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FIGs help new students grow

Freshman groups ease the transition from high school to the University

By Stefanie Knowlton
for the Emerald

Most students would agree with Webster's that a FIG is "a small, sweet, pear-shaped fruit." But contrary to popular belief, a FIG at the University stands for "Freshman Interest Group."

Established 16 years ago, FIGs are now a common part of the freshman experience.

Some 1,000 students participate each year in FIGs. Students can join FIGs that focus on specific interests ranging from religion to history to business.



Jack Bennett, director and founder of the FIG program, said FIGs share the goal of "connecting students to each other

around an academic theme with student mentors."

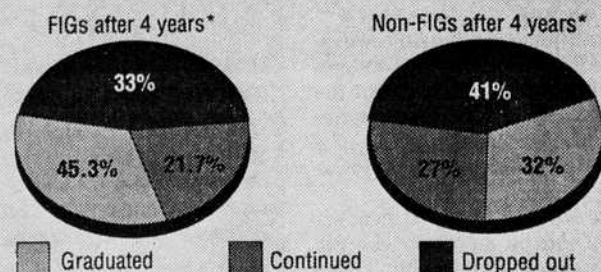
The program is on a first-come, first-served basis. But FIG students are guaranteed enrollment in a set of core classes that address their interests. For instance, students in the "Exploring Italy" FIG take Italian 101, 150 and 199, and Linguistics 144.

"It's a way to link students up with each other for their academic classes" said Marcy Hunt, a graduate teaching fellow who helps run the FIG program.

Claire Robertson, now a sopho-

Graduation and persistence rates for freshmen

FIG students' graduation and persistence rates are considerably higher than those of non-FIG students.



SOURCE: Jack Bennett, director of FIG program

*for freshmen starting fall 1992

Katie Nesse/Emerald

more and communications director for the ASUO, said she believes the program makes life easier for freshmen.

"I went to my first class in 221 Allen," said Robertson, who was in a journalism FIG. "There was a couple hundred people in there, and I knew faces and names ... that was really nice."

Besides core classes, each FIG has two student leaders who help freshmen adjust to college life, such as setting up e-mail accounts, registering for classes and navigating the campus.

Student leaders also sponsor study sessions and recreational activities.

"We encourage the FIG leaders to throw out ideas and then have the group formulate what they want to do," Hunt said.

The program is tracked through student evaluations. Survey results reveal that nearly 80 percent of participants believe

FIGs helped them make the transition to college.

FIG participants also have higher graduation and retention rates compared with non-FIG students. Although FIG students have average SAT scores and high school GPAs, 45.3 percent of them graduate within four years, compared with only 34.7 percent for the University as a whole.

But students have made one suggestion for improvement: more FIGs. Only 45 exist now.

"I was going to join, but the FIG I wanted to join was full," freshman Emily Fenning said.

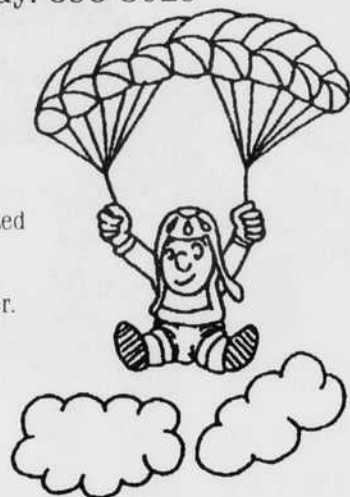
The University is taking steps to involve more students. This year, a FIG for transfer students is being tried out in an effort to retain students.

"If students connect early to each other, to student mentors and to faculty, it seems to have a long-term effect," Bennett said.

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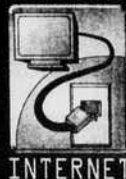
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