works to shape and sustain a dynamic intellectual climate for participants, on which will inspire them to intellectual growth through engagement with their peers both in and outside the classroom, as well as through co-curricular opportunities. The classroom environment apparently proved a bit more of an interactive and creative site for learning in the case of the FYI participant. 46.8% of participants report contributing to class discussions “very often” (41.9% “often”), compared with 38.3% of non-participants reporting “very often,” and 34.4% reporting “often.” 22.6% of participants made judgements about the quality of information “very often,” and 30.6% “often,” compared with 14% and 28.1% of non-participants, respectively. Participants in the FYI program were also more likely to serve as conduits for the flow of information and knowledge into and out of the classroom. 24.2% of participants applied class material to other areas “very often” (41.9% “often), compared with non-participants, 20.8% of whom reported doing so “very often,” 33.9% “often.” And moving in the other direction, 27.4% of participants reported bringing information from other areas into the classroom “very often” (53.2% “often”), compared with 23.1% of non-participants who did so “very often,” and only 35% who did so “often.”

Though the distinction between participants and non-participants was virtually non-existent when it came to the frequency of meeting students for discussion outside of class, a clear divide again emerged in matters of more formal co-curricular activities. Participants in the FYI were more likely to attend cultural or social events (11.3% “very often,” 43.5% “often,” compared with 9.7% “very often” and only 23.3% “often” for non-participants), and chose somewhat more frequently to attend lectures or panel discussions (participants=4.8% “very often” and 22.6% “often,” as

opposed to 6.7% “very often” but

only 11.9% “often”). Participants

chose to engage in planned student

activities more frequently as well:

9.7% engaged in student activities

for 16 hours or more per week,

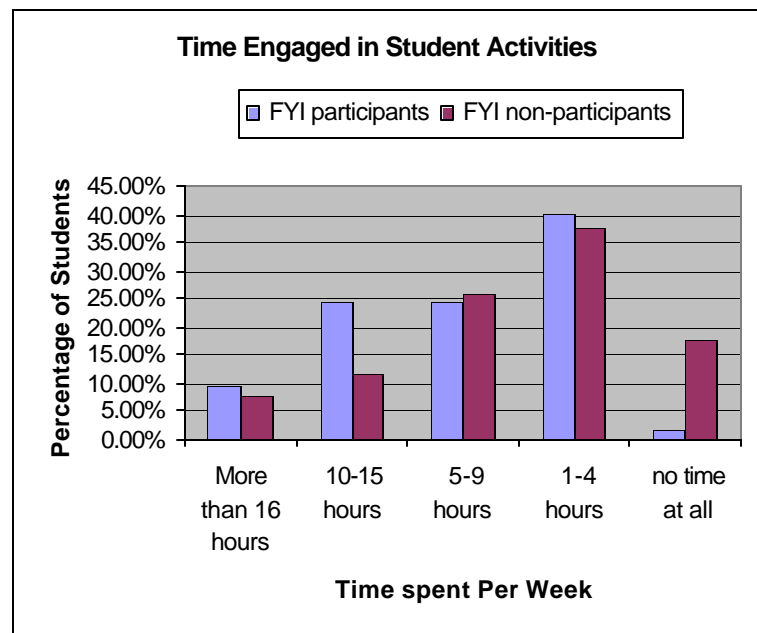
24.2% for 10-15 hours, 24.2% again

for 5-9 hours, 40.3% for 1-4 hours,

and 1.6% for no time at all. Non-participants spent a visually smaller amount of time involved in

such activities: 7.7% were involved 16 or more hours per week, 11.4% for 10-15 hours, 25.7%

