

General Education, First Year Signature Courses, and GST 104

Background for Faculty Assembly and General Education Discussion

The General Education Council is proposing changes to the SUNY Oswego GE Program that could include the requirement for a First Year Signature course and a GST 104 for all new incoming students (all freshmen and transfer students with 11 or less credits). This document provides some information and data regarding the First-Year portion of the GEC recommendation.

What are the First Year Signature Courses and GST 104?

- The [First Year Signature \(FYS\)](#) course project has been in a pilot for about five years. Signature courses are small, seminar-style courses that provide opportunities for first year students to discuss engaging issues while developing critical thinking, information literacy and both written and oral communication skills. Each class is focused on a unique subject but all classes are about intellectual curiosity, making campus connections and learning how to thrive academically.
- The FYS courses have three shared learning objectives:
 - **Critical Thinking and Information Literacy:** Students will identify and critically evaluate information related to the course content.
 - **Oral and Written Communication:** Students will communicate meaning using oral and written language appropriate to the topic and the target audience.
 - **Intercultural Knowledge and Competence:** Students will examine alternative cultural perspectives / worldviews related to course topics.
- They also share the following course design expectations across all sections:
 - Collaborative learning with significant peer-to-peer interaction.
 - Incorporation of evidence-based learning strategies including active learning strategies.
 - Engagement with campus, such as resources, events, organizations, etc., ideally directly related to class.
 - Process for writing feedback and revision.
 - Introduce students to library resources.
 - Engage students in establishing guidelines for open discussions to ensure a respectful environment.
- We suggest that FYS courses in most cases not be existing “intro to XXX” type courses because many of the “intro” courses are critical first classes for the major and thus may be necessary to cover the material necessary for the students to succeed in the major. FYS courses developed without the requirement of coverage provide more flexible opportunities for in-depth classroom engagement when desired.
- GST104 is a 1-credit transition course that is offered during the first eight weeks of the semester. The curriculum covers campus resources, involvement opportunities, academic strategies, career development, and other personal/academic success topics. While this course

provides several activities and assignments related to these topics, they can certainly be reintroduced/reinforced in the signature courses.

Why First Year Courses?

- First year seminars are classified as high impact practices (HIPs) by George Kuh and his colleagues. Such classes and experiences represent best practices in engaging students with their learning.
- First year seminars and other HIPs have been shown nationally to improve student engagement, retention, persistence, and overall student success. In addition, while HIPs are helpful for all students, research has shown that they are particularly impactful for underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students.
- First year courses are designed in a way to ensure significant engagement between student and faculty and student to student. Such engagement provides an important connection between the student and faculty member, and within the student community.
- We currently enroll our incoming students in an “F” section small class. Most of these classes are gateway classes or introductory general education classes. When initially implemented there was an expectation that these classes would also include campus engagement activities, but there is wide variability regarding whether these courses are meeting the goals first developed when they were implemented.
- First year courses are a student success initiative. We continue to see concerns, particularly coming out of the pandemic, regarding lack of student engagement and lower retention. The issues are particularly acute for our first-generation, low-income, and minoritized students. In other words, we have achievement gaps that we need to address (see Appendix A for some of this data), and though FYS courses (and GST 104) are not a silver bullet to address the issue, they are intentional interventions (see Appendix B for GST information), specifically driven by faculty to facilitate students getting a strong start to their university experience (see Appendix C for an initial assessment of FYS in Fall 2022).

