

# Bryant College

## The Institution

Bryant College, founded in 1863, is a private, independent college located in Smithfield, Rhode Island, 12 miles northwest of Providence. Bryant is a four-year coeducational institution with 2,889 full-time and 247 part-time undergraduates. In 2003, Bryant undergraduates came from 31 states and 31 countries. Most students are residential with only 16% of the population commuting. The undergraduate student body is 60% male and 40% female. The entering first-year students in fall 2003 were 56% male and 44% female. Of those students, 87% were White, 7% were minorities (2.4% Hispanic, 1.9% African American, 1.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.3% Native American, and 1.1% other), 1% were non-resident aliens, and 5% did not report their ethnicity.

## The Seminar

Bryant's first-year seminar is entitled *Foundations for Learning (FFL)*. Bryant has had some type of non-credit first-year experience seminar for eight years. The first was a non-credit, extended orientation program called "Avenues to Success in College," designed as a retention initiative. Two years later, another first-year experience seminar was implemented. This iteration, the "First-Year Success Program" attempted to aid retention by including a wider representation of college faculty and staff instructors. This non-credit course was mandatory for students, but students could drop out at any time without repercussions. Student life and academics were the main content. The most recent iteration, FFL, has only been in existence for two years as a required, one-credit course for *all* full-time, first-year students. FFL is an academic seminar with generally uniform content across sections and attempts to provide a more academically rigorous experience for students, as requested by faculty. Students are required to take the course during their first semester. Approximately 40 sections are offered with a maximum enrollment of 20 students. Typically, tenure-track faculty teach one third of the sections, and a combination of academic and student affairs administrators teach the remaining sections.

## Institution Profile:

Smithfield, RI

Private, Four-Year

Academic w/Uniform

Content

This course is designed to help first-year students become engaged members of the Bryant academic community. The course encourages students to take responsibility for their education by focusing on the process of learning how to learn and cultivating the habits of mind necessary for lifelong achievement and success. Students are encouraged to link critical thinking with writing and discussion from intellectual, social, and emotional perspectives. Students are asked to reflect on their past, present, and future in an effort to develop their own perspectives on learning and success.

The primary course goals focus on helping students to take responsibility for their education by:

- Understanding the importance of being actively involved in the educational process
- Developing cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities
- Developing a fuller understanding of a range of learning and study strategies
- Learning how planning and prioritizing impact upon academic success
- Developing self-concept, including an awareness of health and wellness issues
- Developing communication skills, including those related to collaboration and leadership
- Engaging in scholarly activities such as group discussion, conducting research, and synthesizing materials
- Understanding the importance of respecting diversity as a member of the Bryant community and as a citizen of the world

## **Research Design**

Three self-report surveys were conducted and Student Instructional Report (SIR) II data was collected during the fall 2003 semester, and a focus group was conducted during the spring 2004 semester to gauge faculty and student perceptions of the first-year seminar, FFL. For brevity's sake, the focus here is on the end-of-semester student survey. The goal of the assessment was to determine whether curriculum changes implemented in fall 2003 were working toward achieving course goals. Students responded to eight Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions. The Likert-scale questions corresponded to the course goals; students indicated the extent to which the course met each goal. The open-ended questions asked students to consider what they would or would not change about FFL and what advice they would give next year's incoming students regarding college and/or FFL.

## Findings

### *Self-Report Survey Data*

Students were generally positive when asked whether FFL course objectives were met. Table 1 summarizes their responses. Students seemed to feel most strongly that the course had helped them learn that planning and prioritizing impact upon academic success.