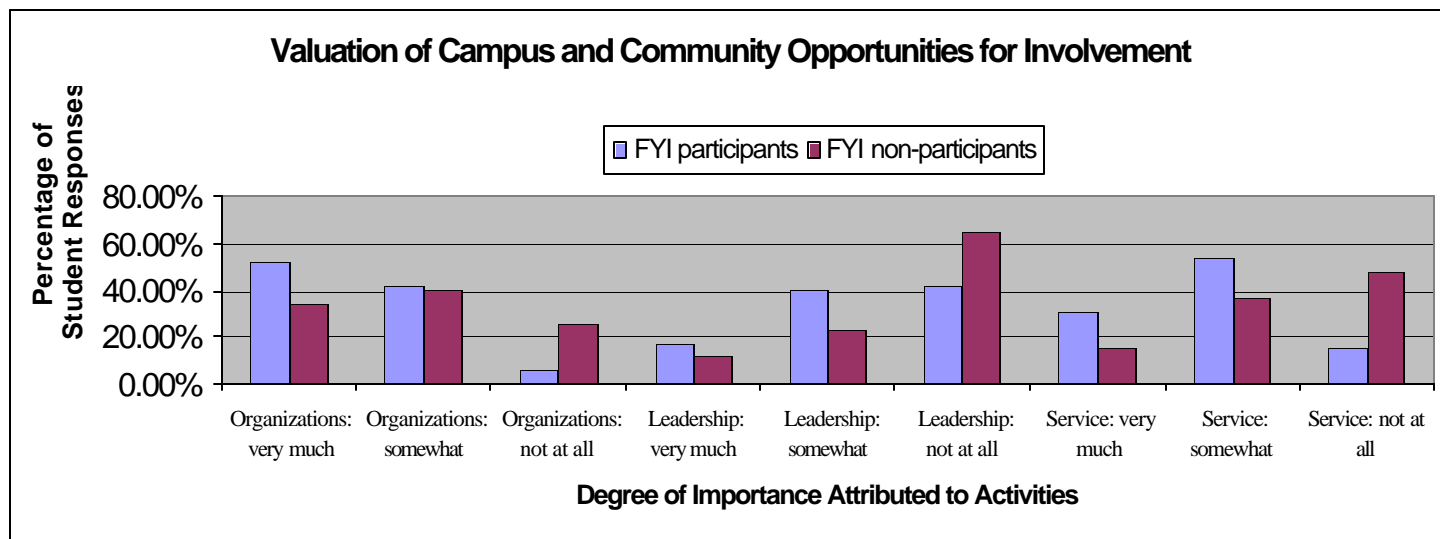
for 5-9 hours, 37.6% for 1-4 hours, and 17.7% spent no time whatsoever so engaged.



Participation in Campus Organizations

FYI participants generally proved more involved in campus organizations, 61.3% attending meetings for such organizations “very often” (19.4% “often”), while only 31.4% of non-participants did so “very often” (20% “often”). More FYI participants felt such campus

clubs and organizations were an integral part of their first-year educational experience (participants = 51.6% “very much so,” 41.9% “somewhat,” and 6.5% “not at all,” compared with 34.1% “very much so,” 40.3% “somewhat,” and 25.6% “not at all” for non-participants). 38.7% of participants worked on campus committees or organizations “very often” (17.7% “often”), while only 15.7% of non-participants did so “very often” (12.5% “often”). While participation in *off*-campus committees or organizations revealed virtually no difference between the two groups, the degree to which FYI participants *valued* leadership positions did in fact separate them from non-participants. 17.7% of participants felt serving in a leadership position contributed to their educational experience “very much” (40.3% “somewhat” and 41.9% “not at all”), while 12.1% of non-participants valued such leadership positions “very much” (only 23.0% “somewhat” and a large 65.0% “not at all”). 30.6% of participants valued participating in community service as a contribution to their educational experience “very much” (53.2%



“somewhat,” 16.1% “not at all”), in contrast to non-participants, only 15.6% of whom valued such service “very much” (36.5% “somewhat” and 47.9% “not at all”). One wonders whether the differences in *perception* of such various opportunities between participants and non-

participants is a product of the FYI program or, rather, a pre-existing inclination that would spark initial interest in such a program.

Possible Program Promotion of Cultural Diversity

Our closing observation regards the difference between FYI participants and non-participants when it comes to familiarity with those from different backgrounds and situations.

43.5% of FYI participants, for instance, reported that they were acquainted “very often” with

students of different races than

their own (40.3% “often”),

compared with 33.2% of non-

participants (36.6% “often”).

