

# The Intentionally Structured Group Freshman Seminar: A Collaborative Model

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*A model using intentionally structured groups in freshman seminars is discussed. Collaborative efforts among academic departments and student affairs practitioners can enhance students' academic and intellectual development. Additionally, a rationale for how collaboration offers special opportunities for promoting positive educational and developmental experiences for both faculty and student affairs staff members is presented.*

Using collaborative methods, such as the one outlined in this article, offers diversity in classroom instructional presentations and assists student affairs practitioners with programs designed to nurture student development. Collaboration among academic departments is an idea long espoused but seldom practiced on most college and university campuses. Joint efforts provide opportunities whereby 'scholar-practitioners are constructing their own knowledge about student and teacher learning, teacher education, school change, and applied research methods. They are developing theory in practice' (Stoddart, 1993, p. 19). A major advantage includes the merging of expertise and perspectives by a variety of professionals.

Although collaboration can expand the arena for discussing "ideas, texts, pedagogy, and the meaning and purpose of higher education" (Moseley, 1992, p. 12), it is not an uncomplicated process. Providing a rich, comprehensive, academic experience for an increasingly diversified student population requires that academic administrators and faculty work together, often using multi-disciplinary approaches and innovative methods. Not only can interdepartmental collaboration result in enhanced educational opportunities for students, it provides advantages for participating faculty as well. Benefits include increased intellectual stimulation, opportunities to acquire new skills, and achievement of a sense of shared community. Difficulties arise, however, when professors are asked to use teaching methods with which they have no

experience or are contradictory to approaches they have used in the past (Stoddart, 1993).

Collaboration, to be effective, demands that academic administrators be supportive and encouraging of its use. Such support includes granting financial assistance, hiring additional personnel, allocating faculty time to collaborative efforts, and providing incentives for faculty collaboration (Moseley, 1992). Cooperation can best be achieved when all parties have a common desire to work through the scheduling and policy differences that almost certainly will arise. Most importantly, those involved must share a mutual vision of the outcome potential (Stoddart, 1993).

Although faculty collaboration within academic departments is sometimes difficult, it will likely be even more problematic when implemented across academic departments and disciplines. Nevertheless, several collaborative programs do exist. Kochenour et al. (1997) discussed an academic support program called Supplemental Instruction. This program was designed to enhance student learning, expand student academic development, and form collaborative relationships among faculty and academic departments. The Supplemental Instruction program, which used student peers, focused on college freshmen and their learning communities. Further, the program focused on high risk courses rather than on high risk students. Another collaborative program was the Learning Communities Model, 'designed to foster a collaborative environment that involves students in their own learning' (Levine, 1998, p. 22). This model required faculty to think differently about teaching, incorporate collaborative learning activities, and redesign courses. The impetus for successful collaborative partnerships was the result of senior administrators' support and validation coupled with the knowledge and skills of faculty and student development personnel (Engstrom & Tinto, 1997).

According to Picklesimer and Miller (1998), "academic courses designed to facilitate relevant skill development are limited in scope and given low priority in the higher education community" (p. 107). They proposed a Life-Skills Training model designed to provide a vehicle for student development educators and faculty members to promote highly educational and developmental opportunities for students, faculty, and student affairs staff members. This interdepartmental collaborative approach involved the use of small intentionally structured groups (ISGS) in a life-skills course. Life skills, as defined by Darden, Gazda, and Ginter (1996), are the basic attributes necessary for successful functioning in the workplace and social environments. Life-skills courses focus on four domains: (a) interpersonal communication, (b) health maintenance, (c) identity development, and (d) decision-making (Darden et al., 1996).

Winston, Bonney, Miller, and Dagley (1988) provide a thorough description of an ISG and define it as an intervention designed to promote specific goals. It has a planned structure or framework and a specified duration, generally from 4 to 30 hours total, lasting not more than 15 weeks or one academic term. In addition, an ISG: (a) occurs in a planned social environment, (b) has preestablished goals

(which have sufficient latitude to allow for members' modifications), (c) is designed to affect one or more areas of human development, and (d) has specific ground rules designed to maintain the essential structure of the group (for example, time parameters, goal specification, level of self-disclosure promoted, and definition of leader and member roles) (p. 6).

The LSG model is an effective vehicle for enhancing college student development across eight developmental areas: (a) physical, (b) social, (c) emotional, (d) academic, (e) career, (f) intellectual, (g) esthetic, and (h) moral. This developmental model for conceptualizing ISGs is comprised of three intervention foci that include enhancement, prevention, and remediation. The use of this model increases immeasurably the opportunities for life-skills development, cultural sophistication, and psychological maturity as a normal part of the higher education experience' (Winston et al., 1988, p. 74).

