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*Susan H. Frost*

## ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

### Can It Be Taught?

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*In this article, the author discusses the mission, activities, and results of a freshman seminar at a private women's college. The course was designed to involve the students actively in the learning and advising process.*

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#### INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to encourage students' intellectual development, the freshman year seminar course at Brenau Women's College includes activities designed to enhance individual academic responsibility. The course, entitled Act I, The Freshman Year Experience, is organized around the goals of developmental advising (Frost & Hoffmann, 1987) and corresponds to the acknowledged objective of higher education to prepare students to accept responsibility for their own experiences and decisions (Ellis, 1984; Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1984). The objectives of specific course activities are to teach students the skills they need to successfully assume this responsibility and to support them while they develop these skills.

The developmental view of education can be traced to Whitehead (1929) and Dewey (1938), who recognized that education should stimulate individual growth. Whitehead called education with inert ideas "harmful"; he advised the learner to make ideas "his own, and . . . understand their application here and now in the circumstances of his actual life." Dewey counseled educators to establish relevance by challenging students with problems related to present experiences. These problems should be within the capacity of the student to solve and should arouse an active desire for new information and ideas. Dewey recommended that teachers constantly bring continuity to students' lives by involving them with the environment.

More recently the Carnegie Commission (1972) and the National Institute of Education (1984) called for reforms in higher education to provide increased student involvement in both curricular and extracurricular aspects of college. The Commission recommended that each student have the opportunity to "find a learning environment that will best help him create for himself a fuller, more satisfying life."

The Institute, in its report *Involvement in Learning*, recognized that higher education must enhance learning and personal development for students of all ages. Astin (1985) echoed these views by arguing that traditional concepts of excellence should be redefined in terms of the fundamental purpose of higher education: the education of students. Astin defined a quality institution as "one that maximizes the intellectual and personal development of its students."

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Personal development emerges as a theme not only of educators who make observations and recommendations, but also of higher education researchers. The question of how higher education brings about change in students is addressed by Centra and Rock (1971), Feldman and Newcomb (1966), and Terenzini, Pascarella, and Lorang (1982). While little research exists relating cognitive development and undergraduate learning (Pascarella, 1985), evidence indicates that students change in the direction of their interpersonal environment (Rossi, 1966). Positive associations between the amount and quality of informal student contact with faculty, and educational outcomes such as intellectual and personal development, college persistence, and educational aspirations are well documented (Pascarella, 1980).

It is encouraging to note that current academic advising concepts reflect the general educational needs identified by the Carnegie Commission, the National Institute of Education, and Astin. In 1972 Crookston initiated a fresh view of academic advising by applying the developmental definition of mental health to the educational setting and organizing a scheme of academic advising around his view. Crookston described a developmental task as any activity that contributes to the growth of the individual. He then outlined an advising framework that addresses the needs of advisors who want to involve students actively in their own educational decisions (Shane, 1981). Crookston's scheme also meets the needs of students who seek academic mentoring as well as answers to questions about course selection and registration procedures (Gardner, 1986). In short, Crookston's view of academic advising as teaching focuses on student development philosophy.

Developmental advising is based on equal and shared problem solving between student and advisor (Winston & Sandor, 1984). The student is seen as growth oriented, capable of self-direction, and wanting to learn. The advisor is a teacher and supporter who encourages the student's independent behavior. Research has shown that students and advisors prefer a system that allows them to share advising responsibilities (McAnulty, O'Connor, & Sklare, 1987). Faculty and students strongly agree that students should be able to make decisions on their own with good advice (Larsen & Brown, 1983). Students rate as important the advisor allowing them to make decisions on their own when presented with options (Winston & Sandor, 1984). Sanford (1967) reported that student growth is possible when both support and challenge are present. Developmental advising provides an educational setting for these needs to be addressed.

In a broad discussion of student growth, Kohlberg and Mayer (1979) claimed that development can occur as the result of a planned educational program. Designed to put developmental advising philosophy into practice, the freshman seminar course exemplifies such a planned program. Gardner (1986) stated that "freshman year experience efforts are manifested by their deliberateness, their effort to make things happen by design, not by accident or spontaneity, i.e., those things that must happen if the student is to be successful" (p. 267). Some institutions have established freshman year experience courses that model developmental advising and enhance the initial college experience (Grites, 1984). These courses foster personal relationships between faculty and students, encourage students to explore options and make decisions, and acknowledge that students must be aided to become responsible, thoughtful decision makers. In addition, the seminars typically provide opportunities for informal faculty-student contact, which has been found to increase positive student outcomes of college (Pascarella, 1980).

