

# Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

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## The Institution

Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is a large, urban, public university located in Indiana’s state capital. In 2015, IUPUI had a student enrollment of approximately 30,000, including 22,000 undergraduates and 5,446 first-year students. Roughly 88% of IUPUI students are in-state, 56% are female, 17% are students of color, and 12% are international students. The majority of first-year students at IUPUI (60%) commute to campus, and about 40% are Federal Pell Grant recipients. For 13 consecutive years, IUPUI has been recognized by *U.S. News and World Report* (2015a, 2015b) for its efforts, including learning communities and first-year experience programs, which help ensure a positive collegiate experience for entering students and other undergraduates.

## Description of the Seminar

First-year seminars (FYSs) at IUPUI are semester-based, credit-bearing classes aimed at providing new students with the tools they need to succeed in college. FYSs are offered in multiple formats, including themed learning communities (TLCs), linked learning communities, free-standing seminars, and classes connected to the Summer Bridge program. The number of credits attached to FYS varies from one to two depending on the format, and sections are offered by both degree-granting schools as well as University College, which holds classes for exploratory students and pre-health professions majors. The mission of the FYS is to support entering students in making a successful transition into the life and community of IUPUI and enhance rates of retention and persistence by providing early academic and social support. All sections of the FYS are taught by a team consisting of a faculty or staff instructor, academic advisor, and student peer mentor.

This case examines the FYS offered by University College. The FYS is a required component of IUPUI degree programs, which all incoming students with 17 or fewer credit hours must take during their first semester of college. All sections share common goals and learning outcomes; however, individual instructional teams may develop, emphasize, and assess these differently:

- **Goal 1: Belonging**—Students will connect with peers and instructional team members; identify individuals who can provide a personal support network; become familiar with campus programs and resources related to academic, professional, and social development.
- **Goal 2: Transitioning**—Students will identify strategies to increase self-awareness and personal responsibility; explore and develop academic success skills, such as information literacy and critical thinking; and recognize differences in the human experience and the ways those differences enrich the academic learning environment.
- **Goal 3: Planning**—Students will practice academic and personal time management techniques; explore and plan for majors, minors, and careers; and identify areas of cocurricular involvement and engaged learning that enrich academic pursuits and goals.

University College uses an electronic personal development plan (ePDP) to enhance the implementation of educationally effective practices in the seminar. ePDP is a tool for helping students engage in a process that facilitates greater understanding of who they are and enables them to set meaningful goals. Students create curricular and cocurricular plans while developing the sense of agency that will lead them toward achievement of their goals. The outcome of the ePDP is a personalized eportfolio that is open to revision and re-evaluation throughout the college experience. Students can build on the work they do in the FYS to continuously develop an eportfolio that integrates and makes visible their in- and out-of-class learning. This pedagogical tool, which supports seminar Goal 3—Planning, helps students make meaning of their college experience.

The ePDP includes five modules with proposed prompts, all of which can be adopted or adapted as faculty see fit:

- Landing Page: Snapshot of Who I Am
- About Me: Developing Identity
- My Academics: Shaping Learning and Experiences
- My Career: Planning for the Future
- My Involvement and Impact: Documenting and Showcasing Involvement

On the Landing Page, students may provide an introduction to who they are in a creative and engaging way, such as a quote, photo, short video, word cloud, or piece of art. The About Me section is the students' opportunity to introduce themselves and describe key aspects of their identity, including their strengths, values, beliefs, and personal mission. This section may contain multiple sub-pages with supporting artifacts from class activities that are synthesized into their introduction at the end of the semester. The My Academics section is used for academic planning and may include the students' two- or four-year plans as well as some research and reflection on their chosen major. The My Career section includes artifacts from class activities where students explore their strengths and interests and make connections between those and possible majors and careers. Finally, the My Involvement and Impact section captures students' experiences on and off campus, including their connections to IUPUI and the Indianapolis community. Each section is designed to be completed in a manner that, when read together, provides an integrated and cohesive narrative about students' goals and accomplishments.

### ***Educationally Effective Practices***

***Periodic and structured opportunities for reflection and integration.*** Within ePDP, students are encouraged to integrate and document in- and out-of-class learning, engage in academic and career planning, and develop a sense of meaning within themselves, their college experiences, and their lives beyond college. Through reflective assignments, such as a classroom activity or discussion followed by structured reflection prompts, students are guided toward a deeper understanding of who they are and where they are going.

***Relevance through real-world application.*** By creating a portfolio that can be built upon beyond the FYS, students begin to connect their in-class experiences to longer term academic and career goals. Prompts in the My Career module lead students through exercises, such as résumé and cover letter writing, researching career alternatives, and creating concrete action steps for career planning—all of which are designed to help students better understand the progression from academics to careers and to begin to make progress toward career goals. The My Involvement and Impact module allows students to plan for and begin to engage in recognized high-impact educational experiences, such as service-learning, international learning opportunities, and undergraduate research, while reflecting on the role of those experiences in their overall college experience.

***Frequent and constructive feedback.*** Students typically tackle modules of the ePDP as point-bearing assignments, allowing them multiple opportunities to receive feedback on specific elements of their portfolio during its creation. Some sections incorporate feedback not only from the instructor but also from the academic advisor and/or student peer mentor. Students often benefit from feedback from classmates in the form of class discussion, as some instructors use ePDP prompts as starting points for reflective thinking. For example, one instructor begins a class discussion by asking, "Who remembers the exact moment when you decided you were going to attend college?" and uses that discussion starter to explore educational aspirations. Another instructor structures the FYS course using the ePDP,

with each class activity, artifact, and reflection becoming part of the eportfolio. Students build sections of the ePDP as the semester progresses, using peer review to step back and consider the ePDP as a whole, and finish the semester with final reflections and presentations that synthesize their learning.

