

Synergy Program Report 2008

This report presents the contributions and impact of the Synergy Program at UW from 2002-2007, arguing that the Synergy Program's success and importance to access for underprepared and underprivileged students warrants the program's continuation beyond the pilot phase.

Brief History

In 2001, the University of Wyoming was one of 21 colleges and universities selected to participate in a National Learning Communities Project aimed at strengthening approaches to college teaching and learning. The Synergy Program grew out of this project and began as a small, three-year pilot program serving 20-30 conditionally-admitted students per year (2002-2005). Because of the program's promising retention, GPA, and academic probation record, in 2004, a Retention Intervention Committee headed by Dean Walter recommended that all conditionally-admitted students be required to participate in the Synergy Program for a second 3-year pilot (2005-2008). Housed within LeaRN, the expanded program serves 144-150 students per year.

Characteristics of Conditionally-Admitted Students

At UW, in-state students are conditionally-admitted if their high school GPA is below 2.75. Out of state students are conditionally admitted if their high school GPA is below 2.75, or if their ACT score is below 20 and their high school GPA is below 3.0.

Although many conditionally-admitted students belong to mainstream demographics, at-risk students at UW follow national trends in comprising higher numbers of males, minorities, first-generation, and students possessing lower socioeconomic status than regularly admitted students. These trends help to explain the need for a program like Synergy at UW and underlie the challenges that conditionally-admitted students at UW share with at-risk students everywhere as they pursue a college degree.

Synergy's Role at UW

Increasing Meaningful Access for Students

As the state's only 4-year University, UW possesses a unique responsibility for supporting students who enter the university with academic, family, or cultural backgrounds that impede their chances for success. Multiple studies of at-risk students indicate that provisionally-admitted students feel less confidence in their ability to succeed in academic settings and need additional help in developing habits of mind and behavior conducive to college success.

Synergy intentionally includes four general education courses in the learning community that foreground skills commonly underdeveloped in at-risk students: reading, writing, speaking, and test and study skills integral to large lecture courses. Synergy's four USP courses include English 1010 (WA), UWYO 1450 (I and L), POLS 1000 (V), and COJO 1010 (O). Synergy's writing courses are smaller than regular sections of these courses (18 students vs. 23 for regular courses). With smaller classes, instructors can more easily meet diverse needs and work one-on-one with students.

Supporting Diversity

The Synergy Program supports diversity within undergraduate education at UW in two important ways: it foregrounds diversity in the curriculum content and it serves students with diverse backgrounds—especially groups traditionally under-supported in higher education. Because Synergy students themselves often feel marginalized from academic

settings for a variety of reasons, a curriculum founded on exploring multicultural perspectives—particularly those of disadvantaged groups—promotes student engagement and community-building.

There is broad consensus among experts in secondary ed. learning that at-risk students receive less support and encouragement in applying to college. However, Synergy faculty consistently report that at-risk students offer higher degrees of peer support in and out of class, take greater risks in their approaches to course assignments and discussion, and share critical perspectives that reflect high sensitivity to marginalized perspectives. Students from all backgrounds need exposure to a range of cultural backgrounds and attitudes in order to gain crucial citizenship skills from a college education.

Promoting Faculty Development

In creating deliberate ties between writing, speaking, research, and political science courses, Synergy's faculty recognize inherent connections within Synergy's courses and increase their sensitivity to interdisciplinary connections in other courses. Instructors testify in interviews that participating in Synergy has significantly aided them in teaching critical reading and research skills in all of their courses—including those unassociated with the Synergy Program.

During spring semester 2006, thirteen Synergy instructors completed questionnaires and were interviewed about their experiences in the program during fall semester. In addition to reporting increased attention to pedagogical self-reflection and innovative learning, all instructors shared that working with at-risk students gave them exposure to new perspectives and backgrounds and impelled them to integrate instructional techniques and frameworks that engage students with multiple—and often marginalized—cultural backgrounds. Synergy's intellectual community courses have included instructors from English, Political Science, International Studies, Chicano Studies, Communication and Journalism, Philosophy, and Anthropology.

