

Open versus Restricted Enrollment First-Year Seminars: Do Beginning College Students Benefit from Being with Like-Minded Students?

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How important is it for college students to quickly meet and interact with other students and faculty who share their academic interests? Does immediate immersion in academic networks of like-minded individuals result in better initial academic performance? These are important questions not only because initial academic performance is an important predictor of future academic success and eventual graduation (Duby & Schartman, 1997) but also because colleges have some control over student interaction patterns. For example, residence hall assignments can be based on academic major (rather than on building and roommate preferences), academic advising can be done through a student's major department (rather than through a university-wide advising center), and first-year seminar sections can be differentiated by student major (rather than having every section open to students with any major). The current study examines the consequences for initial academic performance of this last choice: enrollment in first-year seminars based on academic major or program versus open enrollment.

Background Literature Related to the Study

Many colleges and universities have adopted some form of first-year seminars as an integral part of their orientation of new students to higher education (Barefoot, 1993). While most first-year seminars bring together students from many different academic majors and interests, many schools designate all or at least some of their sections for students who share some common trait, often the same academic major (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2002).

Arguments for restricted enrollment sections include that they can provide more discipline-specific content and can integrate new majors more quickly into the academic department (Gordon, 1989). Arguments against them include that all first-year students are best treated as undecided about their major and that encountering diversity is an important part of the college experience (Ellis, 1994; Hart, 1995).

While previous studies specifically comparing open versus restricted first-year seminars were not found, work with implications for the present study exists in a variety of fields. Although studying just two-person groups, social psychologists (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Morse & Gergen, 1970) reported greater self-esteem and mutual attraction

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occurring in groups marked by similarity than in those marked by complementarity (dissimilarity). In a classic study of friendship among male undergraduates sharing a residence hall, Newcomb (1961) found that similarity predicted mutual friendship and that the effect of similarity on friendship increases with time as individuals became better acquainted with one another and more aware of their similarities.

When restricted sections are based on academic major, instructors are more likely to teach the student in other classes within the major or serve as the student's academic advisor. Pascarella (1980) reported that students experiencing more contact with faculty report more favorable attitudes toward college, greater personal and intellectual development, some advantage in academic achievement, and greater retention than students having less faculty contact. Tinto (1993) observed that college students who feel integrated into an academic community and/or a peer community are less likely to leave college and that those students who feel a greater congruence between their personal goals and the goals of their peers, their faculty, and their school are more likely to persist.

Based on an analysis of responses from students enrolled in open first-year seminars at a community college, Rhodes and Carifio (1999) predicted that restricted sections of a first-year seminar would result in greater seminar satisfaction. This would be because restricted sections allow course content to be more closely tailored to the academic abilities and life experiences of seminar participants. A cautionary note was raised by Pike, Schroeder, and Berry (1997), who argued that while students living in learning community residence halls report greater student-faculty interaction and institutional commitment, the learning community setting did not directly affect academic achievement or retention. The authors pointed out that their results were based on just a single institution; nevertheless, they suggested caution in estimating the positive effects of grouping students based on a common academic interest.

Research Methods

The current research was based on the fall 2000 entering cohort of new first-year college students at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA). SFA is a comprehensive regional university located in East Texas. The first-year seminar at SFA is titled SFA101. Each section has a faculty instructor (actually a faculty member or a student services professional) and an undergraduate student instructor, and is an elective course meeting for 50 minutes that meets twice per week for the entire fall semester. Students receive one semester credit for the course which is graded pass/fail. In the fall of 2000, 59% of the beginning first-year cohort (1,338 of 2,259 students) enrolled in the course. In the fall 2000 semester, 62 sections of SFA101 were taught, 47 sections were open enrollment and 15 sections were restricted enrollment.

From that fall 2000 entering cohort, the study focused on the experiences of 621 students enrolled in SFA101 and were eligible for a restricted section. Because of their major, academic accomplishments, or career goals, these 621 students were each eligible for one of the following restricted enrollment sections: radio/TV, nursing, kinesiology,

business, honors, and pre-professional. Of these students, 175 enrolled in restricted sections while the remaining 446 enrolled in open-enrollment sections. Reasons why students eligible for restricted sections selected open-enrollment sections included scheduling conflicts with the restricted section meeting times, restricted enrollment sections being already filled, and sometimes simply a preference for open-enrollment sections.