## RESPONSIBILITY AS A CURRICULAR COMPONENT

### The Brenau Model

A highly structured freshman seminar course designed to enhance student growth has existed at Brenau Women's College since 1979. Act I, The Freshman Year Experience, is required of all freshman. Each year the course is taught by nine to twelve faculty advisors working with eighteen to twenty-four trained peer advisors and 130-150 freshmen. Each Act I group has twelve to twenty students, one faculty advisor, and two peer advisors. The groups are organized around residence areas and meet weekly during fall and winter quarters. One hour of academic credit is awarded for the two-quarter sequence. Each year the course is redefined to reflect changing needs of the freshmen and the college. The 1987-88 Act I program involved nine faculty advisors, nineteen peer advisors, and 132 freshmen; in 1988-89 ten faculty advisors, twenty peer advisors, and 149 students participated.

For the last two years the course has included a component designed to assist students' progress toward self-guidance and self-responsibility while becoming involved in their own educational choices. The component consists of three exercises\* designed to allow students time for thoughtful reflection on their academic goals, their decisions about these goals as the freshman year progresses, and finally, their total academic plan (Frost & Hoffmann, 1987). Eight open-ended questions that concern the student's academic goals comprise the first exercise. Before responding in writing, students were asked to consider their initial academic expectations. The second exercise contains thirteen open-ended questions designed to assess students' perceptions of progress toward their goals. Faculty advisors encouraged students to evaluate their mid-year progress and their decisions about academics that influenced their performance before responding to Exercise 2. Exercise 3 offers students the opportunity to formulate an academic plan for the undergraduate course of study. Advisors introduced this exercise by again asking students to consider their academic goals and urging them to assume total responsibility for formulating the plan.

Table 1 displays the open-ended questions that comprise Exercise 1. Faculty and peer advisors introduced the exercise during a series of orientation meetings at the beginning of fall quarter. At the meetings freshmen discussed their expectations of college life with advisors and members of their Act I group and identified their academic goals for the quarter and the year. The questions in the exercise are designed to record each freshman's assessment of her expectations and goals. The exercise was completed during one of the group meetings and returned to the faculty advisor, who retained them for later use.

Faculty advisors reported that this activity often revealed unrealistic perceptions of college that are more easily dispelled before the student has become disappointed with her new situation. Boyer (1987) noted that most freshmen enter college with "high hopes, then soon lower their expectations." To minimize this problem Act I students were encouraged to adjust unrealistic expectations before their original academic goals had become blurred.

In a fall quarter meeting to discuss winter quarter registration, advisors returned Exercise 1 to the freshmen and asked them to evaluate their academic progress. Faculty advisors reported that some students were satisfied with their progress, but others had forgotten their original goals. Informal discussion revealed that for some students procrastination and a packed extracurricular schedule had produced disappointing mid-term grades. Many of these students were academically unsuccessful without making a conscious decision to perform below their expectations of themselves. Instead, they made no decision about their academic lives. Advisors reminded students that it was not too late to readopt or revise goals. They encouraged students to review their original expectations and make revisions if needed. Ad-

**Table 1**

*Exercise 1: Designed to Help Students Assess Their Academic Goals*

**You Will Create the Value of Your Education**

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1. What I want to get out of college this quarter is . . .
  2. What I want to get out of college this year is . . .
  3. What I want to get out of college during my four years is . . .
  4. Courses that might lead me to my major interests are . . .
  5. Courses that I would like to take for fun are . . .
  6. I will feel great if I can . . .
  7. I will be disappointed if I don't get to . . .
  8. On a scale of 1 - 100, how much energy do you have to give to your education?
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**Table 2**

*Exercise 2: Designed to Help Students Evaluate Their Academic Progress*

**You Are Creating the Value of Your Education**

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1. What I really want to get out of college this quarter is . . .
  2. What I really want to get out of college this year is . . .
  3. What I really want to get out of college during my four years is . . .
  4. Courses that I have **taken/am** taking that might lead me to my major interests are . . .
  5. Courses that I would like to take spring quarter are . . .
  6. Courses that I have **taken/am** taking for fun are . . .
  7. I feel great because I have . . .
  8. I will feel great if I can . . .
  9. I have been disappointed because I have . . .
  10. I will be disappointed if I don't get to . . .
  11. On a scale of 1 - 100, how much energy do you have to give to your education?
  12. Has this changed since orientation? If so, why?
  13. Is college working out the way you thought it would? If not, why not?
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visors then collected Exercise 1 for later reference. In discussing winter registration, advisors encouraged students to register for courses congruent with their goals.

