

Helping to Bring the Reality of University Level Learning to First Year Students

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A review of some of the literature on teaching first year students confirms what we've all seen in working with new college students. Students come to college with many perceptions that can hinder their success. While many of these students will eventually discover and correct their misconceptions on their own, a university can improve student success by helping students early on in their college careers to understand their role in the learning process and help them identify how to be effective learners. Many universities today offer some type of special course for first year students to help them to both adjust to university life and establish a strong foundation for becoming university level scholars. In Fall 2002, San Jose State will be among these universities when the MUSE (Metropolitan University Scholar's Experience) seminar program begins. A review of some of the perceptions of new college students offers a glimpse into how a seminar program focused on exposing first year students to the reality of university level learning can increase the benefits they will obtain from their studies and thus, help them to make their experience more rewarding.

Frosh Perceptions of Learning

Some of the perceptions of first year students that may hinder their potential to maximize their university learning experience include the following.¹

- ◆ School doesn't relate to reality.
- ◆ A subject matter can be learned in a single course (and they may have already had that course in high school).
- ◆ Education is the work of the teacher.
- ◆ Teachers are good if they give "good notes."
- ◆ Studying is something you do before an exam.
- ◆ Writing and other assignments are not for learning, but for a grade.
- ◆ Professors are more interesting than the subject matter.
- ◆ Understanding and thinking means learning and remembering the thoughts of others (such as the professor or author of the textbook).

Experts have described seminars as "one of the most effective and proven ways ... to enhance freshman success."² If a program can help first year students get a better perception of the reality of university level study – past the perceptions listed above, the students should enjoy greater success and the learning environment should be enhanced for the benefit of both students and professors.

¹ This list is derived from readings in two excellent books about teaching first year students: (1) Robert Leamson, *Thinking About Teaching and Learning – Developing Habits of Learning with First Year College and University Students*, Stylus Publishing, 1999; and (2) Bette LaSere Erickson and Diane Weltner Strommer, *Teaching College Freshmen*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991.

² M. Lee Upcraft and John N. Gardner, *The Freshman Year Experience*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989, page xv.

Working with the Perceptions to Help Improve Student Learning

If new students tend to be more focused on the professor than what he or she is teaching, what happens when the professor is talking about a relatively narrow topic about which he or she is passionate? Students are likely to be drawn in by that excitement and be more interested. Couple this excitement with a small class size (about 15 students), and the professor has increased opportunities to get the students engaged in talking about the subject matter. Asking questions to get students focused on new ways to view an issue or process, having students investigate various aspects of the subject matter on their own and to discuss their findings with their fellow students can help to get them more actively engaged in the learning process. Combine this with activities and discussion about learning styles, making notes (rather than taking them), and learning through class discussions (rather than only lectures) will help students to see their role in the learning process. Also, a small class size where active learning is stressed will better allow for students to interact with their professor and fellow students and create a learning environment that will enable students to get a good perspective on the various ways that learning occurs. Basically, a seminar designed to help students transition to university level study will better enable them to see their responsibility for contributing to their own learning, and to see themselves as capable of thinking through problems and identifying new areas to explore. In depth exploration of a narrow subject matter will also help students to see that there is more to learn about anything beyond a single semester course and that their university studies will help them develop skills for further study and investigation of any area within a broad subject matter. In addition, doing well in such a course will help students feel they have transitioned to college and that they belong there.

One perception of students that doesn't need correction, but instead needs to be considered in helping students adjust to university life, is that most students view success in college as meaning not only doing well academically, but also socially - making friends and having fun.³ Helping students to identify ways for them to succeed academically and socially, along with helping them to understand their role as learners and to develop realistic expectations of university life should increase their chances of success.

More about the MUSE Seminar Program

MUSE expands our current programs for first year students, such as the "Becoming a Master Student" orientation and Frosh 101 programs, to further help these students adjust to university life and be better students. The MUSE program will include not only the seminar courses, but also a peer mentor program. Junior and senior students will be selected and trained to assist students with general issues of dealing with life on campus. Peer mentors will also offer assistance with study skills and use of campus resources. Finally, a series of workshops will be available to provide guidance on everything from how to select a major, reading a syllabus, and student rights and responsibilities to meeting people on campus, including our president and athletic coaches.

The MUSE seminar program is designed to enhance our undergraduate program and help our frosh transition to university level study and SJSU. MUSE is open to all incoming students beginning their first year of college. These courses will be designed to qualify for lower-division GE other than Basic Skills. The courses are not intended to replace introduction to the university/major and study skills courses, such as Science 2, Engineering 10 or Business 10. Courses will emphasize how to view topics and issues from different perspectives, how to gain an understanding of a subject matter, improvement of critical thinking skills and information competencies, critical writing and reading skills, interaction among students, and strategies to help students assess their own learning and learning styles. The MUSE seminar program provides an opportunity for students to become immediately engaged in the intellectual and social activities of university life. Studies have shown that the first six weeks of the freshman year is the

³ *Teaching College Freshmen, supra*, page 26.

“critical determinant of ultimate graduation.”⁴ MUSE is expected not only to increase retention, but to also help the participants to be better students.

Our goal is to start Fall 2002 with 100 MUSE courses, which would serve about half of our incoming frosh class. For scheduling purposes, faculty interested in teaching a MUSE seminar need to sign up by early November 2001. Any faculty member from any college who is interested in creating a course around a topic on which he or she is passionate and who is eager to work closely with a small group of first year students to help them become university scholars should consider teaching a MUSE course. It is your willingness to create a course, work closely with the students and your fellow MUSE faculty that is most important in this program. You don't need experience teaching GE courses or teaching first-year students (assistance will be provided). For more information on MUSE and how to get involved in teaching a course or leading a workshop, please visit <http://www.sjsu.edu/muse/>.

⁴ *Teaching College Freshmen, supra*, page 44.