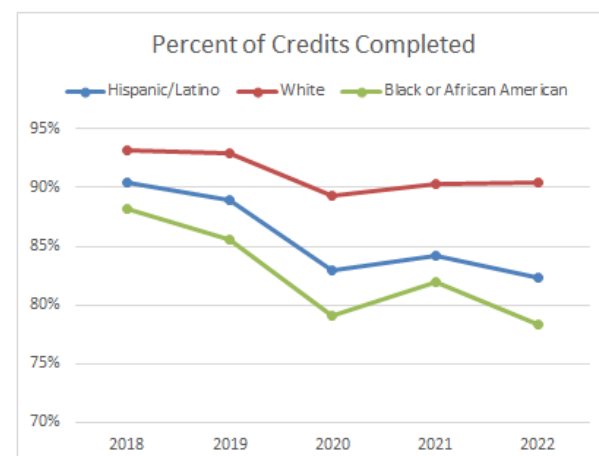
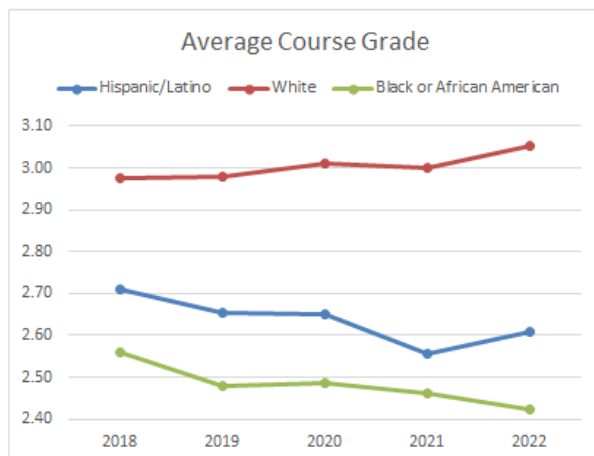
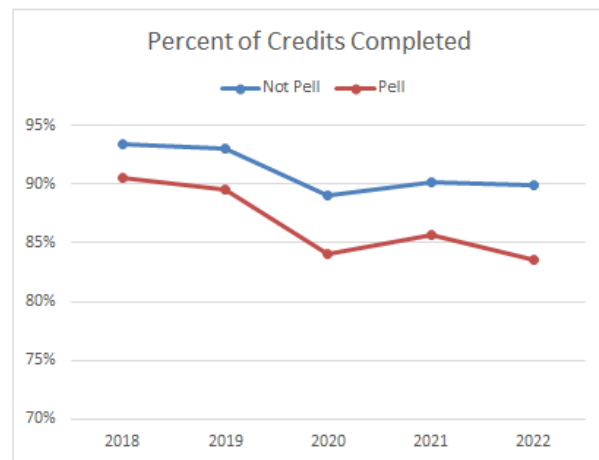
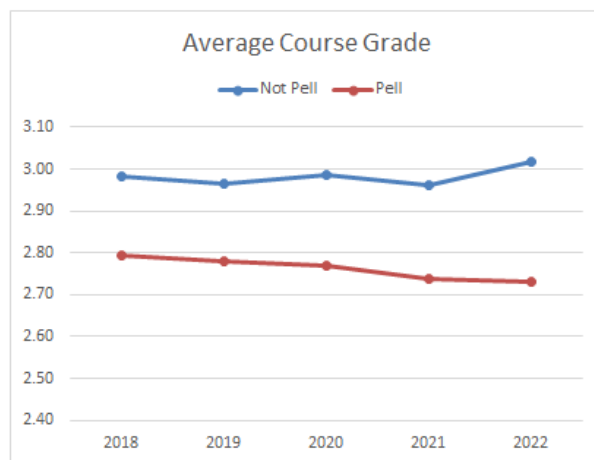
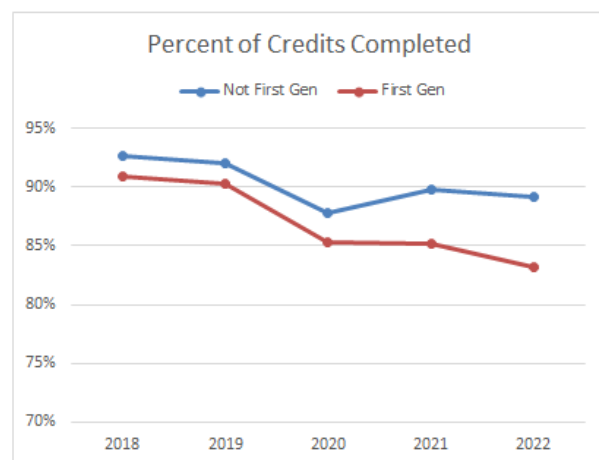
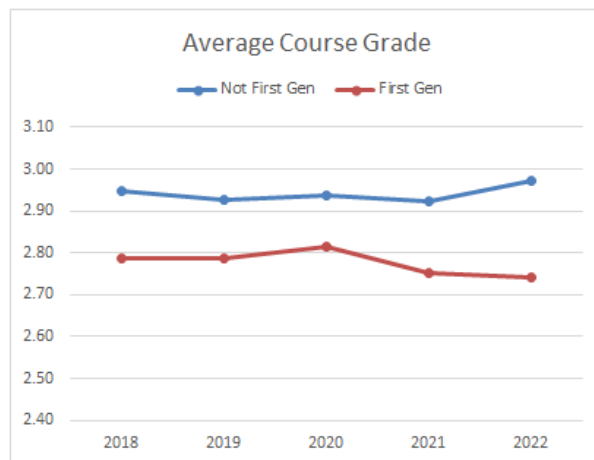
How do we offer FYS and GST 104?

