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## Of Fairs and Festivals: Librarians Teach Thematic First-Year Seminars

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## OF FAIRS AND FESTIVALS:

### Librarians Teach Thematic First-Year Seminars

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#### Introduction

For almost a century, library skills instruction by academic librarians has been a vital component of university programs created to help first-year students adapt to the social and academic environment of college life (Walter, 2004). As retention of first-year students has become a strategic goal for universities, a variety of first-year experience (FYE) programs have been developed over the last decade to address this goal. For many academic librarians, the FYE programs have resulted in an increased collaboration with faculty (Walter, 2004). This collaboration ranges from assisting faculty with incorporating information literacy skills within classroom instruction to embedding librarians within classes throughout the semester. In addition to programs that focus on developing or strengthening learning skills, others have been developed to form social communities for students that are based on shared interests. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has created a number of FYE programs that address both academic and social challenges to retention. Creation of a themed FYE class, the Freshman Seminar 129, provided the UTK Libraries with an additional opportunity for librarians to be involved in the University's retention efforts for first-year students.

#### Retention in U.S. Higher Education

Almost half of all students attending four-year colleges leave before the start of the second year. The first ten weeks of the freshman year are most critical because students have not yet completed their transition to college nor have they made the personal connections that are critical to staying (Tinto, 1998). Student attrition, for whatever reason, has many implications for colleges and

universities, including loss of funds to the institution; waste of resources, facilities, and staff; and diminished reputation. Thus, student retention between the freshman and sophomore years is a topic of great concern to institutions of higher learning.

#### First-Year Seminars

For the past three decades, many U.S. colleges and universities have recognized the importance of one's first year in college and have developed programs for first-year college students (Alexander and Gardner, 2009). Many of these programs are based on Tinto's theory that student retention is not only an issue of academics, but also one of social integration (Tinto, 1987). Tinto's research shows that first-year seminars positively impact both academic achievement and integration of students (Tinto, 1993).

The types of first-year seminars that have developed since the 1990s have been flexible enough to respond to the increased diversity and changing needs of today's college students (Gahagan, 2002). Six first-year seminar types have emerged: extended orientation seminars, academic seminars with generally uniform academic content across sections, academic seminars on various topics (thematic seminars), pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars, and basic study skills seminars (Barefoot and Fidler, 1992).

Barefoot suggests that first-year seminars have become popular because they are easily implemented compared to other programs (Barefoot, 2004). Most first-year seminars consist of a small class enrollment (less than 25), offer credit towards graduation, and are either academic (uniform or thematic) or extended

orientation seminars (Tobolowsky, 2008). Many students who enroll in first-year seminars have higher grades in other classes during their first year (Williford, Chapman, and Kahrig, 2000—2001). Additional findings indicate that first-year seminar students participate in campus activities more often, have more interaction with faculty outside of class (Fidler, 1991), and develop close relationships with others on campus (Keup and Barefoot, 2005).

### **Retention at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (“UTK”)**

Dr. Robert C. Holub joined UTK as Provost in August 2006 and soon made retention one of his top priorities. The first entry to his online forum dealt with retention, and in it he informed the campus of some sobering facts. Provost Holub bluntly stated that the University was wasting not only the time and energy of the 20% of students who would eventually leave, but also wasting the time and energy of the faculty and staff, as well as the resources that were consumed during those one or two years. Thus, retention of students between their freshman and sophomore years became a new focus in the effort to retain students to completion of their academic career at the University.

### **First-Year Experience Programs at UTK**

Interventions during the first year are important. A study of UTK students showed that 40% to 50% of students who did not graduate left the University during their first year (Darling and Kahrig, 2008). The greatest impact on student satisfaction was the support they received from UTK faculty and staff during their transitional first year (Strayhorn, 2005).

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, uses several types of activities to increase retention of freshmen: First Year Studies 101 (FYS 101), First-Year Intervention (FYI), Light the Torch: The First Year Experience at UT, and Freshman Seminar 129 (FS 129) (Student Success Center, 2008). FYS 101 is equivalent to “College 101”, where students are taught study skills, time management strategies, and techniques for adjusting to college and adult life. FYS 101

classes are taught by a faculty member and two upper classman peer mentors. Light the Torch: The First Year Experience at UT is a compilation of activities to engage freshmen before as well as after they arrive on campus.