At an early winter quarter Act I meeting, freshmen again reviewed Exercise 1 and completed Exercise 2, a self-evaluation designed to help them measure mid-year progress toward academic goals (see Table 2). To encourage students to select courses congruent to their goals advisors also challenged freshmen to complete a four-year academic course of study, giving them several weeks to prepare the plan. Students assumed total responsibility for the assignment; successful completion of the plan required studying the college bulletin, talking with faculty members, and narrowing options. Students with undeclared majors planned the 'liberal studies' option, or took the opportunity to learn more about any major they chose. The framework of the plan is depicted in Table 3.

Act I groups discussed the completed plans when the group met to prepare for spring quarter registration. Freshmen had another opportunity to review their original goals and their mid-year self-evaluations. Advisors ended the session by explaining the upcoming change of advisor process from the freshmen program to upperclass advisors in academic departments.

## **ACHIEVING THE DESIRED OUTCOME**

### **The Self-Directed Student**

Positive results have been achieved using the self-evaluation component of Act I. In informal discussion, faculty advisors, when asked to evaluate the usefulness of the component, reported that they perceived their students as more knowledgeable about major requirements and course sequencing than in previous years. When asked to describe specific benefits of the component, advisors responded that the guidance and support freshmen received as they set goals, evaluated themselves, and set new goals helped them learn how to seek the advice needed to determine their academic futures. Advisors perceived that students were challenged to think carefully about their college careers and avoid potential problems presented by improper sequencing of classes and unfulfilled core and departmental requirements. By spring quarter advisors reported that students were equipped to handle a less structured advising setting and were ready to pursue the goals they had identified and clarified.

Additionally, freshmen faculty advisors reported that the exercises gave them insight into their advisees' academic expectations and often enabled them to facilitate adjustment of unrealistic perceptions. Advisors found it important that each freshman should have a class schedule with which she anticipated success and should take a course for enjoyment at least once during the first year. By knowing the student's academic expectations, the advisor felt better able to guide the student through a successful freshman year.

Although freshmen were not asked to comment on the self-evaluation component specifically, written student evaluations of the Act I program were positive. When asked to give a general overall opinion of the Act I program, 99 of the 131 students (76 percent) responding in 1987-1988 made comments judged positive by the program director. Twenty-three comments (17 percent) were judged neutral and 9 (7 percent) were judged negative. Positive responses included "Act I let me know what to expect," "I got a chance to express my feelings . . . about my classes," "I know who to talk to about classes," "Act I allows us to see different areas of study," "I got to look at the different majors," "I learned to plan my time and studies carefully," "It gave me an opportunity to meet new staff in an easy way to ask questions," and "I like knowing how to do everything" (Act I Evaluations, March 1988).

**Table 3**

*Exercise 3: Designed to Help Students Formulate an Academic Plan*

**Four-Year Academic Plan**

	Core	Major Courses	Electives
Freshman Yr.			
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Total hours			
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Sophomore Yr.			
<hr/>			
Total hours			
<hr/>			
Junior Yr.			
<hr/>			
Total hours			
<hr/>			
Senior Yr.			
<hr/>			
Total hours			
<hr/>			
Grand total hours			

## SUMMARY

In providing a rationale for freshman seminar courses, Gordon and Grites (1984) recommended the formalized course as a way to provide a quality undergraduate experience. They suggested such topics as addressing basic orientation to academic expectations, personal goal setting, understanding self in the environment, and teaching decision-making skills as possible course content. Yet reviews of organized seminars do not indicate that components designed to encourage goal setting and self-evaluation are being used (Buhr, Pellitier, & Wark, 1987; Crockett, 1978; Gardner, 1986; Grites, 1984). The Brenau Women's College freshman year seminar course described in this article contains a specific course component designed to encourage students to identify and evaluate their progress toward their academic goals. Informal faculty advisor evaluation of the component and student written evaluation of the seminar course indicate the usefulness of such exercises. The evaluations would seem to recommend adoption of the exercises to other seminar planners.

Although the Act I self-evaluation component was designed for use in a freshman seminar course, the exercises can be used in any developmental academic advisor-advisee relationship. The advisor who perceives the student as growth oriented and is aware of the larger task of aiding personal development by sharing responsibilities can facilitate progress toward academic goals by using the written format. Students then have a documented tool with which to measure their own progress toward self-determined goals and have practiced the developmental tasks of problem solving, decision making, and evaluation advocated by Crookston (1972). Such activities promote the student involvement in higher education called for by the Carnegie Commission, the National Institute of Education, and others.

\* Ideas for these exercises were prompted by proceedings of the *Be Here Now* Seminar, Atlanta, Ga., May 1986.

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