Bulkeley and Cramer (1994) found that small ISGs were most effective when the students were first assessed and then placed in groups according to the life-skill areas needing the greatest improvement. While differences in pre- and post-test scores may reflect the ISG content emphasized, the four life-skills domains were not found to be mutually exclusive, and improvement was observed in all areas (Darden et al., 1996). Most college freshman seminars are one academic term in length, thus limiting group participation to a relatively short period of time. Markstrom-Adams, Ascione, Braegger, and Adams (1993) reported on the permanency and measurability of skills learned in short-term interventions. They concluded that although the level of identity development achieved in such settings is inconclusive, even brief exposure to new skills can have lasting results.

The Intentionally Structured Life-Skills Group Model reported herein represents a collaborative effort among psychology faculty members and graduate students, faculty from other academic disciplines, and student affairs staff members, all of whom have taught freshman seminar classes. This project used the small ISG approach to teach life skills in a large Southern university. The groups were led by members of a graduate-level group counseling class in the department of psychology.

The ISG model was designed to provide students with opportunities to experience the benefits of an ISG with emphasis placed on the development of life skills and group cohesion for social support within the context of a freshman seminar. In addition, the model provided a supervised group leadership opportunity for graduate students who served as group leaders.

### **The Collaborative Group Model**

#### **Participants**

The coordinator of the freshman seminar program and two psychology faculty members randomly selected 2 of the 45 university freshman seminar sections in which to incorporate ISGs as an instructional component. During the first seven weeks of the semester, students in these two ISG sections (20 to 24 students per class) attended two 75-minute traditional classroom sessions per week. During these classes, their instructor presented topics from the freshman

seminar curriculum. The "traditional curriculum" included, but was not limited to, such topics as: (a) exploring the student-teacher connection, (b) choosing a major and planning a career, (c) time management, (d) learning styles, and (e) managing stress. The predominant teaching methodologies were lecture and class discussion. Experiential components were minimal or absent. At the beginning of the eighth week, however, students were randomly assigned to one of three small life-skills groups (six to eight members) within each ISG section. Facilitated by graduate student co-leaders for the remaining eight weeks of the semester, students attended a 75-minute small group session once a week. In addition, the students remained in their weekly 75-minute large group session (traditional classroom) taught by their instructor. Classroom content continued to supplement the small group experience by addressing components of the freshman seminar curriculum which were not covered in small group sessions.

#### **Group Leaders**

Master's level students in school counseling and clinical or school psychology enrolled in a group counseling and psychotherapy course served as ISG co-leaders. The graduate students in the ISG project attended the master's group course for the entire semester and studied group theory, process, and research. Further, they participated in applied practice to develop group leadership skills through observation and participation in group exercises. They also participated as group members in a 12-hour growth group. Beginning the eighth week of the semester, they served as co-leaders for the ISGs in the freshman seminars. These sessions were videotaped for supervisory purposes by the group course instructor.

#### **Intentionally Structured Group Content**

Each ISG focused on one of three life skills: (a) Interpersonal Communication/Human Relations, (b) Problem-Solving/Decision-Making, or (c) Identity Development/Purpose in Life. Interpersonal communication/human relations skills, often learned at an early age from parents and other family members, are necessary for effective verbal and nonverbal communication (Gazda, 1989; Picklesimer, Hooper, & Ginter, 1998). 'These skills enhance (a) establishing relationships, (b) participating in community activities, (c) managing interpersonal intimacy, and (d) articulating clear expression of thoughts and options' (Picklesimer & Miller, 1998, p. 101). Problem-solving/decision-making skills are used to assess and analyze information, identify problems, establish goals, resolve conflicts, and manage time (Picklesimer et al., 1998; Picklesimer & Miller, 1998). This life skill involves cognitive skills that can be learned (Klaczynski, Laipple, & Jurden, 1992; Picklesimer et al., 1998). The identity development/purpose in life dimension includes skills needed for 'establishing an awareness of personal and emotional identity, maintaining self-esteem, clarifying values, determining moral dimensions of sexuality, and developing meaning of life' (Picklesimer et al., 1998, p. 274).

Student co-leaders and the group instructor developed group manuals designed to guide the various life-skills development sessions. These manuals

emphasized the development of group cohesion and support in addition to life skills through a variety of activities.

*The Interpersonal Communication/Human Relations group* content was covered in eight sessions including: (1) Getting Acquainted and Getting on Board; (2) Getting Further Acquainted and Giving Positive Feedback; (3) Exploring the Importance of Context in Communication; (4) Practicing Assertive Communication Skills; (5) Taking Ownership for Emotions and Actions; (6) Using 'I' Messages and Reducing Defensiveness; (7) Practicing Other Relationship Skills; and (8) Reviewing Skills and Bringing Closure.