Provost Holub brought the thematic freshman seminar concept was brought to our campus. On January 31, 2007, he sent a memorandum to UTK faculty informing them of the creation of the Freshman Seminar 129 course. In the letter he cited several reasons for its creation, including bringing students into close contact with faculty members in their initial year and providing an alternative to the large lecture courses. He explained that the seminars would be one-credit courses with satisfactory/no credit basis, that each seminar would be capped at 18 to 20 students, and any faculty member teaching a seminar would receive a \$1500 stipend to use for research purposes (Holub & Diacon, 2007). The current Provost, Dr. Susan Martin, continued the freshman seminar program. In 2010, the University’s “Ready for the World” theme was incorporated within the Freshman 129 Seminars (Martin, 2009), which are now under the leadership of Dr. Sally McMillan, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

### **Librarians Teaching First-Year Seminars at UTK**

Many articles have been written by librarians about freshman seminars. However, the majority of articles discuss librarians teaching a “library component” for a freshman seminar, while a few discuss librarians teaching information literacy related seminars (Walter, 2004). The authors have not discovered any other articles about librarians teaching thematic freshman seminars similar to the Freshman Seminar 129 at UTK.

The University of Tennessee Libraries has forty-four tenured and tenure track librarians. In addition to the authors, four librarians have taught the Freshman Seminar 129 with course titles: Concepts of Communication and Diversity in Music ; From the Depths of the Pensive: Memory, History, and the Past in the Harry Potter Series; The Language of Clothes; and The Music of the Grateful Dead.

The Freshman Seminar 129 provides an opportunity for faculty to teach a class outside their research interests, but one in which they have a passion. (Donna Braquet, Instructor), a native of New Orleans, has experienced many Mardi Gras celebrations and wanted to share the uniqueness of that celebration. (Micheline Westfall, Instructor) became interested in the world fairs when she moved to Knoxville in 2006 and began researching the 1982 World's Fair that took place in Knoxville.

### **Mardi Gras: The Greatest Free Show on Earth (Donna Braquet, Instructor)**

Mardi Gras is a fun topic, yet also lends itself to the discussion of serious issues such as culture, race, class, history, and family. I created a general outline of topics for the syllabus, which included, Music, Costumes, Krewes, Parades, Mardi Gras Indians, Bourbon Street, Tourism, History, and Food. Since Mardi Gras is a festival of the senses, I used as many multimedia sources as possible, including professional and amateur photos, video, and audio posted on Nola.com (the online site for the New Orleans Times-Picayune), WDSU.com (local New Orleans television station), and YouTube. Readings from books and journal articles were also used.

I incorporated a library assignment into the course. The assignment required the students to find five articles from the New York Times relating to Mardi Gras throughout different decades from 1890-1990; three articles in the New Orleans Times-Picayune from 1890-1990 (stored on microfilm) and two articles about New Orleans' Mardi Gras after Hurricane Katrina, with one being from a national source and the other being from the Times-Picayune. The students were given instruction to read the articles and write an essay describing the changes in Mardi Gras throughout the years, as well as the differences in reporting from a national and a local newspaper.

To encourage group work and peer mentoring, I assigned class presentations on the theme "How Would You Do Mardi Gras?" Meant as a way to promote individuality, creativity, and group bonding, these presentations not only supported

the goals of the freshman seminar, but also the lessons and traditions of Carnival.

### **World's Fairs (Micheline Westfall, Instructor)**

I chose "World's Fairs" as my topic for the freshman seminar because the 1982 World's Fair was held in Knoxville, Tennessee. I thought that the topic would be interesting to freshmen because of this "local" connection. Enrollment the first year was about half the maximum (20) that was allowed. The second year I was encouraged to market the course with a title that would draw more students. Changing the name of the course to "Bart Simpson at the Knoxville World's Fair" resulted in maximum enrollment with requests from students to enroll after full enrollment was reached. Both years, the class focused on the Knoxville World's Fair, but also covered selected world's fairs from other years. Topics included each fair's theme, architecture, special exhibits, demonstrations, food, souvenirs, personalities, and funding. Relationships between historical events taking place at the time of each fair and its contributions to society were also discussed.

