

**MAKING MEMORIAL STUDENT-READY:  
Reflections on the First Year Success Experience**

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*Edited by Valerie Burton, 2016*



Faculty of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

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## Opening doors

I had no way out  
from under the in-between.  
All doors were closed, so I thought,  
until someone came and intervened.  
Judging me on where I might go,  
instead of where I've been,  
they opened up a door,  
and let me in.

*Iain McCurdy*

*Poet Laureate of First Year Success and University 1500 instructor*

## INTRODUCTION: **First Year Success**

IN SEPTEMBER 2012, Memorial University launched a pilot project aimed at students who entered the university with grades that predicted their chances of graduating were slim. Conceived by the university's Teaching and Learning Framework, the First Year Success (FYS) Program addresses the difficulties of students with admission averages between 70% and 75% by offering them an enriched first-year experience. The Program combines three dedicated credit-bearing courses with academic and career advising, small class sizes, and the support of a learning community (see [fig. 1](#)). Cohort support extends into Mathematics in the Fall and English in the Winter semester. FYS was an initiative undertaken early in the existence of the Framework and the Program remains its boldest and most comprehensive innovation yet. As far as we know, its emphasis on students entering the university in the lowest grade band is unmatched among transitional programs offered by universities in Canada.

It was by the suggestion of John Hoben, Teaching Consultant at Memorial, that colleagues contributed to “a success portfolio.” This way we might encourage reflection on FYS as the work of a community rather than any one individual: “What matters,” he said, a few days after one of the regular FYS team meetings, “is not just a set of qualities or capacities intrinsic to the individual, but rather something that inheres within the relationships between individuals that collectively constitute a community.” We had been successful in making these relationships, John observed; in doing so we had created new and important spaces in a pluralist educational landscape. There, students of whom perhaps no one before had thought very much might do more than survive the education that would get them a degree or diploma. Yet if they were to be encouraged to exceed what they expected of themselves, their expectations of post-secondary education also had to change, and that put a different complexion on transformation in the university.

John emphasized that the bar had been set high for FYS: “reversing trends that have been ongoing for years with a handful of courses is daunting,” he said. It was timely, then, to see a Vice President in the US issuing a wake-up call about how a past of deterring students who were not paradigmatically “college-ready” weighed heavily in North American institutions (White, 2016). Bryon P. White's term for the institution that has transformed

itself to be inclusive by being “student-ready” serves us well in the title of this publication. It both describes our existing achievements and sets out our further ambitions for the FYS project.

The collaborators in the FYS Program have worked to see the concept of a particular group of students in need of remediation rescinded. Whether as instructors or academic advisors we advocate against the reductive and destructive notion that our students are simply failures. An always-emergent learning process is at the heart of FYS and “a still to be developed capacity” informs our pedagogy. Activities with students are shown as organized by goals more abstract and personally meaningful than are supported by traditional didactic teaching and learning. Thus the essays provide practical insights even as they stress the ethical responsibility to facilitate inclusive learning.

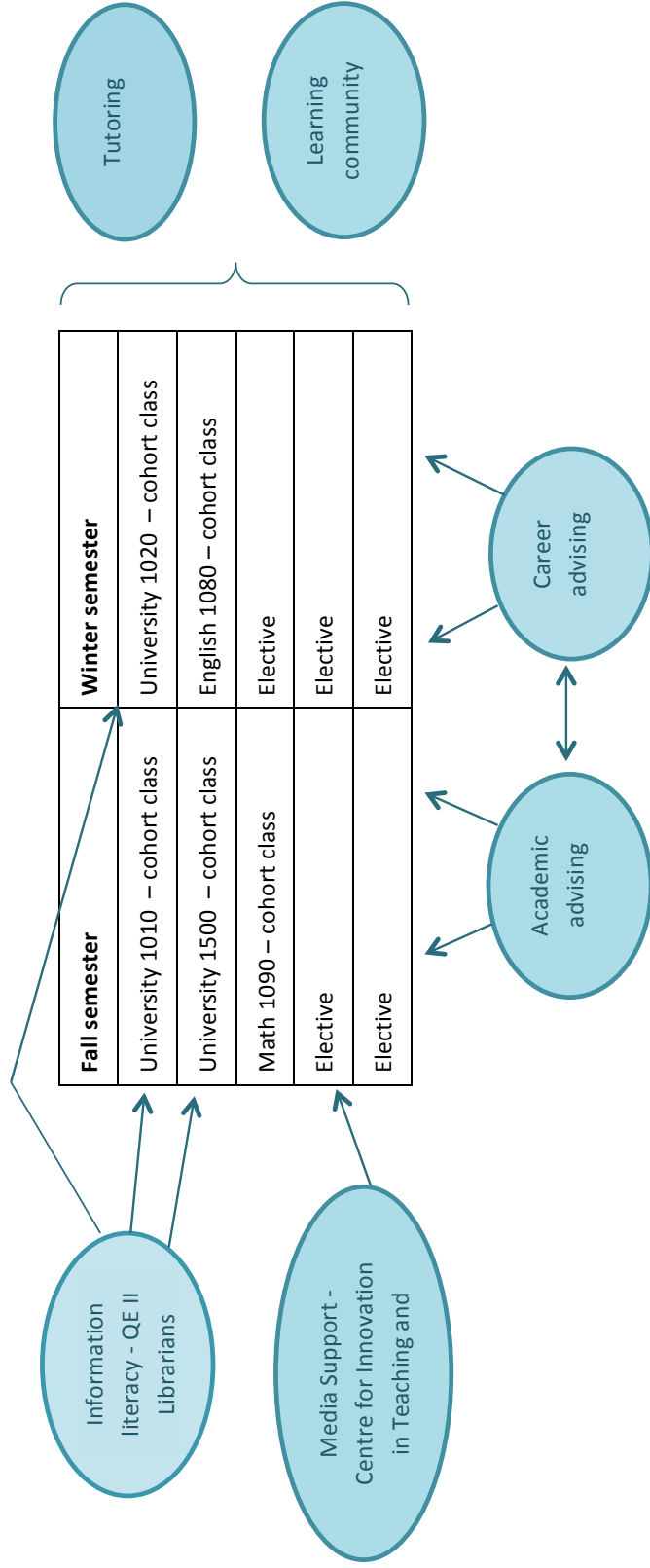
This collection concerns student-centred teaching, yet only indirectly does it incorporate a student voice. The commentary by the Memorial Student Union (MUNSU) representatives mostly treats student involvement in the governance of FYS, though not without making clear that their involvement springs from the importance of the Program to Memorial’s undergraduates. Student reflections on their own experiences in FYS were thought best captured in another medium. The Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning provided video-taping facilities and Program alumni were invited to a freewheeling discussion coordinated by their colleague from MUNSU ([How did First Year Go?](#)). While the results may be said to speak for themselves, what the video is particularly effective in showing are the symmetries of student–instructor perspectives on how FYS has begun to serve Memorial in making itself “student-ready.”

Valerie Burton  
Academic Director of the First Year Success Program

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Figure 1: Components of the FYS program



**FYS course descriptions**

- University 1010 helps students develop critical thinking, information literacy, communications skills, self-awareness and understanding of the university.
- University 1500 teaches the writing skills required across all subject areas in the university.
- University 1020 broadens the students' understanding of the multi-disciplinary nature of the university in plenaries (and follow-up workshops) with researchers from throughout Memorial.

**Advising in the FYS program**

- Academic advisors contact prospective students once they've applied to Memorial to introduce the FYS program and explain the benefits of taking part.
- Throughout the spring and summer, advisors help student choose courses, plan their first year of studies and learn more about campus resources.
- Once the semester begins, academic and career advisors visit FYS classes and engage the students in activities that illustrate how advising can help them during their first year.
- Advisors encourage students to sign up for individual appointments at the Academic Advising Centre or the Centre for Career Development and Experiential Learning to explore their academic and career goals.

READING AND  
WRITING INSTRUCTION:  
**Enabling students  
(in more ways  
than I anticipated)**

.....  
*Iain McCurdy*

MAKING GENERALIZATIONS about what I may have learned about students and teaching in First Year Success (FYS) is risky because different things will emerge, semester by semester and class by class: the Program itself will never be static. But on the basis of a rich and rewarding year as the University 1500 instructor, I want to use my space in this white paper to comment on significant elements in the Program and make particular reference to its reading and writing course component. Just as my teaching is student-centred, so will be this narrative.

I have been pleasantly surprised by the level of engagement shown by the students (Wendell, 2009). In truth, when I knew that the Program's targeted recruitment would bring a majority of students who had been challenged by high school into my University 1500 classes, I prepared for indifference and disengagement. But, as it turned out, keenness was not lacking in my classroom. Many students went above and beyond the effort I was expecting for assignments, particularly when these were exercises that did not intimidate by an extensive research requirement. So, not long into my first delivery of University 1500, I realized there was more scope than I had anticipated for student-centred learning. I needed to cut short my didactic "lessons" and instead afford students the time and space to complete brief reading or writing assignments (Kember, 1997). A class discussion could thus ensue and this could become the focus of the session.

Imagine a class that is asked to write about the bag that I had placed before them. I had brought it to every class: this bag was eminently familiar, but with the invitation to an exercise in description it became newly strange and thus a novelty at the centre of attention. Imagine the students as they began to compare descriptions and as they discovered that no two people had seen the same "bag" or used the same words or format in their description. A particular and perhaps lasting purpose was served when the class reached the point that it saw specificity was needed to carry discussion and analysis further. At the next step in this lesson in writing with precision we considered how their text would pan out if instead of writing about the bag descriptively they wrote analytically. As the chalkboard filled with suggestions and pointers, I build upon the class's ideas, underscoring that we were talking about task-appropriate modes of communication.



