



ISSUE BRIEF

First-Year Seminar Self-Assessment Tool for Supporting Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Morgan State University

Chrstine Harrington
Michael Sparrow
Karen Irving

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Our Why: Students from Low-Income Backgrounds Have Low College Completion Rates

Students from low-income backgrounds comprise almost a third of college enrollment, but many colleges are ill-prepared to support this significant population of students well. This misalignment between the unique needs of students from low-income backgrounds and the strategies colleges use to support incoming students leads to unacceptably low persistence and graduation rates compared to their better-resourced peers. In fact, Pell Grant recipients had 7.8-14.2 percent lower completion rates than their better-resourced peers.¹

Our Focus: The First-Year Seminar

First-Year Experience seminars (FYS) are a high-impact practice that are offered at most institutions. Based on recent national survey data, 77 percent of colleges and universities in the United States offer a first-year seminar.² Rather than adding services to support students from low-income backgrounds, we wanted to help institutions strengthen existing practices. We believed that assessing and improving the FYS would be an excellent, systemic way to support large numbers of incoming students from low-income backgrounds.

¹ David Nguyen, "Low-Income Students Thriving in Postsecondary Educational Environments," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 16, no. 4 (2023): 497-507, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2022-12886-001>.

² Ashley Mowreader, "Survey: Half of First-Year Seminars Focus on Academics, Student Success," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 26 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/academic-life/2024/02/26/academic-success-priority-first-year-seminars>.

Our Goal: Develop a First-Year Seminar Self-Assessment Tool

We wanted to develop a tool that first-year seminar directors and their teams could use to engage in a self-assessment and reflection process about how well their first-year seminar course was supporting students from low-income backgrounds. We hoped that engaging in this process would help institutions determine the course strengths and areas for improvement.

Our Approach: Using Design Thinking to Enhance the First-Year Seminar Self-Assessment Tool

We wanted to rely not only on the literature but also on the expertise of practitioners in the field as we sought to understand how colleges can better support students from low-income backgrounds in the first year of college. We believed that practitioner perspectives from the field were critical because those working with students from low-income backgrounds in the first year have a strong understanding of the challenges they face and how a first-year seminar could best support these students during their transition to college.

Because we believed gaining user perspectives would strengthen the tool, we opted to use a design thinking process. Design thinking involves five stages: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.³ At conferences, we listened and empathized with practitioners around the challenges they faced and then defined the problem that students from low-income backgrounds have lower retention and completion rates than their peers.

³ "An Introduction to Design Thinking Process Guide," *Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford*, accessed April 2 2025, <https://web.stanford.edu/~mshanks/MichaelShanks/files/509554.pdf>.

We then determined that the first-year seminar would be the focus of the project. Before developing the prototype, we conducted literature reviews on students from low-income backgrounds,⁴ as well as on first-year seminars.⁵ Next, we conducted focus groups to gather practitioner insights into the needs of students from low-income backgrounds and learn how institutions could best support this population through the first-year seminar.⁶ We recruited practitioner volunteers, being mindful of creating a broad representation of perspectives by university type (two-year, four-year, public, private, HBCU) and by the role of volunteers (faculty, coordinator, director, senior administrators) through listservs, social media, and our professional networks. We conducted two hour-long focus groups with eight participants each. Based on the data from these three sources, the two literature reviews, and the focus groups, we developed the prototype FYS self-assessment tool.

For the testing phase of the design thinking process, we recruited eight practitioners to participate in two rounds of interviews. The first iteration of the instrument was shared with these eight practitioners. All participants had experience working with students from low-income backgrounds and with the first-year seminar. During one-hour-long interviews, each practitioner provided detailed feedback on the tool. The feedback focused on the strengths of the tool, ways to improve the tool, and their thoughts on how the tool could best be used by institutions. We evaluated and implemented this feedback into an updated version of the tool, which was then circulated to the same eight practitioners for a second round of feedback. This time, we asked participants to use the tool rather than just review it. The second round of feedback informed the finalized version of the instrument.

⁴ Michael Sparrow, "Students from Low-Income Backgrounds: Characteristics, Common Barriers, and Initiatives to Better Support Student Success," *New York Journal of Student Affairs*, under review.

⁵ Christine Harrington, (in-press)

⁶ Michael Sparrow et al., "Using Focus Groups to Explore the Needs of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds: First-Year Experience Practitioner Perspectives," *Peabody Journal of Education*, forthcoming 2025.

Our Product: The First-Year Self-Assessment Tool

The first-year seminar self-assessment tool has three sections.

1. The first section is to be completed by first-year seminar directors or leadership teams. The leader-focused section has 89 items related to teaching practices and institutional practices. Teaching practices include items related to
 - a. developing a sense of community,
 - b. resources,
 - c. academic strategies,
 - d. career,
 - e. mindsets, and
 - f. assignments.

Institutional practices include items related to

- a. professional learning for faculty and peer leaders,
 - b. assessment, and
 - c. institutional efforts.
2. The second section is to be completed by faculty. The faculty-focused section only includes the teaching practice items.
 3. The third section is to be completed by the first-year seminar director and leadership teams. In this section, first-year seminar directors and their teams are asked to summarize the strengths of the course, identify areas for improvement, and determine an action plan for prioritized improvement areas. The tool can be accessed at <https://www.scholarlyteaching.org/fye>.

We recommend that first-year seminar directors first determine who should be involved in the assessment process and consider including professionals who will bring varied lenses to the work. To gather information about current practices and to determine faculty development needs, we also encourage full and part-time faculty teaching the first-year seminars to complete the tool.

Strategies for assessment and implementation are context-specific and depend on many factors such as financial resources, availability of personnel, and institutional strategic planning. Small review teams can focus on one of the areas in the tool or even specific items within an area as either a one-time exercise or as part of a multi-year strategy that expands into other areas of the tool incrementally. Alternatively, colleges can opt for larger adoption strategies from the start that involve many or all of the areas of the self-assessment tool.

In either case, after all the key stakeholders have completed the tool, the first-year seminar director can compile the findings and bring them to a team meeting for discussion. The teams can then determine the desired strategy and tactics aimed at better serving students from low-income backgrounds through the first-year seminar.