

The Foundation Year Experience

Foundation year programs attempt to introduce students to a wide array of material and to the university experience while developing basic skills that will prepare students for higher-level course work in whatever area they chose to study. Foundation year programs usually involve some form of integrated course work in which first-year students take a common curriculum for a significant portion of their first-year courses. While these courses are not intended to replace introductory courses in the disciplines, they can give students some sense of the different disciplines, through lectures given and discussion led by instructors from those disciplines, while integrating disciplinary perspectives on given topics in thematic courses. In order to provide the same foundation for all students it is helpful to have all students (say all students in the BA area) take one or more foundation course (and these courses may be worth 6 or 9 or more credits); however, the portion of the student's first-year course load that is taken up by required courses can vary and there can be options between different broad thematic courses as well. A common model for foundation-year courses is to have a large lecture component in each which is supplemented by smaller discussion-based groups and with co-curricular activities outside of class.

The rationale for foundation years is essentially two-fold.

First, the common curriculum adds to a common experience which helps foster intellectual and personal relations amongst students so as to improve student engagement and retention. Students find themselves going through a common experience which helps them bond in their first year of university. In addition, as there are large numbers of students taking the same course material at a given time, it becomes easier to organize co-curricular activities (student productions, cultural outings, activities in the community, and other things which can be designed to fit with the curriculum being taught at a given time). These activities can enrich the educational experience and help with student engagement and retention. Student success can potentially be enhanced by organizing the courses so that students are studying one topic at a time and in an intense fashion, as opposed to having to read for five potentially disparate courses and topics in a given week. This can be done either through wide integrated courses that deal with one topic at a time and take up a large portion, or all, of the students' full time course load, or through more focused courses that are taught in shorter (4-6 weeks) "blocks". Options for part-time students would have to somehow be built in if a block system were adopted.

Second, foundation years tend to allow universities to better assure themselves that all their students are achieving certain breadth-in-content requirements as well as developing certain essential skills. Writing and reading skills can be developed throughout the first year in all foundation courses, while BA students can be introduced to some math and science content that could be taught by science faculty in an integrated fashion in one of their foundation courses. As foundation-year courses can incorporate different faculties and departments they also have the potential benefit of making the evaluation of first-year students more standardized so that expectations on students can be more universal and transparent while the skills that have been identified in advance as vital for all students get taught to all students. (It is worth pointing out that having teaching teams from different departments and even faculties can also foster communication across what sometimes feel like silos and potentially lead to

further interdisciplinary teaching and research). Provided that foundation courses develop a smaller discussion-based component, they can help educate students into the art of being a student; that is, the discussion group, led by an instructor, can help students learn through practice the sorts of conversation, forms of inquiry, and styles of fruitful debate that will help them learn *with each other* and take greater responsibility for their own educational experience in the years to come. Starting this in the first year can allow students to get more out of their four-year degree, improve their eventual performance in the workplace, and make them stronger citizens who are able to listen across political differences while speaking clearly in their attempts to articulate the common good.

As mentioned above, no foundation course will entirely replace the disciplinary rigour of a full or two full introductory courses in departmental course offerings. However, some faculties find that first-year students are currently being exposed to the same or similar material in two, three or four different introductory courses. Wider foundational courses that integrate different related disciplines would allow the institution to better serve those first year students and improve student success. Departments would still be able to provide instruction in key areas in different courses; moreover foundation courses would teach students to not only think about the different distinct disciplines but also to think about how those disciplines are related and how they often complement one another in addressing topic and problems of great concern. Some material specific to each discipline might need to be covered at the second year level; however, this might enhance the second-year course offerings in various departments on campus as these courses are sometimes less well developed and stuck between the introductory first year courses and more focused upper-level courses. In short, integrated, inter-disciplinary foundation course, on themes, might allow departments to better focus their discipline-specific teachings and make the students' trajectory through those 2nd-4th year course offerings more successful as a learning experience. Another benefit of foundation year thematic courses is that they can expose students to a range of options in university that they might not have previously been aware of when they were coming out of high school or deciding to return to school. The themes of courses can be struck in a myriad of ways. Think of the following potential course titles: "Power and Freedom", "Earth and Environment", "Creativity and Human Aspirations"... clearly in this short list, given only as means to provoke thought, one can imagine different disciplines having much to say and in ways that would be different from one another and even more interesting if taught together.