Supporting Freshman Transitions On-line
Dr. Barbara Jackson and Lauren Chism
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

Abstract
This paper describes an attempt to combine “high tech with high touch” in supporting freshman academic success. University College at IUPUI is in the process of developing a primarily on-line version of its nationally acclaimed first year seminar. This freshman initiative is the key element of a first year program designed to support freshman in their transition to a collegiate learning environment.

Institutional Overview
With a student population of over 29,000, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) grants degrees in over 180 programs from both Indiana University and Purdue University. Just over a thousand students live in a residence hall or campus apartments; the vast majority of students commute. A high percentage of students are the first members of their family to attend college, and our students work significantly more hours than those at our urban peers. This unique student population presents challenges in achieving satisfactory levels of student retention and academic success.

The Development of the On-line First Year Seminar
IUPUI’s first year seminar program has achieved demonstrated success in assisting students through their transition to college by offering an outstanding first year seminar to a majority of the fall entering class. However, the university’s ability to make the experience accessible to all entering students has been hindered by both human and spatial constraints. It was within this framework of extending the availability of the freshman seminar that we considered the use of technology.

While the campus has been very active in using technology to deliver instruction, we were initially reluctant to use on-line learning with first semester students. National data indicated that our freshman were not the types of students who would be highly successful with this format. Further, we felt that distance learning was antithetical to social aspects of the needs of our freshman. University College (the academic unit for entering students) decided to pilot a first year seminar course in a primarily on-line environment. A major campus asset is the capability of the campus on-line course environment, ONCOURSE, to support the seminar’s curriculum, as well as provide ways to replace social and communication features of the traditional classroom format.

Faculty required that the on-line version of the first year seminar must be based on the same student learning outcomes, and must be as academically rigorous as the traditional first year seminar. The learning outcomes that define the curriculum of all seminars are:

- Students will begin to develop a comprehensive perspective on higher education.
- Students will have the opportunity to experience a safe, supportive, and positive university learning experience, which includes the establishment of a network of staff, faculty and other students.
- Students will understand and begin to practice basic communication skills appropriate to the academic setting.
- Students will begin the process of understanding critical thinking in the university context.
- Students should understand and apply information technology in support of their academic work.
- Students should begin to develop a knowledge of their own abilities, skills and life demands so that they can develop these more effectively in pursuit of their academic goals.
- Students should understand the role and make full use of IUPUI resources and services which support their learning and campus connections.

Many of the existing syllabus elements were seamlessly transportable to the on-line format, including critical reading and writing assignments and exercises on time management and campus resources. We felt it important
to maintain a core element of our traditional format – the use of an instructional team composed of faculty, academic advisor, librarian and student mentor. The role of each team member was slightly changed with the advisor role assuming additional course management responsibilities.

**Developing a “Hybrid” Model**

Despite our confidence in our ability to translate elements of the traditional curriculum to an on-line environment, a major concern prevailed regarding the social component of establishing connections and networks in support of learning. This is of particular significance given the nature of our large and complex campus environment and the fact that most students commute. Our own data supports national research conclusions that establishing powerful social connections to the campus is critical for student success. We therefore committed to two important strategies: 1) the use of a hybrid model and 2) the use of technology to create connectivity.

Using the hybrid model, the new version of the first year seminar course was designed to include several opportunities for face-to-face participation on campus. The first of these is a mandatory three hour orientation. Students who do not participate in the orientation are not permitted to enroll in the course. During this time, the student mentor leads ice-breaker activities to build connections between students, the librarian introduces students to the library and the faculty member and academic advisor provide a detailed, interactive overview of the course. After the orientation, students are required to visit a variety of campus resources and create a Powerpoint presentation which conveys important information about the resources to other students. In addition, students come to campus to interview a faculty member, meet with an academic advisor and attend a campus cultural event. Students also have the opportunity to attend a lecture on campus, which is also streamlined through the web for students who are unable to participate in person.

**Connecting First Year Students through Technology**

A second foundational strategy for the on-line seminars was to creatively utilize technology to create strong student connections to the campus and to one another centered on learning. This has proven to be a very powerful component of our traditional classroom format. The following communication strategies were used to replicate the types of traditional seminar discussion and collaboration.

The electronic mail function of Oncourse is used extensively by all members of the instructional team to provide feedback and by students to contact each other and coordinate group work. A variety of discussion forums were assigned which resulted in lively and intense communication among students. For example, **Getting to Know You** required each student to create an online profile and to view the profiles of other students in the class. After reading the profiles of other students, the students use the discussion forum to post connections they have with other students. These initial contacts resulted in the formation of interest groups that extended beyond the class such as the formation of study groups for Chemistry and Psychology, a Creative Writing group, “Roy’s school of guitar” and group participation in several campus events. Another forum, **Academic Autobiography**, based on the ideas of Dr. Constance Staley, asks students to reflect on their experiences as a learner. Using this forum, students post reflections on their academic experiences for other students to review. One of the most powerful examples of this was from an international student relating her challenges of her academic experiences. The student’s passionate description of the hardships she had faced in Africa and her profound appreciation of both financial aid and the opportunity to pursue higher education had a profound impact on the students and the instructional team. Student mentors also created several discussion forums that were designed to replace the classroom role modeling that is a key use of peer mentors in the traditional seminar format. A university lecture requirement was designed to both introduce substantive content about the culture of the university, as well as guide students through appropriate classroom communication strategies. While students were encouraged to attend the lecture in person if their schedules permitted, most took advantage of on-line options for participation. The on-line seminar is evolving as another key strategy for connecting students using technology in place of the traditional classroom. All students are required to participate in a real-time on-line seminar. The topics for discussion derive from previous assignments and readings and students’ level of active participation and contribution are individually assessed.
Assessment
IUPUI and University College have a strong commitment to assessment, and all of our freshman initiatives, including the classroom-based seminar have been extensively assessed. These assessments have been used for continuous program improvement. The on-line seminar pilot is still in its pilot phase and with a small sample size we have not yet done statistical controlled comparisons on retention, GPA, and student satisfaction with regular seminars.

Faculty, student mentors and advisors involved in the pilot have compiled anecdotal evidence comparing online sections with the classroom-based format. Such comparative evidence includes the frequency and quality of student discourse via e-mails and on-line seminar as well as the high quality of collaborative assignments produced by on-line students. Additionally, the nature and frequency of individual faculty interactions appears superior to traditional format. Faculty report that the freedom from having to prepare for and conduct weekly seminar sessions, and keeping up with course “housekeeping” allows for more individualized knowledge of students and the ability to respond and connect.

We still, however, regard the on-line first year seminar as a work in progress. Many of the curricular elements have been re-designed for the next academic year. While the online version works very well for many, it still makes it easier for those so inclined to be disengaged—some disappear, or submit assignments in perfunctory fashion.

We feel that these are challenges to be met, and this new format of the first year seminar can be developed into a viable regular curricular offering. We will be expanding the pilot from five to ten sections for Fall semester 2005.