Results

The study was particularly designed to explore the effects of the first semester experiences on student grade point average and retention, and if students who participated in restricted sections were more likely to continue participating in their original major (the one that earned them eligibility for a restricted SFA101 section). As Table 1 shows, students who choose restricted enrollment sections of the first-year seminar have a significantly higher average grade point average after two semesters; a higher, but not statistically significant, one-year retention rate; and are significantly more likely to still be in the same major after two years than students who choose open-enrollment sections. However, Table 1 also shows that students who enroll in restricted sections are more likely to be female, less likely to be minority, have higher average SAT scores, and higher rank in their high school graduating class. Some or all of the differences in academic outcomes between restricted and open enrollment sections may be due to these background differences in students. Further, since the proportion of eligible students enrolling in restricted sections varies by major, what appeared to be the effect of section type may actually be the effect of major. For these reasons, the effect of section type on GPA, retention, and persistence were analyzed controlling for student prior characteristics and major.

Although students in restricted sections had higher GPAs, better retention, and better persistence, Table 2 shows that these results are not uniform across all six majors. Students in restricted sections had a higher average GPA in four of the six majors, higher retention in just three of the six majors, and higher persistence in just three of the six majors. Once student data were stratified into major groups, the advantage of restricted sections seemed much less certain.

A still more sophisticated approach to the problem is multiple regression analysis which allows us to examine the effect of section type while statistically controlling for both major and prior characteristics such as gender, minority status, SAT, and high school graduating class rank. In accounting for grade point average, ordinary least squares regression was used. Logistic regression is used to account for retention and persistence since both those dependent variables are dichotomies. Table 3 very briefly summarizes the results, indicating which predictor variables had statistically significant effects.

The effect of section type on GPA appears negligible once student prior characteristics and major are taken into account. All four background characteristics have statistically significant net effects. After controlling for other factors, women,

non-minorities, high SAT scoring students, and high-ranking high school graduates are more likely to have higher grade point averages. Compared to business majors (the omitted category), only being an honors student has a statistically significant net effect on grade point average. That effect is positive. The net effect of being in a restricted section on grade point average is actually negative but slight and not significant.

Significant predictors of one-year retention were cumulative GPA after two semesters, high school graduating class rank, and being in the honors program. Students with higher grade point averages were more likely to return for a second year at the university. Interestingly, higher ranking high school graduates were more likely to leave the university which may be due to their transferring to larger, more prestigious schools. Compared to business majors, students in the honors program were more likely to return for a second year. Being in a restricted enrollment first-year seminar has a small, non-significant, negative effect on one-year retention.

Data were unable to predict whether students who stay at the university will stay in their original major. Although being in a restricted section did have a positive effect, none of the individual variables in the equation were statistically significant.

The analysis was concluded by switching to a different level of analysis and looking at the sections themselves in terms of internal student diversity. For that, the unit of analysis became the section itself as the 47 open sections were compared to the 15 restricted sections.

Do students encounter less diversity in their fellow students within restricted enrollment first-year seminars than they would encounter if they enrolled in open-enrollment sections? Using the four student background characteristics of gender, ethnicity, SAT score, and high school rank, the commonly held assumption that open-enrollment sections bring together a more diverse group of students than do restricted-enrollment sections was tested. While by definition this is true regarding academic major since enrollment in restricted sections requires participation in a specific major, is it true regarding these other student characteristics? The standard deviation within each of the 62 sections of SFA101 on each of these four characteristics was calculated. The higher the value of the standard deviation, the greater the diversity within that section, and the open-enrollment sections averaged greater diversity in gender, ethnicity, and academic ability (both SAT scores and high school rank). All of the differences were small, however, and none were statistically significant.

