

Miami University  
Assessment

# Assessment of First Year Seminar Courses: Part Two

Today's brief is the second issue dedicated to Miami's newly-created First Year Seminars (FYS; begun Fall, 2004), which are especially designed to provide first-year students with a small group learning experience. In the last issue we told you how students in FYS courses compare to first-year students at other Doctoral Intensive institutions as well as at Miami in terms of their classroom activities, skills, and personal development. Using their responses on a subset of items from the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE), the current brief will also compare 342 students enrolled in FYS courses during the 2004-2005 school year (82.6% response rate) to a national sample of first-year students at Doctoral Intensive institutions and a sample of first-year students at Miami.

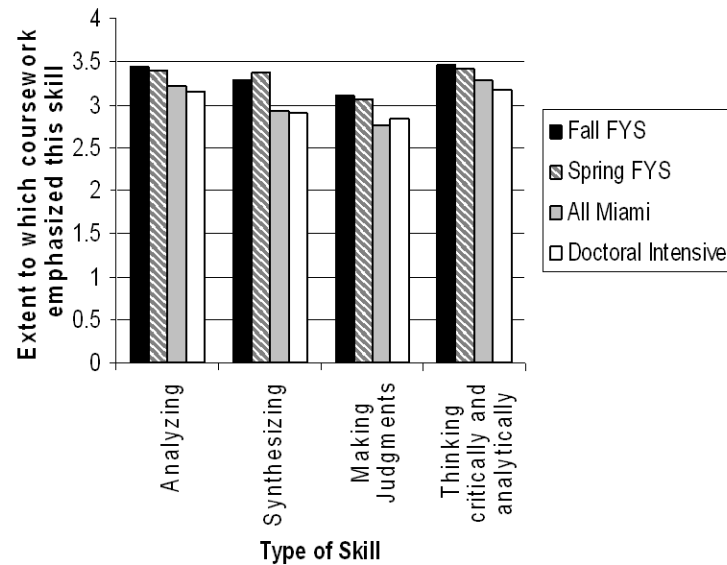
## The Experiences of FYS Students

The survey results revolved around four main themes and were, overall, more favorable for the FYS students than for the comparison groups. Two of these themes are presented below. The remaining themes were addressed in the previous brief (#9).

1. *Critical thinking*: Students in both the fall and the spring FYS courses reported engaging more frequently than the comparison groups in critical thinking skills such as analyzing and synthesizing information, making judgments about the value of information, and thinking critically and analytically. (See figure; scale ranges from 1 (never) to 4 (very often).) There was no difference between FYS students and comparison groups on the extent to which they applied classroom concepts to practical problems or new situations.
2. *Perceptions of the instructor and classmates*: Students in the FYS courses rated their instructors as more available, helpful, and, sympathetic than did students in the comparison groups. Students in the FYS courses also rated their relationships with their classmates as being friendlier, more supportive, and more likely to reflect a sense of belonging than did students in either comparison group.

For a full copy of the First Year Seminar Assessment Report, please visit <http://www.units.muohio.edu/led/FirstYearSeminars>. Do you have questions about this brief or suggestions for future topics? We would love to hear your comments! Please contact Andrea Bakker, Coordinator of Assessment, in the Office of Liberal Education at [bakkerai@muohio.edu](mailto:bakkerai@muohio.edu) or 529-1567.

## Critical Thinking Skills



## Teaching Critical Thinking

Most syllabi contain some reference to the importance of critical thinking in the course, yet students often do not know what we mean by the term. Talk to your students about what critical thinking means in your discipline and what your expectations are for their performance in this area. Expect that your students will need help to become better critical thinkers. First year students will benefit from assignments which focus on just one aspect of critical thinking at a time. For instance, you might:

- Have students read an article and identify the author's implicit assumptions.
- Provide students with an opinion statement and have them find evidence supporting the statement.
- Select an issue and have students identify different contexts in which the issue could be considered.
- Provide a series of statements or quantitative data and ask students to draw conclusions from the information.

For additional information on teaching critical thinking consult one of the Assessment Fellows or the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.