## University 1500: A Map

Plenary	Workshop Activity	Assignments (Examples)
1. Introducing the Course: what is critical reading and writing?	Critically Reading the Syllabus.	Goals: Articulating goals for life, university, and for University 1500.
2. The Basics of Language: how do we communicate at all?	The vagueness workshop: what does it mean when we use words like good or bad.	Pitch an essay topic, paying particular attention to avoiding vague language.
3. Logical Fallacies: just because it looks like an argument doesn't mean that it's a duck.	Small group discussion on the essay pitches from week 2.	Writing a thesis statement, three topic sentences, and a concluding topic sentence for an essay topic.
4. The Textbook: just because you don't like grammar doesn't mean that it doesn't like you.	Class discussion on the various kinds of grammar that are used in everyday life.	Making a delicious essay reduction by boiling it down to less than ten words.
5. The words for all the different kinds of words	Freestyle writing exercise: consider an essay topic and represent it in any form desired, be it poetry, drawing, etc.	Take two simple ideas and grow them into a large compound sentence by adding dependent clauses, interrupting modifiers, adjectival phrases etc.
6. The sentence continued	A class reading and discussion of Lewis Carroll's <i>Jabberwocky</i> .	Write a paragraph using both simple and compound subjects and verbs.
7. It's your verb against mine	Describing your weekend while considering how verb tense affects meaning.	The dreaded 70 sentence verb assignment.
8. Noun you're talking about it	Describing my tote bag from many perspectives.	Describing a place on campus.
9. Let's go deeper	Plato's Cave discussion.	Applying Plato's Cave to last week's description assignment.
10. Critical reading and research	Discussing academic sources, popular sources, and advertising.	Annotated bibliography.
11. Putting it all together	Class reading of different kinds of essays.	The citation game.
12. A final paper	Less talk, more editing.	The final paper.

Group meditations of this kind allowed me to gauge student interests and abilities. Meanwhile students got to know me. Even several weeks into the semester I was not, however, able say with any certainty which of the students had left high school with a high average and which with a low average. The reasons for this incommensurability from high school to university are particular and highly variable, but the disparity can be striking. Of the three students whom I would select from my Fall group as most likely to progress beyond a first degree, one came with such low grades that they were accepted to Memorial only after requesting special consideration. When I have received a poorly written paper it is not hard to see that its author does not lack ability or intellect. Rather the wisdom lacking is to how to channel thoughts into a coherent written piece. This is why FYS speaks to me of

tapping once-denied potential (White, 2016). It provides an entry point for students who are capable, but whose high school experience might well have worked for them in other ways than as an apprenticeship for university (Haggis & Pouget, 2002). In NL it is simply not realistic to expect that every high school principal will see the latter as the pre-eminent purpose of their school's curriculum. Students fitting the institutional description of "challenged" turned out to be an asset in my classroom, and this is why I have disabused myself of predictions based on students' high school records.

By achieving institutional comfort students are able to position themselves for a productive university career (Yearwood 2006). In FYS's first semester University 1500 is one of two core courses that interlock to provide the basis for a comfortable university transition ([fig.1](#)). Growth in confidence requires risk taking and vice versa. As I know all too well from other initiatives in which I have been involved on campus, insecurity is debilitating and dispiriting. Almost two-thirds of students responding to Memorial's First Year Experience Survey indicate the factor of stress management as one they need to cope with better (CIAP, FYE Survey 2013, p. 2). While an experienced and hard-nosed academic might not see any risk entailed to a student presenting themselves at their office, for a young person new to campus office hours can be intimidating. Many FYS students have come regularly to see me in my office. I put this down to more than their settling into a comfortable relationship with me: it is a reflection on the inclusive ethos of the Program. They are stronger students for belonging to a first year cohort where relationships are fostered and advisors and supporters are available to them in case of crisis.

I was surprised by how forthcoming students were when reaching out to me for help, and often when they did so I was astounded by what difficulties their lives presented. Still they worked towards finishing their semester and passing my course. Making students aware of channels of communication early is the difference to a student disappearing in a crisis or showing up to figure out a way to make it work. Support I provided one student experiencing a mental health crisis contributed to them completing their semester. We worked out a realistic plan; they accomplished what was required, and while their grade was not great, under these circumstances passing was an achievement. Then the pay-off came in the subsequent semester when they accomplished some exceptional work.

There are two things that I have found challenging as an instructor over the past year. There is no point in disguising the reluctance of students to read scholarly articles and essays especially when this literature concerns

matters in which they not inherently interested. Many instructors notice this in their students, and at all years of undergraduate study. But we are pioneers and are looking at ways of coping with it. Library assistance in the University 1500 and 1010 classes is one component. Yet even after students are at ease with locating suitable literature it is the instructor's job to encourage the sense of form and content, and evidence and argument, without which students will remain forever naïve in a world of sophisticated textual, visual, and verbal communication. In University 1500 I am not inclined to give a lot of grade-weight to quizzes that specifically evaluate reading. The alternative is engaging students with ideas and this means encouraging them to take an interest, sometimes in matters where none has existed before. There are students who are keen for exposure to different ideas and others who can only be drawn by material touching on a personal interest. Challenging as it is to find common ground in this diverse cohort I am learning the significance of listening to students and starting where they are, which is not by any means to say to limiting literature to only what would come their way and intrigue them during a day tuned into social media. FYS works to establish by non-prejudicial and non-judgmental methods that there are richer seams in life and that this is part of the rationale for becoming a degree-holding citizen.

Finally, I ask myself a question that I commonly task students with as they review a paper draft: "what is your most important point in this piece, and how does its content and structure help the reader to see its significance?". Thus, at its end, I turn to the process of identifying the most salient aspect of this reflection.

The Program as it appears to me has created a place at this institution for students who have the ability to succeed at university but who might not otherwise have access to it or have found reason to persevere once admitted. I take encouragement from research elsewhere that has shown students' perceptions of their current learning environment to be a stronger predictor of learning outcomes at university than prior achievement at school (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002). I also know that even when they reach the end of my course a student's final mark isn't always the indicator of their ultimate academic potential. Some truly excellent people would have been lost to the institution in an attrition that counts against new students who are engaged by projects and ideas usually reserved to senior undergraduates. Yes, the Program has been and will continue to address the needs of a whole raft of students admitted in the lowest grade bands, and many will find their aspirations satisfied by simply getting a degree. But it is also laying the foundation

for excellence in its provocation to students, faculty and administrators alike to think differently about a university education. My role in this is to provide an experience whereby no matter what students start with, by the end of the semester they will be able to see their own improvement as critical readers, writers and thinkers. After only two semesters of working with the Program I am left confident of an environment that makes this task possible. I think that the community model works, the student-centric approach works, the openness to complex needs and exceptionalities works, and I think the students are absolutely better off as a result.

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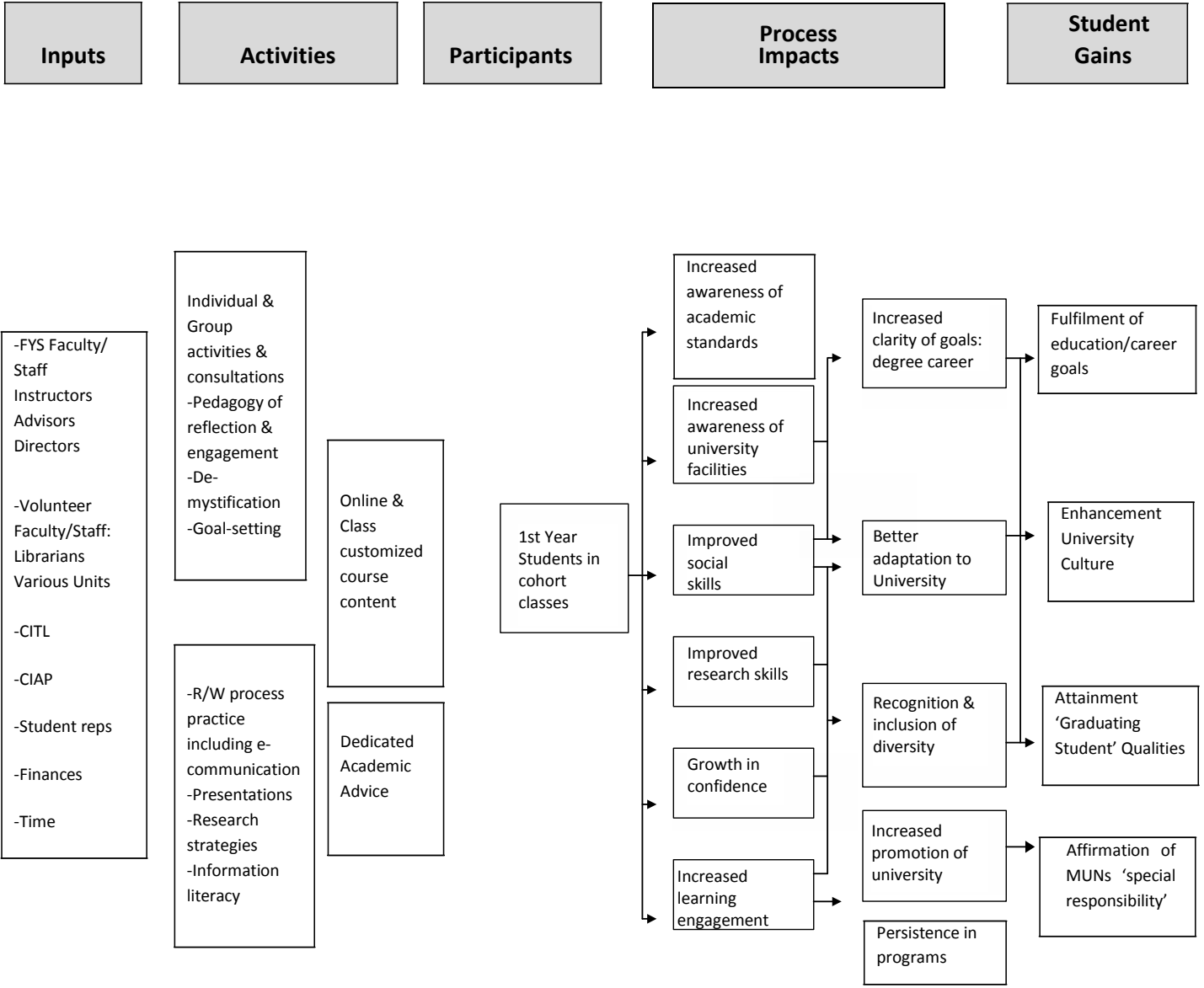