Table 1  
*Meeting Course Objectives (N = 627)*

	SA		N		SD		Avg
	1	2	3	4	5	no ans.	
1. FFL has helped me understand the importance of being actively involved in my educational process.	107 17%	229 37%	159 25%	77 12%	54 9%		2.58
2. FFL has helped me develop my cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities (i.e., those skills involved in the self-regulation of learning).	57 9%	213 34%	204 33%	84 14%	63 10%		2.78
3. FFL has helped me develop a fuller understanding of a range of learning and study strategies.	90 14%	238 38%	160 26%	84 14%	63 10%	1	2.71
4. FFL has helped me learn how planning and prioritizing impact upon academic success.	121 19%	246 39%	142 23%	64 10%	53 9%	1	2.49
5. FFL has helped me develop self-concept, including an awareness of health and wellness issues.	73 12%	176 28%	202 32%	102 16%	79 12%		2.93
6. FFL has helped me develop communication skills, including those related to collaboration and leadership.	49 8%	155 25%	224 36%	109 17%	86 14%	1	3.03
7. FFL has helped me engage in scholarly activities such as group discussion, conducting research, and synthesizing materials.	59 10%	171 27%	211 34%	108 17%	74 12%		2.93
8. FFL has helped me understand the importance of respecting diversity as a member of the Bryant community and as a citizen of the world.	98 16%	201 32%	175 28%	90 14%	68 10%		2.75

### *Student Instructional Report (SIR) II Data*

Students' responses on the Student Instructional Report (SIR) forms were generally positive. The overall mean rating course organization and planning for all 33 instructors was 4.12 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being very effective. The overall mean for communication was nearly identical at 4.13. The highest mean of 4.41 was reported for faculty/student interaction, not surprising for such a course. Students rated assignments, exams, and grading a 3.89. The two remaining scores were the lowest: course outcomes at 2.79 and student effort and involvement at 2.50. These scores fell within the moderate to somewhat ineffective range.

### *Focus Group Data*

In spring 2004, approximately 180 out of 773 first-year students participated in focus groups in an effort to assess students' overall first-year experience with the institution. The questions focused on three main areas of the students' experience: (a) academics, (b) campus culture, and (c) facilities. Responses regarding *FFL 101* were elicited during the discussions on academics.

In general, first-year students indicated that they felt challenged by the curriculum, experienced positive interactions with faculty and staff, and felt they benefited from the learning assistance programs available to them on campus. Students tended to be more critical when discussing specific courses. Feedback about *FFL 101* seemed to be mixed: approximately half of the sample articulated that they felt the course was extremely valuable, though an equal number indicated "it did not help them."

## **Implications**

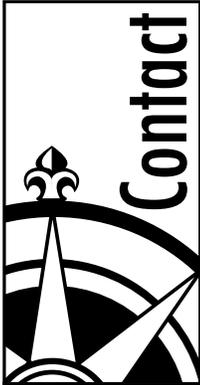
A majority of students responded on the self-report and SIR surveys that they felt course objectives were being met. They felt, for example, that *FFL* had helped them be more involved in their educational process (54% agreed or strongly agreed, while 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed) and understand how planning and prioritizing impact upon their academic success (58% agreed or strongly agreed, while 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Approximately half the participants in focus groups felt that the course was not helpful, while the written assessment showed that approximately 9% of the students felt they were not helped or supported by the course. The discrepancy in the two self-report measures could be explained by the nature of the reporting mechanisms and the difference in sample sizes. In the focus groups, students ( $N = 180$ ) were asked to verbally express feedback in front of their

peers, which may have resulted in socially acceptable responses. Students may not have felt comfortable admitting the extent to which the course helped them with the transition from high school to college. On the written assessments, students ( $N = 627$ ) were free to indicate their responses anonymously and perhaps felt more able to be candid as a result.

It is important to note that each mechanism used to solicit students' feedback was implemented early on in their academic career. Students may not have had the opportunity to accurately assess whether, for example, the course had helped them develop cognitive and metacognitive abilities. One indication of this is the response of neutral in the course objectives portion of the self-report survey. For each objective, between  $1/4$  and  $1/3$  of students responded "neutral," indicating that perhaps they hadn't had the time to assess each area. More long-term surveys could supplement this early assessment in order to gauge student perception more effectively.

These findings demonstrate the importance of conducting systematic research to gauge student perceptions. Many college campuses are still in the process of introducing first-year experience courses into their curricula. The tendency is to rely on student anecdotal feedback and campus musings to determine the effectiveness of these new courses. This research suggests that more rigorous assessment is critical to obtain an accurate indication of course effectiveness.

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