Discussion

Initial differences between students in restricted and in open sections appeared to be substantial. Once student background characteristics and major were taken into account, however, the effects of section type became small, inconsistent, and non-significant. Students with different background characteristics and students in different majors often differ substantially and significantly in terms of academic outcomes, but whether those students enroll in open or restricted sections of the first-year seminar seems to matter very little.

So, why offer restricted sections? Little advantage to students in enrolling in them was initially identified. Restricted sections might not even assist the academic department by keeping students in the major at higher rates than open-enrollment sections. Perhaps the best answer, though, to the question of why restricted sections is “why not?” Ironically, this analysis which has generally failed to find reasons to offer restricted sections has also lessened the arguments against restricted sections. One criticism was that a purpose of college is to introduce the student to other students with diverse backgrounds (Ellis, 1994). The current study identified less diversity of student characteristics in restricted sections, but not a significant difference in diversity. Another criticism was that most beginning college students should be treated as undecided majors (Hart, 1995) and that restricted sections lock students into majors too early. Our analysis has shown, however, that students are as likely to change majors or withdraw from academic programs if they went through restricted sections as they are if they went through open sections.

Because these results are from just one entering cohort at one university, because restricted sections may affect academic outcomes at universities with student populations different from SFA’s student population, and because restricted sections may have important consequences not investigated here, the present analysis is offered as exploratory. The results should encourage other colleges and universities to investigate similar questions. The current study will be replicated in the future at SFA, and the student and faculty preferences for and outcomes from restricted sections by major will be closely examined.

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TABLE 1

Averages for Students in Restricted and Open-Enrollment Sections

Variable	Enrolled in Restricted Section	Enrolled in Open Section ¹	Total
GPA after 2 semesters	2.30	2.12 *	2.17 (N=621) ²
One-year retention (0=no, 1=yes)	0.62	0.59	0.60 (N=621)
Still in major after 2 years (0=no, 1=yes)	0.81	0.70 *	0.73 (N=298) ³
Female (0=no, 1=yes)	0.66	0.54 **	0.57 (N=621)
Minority (0=no, 1=yes)	0.26	0.34 *	0.32 (N=621)
SAT score	980.17	962.00	967.12 (N=621)
HSrank (0=low, 100=high)	70.98	65.98 **	67.39 (N=606)

¹ Independent samples t-test for difference in group means

* significant at .05 or less

** significant at .01 or less

² GPA after one semester is used for GPA after two semesters for the 14 percent of the students who left the university after one semester.

³ Only students still at the university after two years are used in analyses of persistence in original major.

TABLE 2

GPA, Retention, and Persistence in Major by Student Group and Section Type

student group	# of students	cumulative GPA after 2 semesters	12-month retention	still in 1st major after 2 years
honors program				
in restricted sections	19	3.21	95%	79%
in open sections	9	3.27	89%	86%
business majors				
in restricted sections	56	2.07	52%	88%
in open sections	266	2.05	57%	71%
kinesiology majors				
in restricted sections	24	2.51	71%	93%
in open sections	20	2.00	55%	62%
radio/TV majors				
in restricted sections	18	1.87	39%	67%
in open sections	10	2.52	80%	100%
nursing majors				
in restricted sections	26	2.26	58%	70%
in open sections	42	2.21	59%	73%
pre-professional program				
in restricted sections	32	2.29	72%	75%
in open sections	99	2.18	61%	62%

TABLE 3

Summary of Regression Analyses

	cumulative GPA after 2 semesters	12-month retention	still in 1st major after 2 years
Female	positive **	n.s.	n.s.
Minority	negative *	n.s.	n.s.
SAT Score	positive **	n.s.	n.s.
High School Rank	positive **	negative **	n.s.
Honors Major	positive **	positive *	n.s.
Kinesiology Major	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Radio/TV Major	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Nursing Major	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Pre-professional Major	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Restricted Section	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
2 semester GPA		positive **	
2 year GPA			n.s.
overall equation	N = 606 F = 19.2 ** Pearson R ² = .23	N = 606 Chi-Square = 151.5 ** Nagelkerke R ² = .30	N = 292 Chi-Square = 12.8 Nagelkerke R ² = .06

* Significant at .05 or less

** Significant at .01 or less