Figure 2: The Student Process in FYS

UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE:

**Community as a  
support to and  
context for learning**

.....  
*Matt Lidstone*

THE SUCCESS OF THE FIRST YEAR SUCCESS (FYS) PROGRAM emanates from its reliance on community and connectivity. In my FYS classrooms during the two semesters I have taught in FYS I have been amazed to see time and again how often it was a collaborative effort on both sides of the classroom that contributed to positive learning outcomes. The community of students that FYS establishes from day one is, in my opinion, the single most important factor of the success of this unique program. Unlike the typical experience, the built-in community of peers acted like a social safety net for these potentially vulnerable new students. To see familiar faces across multiple classes and to have the ability to talk to classmates outside of the program aided in the otherwise daunting transition to the academic world. This stood out to me when I taught the University 1010 class this past winter as a stand-alone offering—though my approach in the classroom was quite similar to past offerings, the sense of community was not established as quickly. The classroom comfort that comes to students with time took longer to develop. I had always considered this established student community to be a strong asset of the program, but its impact was never as noticeable as when its absence revealed its significance.

The community that was established (and continues to evolve) on the other side of the classroom has proven to be just as significant and important to my success as an FYS instructor. Though I have only been involved in teaching for five years, I am confident in saying that the group of people that work together to make FYS happen makes for a teaching experience unlike any other. This is not a brilliant insight on my part: we are all aware of how many people behind the scenes contribute to this Program and can see that the community of people is pretty terrific, partisan as we may be. But from an instructor's perspective, I am talking about how much I improved in the classroom when I began to collaborate with my fellow instructor, and by that I mean the instructor of the FYS course with which my own was twinned in fall semester ([fig.1](#)). Working alongside other instructors changed my lecture and content approach immensely, as we tried to achieve programs that complimented one another, with activities and assignments that dovetailed (hopefully) and filled in the pedagogical gaps of each other's course structure. There were formal and informal

opportunities to bounce ideas off my fellow instructors. Preparing a joint paper and then an article from a presentation to the Atlantic Canadian delegates of a Teaching Showcase sealed our collaboration (Burton, Lidstone, Ryan, 2016). Similarly, my work with the librarians allowed for a change of scenery for my students and afforded them the opportunity to integrate library technologies into their learning experience. Hands-on real-time research methods were always more effective than a lecture alone.

#### University 1010: A Map

Objective	General Topics	Potential Assignments
Self-Awareness & The Academic Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of the University</li> <li>• Setting Goals &amp; the Reality of the Academic Process</li> <li>• Managing student Life and Understanding the Student Role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Assessment</li> <li>• Preconceived Notions of the University &amp; Goal Settings: A Personal Academic Trajectory</li> </ul>
Critical Thinking Meets Creative Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing the Concept</li> <li>• How to Analyze like a University Student</li> <li>• Deconstructing the Source/Reconstructing a Potential Thesis</li> <li>• Methodology into Method</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretation and Beyond Content Analysis</li> <li>• Designing Questions, The Professor Performance</li> </ul>
Information Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using the Library: A Student's Number One Resource</li> <li>• Acquiring Appropriate (Re) Sources: Wheat v. Chaff</li> <li>• E-Scholarship &amp; Using Online Sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several Research/Computer Based Exercises in the Library, Some Guided by the Librarians</li> </ul>
Learning & Study Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review, Research, Pointed Analytics, and Reading with Purpose</li> <li>• Close Reading</li> <li>• Memory, Efficacy, Note Taking, Organization, and the Like</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing Detailed Notes to Transfer Information</li> <li>• Separating the Paramount from the Erroneous: Efficient and Effective Reading</li> </ul>
University Navigation & Maximizing Resource Potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making the Most of Where You are: Opening Doors and Creating Accessibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring the University and its Many Resources: Exploring a Chosen Area Via Interview, Online Research, etc.</li> </ul>
Communication(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective Writing Strategies: Preparing an Academic Document</li> <li>• Presentation Skills and Approaching an Audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building an Essay From Scratch: The PPE Strategies</li> </ul>
Research, Reflection, Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application of the Acquired Skillset: Opening the Toolbox</li> <li>• Bringing it all Together for a Specific Disciplinary Purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annotated Bibliography</li> <li>• Expanding into the Long-Form Essay</li> <li>• Writing More Without Saying Less</li> </ul>

Which brings me to my next observation: the students responded better to a structured setting with tangible, meaningful goals. When I taught 1500, writing exercises alone were not enough; it was when I anchored them in “real-world” applications or showed how they connected to other areas of the academic world, that they became focused (Burton, Lidstone, Ryan, 2016). I had to get away from the conception that assignments were done for marks alone and highlight how these exercises were specifically designed and chosen to lay the foundation for skills they would need as they continued as students. Making learning meaningful made the students take things a lot more seriously. Establishing that this is a commitment not unlike any job that requires effort and results in skill acquisition was an essential characteristic of my teaching style that I continue to find effective. Discovering why those skills deserve effort and thus acquiring what makes the difference between exercising curiosity and merely enacting routine is the student’s prerogative at university.

First Year Success has changed me as an educator: as a nascent program populated with educators with many unique backgrounds, it made me aware of my own pedagogical approach. The self-awareness that arose from being part of a team that is committed to creating an orientational university experience forced me to continually course-correct and adjust spontaneously. Some of my lectures and assignments were not as successful as others, and because I know that not all reached their mark I continue to modify my approach—especially now that I have transitioned from the 1500 instructor to the 1010 instructor. The modification and growth that FYS forces upon me has been essential to how I approach each new semester and each individual lecture therein.

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MATHEMATICS  
FOR FYS:  
**Limiting numbers  
adds up**

.....  
*Beth Ann Austin*

AS A LECTURER IN THE MATHEMATICS DEPARTMENT, my role in the First Year Success (FYS) program was to instruct the section of the first year Algebra and Trigonometry course that was reserved for FYS students. This course is a prerequisite for many programs, making it a popular choice for first year students, but its broad range of topics means that it is also a challenge. For FYS students, the class is capped at no more than 40 students. This small class size meant I would be able to know my students, see when they were struggling, and spend extra time addressing individual issues.

There is evidence to support the benefits of small class sizes for students. Studies have shown that “larger classes determine a significant and sizeable negative effect on student performance in mathematics...the negative effect of class size is significantly larger for low-ability students,” (De Paola, Ponzio & Scoppa, 2013, p.151) making this result particularly relevant for FYS students. The best results are seen in the smallest of classes, with one study noting that “it might be preferable to reduce a smaller class even more than to divide a larger lecture class into several medium-size classes” (Johnson 2010, p.721). By keeping the class capped at much less than the usual size of 100 or more students, we maximize the benefits of a small learning group and allow the students to develop a community in the classroom.

It was clear very early on that the small class setting made a difference to the FYS students. They offered answers to problems we worked on together and asked questions when ideas were unclear—something I’ve seldom seen in other first year classes. This initial interaction led me to bring more active learning to the classroom. As we learned new topics, I gave the students problems to work on in class. This allowed me to see where students ran into trouble so that we could develop strategies to approach problems, and to recognize when something had gone wrong. On the course evaluation questionnaires at the end of the term, one student said, “The amount of feedback and student aid given was great. Definitely made it easier to figure out where my mistakes were made and how I could fix them” (CEQ Math 1090-004 Fall 2014). Working together throughout the term was an important step towards student understanding, and led to a learning community in the classroom with the students actively involved.

This individualized approach with constant feedback made me consider my methods in other courses. In a large lecture hall, it can be easy to lose sight of the individual student—and just as easy for students to feel like just another name on a list. It is difficult to foster the same kind of community feeling that encourages open questioning and involvement, but I began to see steps that could be taken to bring students into their learning. I began assigning in-class questions for students to work on in all of my classes, and working through the solutions step-by-step while pointing out where common errors might occur. In an effort to see where students struggle, I have also been exploring some of the technologies, such as TopHat and Learning Catalytics, that exist to have students ask and answer questions in class with the results delivered to me in real time. I can display questions in class and have students submit their answers using phones or laptops. The solutions are tabulated to show me how many students correctly worked out the problem, as well as telling individual students how they performed. This has allowed me to give the constant feedback needed to keep students on track, and lets me know when I need to review topics even if the class doesn't ask questions directly.

Exam results are not the only concern in a classroom. Interactions with both instructors and fellow students form connections with great implications, since “academic and social integration facilitate student persistence through college” (Beattie & Thiele, 2016, 351). A single instructor has a finite amount of time for individual interactions, so a smaller class will naturally allow for a stronger student-teacher connection. In the coming year, I hope to coordinate meetings with all FYS students in my class to hear concerns and address any problems at an early stage. This should help to enhance the ongoing communication throughout all levels of the program as everyone works to the common goal of overcoming the challenges faced by these students. Although large classes give a greater number of peers, it seems to result in fewer peer interactions—especially for minorities and first-generation students who see the most benefit from this integration (CEQ Math 1090-004 Fall 2015). The capped FYS math class certainly contributes to these interactions, as does the overarching community built by the program. The students share multiple classes and work together on a regular basis. All of this leads to a community where students are comfortable asking questions, and can learn from each other as well as from the instructor-provided resources.