A common format for many of these sessions included member exploration and assessment of communication styles in relation to subtopics, and introduction to and practice of additional skills. For instance, in one session members read responses for various scenarios provided on a handout, identified the behavior most similar to their own, discussed if each was passive, assertive or aggressive, and explored possible consequences of each response. Then they practiced various assertive behaviors such as the "Broken Record Technique" in role-play of their own real-life situations. This technique is useful when dealing with aggressive and/or manipulative individuals.

One favorite exercise was the "Warm Fuzzy" activity, which involved multiple rounds of members sharing information about themselves on designated topics (i.e., a favorite childhood memory; something of significance in my life right now; a difficult decision), followed by the reading of "The Original Warm Fuzzy Tale" (Steiner, 1977). Members then wrote "warm fuzzies" to each other, practiced giving and receiving clear, direct, and positive feedback, and processed the experience. While this activity was used in the second session of each of the groups as a means of getting acquainted and building cohesion, the focus of the processing of the exercise varied according to each group's developmental focus.

*The Problem-Solving/Decision-Making group* sessions were as follows: (1) Getting Acquainted and Getting on Board; (2) Getting Further Acquainted and Giving Positive Feedback; (3) Using a Problem-Solving Model; (4) Taking Responsibility for One's Life; (5) Examining Short-and Long-Term Goals; (6) Using Time-Management Strategies; (7) De-emphasizing the Negatives and Accentuating the Positives; and (8) Reviewing Skills and Bringing Closure.

These sessions, like those in the 'communication' group, involved a combination of self-exploration and practice of new approaches. Among the techniques in this ISG were the application of a problem-solving model to real-life concerns and practice of realistic self-talk related to procrastination habits. In another session, members were asked to fantasize being octogenarians and identifying statements they would like to be able to make about their lives. They then read and discussed goal-setting suggestions and practiced formulating both short- and long-term goals.

*The Identity Development/Purpose in Life group* was comprised of eight sessions including: (1) Getting Acquainted and Getting on Board; (2) Getting Further Acquainted and Giving Positive Feedback; (3) Understanding our Emotional

Selves; (4) Linking Our Emotions and Our Behaviors; (5) Understanding Our Behavioral Selves; (6) Identifying Our Wants and Needs; (7) Understanding Ourselves in Relationships; and (8) Reviewing Skills and Bringing Closure.

One activity for this group required members to identify influential people in their lives, whether real or fictional, historical or contemporary. Members discussed the facets in their lives that had been most directly impacted by that person. If negative influences were identified, the group brainstormed ways such influences could be overturned. Over the course of several weeks, students in this group progressed from discussing either hypothetical or superficial personal issues to more personal and significant issues. Sessions involved the group leader demonstrating specific techniques to enhance personal and emotional identity development. Group members were encouraged to brainstorm alternative techniques and to evaluate the potential effectiveness of each. Role play was used in several sessions, allowing group members to observe and practice skills such as using "I" statements to take ownership of feelings, actions, and verbalizations. Recognizing passive, aggressive, and assertive behavior and language was more easily accomplished using role play or personal narratives than it would have been in a traditional, didactic setting.

#### **Student and Teacher Reactions**

Initially, some students reported feeling apprehensive about discussing personal problems within the group. However, as the ISG evolved, informal student feedback was generally positive probably because of the increased level of trust established within the group. Students' comments reflected a diversity of learning experiences as a result of their group participation. One of the most frequently reported outcomes was the formation of supportive friendships among group members that extended beyond the classroom setting. Examples of specific responses included:

- I enjoyed my group a whole lot. It was probably my favorite part of the class. I met some wonderful people that I will consider my friends throughout college and beyond.
- I liked the groups because I could come with a frown and come out with a smile. There wasn't anything that I didn't like. I learned how to show my emotions and send "I" messages instead of "you." I also learned how to control my anger and it gave me a boost of self confidence.
- The group sessions were a valuable experience in the class. It brought the peers much closer to each other. We all found out how all of us had something in common. It was a very positive experience.
- At first, I hated the idea of being in a group. After a while, I started to not mind the idea of it. I learned about a variety of interesting people.
- I didn't like talking about personal problems. The group helped me to reduce my shyness and be a more sociable person.

While no systematic feedback was collected from instructors of the ISG sections, informal reactions were extremely positive. Teachers stated that the benefits of small group cohesion generalized to the large group classroom. They

observed more positive student interactions and peer support.