I used a variety of learning activities: lectures, readings, discussions, multimedia presentations, guest speakers, and a field trip. The guest speakers piqued the students' interest since they were able to hear about the experiences from actual attendees. Jane Row, the Librarian for the 1982 (Knoxville) World's Fair and currently the Head of Research Services at the University of Tennessee Libraries, conducted one class session. Other guest speakers included Betsy Creekmore, a University of Tennessee administrator, who brought her souvenir collection from the 1982 Fair and described the intricacies of souvenir trading; and two UT professors, Dr. Stephen Bales and Dr. Charlie Gee, who presented their cultural study of how outsiders at the 1982 World's Fair were portrayed by the official press. The culmination of each course was a field trip to the Sunsphere, the landmark tower created for the 1982 World's Fair that is now the unofficial symbol for the city of Knoxville.

Literacy components of the course included analyzing web sites and other information

sources about World's Fairs. Library instruction was conducted to help students with their final essay and class presentation on the topic "What did you find the most interesting about the 1982 World's Fair and why?" The assignment required them to find at least three journal or newspaper articles to support their position. Since there is limited indexing of the local newspaper in the 1980s, this instruction introduced many of the students to searching resources not found by "Google".

Students were engaged throughout, as exhibited by their questions, discussions, relationships established, and enthusiasm for learning about a subject that was not directly related to their academic studies but was of interest to them, thus meeting the goals of the Freshman 129 Seminars.

### **Implications for Librarians Teaching First-Year Seminars**

#### *For the Students*

Students who have librarians as seminar professors may experience several advantages. Librarians are in the unique position of serving all students on campus, thus they have the ability to assist students throughout their entire academic career. Unlike teaching faculty who are tied to a particular college or department with dedicated courses and subject matter, librarians are always available to students. Students who have librarians as teachers may be more aware of library services and resources and possibly be more likely to contact the librarian in the future with research questions.

Thus far, the Freshman 129 Seminar has become a vital component of the University's retention program. Todd Diacon, Vice Provost for Academic Operations in 2009, stated: "Evaluations indicate strongly that the students enjoy the course. These [Freshman Seminar] 129 alumni indicate that they are more engaged with the University, and will be more likely to persist to graduation from [the University of] Tennessee" (Diacon, 2008).

#### *For Librarians*

Librarians typically have limited contact time with students. Public Services Librarians'

interactions with students usually consist of a few minutes at the Reference Desk or a one hour, one-shot instruction session. This interaction is even more restricted for librarians who are in Technical Services, where contact time is often limited to supervising or working with the department's student workers. Teaching a semester-long seminar offers librarians an opportunity to expand their teaching experience in a totally different environment. Librarians are able to connect with the students and follow their progress throughout the entire semester, as well as to become unofficial mentors to the students throughout their enrollment at the University.

The opportunity to teach outside the traditional bibliographic instruction course on a topic of interest to the librarian was cited as one of the reasons the UTK librarians teach the Freshman 129 Seminar. Each year, more UTK librarians participate in this FYE program.

#### *For the University*

Even with faculty status, librarians often feel a disconnection from their teaching faculty peers. Librarians, as faculty members, are required to provide a high quality educational experience to undergraduate students, contribute to the common life of the University, and to contribute to the diverse and complex role of the University in society. There are many advantages to librarians teaching the seminars. First, librarians can contribute to an area which has been given high priority by campus administrators. Second, librarians have more contact with teaching faculty and more awareness of curricular issues. By teaching freshman seminars, librarians are able to unequivocally contribute to the teaching mission of the institution.

The retention rate for freshmen at UTK has increased almost three percentage points (from 83.6 per cent to 86.2 per cent from 2009 and 2010) (News Sentinel Staff 2010). Improvement has been credited to the early academic intervention, of which FYE is a part (Cheek 2010). Although no studies have analyzed the relationship between the improved freshman retention rates at UTK and the Freshman Seminar 129, anecdotal evidence reveals that this FYE has contributed.

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