The First Year Success program is about more than acquisition of knowledge; it leads students towards the independent study and critical thinking needed to succeed in university. For math in particular, this necessitates a

change of perspective for many students who have come to feel that math is an insurmountable task—an obstacle on their way to other things. By bringing students into the act of learning, I hope to foster an understanding of the principles behind the math they learn, so they can to apply them to a variety of situations. Working through problems also allows students to solve problems independently early in the course and throughout the term, showing them that they are capable of understanding. The students' comments on the course evaluation questionnaires speak for themselves. One student said “I've never been amazing at math or a fan but Beth really made sense and helped me boost my confidence in math” (CEQ Math 1090-004 Fall 2015). Regardless of the grades achieved, this attitude is what I consider success in the course. A student who understands the basics and has confidence in themselves is set up to be a lifelong learner, discovering knowledge on their own and sharing it with others.

As an institution, this is the kind of student we want to send into the world: one who can take the seeds of knowledge we plant and nurture them for a lifetime (Qualities of the Graduate). My experiences with FYS have shown me that individual attention and active involvement help students to form this kind of perspective. The comment I received more often than any in terms of what helped students is that I cared about them and wanted them to succeed. That feeling should not be rare for students. Let us build a community of learning throughout the university that lets every student know that we care, and that we are all working together to prepare them for the future.

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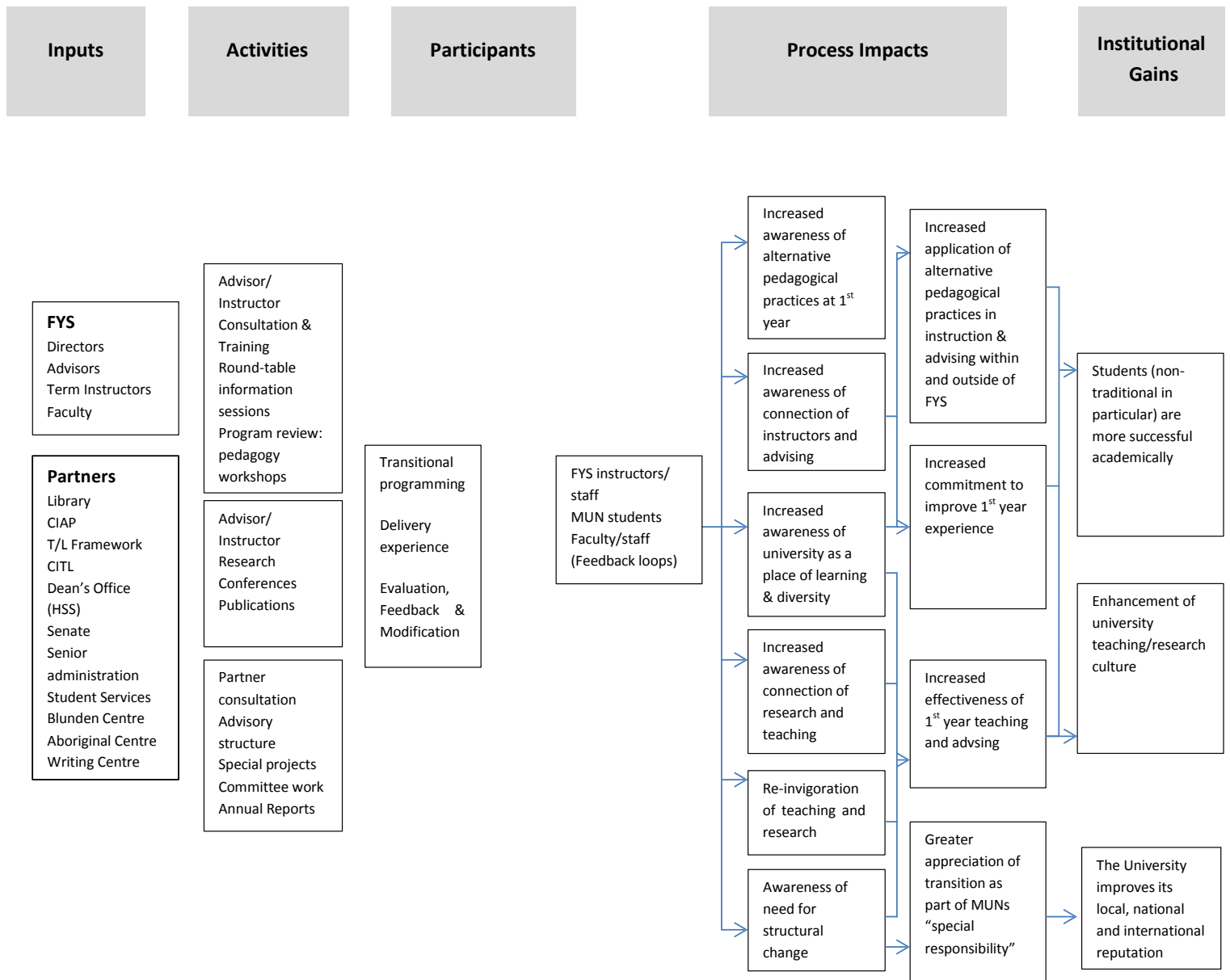


Figure 3: The Faculty/Staff Process in FYS

THE LIBRARY IN FYS:  
**From skill training to  
conceptual awareness**

.....  
*Janet Goosney,  
Jeannie Bail,  
and Lorna Adcock*

**Library contributions to the overall strategy for assisting student transition.**

Evidence collected at Memorial points to a clear need for library support in the first year. For example, students responding to the Centre for Institutional Analysis and Planning (CIAP) first-year experience survey have consistently identified “library skills” (out of a list of 10 skill-sets) as an area for which they felt least prepared coming into Memorial. For example in the 2013 survey, the question on skills preparedness found that out of 3 (3=well prepared; 1=not prepared), students had a mean of 1.6 (Centre for Institutional Analysis and Planning, 2013, p. 2).

Although first year students at Memorial most often receive their library exposure as a “one-shot” session focusing on the processes of information discovery, their information literacy (IL) needs are actually much broader. The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015), adopted by university and college libraries in North America, encompasses threshold concepts such as “Scholarship as Conversation” and “Searching as Strategic Exploration,” which have been integrated into the FYS IL curricula with the goal of preparing students for undergraduate studies. As librarian and educator Michelle Simmons (2005) points out, undergraduates must learn both “the domain content and the disciplinary discourse or rhetorical processes of their chosen field,” but that frequently “the domain content receives the lion’s share of instructional time...even though students often struggle to learn the tacitly communicated rhetorical processes” (p. 297). FYS as a whole introduces students explicitly to these rhetorical processes by teaching students academic writing strategies, promoting critical thinking, and, in 1020, helping them begin to examine the modes of thought and discourse of different disciplines. For our part, we contribute to this process by helping students to engage in situated information literacy, and by exploring threshold concepts that support both IL and university-level discourse.

**Narratives of success & transformation**

First Year Success has helped to transform the way IL is taught and learned in first year, at least within the confines of this program, as we have moved away

from traditional “one-shot” library instruction toward a fully integrated, sustained IL curriculum and from a skill-oriented approach toward a broader, more critical and concept-oriented perspective on information literacy. In building the FYS IL model, we cannot emphasize enough the benefits of collaborations that have taken place between librarians and course instructors, as well as student services providers and program administrators. Researchers such as Booth, Lowe, Tagge and Stone (2015) have identified a clear positive connection between librarian/faculty collaboration and student learning, finding that “higher levels of faculty/student interaction with librarians (and thus more intensive engagement with IL concepts) improved authentic student IL performance in first year.... Simply put, the quantity of librarian engagement was a clear correlate to the quality of student learning” (p. 635).

The IL components of FYS emphasize the transferability of knowledge from both a teaching perspective and a learning perspective. For example, librarian engagement in both University 1010 and University 1500 has helped students, instructors, and librarians to forge connections between these two parallel courses. Although the majority of IL has been taught in 1010, cross-course communication, efforts to link both syllabi with the IL curriculum, and the well-timed application in University 1500 of concepts taught in University 1010 helps to reinforce ideas and promote learning transfer.

As teachers, the librarians also deeply value the opportunity afforded by the FYS program to build relationships with students through sustained interactions over the course of two semesters. This relationship-building in turn promotes a sense of awareness, comfort, and even ownership of the library, which helps to reduce library anxiety and contributes to positive help-seeking and IL behaviors in FYS graduates.

Finally, library involvement in First Year Success has led us, as with all members of the FYS team, to think broadly about how success is realized. For example, if a student has been fully engaged in FYS and it has helped them to recognize that they wish to pursue a different path, is that not a success, even if it leads them away from the university? At the other end of the spectrum, we know of one former FYS student who is nearing graduation and has expressed an interest in librarianship as a profession.

### **Impact of the program on FYS librarians**

It goes without saying that our teaching experiences help us to grow and evolve as teachers ([fig. 3](#)). FYS has provided the librarians involved with a unique opportunity to expand our instructional practice; to experiment and

develop new strategies and methodologies; and to discover new ways to foster information literacy. In turn, these discoveries have enriched our contributions to other teaching & learning initiatives as elements of the FYS IL curriculum have been adapted, shared, or have otherwise informed our work in non-FYS instruction. For example, a class in University 1010 on reading academic literature, introduced in 2014, has been valuable for developing other, non-FYS classes on this topic. FYS IL content has also informed the development of the online Academic Integrity Course currently under development.

Librarians involved in FYS have also learned a great deal about collaborative design and teaching through working with each other and with the entire FYS team. Instructor and librarian partnerships have helped to advance the FYS IL curriculum and also to refine our approach to student evaluation, using detailed rubrics to create a shared understanding of expectations and outcomes and provide consistent feedback across instructors and semesters.

Cross-campus collaboration has also improved our understanding of the range of supports available to students. For example, while we have always been aware of and referred students to the Academic Advising Centre, we now feel that we have a fuller understanding of how they work with and support students. This useful understanding has helped to inform not just our FYS encounters, but also our day-to-day experiences with students in the library.