### **Critical Implementation Issues**

During the development of the model, it became apparent that several factors could be applied to increase the likelihood of student satisfaction. One suggestion was that students be given the option to transfer to a 'traditional' freshman seminar class if they so wished. In addition to addressing the ethical issue of voluntary group participation, this practice would contribute to a greater sense of control and ownership for group members. A second factor was that seminar and group attendance policies for all sessions be consistent and be clearly communicated. This should help less motivated students to ascribe the student-led group a status equal to the seminar. Third, sessions should be no less than 75 minutes in length to allow for adequate time for participation and processing. A fourth factor was that although group composition would be based on random assignment, the instructor could make adjustments on the basis of gender and ethnicity prior to announcing group placements. This approach was based on the premise that students should not be assigned to a group where they would feel markedly different from all other members. A final factor was that whenever possible, the ISGs should meet in the same building as the large group seminars.

### **Discussion**

Guskin (1997) noted that faculty tend to focus too little time on factors that impact student learning. He encouraged faculty to become more involved with methods that promote learning such as peer groups, team-oriented activities, and out-of-class experiential learning. 'Factors, such as academic and social integration, faculty-student interaction, and support from other people exert significant indirect effects by acting on achievement and commitment' (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997, p. 611). This kind of systems thinking (Cotter, 1998) challenges faculty and administrators to work as a whole and to search for connections among separate entities-departments, faculty, programs, student services. Likewise, systems thinking forces academic departments and student development specialists alike to work outside individual boxes, look for gaps, and explore potentials for working from a systems perspective.

Forming a collaborative relationship among student affairs and academic disciplines could be likened to interdisciplinary teaching, a direct connection between disciplines and specialties. A multi-dimensional life-skills group model provides a variety of skill-building activities (Picklesimer et al., 1998) that can be used by faculty members, departments, and student development specialists to enhance students' academic and intellectual development. Clark (1993) used life-skills enhancement groups to create an alternative means of providing opportunities for students to receive quality services.

Collaboration 'takes a great deal of time, emotional and intellectual energy, and commitments (Stoddart, 1993, p. 16) as well as the support of administrators (Moseley, 1992) and calls for facing and overcoming obstacles and challenges. Intensive training that includes faculty workshops and in-service sessions, publication of handbooks, faculty mentoring, and the preparation and nurturing

of teaching staff are needed to ensure the effectiveness of any collaborative undertaking (Moseley, 1992). Additionally, safeguards should be taken to minimize the risks of dual relationships that might exist between faculty, student development specialists, students, and peer leaders (Romano, 1998). Although collaboration takes time and effort, Levine (1998) found that faculty who incorporated the Learning Communities Model reported "that the often slow process of building community in a classroom is accelerated in a learning community" (p. 24). Students were observed to converse more with one another and to become more involved in the class. Similar results were reported by the freshman seminar faculty members whose students participated in the ISGs discussed herein. Students who become actively involved in university activities, both curricular and co-curricular, are more likely to remain in college. Freshmen are at the greatest risk of dropping out and are most likely to make gains in learning (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). Student satisfaction and retention are issues that directly impact academic faculty and student affairs staff members. A collaborative ISG life-skills model can provide a link to increasing student satisfaction.

It should be noted that collaborative endeavors are not limited to the classroom. Residence halls provide an important avenue for improving and extending undergraduate education (Pike et al., 1997). Using an intentionally structured life-skills group model in residence halls could assist students as they 'go through a process of separation, transition, and incorporation' (Pike et al., 1997, p. 610). Winston et al. (1988) identified seven student subpopulations appropriate for ISGs including: (a) student paraprofessionals, (b) students in residence halls, (c) foreign students, (d) married students, (e) members of student organizations, (f) students living with parents, and (g) returning adult students. Likewise, ISGs have great utility for in-service training, student leadership training, counseling growth groups, and learning assistance academic program skill groups, among others.

Leadership for these groups could be provided by students in a graduate group counseling course as described in this paper. Other interdepartmental collaborations might also be designed. For instance, student affairs professionals or faculty members in social work, counseling or psychology departments could coordinate the training of group leaders from their own or from other academic programs such as nursing, education, and family sciences. In fact, the ISGs themselves might serve as sources for identifying and recruiting future group leaders.

According to Banta (1993), improving student learning, increasing persistence and graduation, and enhancing postgraduate success are the ultimate goals to improved undergraduate education. It is a reality that higher education must do more with less (Levine, 1997). It is believed that incorporating the collaborative ISG model is clearly one way to offer expanded services to students at no additional expense, using the combined efforts of faculty and student affairs personnel.

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