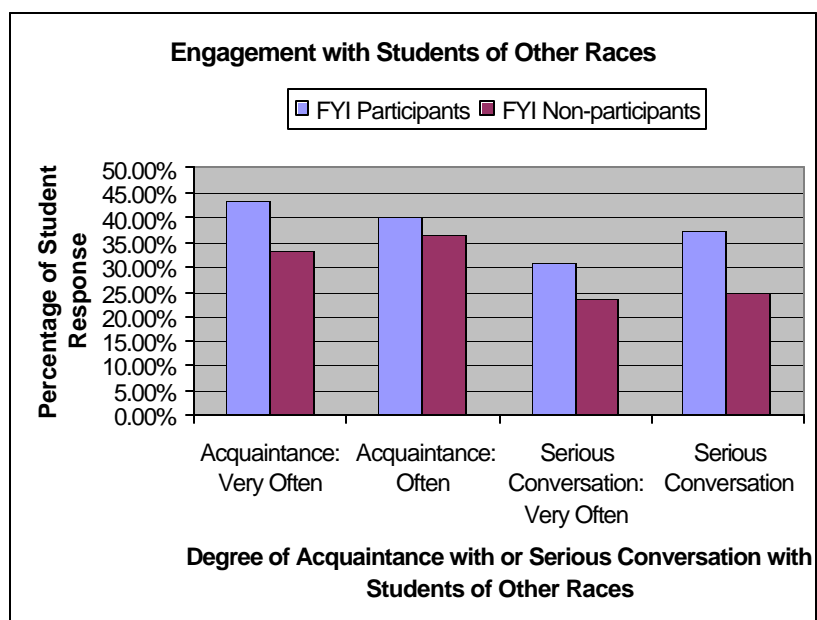
And they more often engaged

in serious discussions with

such individuals: 30.6% of

participants found themselves

in such serious conversation



“very often” (37.1% “often”), compared with 23.5% of non-participants (25.0% “often”).

Participants were also more often acquainted with students from different countries (24.2% “very often,” 22.6% “often”) than were non-participants (14.8% “very often,” 19.7% “often”), as well

as with students holding very different values (33.9% “very often,” 32.3% “often,” compared

with 24.9% “very often” and 30.0% “often” among non-participants). Topics such as different

lifestyles, customs, or religions were more likely to come up among FYI participants as well

(37.1% “very often” and 43.5% “often” compared with 31.0% “very often” and 40.4% “often”).

Given what appears a richer appreciation of and engagement with the campus community at UNC-CH—perhaps to some degree a result of the FYI program—it comes as little surprise that participants in the First-Year Initiative award our school a higher appraisal than do non-participants. 67.7% of participants cite an “enthusiastic” appreciation (25.8% report merely that they “like it”), while of non-participants, a somewhat smaller 54.6% were “enthusiastic,” (36.% “like it”). Apparently, participants also consider their peers more amiable in general. Regarding the quality of relationships formed with other students, 43.5% of participants gave the top rating of “7” as “friendly” (with 29% giving a slightly lower rating of “6”), compared with a much lower 26% of non-participants who rated other students as “friendly” (with 35.2% reporting a “6”).

Such findings surely sketch quite a flattering portrait of the First Year Initiative and its probable impact on our students here at UNC-CH; those desiring more definitive conclusions concerning the program’s impact might consider in the future measuring participants along these many variables both at the program’s beginning and after its completion, including in the latter assessment additional questions that ask students to differentiate directly between the impact of this program and that of other programs and formative experiences on campus.

Respectfully Submitted:

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Endnotes

¹ In an effort to measure and promote learning in and outside the classroom on campuses across the country, Dr. Kuh helped develop *The College Student Experience Questionnaire* (CSEQ), a questionnaire which has played an important role at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since it was first piloted here with the graduating class of 1999. This tool provides faculty, administration, and the student body with salient information about the student populace, serving as a measure of:

the quality of effort students expend in using resources provided for their learning, aspects of the college environment that foster such effort, and the progress (gains) students make in a variety of desirable outcomes of college. (Fourth Edition, 1998)

The CSEQ is generally administered in the spring when 60-75% of the school's academic calendar has passed, thus providing a rather inclusive picture of student experience in a given year. In addition to general demographic information, such a picture captures student perception of the college environment, self-reported effort inside and outside the classroom, and measures of student gains in such academic arenas as the humanities, science and technology, and the social sciences, as well as providing an evaluation of personal gains in social competence and personal development.

² In the spring of 2000, first year undergraduate students at UNC-CH were invited to complete the CSEQ on the web. As we were unable to mandate completion of the instrument, the web site option helped insure that at least a strong sampling of students would complete the questionnaire. Comparing the demographic information of our sample to that of the entire first year student body, as recorded in the University's annual *Profile of Enrolled Students*, we find that, while no perfect match, the sample (25%) does seem rather representative of the population for which it stands. The racial breakdowns in each group, for instance, are quite similar.

According to the University's profile, the Class of 2003 described itself as 79% “white,” 10% “black,” and 11% “other,” and the distribution for our CSEQ sample was 85% “white,” 8% “black,” and 7% “other.” While less of a match, the gender distribution in our sample reflects the same trend that has existed at UNC-CH for decades, a female majority. In the entire *undergraduate* student body, one finds 61% female and 39% male, while the breakdown of those who filled out the CSEQ is 75% female and 25% male. While 30% of the Class of 2003 took a First Year seminar, 34% of our sample participated in such a class. A surprisingly close match was found when considering participation in the First Year Initiative (FYI) Living/Learning Program. 7.4% of the Class of 2003 participated in the initiative, matching almost exactly the 7.5% of our sample reporting participation in the program.

References

Kuh, George D., John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt, & Associates. “Information for Prospective

Users.” College Student Experiences Questionnaire. 4th edition. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1998.