**Public demonstration of competence.** This educationally effective practice is sometimes difficult to capture in the FYS. When implemented holistically, the ePDP provides a framework to situate much of the content of the seminar, culminating in a product that allows students to showcase artifacts of their learning, goals and plans, and academic and cocurricular accomplishments. Most faculty help students create a web-based portfolio that can be shared electronically, though some ask students to display their portfolios in binders or another physical format. One FYS instructional team requires students to present elements of their ePDPs during a public event focused on multicultural awareness and diversity; another asks students to share aspects of their ePDPs through in-class presentations. Finally, all students are invited to submit their ePDP work to an annual campuswide ePortfolio Showcase, which is open to undergraduates in all stages of their academic program as well as to graduate and professional students. The event accepts up to 20 eportfolios and awards a top prize for student submissions in the first-year experience category. Students accepted into the showcase present their eportfolios and engage in discussion with attendees. In all these cases, the ePDP creates a framework in which student learning can be made visible and meaningful.

## Discussion

A comprehensive evaluation of the ePDP in FYSs took place in fall 2010 and included sections offered by both University College and the degree-granting schools. Results indicated that students participating in sections that incorporated the ePDP had significantly higher fall GPAs (2.95 in ePDP vs. 2.79 in non-ePDP sections) and one-year retention rates (80% in ePDP vs. 74% in non-ePDP sections), even after adjusting for high school GPA, SAT score, gender, income level, and admit date.

In subsequent years, the positive effects of the ePDP on students' levels of academic success and persistence were not sustained. Possible reasons for this shift include the adoption of the ePDP platform across FYS sections campus-wide; a shift away from mandatory multiday training on ePDP technology and pedagogy for all participating faculty; and increased flexibility in options for implementation, resulting in less uniformity in the ways and the extent to which the ePDP was used across sections.

In fall 2012, students participating in University College FYS sections who completed all five modules of the ePDP had significantly higher mean scores on student success and self-reported learning outcomes than students who did not complete ePDPs. Means were calculated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *no gain/strongly disagree* and 5 = *great gain/strongly agree*). Students who completed ePDPs were more likely than those who did not to note gains in the following areas (ePDP vs. non-ePDP, respectively):

- using reflective writing to understand their experiences (3.93 vs. 3.46),
- adjusting to college (4.31 vs. 3.82),
- successfully transitioning to IUPUI (4.22 vs. 3.69),
- deciding on a major or future career (4.15 vs. 3.54),
- understanding self (4.38 vs. 3.79), and
- understanding motivations for attending college (4.34 vs. 3.81).

## Implications

Data suggest that although the ePDP has the potential to impact retention and GPA positively when fully and consistently implemented in the FYS, the effects may be diluted when faculty are not fully versed in the pedagogy or are not fully invested in using the portfolio. Currently, faculty are encouraged (but not required) to attend a short training session prior to implementation of the ePDP in their sections. Although they are required to use the ePDP in some respect in their classroom, they are free to incorporate as many or as few of the modules as they want, customizing the prompts as they see fit. Some faculty reduce the ePDP to an independent assignment or two, whereas others use it to create a fully integrated framework to which students can connect much (or all) of their work in the FYS.

To take full advantage of the ePDP's potential to engage students in educationally effective practices in the FYS classroom, it seems evident that more in-depth and consistent faculty development and training is necessary. Incorporating an integrative portfolio into the typical FYS pedagogy is a new concept to many instructors, and without proper guidance, training opportunities, and ongoing resources and support, the initiative runs the risk of being reduced to yet another curricular requirement that faculty are forced to incorporate into an already-packed semester. Instructors must be provided with the tools and knowledge to fully implement the ePDP as it was conceived—as an integrative framework that brings together the various components of the FYS in a meaningful and relevant way.

Likewise, without clear guidelines related to the extent to which the ePDP is implemented from section to section, we are likely to continue to see uneven results. To reach the full potential of the ePDP in FYSs, more guidelines regarding the number of modules covered from section to section and the ways in which those modules are incorporated into the curriculum are necessary, while preserving some degree of flexibility and creativity among the instructional teams.

The ePDP is clearly a useful tool for ensuring high-impact delivery of FYS content, incorporating frequent and constructive feedback; multiple, structured opportunities for reflection and integration; relevance through real-world applications; and public demonstration of competence. Some fine-tuning of its implementation moving ahead, both in the area of faculty development and support and curricular guidelines, will serve to enhance the impact of the FYS program on the IUPUI campus.

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Cite as:

Skipper, T. L. (2017). *What makes the first-year seminar high impact? An exploration of effective educational practices.* (Research Reports No. 7). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.

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ISBN: 978-1-942072-01-0

Published by:

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition

University of South Carolina

1728 College Street, Columbia, SC 29208

[www.sc.edu/fye](http://www.sc.edu/fye)

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Production Staff for the National Resource Center:

Project Manager: Tracy L. Skipper, Assistant Director for Publications

Cover Design: Allison Minsk, Graphic Artist

Design and Production: Joey Hilton, Graphic Artist

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Skipper, Tracy L. (Tracy Lynn)

Title: What makes the first-year seminar high impact? : an exploration of effective educational practices / Tracy L. Skipper, editor.

Description: Columbia, SC : University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the first-year experience & students in transition, 2017. |

Series: Research report on college transitions ; no. 7 | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016045388 | ISBN 9781942072010 (print)

Subjects: LCSH: Seminars. | College teaching.

Classification: LCC LB2393.5.W53 2017 | DDC 378.1/77--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016045388>