We believe that our role in FYS has contributed to a growing awareness of the Library's contribution to pedagogy at Memorial, while providing us with an important and collaborative space in which to experiment, evolve, and learn from our teaching practice. Notably, it also helped to foster a sense of readiness for one librarian (Janet Goosney) to apply and be appointed as a Chair in Teaching & Learning (CTL) in 2015.

### **Institutional changes needed to create a general FYS program for all students**

Potential growth of the FYS program may bring with it opportunities for more blended learning. In the current program students engage in a variety of activities—e.g. group collaboration, assessments, accessing and responding to research and scholarship—using a variety of online tools to enhance learning. While there is potential for further development of blended learning elements, further exploration and discussion would be necessary to determine how FYS will evolve and how its two forms—as a Program with a structured set of courses with supports included, and as stand-alone offerings—will develop. Such discussions will in turn lead us to understand better

what changes would be required in order to support a general FYS program, including an embedded IL curriculum, for all students of Memorial.

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FIRST YEAR SUCCESS:  
**Helping students live  
their questions**

.....  
*Janna Rosales*

I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED with the First Year Success Program (FYS) since January 2014 as a session presenter and “grand plenary” participant in UNIV 1020: Path to Future Studies. What follows are my reflections on the specific value of this course, and on the contribution of FYS to teaching and learning at Memorial.

In “Letters to a Young Poet” Rainer Maria Rilke urged his young friend to “[l]ive the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” I think the university experience is particularly one of living the questions. University 1020 plays an essential role as a second semester core course specifically because it is built explicitly around questions. The course acts as a capstone experience that orients students to the tools and techniques that we can use to go about asking and answering questions, and in so doing, it prepares students to embark on their own journeys of discovery.

In this course I lead a plenary session called “Technology: The Answer to All our Questions?” There are a few reasons why I think this particular plenary can contribute to the FYS strategy to assist students in transition: because it is experiential, because it is interdisciplinary, and because it encourages students to situate themselves in the subject matter.

My session explores research on the effects of multitasking on the brain and research that indicates that mindfulness practice can serve as an effective counterbalance to technologically-related multitasking and distraction. It is experiential because students are exposed to a situation where they are called to multitask, and then an exercise where they are led through a mindfulness practice, and then they are asked to reflect on both of those experiences in the context of how they learn. The session also explores theories of technology and asks students to consider the role that digital technology plays in shaping their lives and directing their attention. What grounds the entire session is the premise that what we are actually doing together is exploring the nature of attention; in essence, paying attention to attention. I try to show them the ways that attention can be seen as the most basic and precious response that they have to give to the world. This is a message that transcends culture, origin, age, gender, politics and social status: that learning

*anything* begins with first *paying attention* to the matter at hand. In a certain sense the session transcends any particular discipline because the real lesson is that the quality of their learning experiences depends to a large extent on the quality of their attention, and that they have the autonomy to choose where and how they direct their attention.

In another sense the session illustrates that sometimes an interdisciplinary approach is needed to explore multifaceted questions. Students who are transitioning into the university environment are looking for disciplinary homes but in this session—and others in University 1020—they also have exposure to the other reality of academic inquiry, that there are places and ways for the disciplines to mix and cross over and complement each other. In my session they can see interdisciplinarity at work.

But further to this, in bringing together a number of different areas in my multitasking and mindfulness session, I try to get the students to relate that research back to their own lives. Because so many things can compete for one's attention at any given moment—and particularly in an age characterized by instant communication and ubiquitous connection—I want to get them actively considering the most basic foundations of their lived experience: to start to notice where their attention is in the run of a day. Cultivating the capacity to attend to your own attention is a skill that can carry over into any situation: workplace conflict, personal relationships, learning from experience. It is a step towards fostering more self-awareness, which in turn can help foster more self-reflection, which then can deepen lessons learned from any experience. Most importantly, the skills of focusing and paying attention in the present moment are capacities that are open to anyone regardless of background, and accessing this insight can be an empowering and equalizing experience. The idea is to introduce students to tools and capacities that they already possess, and have the freedom to choose to hone. That is why I used my appearance in the video introduction to University 1020 to prompt students with the thought that “what do you want to *do*?” might be more appropriately parsed as “*who* do want to *be* in the world?” in light of where their second semester in FYS takes them.

The individual disciplinary sessions are all very valuable in demonstrating the various ways that university teachers and researchers explore their questions, but I have come to see the grand plenary session, where all the session instructors return to convene at the same time, just before the end of the course, as what ties the FYS experience together not only for a lot of the students but also for the instructors. This is where a student once turned the

tables and asked of me and all the instructors “who do *you* want to be in the world?” This provides an insight into two things that the grand plenary contributes to the success of FYS: recognizing that people learn best through stories and conversation, and helping to create a cross-campus teaching and learning community.

At the grand plenary, as instructors respond to student questions, they provide multiple perspectives on what people do in the university. Sometimes students gain insight from narratives that clarify how a professional and personal commitment to enquiry and education is part of a professor’s or librarian’s life course. This session exposes students to the great variety of things that make up the Memorial University experience specifically and post-secondary education more generally at a time when students are probably asking themselves “do I belong?” We know that some decide they do belong and they declare a program while others decide on a different path outside of university. I think FYS is a valuable transitional experience either way because in being presented with the choices available in university culture, the students can be more informed about *what* it is they want to transition *into*. I hope that having had the opportunity to sit down with some instructors to ask candid questions so early in their university experience gives the students confidence to continue to approach their professors in other courses. I’ve found that in the grand plenary I end up telling the story of my own meandering university journey, and my colleagues often reveal the motivations for their own journeys, all of which sketches out various realities and bits of life advice that might be helpful as the students navigate their own paths.

Having contact with FYS also gives me more of a bird’s eye view into teaching and learning across the university. As Chair for Teaching and Learning for the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science, my professional focus is not just on best practices around teaching and learning about science and technology ([Learning About the Chairs](#)), it is also to function as part of a university-wide network of Chairs for Teaching and Learning. I therefore value any opportunity to connect to a diversity of events and perspectives, rather than remaining siloed in one Department or Faculty, and I have found that contributing to FYS is an engaging way to stay connected. It’s fascinating and energizing to be in a room with colleagues from different fields who are keen to share their curiosity and love of knowledge. It is a rare opportunity in any undergraduate experience to be able to tap into the experiences and insights of diverse members of the university community. I commend the program for ensuring the students are the ones to generate the questions because the session

can then authentically address the things that interest them. In turn I think the grand plenary evokes a lot of sincere conversation on the part of the instructors who have mulled, and sometimes wrestled with, the questions that the students generate and pose. It is an insightful experience to share that time and that mulling with a cross-disciplinary community of people who care about teaching and learning at Memorial.

Furthermore, as an educator, I have felt the impacts of the FYS program in being able to have contact with first year students—a demographic every faculty member should make an effort to understand, in order to better understand what student reality is, and to keep ourselves relevant. Working with FYS in particular keeps me mindful of the depth of humanity that shares our classroom—that there are people with all kinds of struggles, challenges

#### University 1020: A Map

Plenary	Workshop Activity	Assignments (Examples) *
1. Introducing the Course: Everything is a Question	Finding Meaning: Structure and Argument in Academic Literature	Posting to online discussion: "what interests me most in course website?"
2. But is Everything a Question? A Philosopher's Take on Questions	Preparing and using a text in discussion: seeing the larger picture & getting the detail.	Annotation of Gee reading (cartoon/text) incorporating revisions subsequent to class discussion.
3. What is Evidence? A Linguist's View	Couples plan field work case study based on an example in assigned reading	Class ends with self-evaluation mini-essay: "how [well] did I prepare?"
4. Engaging with Communities in Asking and Answering Questions	Academics doing community research. Analytical categories and ethical considerations in research.	Quiz on readings on ethnographic and participant investigation.
5. My Univers[e]/ity: Images and Meaning	Visual literacy: discussion of class light-box referring to concepts in Sontag reading etc.	Taking and making images: Asynchronous discussion posting
6. A Question of Life and Death: Working in Teams	2 practice routines: Do teams work? Groups plan for writing a class Wiki.	"Wiki" reporting class research on teamwork using research literature.
7. Questions Going in Search of Answers: Information Sources	Info/digital literacy in Library computer classroom	i) finding and assessing sources ii) summarizing and contextualizing literature.
8. Mathematics as a Questioning Practice	[How] does practice make perfect? Making an argument with statistics.	Report on routines and results (including student-generated statistical display).
9. Questioning by Experiment: The Chemistry of the World Around Us	Lab session: The science of materials.	[Photo]-essay documenting experiments
10. Technology: The Answer to All Our Questions?	Practice routines: distractions and keeping focus.	Critical response: short essay responding to a "hot topic" editorial.
11. Review panel and review week: Outstanding questions for faculty.	Prep for advance notice exam: Exam strategies considered	Using instructor feedback: a self-evaluation/assessment
12. Questions Taking Us Further into the Future: Year II & Beyond	Workshop instructors available to individuals & study groups	

and stories who find ways to manage money, work, family obligations, illness, language and cultural differences in order to further their education.

In closing, FYS has been flagship initiative of the Teaching and Learning Framework that I hope will thrive and flourish in years to come. Having served on a sub-committee that contributed to the pilot proposal, I was optimistic that this initiative had a lot of potential to support teaching and learning across Memorial University. Now having had the pleasure of working with FYS, I can attest to the value of the Framework not just in creating a transitional program for first year students but in fostering a strategy that is at once forward-thinking, responsive, and equitable, and transformative for students and instructors alike.

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BENEFITS ALL ROUND:

**A post-graduate  
experience of tutoring**

.....