Modeling Connected Curriculum and First-Year Support

Synergy is UW's first learning community that integrates connections among the participating courses, including thematic, text, and assignment-based connections. In 2008, Freshman Interest Groups will integrate Synergy's model through greater course connections and peer mentors. Plans are also underway for a learning community modeled after Synergy that will reach undeclared students at UW.

National Recognition

Hesburgh Award

In 2007, Synergy won the Hesburgh Award, an honor given once a year to the college or university sponsoring the most effective program for enhancing undergraduate teaching and student learning. The award carries a \$25,000 cash prize which will support program research, faculty development projects, and scholarships for Synergy students.

Basic Writing Award for Innovation

In 2004, Synergy received the National Conference on Basic Writing's Award for Innovation which recognized the program's connected approach to teaching college-ready writing and reading skills to under-prepared students.

These awards have spurred discussions and collaborations with student support services and first-year programs at several universities.

Quantitative Assessment

At the beginning of the pilot program 2005-2007, Synergy and Academic Affairs determined program assessment factors including fall GPA, fall academic probation, and fall-to-fall retention rates. The following boxes present a summary of these factors during Synergy's three initial pilot years (2002-2005), and a comprehensive look from 2002-2007. The box on page 4 presents results for the expanded program in 2005 and 2006. Synergy's numbers are compared to averages for conditional admits who did not participate in Synergy during the years 2002-2005—approximately 100-120 non-Synergy conditional admits students per year.

GPA

- Average fall GPA non-Synergy conditional admits 2002-2005:
1.79
- Average fall GPA Synergy 2002-2005:
2.13
- Average fall GPA Synergy 2002-2006:
2.14
- Average GPA regular admits 2002-2006:
2.76

Academic Probation

- Average percentage of non-Synergy conditional admits on academic probation in fall semester 2002-2005:
60%
- Average percentage of Synergy students on academic probation in fall semester 2002-2005:
41.2%
- Average percentage of Synergy students on academic probation in fall semester 2002-2006:
40%
- Average percentage of regular admitted students on probation 2002-2006:
19.7%

Fall-to-fall Retention

- Average fall-fall retention non-Synergy conditional admits 2002-2005:
51.8 %
- Average fall-fall retention Synergy 2002-2005:
57.7%
- Average fall-fall retention Synergy 2002-2006:
55.6%
- Average fall-fall retention regular admit 2002-2006:
76.6%

2005-2006 Data**Average Synergy GPA**

2005: 2.15

2006: 2.18

Average Synergy Academic Probation

2005: 43.1%

2006: 37.1%

Average Synergy Fall-to-Fall Retention

2005: 49.6%*

2006: 55.2%

*Synergy's first year as an expanded program brought many challenges for Admissions and faculty course-coordination, factors that may have lowered retention

Program Budget Description and Rationale:

Synergy's \$67,000 budget includes funds for compensating departments for teaching Synergy's intellectual community courses (similar to the Honors Program model), compensating the English Department for additional English 1010 sections created by Synergy's lower course caps, hiring peer mentors and supplemental instruction leaders, sponsoring a faculty colloquium and student seminar in the summer, and conducting course and program assessment. While the Synergy Program costs approximately \$462 per student participant, the I-course portion of \$24,000 should not be considered a "true" cost to the University, as conditionally-admitted students would be taking intellectual community courses if Synergy did not exist—the costs for these sections would simply be absorbed in other ways.

It's important to note that if Synergy is able to maintain an approximate 5% increase in fall-to-fall retention among conditional admits in future years (7-8 students per year), the program would be financially self-sustaining.

Future Projects:

Using Hesburgh funds, Synergy is currently researching innovative early-alert practices with the goal of better identifying and reaching borderline students within the first six weeks of the semester.

Synergy is also in the midst of a research project focusing on conditionally-admitted students who persist into sophomore year, investigating academic and non-academic factors that make a difference in students' success and persistence at UW.