- The General Education Council is recommending that FYS and GST 104 become part of the SUNY Oswego general education program. The courses would be provided to all new students (first year students and transfer students with less than 12 credits) during their first semester.
- The Resource Question – Some have raised the issue of how we mount 60-75 FYS classes.
 - We have been teaching around 15 sections of the FYS for the past few years.
 - The campus is currently down in enrollment by approximately 1000 students, which may provide an opportunity to make this adjustment.
 - The campus has already invested in the idea of small, first year classes already through the requirement of F sections.
 - Implementing FYS could be considered a reallocation from the existing F sections to FYS courses.

- Some specific ideas:
 - Many of our existing F sections are one (or more) of multiple sections of the same course (and perhaps taught at higher course caps). We examined the whole of our 100/200 offerings in the fall semester to determine what flexibility may be available in this part of the curriculum to allow for the offering of sufficient number of FYS courses. Some examples of this flexibility include:
 - As noted earlier, many of our F sections (small) are gateway or introductory general education course. There is capacity in other (non-F) sections to absorb those from the F section. This frees up a faculty resource to develop and teach a FYS course.
 - Some existing courses (that have many sections) might work well as FYS courses with some intentional changes. Might some of the sections for these classes be designated as FYS? For example, Strategic Comm in Business (COM211) or English Comp 102.
 - Other examples of existing courses that might work well as FYS course may be Creative Nonfiction Writing or Writing About Literature, or Leadership in Action (GST 120).
- This will not be an easy shift. But what we are suggesting is to be more intentional about where we should focus our small courses to incoming students so that they can have the most impact in their development.

Appendix A: Persistent academic performance gaps

These graphs compare average course grades and the percent of attempted credits that were earned for several key demographics. Gaps in these two student success metrics have grown for First Generation Status students, Pell Recipients (a proxy for low-income status), and for key racial/ethnic groups.



Appendix B: Some information regarding GST 104 assessment (2022)

- In Fall 2022, 70% of incoming freshman were enrolled in GST 104. The remainder took a different 1-credit seminar.
- A majority of the GST 104 students reported that they:
 - Benefitted from co-curricular experiences
 - Located and utilized campus resources
 - Set meaningful and achievable goals for themselves
 - Utilized new academic strategies that helped them to be successful
- 91% of the GST 104 students were retained into the Spring semester, which was 5% higher than those that did not take the course
- Those completing GST 104 had a higher first semester GPA (2.6) than their peers (2.46).

Appendix C – FYS courses and Spring Retention

Fall 2022 First Year Signature Initial Assessment											
		N	HS GPA	Fall GPA	Fall Credits Earned						
Seminar Students	Total	300	87.8	2.65	12.9						
	Enrolled for Spring	276	88	2.68	13.1						
	Not Retained	24	86.5	2.32	10.7						
	Retention Rate*	92.0%									
No FYS	Total	1164	87.7	2.35	11.9						
	Enrolled for Spring	1032	87.8	2.48	12.5						
	Not Retained	132	86.5	1.37	6.8						
	Retention Rate*	88.7%									
Retention Difference*		3.3%									
*The chi-square statistics differentiating 92% and 88.7% is 2.7953. The p-value is .095. The result is statistically significant at p < .10 but not at p < .05.											
Student's Major or Major Department in Fall 2022:											
		All Business Areas	Adol or Child Ed	Biology or Zoology	Art, Music, Theatre or CSS	Psychology	Computer Science Department	Undeclared	Comm Department	All Others	
Seminar Students	Total	26	39	39	33	32	40	29	7	55	
	Enrolled for Spring	26	37	36	30	28	37	25	7	50	
	Not Retained	0	2	3	3	4	3	4	0	5	
	Retention Rate*	100.0%	94.9%	92.3%	90.9%	87.5%	92.5%	86.2%	100.0%	90.9%	
No FYS	Total	282	170	103	105	100	59	59	79	207	
	Enrolled for Spring	253	149	90	88	92	47	48	72	193	
	Not Retained	29	21	13	17	8	12	11	7	14	
	Retention Rate*	89.7%	87.6%	87.4%	83.8%	92.0%	79.7%	81.4%	91.1%	93.2%	
Retention Difference*		10.3%	7.2%	4.9%	7.1%	-4.5%	12.8%	4.9%	8.9%	-2.3%	