*Elizabeth Russell*

**Benefits to Students**

I delivered the psychology tutorial (for 1000/1001) for four semesters, while I was a PhD student in Psychology. I provided hands-on, interactive weekly sessions that sought not to re-teach the material provided in class, but to focus on material that I deemed to be the most *difficult*, or, the most *important*. Each week, students heard a mixture of short lectures punctuated by videos, or received detailed explanations of particular problems and were involved in group work, and other forms of interactivity. The same students attended regularly, and after a few weeks, some were comfortable enough to come prepared with specific questions about the material they were encountering. I provided an environment that was relaxed, and took the time to answer individual questions in a manner that drew in the other students as well.

I often adapted each class, on the fly, to suit the questions that students had that week, or to help prepare them for their upcoming tests. This is not to say that the tutorials were not structured, but instead that they were designed for flexibility. I believe that simply providing a space for students to ask questions, to work on study strategies, and to go over material in a more informal lecture style contributing to improvements in their Psychology grades. During class, I always emphasized study techniques, but my explanations of effective ways to study were delivered incrementally. Included in my advice was how to note-take; how to turn the textbook into a tool, and how to effectively encode new material for longer-term recall. After a test had been taken in their Psychology class, we would discuss their experiences and how they might improve on study strategies. Sometimes this started with me asking whether they felt happy with their results, I also invited them to share their own strategies with the class.

Ultimately, I do not know the final grades of these students in Psychology, but, I do know that they grew throughout the semester in confidence, course knowledge, and study skills. Even if these students never took another Psychology course, these work strategies could be generalized to most other courses in university.

### **Benefit to Instructors**

Teaching the FYS Psychology tutorial was an invaluable experience. It taught me sensitivity to the particular needs of students who do not do as well; in particular, I recognized that sometimes their lack of success is due not to a lack of trying, but instead to a lack of knowledge about how to prepare. As a result, in my teaching I always pay particular attention to studying at a meta-level. When I lecture, I am cognizant of the experiences of students in the classroom, and not only the A students who would likely perform well regardless, but others who *need* my teaching to be effective. Coming out of my experience working with FYS students I feel more comfortable in my teaching method. I know that no amount of reading about this population of students, and no instruction in university-level teaching skills, could have prepared me for this insight as did the FYS experience

### **Recommendations**

First, students who do not achieve A's in university may not be succeeding because they have never been effectively taught to prepare. I feel that this lack of understanding is systemic, as I have observed it among all of the classes I have taught. This is something that needs to be addressed and incorporated in a more general "first year experience" program or course. The FYS experience is a hidden gem at our university, and its facilities and expertise should be made available to the broader population of first year students. Second, university instructors are often not taught to teach—we might be experts in content, but rarely in delivery. Teaching this population of students exclusively is an eye-opener for an instructor and every faculty member should be offered the opportunity. Third, the point in need of making more generally is that FYS does not secure passing grades for students by making the content easier. The barrier that is lack of knowledge on how to succeed in university is one that should trouble all of us.

I observed there were tangible benefits to the students in FYS, but neither would I downplay what I myself learned as a Graduate Teaching Assistant with the Program. This is, then, my opportunity to say that the experience helped me along the way to the tenure-track position that I am about to assume in a central Canadian university.

## Advising for First Year Success

.....  
*Beth Ryan,  
Denise Reynolds,  
and Chris Hibbs*

ADVISORS HELP STUDENTS explore academic goals, learning styles, study habits and skill development. While positioning the students to reflect on their educational experience, we encourage them to identify how their particular strengths can be applied to university studies and, in time, to employment. Career advisors take over at the point where the exploration of personal strengths, interests, and reflection on skills suggests that insights into potential career paths might be useful.

Advising has long been identified as a key element in student retention in colleges and universities (Crookston, 1994; Tinto, 1993; Cuseo, 2003 and Habley, 2000), especially in the context of transitional programming for incoming students. Not surprisingly, the proposal for the First Year Success program (FYS) recommended a robust academic and career advising component for the pilot. Its timing and mode of delivery has evolved and advising staff have been reduced over the course of the pilot, but content and goals remained the same—to offer students support and guidance as they navigate their first year of university studies.

### **The role of the advisors**

From the start, the academic advisors have been FYS ambassadors, promoting the program to high school students, teachers, guidance counsellors and parents, and advising potential participants on the benefits of FYS and how it could mesh with their academic interests and career goals. Academic advisors are still the first members of the FYS team to meet new students and in the months leading up to the Fall semester, we are their primary point of contact. Guidance at this time makes a difference because it ensures that students understand how FYS can complement the courses they have chosen based on their interests and intended program. After the fall semester begins, we become proactive in contacting students with the offer of individual academic advising sessions. Career advisors from Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) likewise offer their expertise. It is not unusual for a first session with a student to be given over to explaining how an academic or career advisor can help identify academic concerns, suggest relevant resources available on campus, clarify academic goals and explore future possibilities.



The unique nature of the FYS program allows the advisors to work individually with the students and develop a sense of their specific needs. We start by normalizing events that are typical of first year students, thereby assuring students that they are not alone in their experiences. We try to accept students as they are and work with the strengths they bring with them, while offering guidance to cope with challenges and build new competencies. Some of our students have specific concerns (mental health issues, developmental disorders, learning disabilities, physical disabilities) that may require accommodations.

Academic and career advisors learned that attending classes and addressing students as a group best facilitated early contact, even though we needed to follow up with individual appointments at key times of decision-making such as the deadline for dropping courses. A series of case studies examined in University 1010 in small groups set students thinking about when and how academic advising could prevent or solve problems. Career advisors visited the University 1010 class to introduce students to the concept of interest-based career exploration and in individual appointments, they offered access to additional tools such as Career Cruising and the Strong Interest Inventory. In the second semester of the Program, a capstone session facilitated jointly by academic and career advisors includes reflection activities that helped the students put their year in context and think about next steps.

Following our appearances in their 1010 classroom, students were more inclined to see us as part of the collective FYS effort to demystify the university and to put the means of decisions about their futures into their hands. Comments from both faculty and students in the CIAP focus group indicate that this pattern of advising is perceived to have made a difference to retention.

### **What has made the difference?**

*Flexibility:* We learned the lesson of flexibility at every turn, with students, faculty, directors, deans, departmental representatives, the university community and the external community. Each year there were gradual changes in our approach. Each group of students seemed to demand something slightly different than what came before.

*Accessibility:* When there were two academic advisors assigned to the program students' questions and concerns could be answered expeditiously. In the interest of trimming the program's budget, one of the positions was not filled when an advisor left the program so now the administrative director (a former FYS advisor) fills the gap. We maintain a prompt and solicitous service, assuring students that they can return to the AAC as often or as little as

they need to or drop into the FYS office for guidance.

*Confidence:* The advising component of FYS helps its students develop confidence in their ability to face the challenges presented to them by first year university courses, the campus environment, the professors and their peers. We involve them in appropriate problem-solving and decision-making strategies. We reach out to students at key points before and during the semester and offer information that helps them make the right decisions for their academic path. But we encourage self-reflection and self-reliance by showing them how to complete tasks and make decisions. For example, instead of simply giving the student a list of courses, we discuss the course options, the degree regulations, and the student's desired course load and schedule, offering the student choices at every turn. If a student comes to ask about dropping a course, we lay out the various consequences (positive and negative) and help them determine what decision is right for them.

The high level of contact between the advisors and the students helped create a strong connection that persists even after the student completes their first year. Based on visits to the academic advising centre, advisors found that the FYS students would visit more frequently than their non-FYS peers. All of the advisors report that some FYS students continue to book appointments with them once they move on to second and third year of their studies because of the relationship they established in first year.

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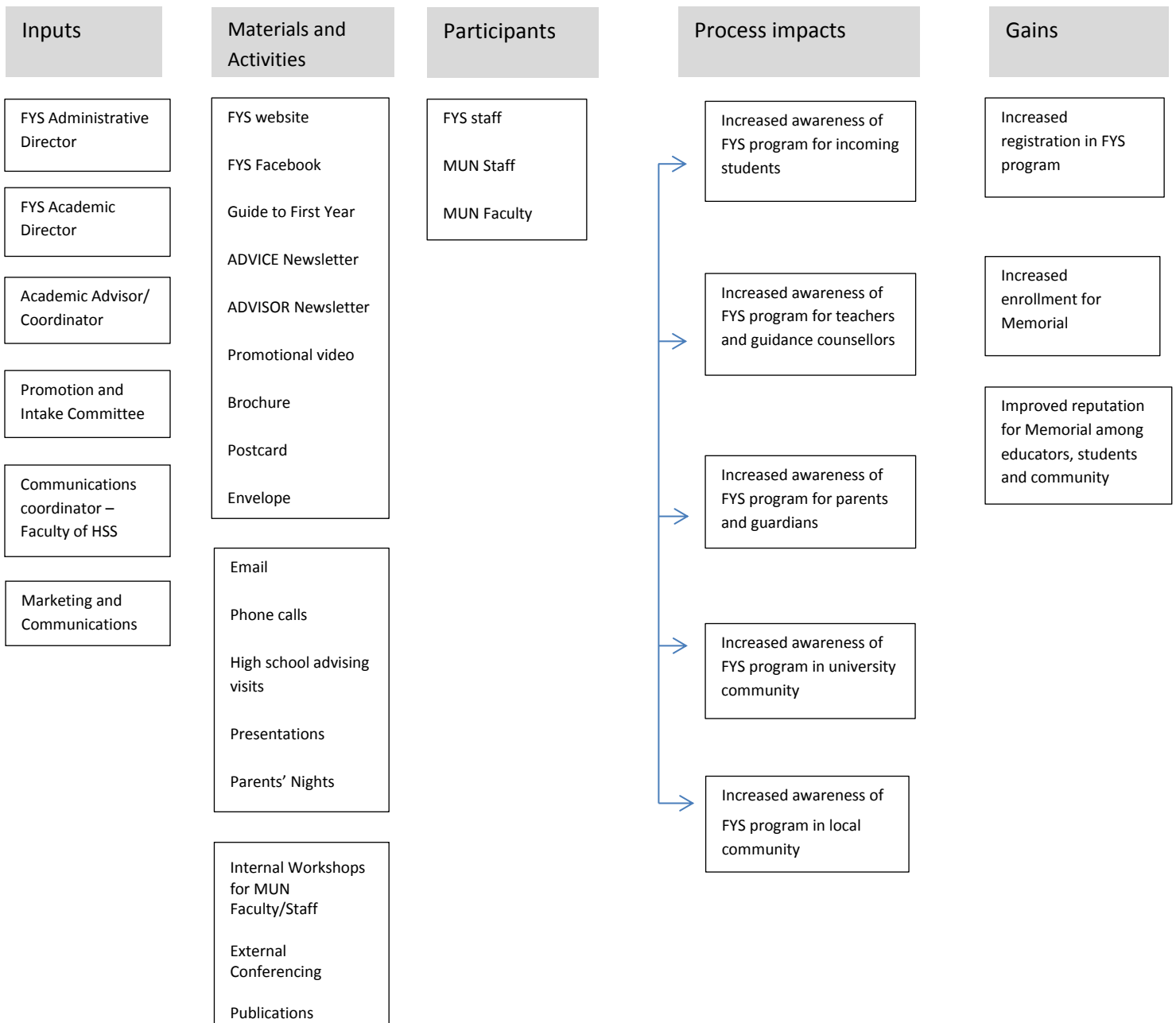


Figure 4: The Communications Process in FYS

GETTING THE WORD OUT:

**Reaching students,  
schools and families**

.....  
*Beth Ryan*

SINCE 2012, I'VE PLAYED SEVERAL ROLES with the First Year Success program, all of which have allowed me to communicate directly with the students who take part in FYS. Given its focus on easing the transition from high school to university studies, FYS has been most effective when we have been able to establish clear line of communication with prospective students as they make decisions about their first semester at Memorial. But over the past four years, we have learned that reaching those students requires a variety of approaches ([fig. 4](#)).

Getting the word out about the First Year Success to the province's schools was a challenge from the start because of the timing of the program's launch. Senate approved the pilot project in February for a start date of September 2012. At that point, Memorial's student recruiters had already completed their visits to the province's schools to promote the university's programs. I was working as an advisor at the Academic Advising Centre at the time and we had just begun our visits to the province's schools to give individual students advice on their course selections for fall when FYS was announced. We had to work quickly to become familiar with the program and create an information sheet to offer students details about FYS. Advisors were tasked with describing a program to students that did not yet exist and trying to persuade them to take part on the basis of the benefits we thought the program would hold. By June, I had been hired to be the advising coordinator for the program, and with the second advisor, began a concerted effort to contact with students by phone, email, personal visits and presentations.

Once the first semester of the program was underway, it was then that we could stop and reflect on the communications approach we had used during the first recruitment season for First Year Success. One thing became abundantly clear to us during our conversations with students—if they hadn't heard about the program from their siblings, friends, parents, teachers or guidance counsellors, they were likely to greet us with skepticism. Students tend to rely on the people they know and trust for advice. That was particularly problematic for FYS because the program was completely unknown and untested by the people who influence the decisions of incoming first-year students. The issue was further complicated by the fact that some

parents, guidance counsellors and teachers were familiar with earlier Memorial initiatives for first-year students such as “Junior Division,” “General Studies” and “Foundation Year” and were confused by the intent and composition of a new program. They wondered if the FYS courses were credit-bearing or if they would delay a student’s academic progress.

During the first (and subsequent years) of the pilot, the FYS academic advising team collaborated with the Administrative Director and the Promotion and Intake Committee to make sure all the key people got the message about FYS. We worked proactively to build awareness of the Program among high school students and their peers, teachers, guidance counsellors and parents. Memorial also tries to connect directly with students through the fall visits to the province’s schools by Student Recruitment. In my current role as Administrative Director, I meet with the recruiters before they head out to the schools to offer an update on the program and make sure they have what they need to effectively present the program to high school students. Meanwhile, we try to connect with the guidance counsellors (and through them, the teachers) during the year through articles in the Academic Advising Centre’s newsletter for guidance counsellors, known as ADVISOR. I have also had the opportunity to meet with the guidance counsellors from the largest schools in St. John’s and the surrounding areas in the last few years to discuss the program and the ways it might benefit their students.

In 2015, we stepped up our communications efforts by redeveloping the FYS website to offer students and their influencers the most current information about the program and give students a direct way to apply for the program. The FYS Facebook page offers us another way to reach out to students and connect in a timely way. But we also realized that it would not be smart to abandon traditional media in favour of a digital approach. We created a visually engaging graphic for an envelope that used to mail printed materials (a personalized letter to the student signed by our academic advisors, along with a copy of the current FYS brochure and postcard) to students who were deemed possible participants. The content was primarily aimed at the student but it was strategically placed on the outside of the envelope to catch the attention of a parent or guardian even if the student did not open the envelope. Building on the belief that students are the best representatives of the program, we have produced several videos over the course of the pilot featuring former FYS students. Those videos allow students to share their candid thoughts on the program and how the experience impacted their first year of studies. We have found that students respond well to having other young

people talk about the program in ways that made sense to them and related to their own experiences. But the videos also helped teachers, guidance counsellors and parents understand how the program might benefit a new student.

Many students hear about FYS for the first time when Memorial advisors come to their high schools to meet with them individually and plan their first semester of university studies. After students have applied to Memorial, staff from the Academic Advising Centre, along with dozens of faculty and staff members from throughout the university, visit the province's high schools. I work with our current academic advisor to ensure that one of us will be on hand at every school and I also take part in an information session organized by Academic Advising, in which I give a presentation about FYS to the faculty and staff who will be advising students in the schools. That way, we know that any Memorial representative can speak to students about FYS and offer an introduction to the program. During the advising sessions, the advisors introduce the FYS program and explain how it might assist students with their transition from high school to university. They help students select courses and build a schedule around the key FYS courses. The communication between the FYS advisor and the students actually reaches its peak during the summer. The FYS advisor continues to respond to inquiries from students and parents via phone, email and drop-in advising over the following months and reaches out to prospective FYS students by email and phone throughout the summer (July is the start of the fall semester registration period).

Since the beginning, one of our greatest communications challenges has been identifying potential participants. We look at any students with grades that are consistently lower than 75% (notably Grade 11 English) as those who could benefit from the program. Those students are added to our list of potential participants. Added to that number are the students who contacted the FYS program directly by phone, email or online application. But we have also realized that there are students outside of our target group who could benefit from the Program's supportive environment and enriched curriculum. Therefore, we broadened our message to incoming students to include those who are undecided about their future career or academic paths, are concerned about the transition to university, and feel they may need additional support and guidance in their first year.

Over five years of recruitment efforts for First Year Success, we have learned a great deal about how the program can help students and have become more adept at communicating its strengths. But more importantly, we have come to understand that students do not make their decisions in

isolation. They are greatly influenced by their peers, siblings, parents, teachers and guidance counsellors and turn to those people for recommendations and advice. In response to that dynamic, FYS has created an interconnected series of communications tools that share and reinforce the messages we have developed about the program. Our communications efforts have also benefited from the passage of time. Some guidance counsellors or teachers may have been reluctant to champion or promote a program that had a projected two-year lifespan. But as we enter our fifth year, First Year Success has become a known quantity, one that students and their influencers have come to understand and trust.

## Representing undergraduates in FYS

.....  
*Leah Robertson  
and Sean Kennedy*

ON THE FIRST YEAR SUCCESS ADVISORY COMMITTEE there is a position that is held by a student representative on behalf of the Memorial University Students' Union (MUNSU). During the 2014–15 academic year Sean Kennedy held this position, and in 2015–16, Leah Robertson. As the MUN Students' Union represents all undergraduate students we consider it important to be involved with transition programming at Memorial University. MUNSU has supported the Program from its commencement in 2012. We see it as providing increased support to our members who choose to partake, and the fact that it is voluntary is a point in its favour.

From a student perspective this program provides support in multiple areas. For some it provides academic direction, and for others who worry about transitioning from small rural areas it provides a measure of social stability. With growing concerns to retain students recruited to degree programmes, Memorial needs to be creating and sustaining the means of easing students into their early university experience as a means to providing stability in the years to come. As two members of past MUNSU executives we advise our successors that transitional programming fills a need and must be continued at Memorial. MUNSU is aware of the numbers of students struggling in many aspects of their lives. They are often students from rural, first generation or marginalized communities. The FYS Program helps realize Memorial's commitment to ensuring that the doors of academic success are open to all youth and later life learners in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As successive members of the committee that has overseen the development of the program, we and the other student representatives (who are drawn directly from FYS participants) have watched the Program transform. Student representatives have played their part since they have been brought into a collaborative role with its instructors, advisors and administrators. We have seen enhanced partnerships and anticipate that with the continuation of this consultative model the Program will continue to open paths for students to enter a variety of faculties. As student advocates we have been involved in the consultation about and the governance of FYS to a degree unmatched on other committees across the institution. We often work with students in various faculties and schools, as well as with administrators but what we have



seen in FYS is the kind of consultation that makes for continuous improvement. This type of approach is important for a committee that is looking to consistently better the student experience. Students who sit on this committee gain invaluable skills about administration work and oversight at a post secondary level. The First Year Success student representatives have a chance to see how pedagogic and administrative concerns interplay in the courses they take and the supports availed them at a level that is often closed off to regular undergraduates.

During the past two years of the Program's existence budget constraints have become more evident in the Province. Aware as we are that financial exigencies press we have seen enough of how students flourish in FYS to advocate for the continuation of transitional programming. Indeed we argue that such provision for new students will become more necessary. With increased personal financial constraint students are taking on increased work loads in and beyond the university. At a recent group event one of us heard students who have participated in FYS voicing not just their enthusiasm for the Program but the importance of lessons they had learned about balancing school-life obligations and making the most of their university experience ([How did First Year Go?](#)). As student advocates it is our mandate to ensure that programs such as First Year Success are inclusive and accessible to all students that wish to participate. This goal is consistent with the Canadian Federation of Students that endorses education as widely accessible (Public Education for the Public Good, 2016).

Overall, during our time on the Program's Advisory Committee, we recognized it was the source of unparalleled opportunities for new students. The benefits of this Program register both quantitatively and, more importantly, qualitatively. We consider it an essential provision for Memorial students now and in the future.

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WHEN KNOWING THE  
WRONG PEOPLE MIGHT  
BE THE RIGHT THING:  
**Committee work in FYS**

.....  
*Danny Dyer*

I ALWAYS TELL PEOPLE that I got involved with First Year Success (FYS) because I knew the wrong people. I got invited to some events in the pre-FYS, maybe even the proto-FYS, because I knew one of its early promoters (Philpott & Cleyle, 2012). I think that he felt it would be a good idea to have someone from Mathematics, or maybe his invitation was just his way of fluffing out the number of Science faculty attending. One of the things I've learned as a faculty member is how to say "no," but I went to these meetings anyway. At that point, late 2011, around half of my teaching was in first year classes, and I definitely had ideas about how first year mathematics should be taught.

So I was one of around 60 people who were involved in the early discussions towards a pilot transition program. Lots of small group discussion with a very mixed group from all around the university led to common recommendations that would, in turn, be grouped according to student problems we had identified with the idea that resolutions would follow. There were lots of sticky notes, and of arguing about where sticky notes should be placed, and whether two sticky notes were saying what amounted to the same thing.

To some degree, I was at sea. This was unlike any kind of meeting in which I had ever participated. At this point, I had just finished my sixth year at Memorial and although newly tenured, I wasn't used to dealing with as many people who thought in fundamentally different ways. Yet I was egotistical enough to think that I had something to say, and I was going to say it. At this stage three to four hour blocks were reserved for the meetings. That gave me some concerns: were the faculty as distinct from staff participants going to be able to spare enough time from their teaching timetables? There might be consequences if decisions were made without a balance of instructor input. Misconceptions did arise, but that was the point of being there. I wanted to make sure that whatever recommendations came out of the committee, they at least reflected the right issues, mathematically speaking.

This meant that I got a little more involved. After the duo steering the pilot proposal visited the Math Help Centre to see what supports were then available to struggling Mathematics students, I gained an extra job—I chaired a subcommittee to examine what supports students could use in mathematics. Now this was, I think, the first academic committee I had ever chaired. To be

sure “math” people predominated, so I was fairly comfortable. But there were a lot of different backgrounds since it included people from the Grenfell campus, from the Marine Institute, and people who had taught at the College of the North Atlantic. For the first time, I became very aware of the difference in pedagogical approach, even where the same (or equivalent) courses were being taught in this province.

At some point after the completion of the committee’s report, I was asked to join the First Year Success Advisory Committee. A lot of people had been involved with the planning process, so, to be honest, I was flattered. It didn’t take me very long to decide to join—I had had the chance for some personal reflection in the time between my first participation and joining the Advisory Committee.

Primarily, I felt that I had to be involved with the FYS program because of a moral obligation. My position is that Memorial has an obligation to anyone that it accepts as a student. A student accepted at Memorial should have a reasonable chance at success—the University should not exist with some sort of predatory “buyer beware” mentality. This obligation is implied by our admission requirements; upon meeting them, students may justifiably feel that the University, as a whole, judges that they have the potential to graduate from it. (Otherwise, what is the point of admission requirements?)

So, faced with the reality, as described in the initial proposal for First Year Success, that two-thirds of the students who are admitted to MUN with an incoming average below 75% have not completed their degree within seven years (Philpott & Cleyle, 2012, p.1), we may very reasonably be considered to be failing these students. Either our admission requirements are incorrect, and these students are not suited for university at all, or we do not support them as needed once they enter the institution.

Very few universities see a benefit in turning away students. In a province with a graying, and declining, population, this seems like a very bad idea—and one that flies in the face of Memorial’s Enrolment 2020 plan, which indicates that, at the very least, we should make up the loss of the 1000 fewer high school students expected to graduate each year, but maintain the current undergraduate population of 15 000 students (Enrolment Plan, 2014). And so, our only other alternative becomes to support the students we do accept as best we can.

Being on the FYS Advisory Committee has also affected my own teaching. I’ve been forced to think about my own moral obligations. It’s easy, especially when you’re preparing for tenure, to downplay the teaching side of things.

Having sat on Promotion and Tenure committees, I know the drill: *Some committee work? Good. Teaching evaluations ok? Good. Now, how many papers have been published? What's the size of the grant? How many graduate students supervised?* So, it's easy for teaching to get the short shrift—after all, if your teaching isn't bad, it's good.

But when, as an Advisory Committee member, I was confronted with a hard truth—that many students made it into first year with little chance of actually getting out—I had to take a correspondingly hard look at my own teaching. Was I just treading water? What did I think was the best way to learn mathematics? Whatever I believed, did my teaching reflect what I thought was best? Was I obliged to change what I did?

For me, the answer was that I was obliged, and that I wasn't doing enough. So, besides giving what advice I could, my time on the Advisory Committee led to a lot of self-reflection, which in turn led me to make major pedagogical changes to the way I teach mathematics, particularly in the first year. And, as a result, I continue to be involved with colleagues talking about teaching, but now in the additional capacity of the Chair in Teaching and Learning for the Faculty of Science (About the Chairs).

The experience of being on the Advisory Committee itself was also very unusual—I've never been involved with any other university initiative with a similar advisory group. I've now been on Faculty Committees, and Senate Committees, and even Departmental Committees—but having a group which fundamentally existed to give advice was a novel experience for me. And the group had a wide background, though one that was certainly appropriate for FYS. People you'd expect were there—the Dean; the Academic and Administrative Directors; student representatives. But as well, there were representatives from Student Recruitment; from the Student Union; from the Library; from Academic Advising; from the Department of English; from the Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning; and, surprisingly, me!

And we did give advice. Over the years, we've debated what students we should target; when we should contact them; who should teach courses (and when should we offer them); and, fundamentally, whether the program works.

As a parting thought, something that occurred to me many times over the years since I've been involved with the Advisory Committee should be mentioned—maybe it should be the central theme for another essay? Unlike many academic committees I have served on, the gender balance of people who will invest in further first year initiatives is predominantly female. Often, I was the “token man” at the table. Having a group of interesting and

informed individuals discuss fundamental issues about how we teach, and how we treat our students, is rewarding. As this essay makes clear my own development as a teacher and as a facilitator of teaching-related committee work has been furthered by my FYS participation. A gender ratio on the FYS Advisory Committee so different from that of most other academic committee I've ever been involved suggests that there is scope for others amongst the faculty to take a greater interest in first year and add to the impetus that is making Memorial student ready.

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AFTERWORD:  
**Readiness in many forms**

.....  
*Lynne Phillips\**

AS THE DECANAL SPONSOR of the First Year Success (FYS) program since 2012 I have learned much about how students experience the transition from high school to university and what sorts of processes we need in place to ensure their success. At a time when resources at high schools are stretched and the preparation of students for university may not be a high priority, we have a responsibility to ensure that students are offered the skills and knowledge they need to be “university ready.” So many very capable students do not make it past the first term simply because they are not able to benefit from this one small step of support. FYS showed me just how important it is to take in account the framework and “culture” of first year. We tend to take it for granted in the academy—at our peril.

What strikes me as the most important lessons learned over the last four years are, first, that any program given this mandate needs to be a flexible one. There is no point in learning lessons if you can’t incorporate them as the program progresses, and it is essential for such programs to be agile in their responses to student learning. This certainly must be remembered as we move past the pilot stage of the program; we need always to be open to change as we continue to learn about what is best for our students. We know the landscape on transition-oriented programs (in Canada and the US), and there is no silver bullet on this question: all continue to experiment with what works best in their institution.

Second, it is imperative to have a first year program that blends together the academic and non-academic sides of learning. As I’ve said elsewhere, the relationship is not always an easy one, so you need to work at it—but when it works, it’s brilliant! The structure of FYS demands this level of integrated collaboration, with the Administrative Director and Academic Director as equal partners and instructors, librarians, Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, and student advisors working as team. This strategy ensures that everyone has an opportunity to think outside the box to build stronger pedagogies and, ultimately, to bring a stronger program to students.

And, third, the program has focused on creating an environment where instructors reflect on their teaching as part of a collaborative effort, and this practice has helped to produce inspired teachers. The narratives of instructors

in this white paper confirm that they were encouraged to think through their teaching in novel ways; FYS made them better teachers, and that's a good thing for the University. Better teachers more usefully serve to bring out the best of our students.

I am amazed by the dedication of the people from various departments and Faculties across the university who have participated in this pilot project. Many people have believed in this project's value and have volunteered time to dissect and profile its strengths and continuing challenges—CIAP and the members of the Advisory Committee come to mind. We surely need to press forward with this project, for our students as well as for ourselves.

\*Lynne Phillips is the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Memorial University

## **Plan for success**

To succeed you need to focus,  
Be committed,  
Learning how to say “no” when it is hard,  
To succeed you need a plan,  
People to help you and yourself  
Being ready to fall on your face and still have the strength to get up,  
And try again.  
Succeeding is about learning something new,  
Discovering your weakness and strength,  
Learning how to interact with the people around you,  
Learning to accept failure when it is hard.  
But at the end of end you will be proud of what you have done,  
Smile on and say to those that brought you down that you  
Have done it.  
Thanking those that supported you,  
Being successful is a long journey,  
A journey where a person needs to keep focus.

*Student of University 1010, 2012 Cohort*