

Episode 33: Supporting First-Year Students

Season 4, Episode 33
The L&S Exchange Podcast

[00:00:00] **David Macasaet:** Welcome back to the L&S Exchange, a podcast about teaching and learning in the College of Letters & Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Today's episode explores topics and perspectives from the L&S Instructional Design Collaborative's Design for Learning series. Topics for articles are chosen based on input from the L&S community.

Trends we observe in our own work with L&S Instructors and current news and events today, Maria Widmer and Molly Harris take a closer look at what it means to support first-year students. Starting with Maria's article, they connect research with real classroom examples, especially in courses that enroll a lot of first-year students, but aren't designed specifically for them.

If you're thinking about how to better support students as they make that transition into college. This [00:01:00] conversation offers practical evidence-based ideas that you can use right away. Here's Maria Widmer and Molly Harris.

[00:01:10] **Molly Harris:** Welcome Maria to the L&S exchange. Thanks, Molly. So I really enjoyed reading your article about supporting first year students.

Could you tell us a little bit about how this article came about and why you think this topic is important for instructors?

[00:01:24] **Maria Widmer:** So I started here in the College of Letters and Science a few years ago, and one of the first things that I learned about the college was that instructors here teach about 80% of first year students credit hours.

And so I started to get really curious about what good teaching for first year students looks like as I started to dig into this topic a little bit more. I really gained an appreciation for all of the different services and resources that we have at UW to support first year students. There's the Office of Student Transition and Family [00:02:00] Engagement, first Gen and Limited Income Services, the FIGS program, a variety of first year seminar courses like CP 1 25, Wisconsin Experience Seminar.

*The contents of this transcript were generated, in part, with the help of AI, and may include inaccuracies.
You may send corrections to: fdc@ls.wisc.edu*

And so we have all of these amazing kind of centralized resources, but I was curious to think about, well, what can we do within the classroom to support these students and what can we do for courses that maybe have a good deal of first year students, but they aren't explicitly designed for that audience?

What, if anything, could instructors be doing in those courses to support those students who are just beginning their transition into college life?

[00:02:36] **Molly Harris:** Yeah. That's great. It sounds like it is a really important topic for us. Could you tell me a little bit more about the first year students that we have here at UW Madison?

What does that population look like and do they have unique needs? What are they bringing to campus?

[00:02:51] **Maria Widmer:** Last year, in fall 2025, UW enrolled about 8501st year students, and they're a really diverse [00:03:00] group. They came from all of Wisconsin's 72 counties, all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and more than 50 countries outside of the United States.

About half of them were Wisconsin residents, and increasingly we see that our first year student population includes higher numbers of first gen students. We had the highest number of first gen students since 2005 last year, and a record high of first year students received federal Pell Grants. So it's hard to say exactly what that population looks like at UW Medicine because it's such an interestingly varied group.

But there are a few things that we know about first year students in general and what that transition to college looks like. That seems to be pretty well supported by the research base.

[00:03:47] **Molly Harris:** So your article points to how adapting to college academics can be a challenge for some students. What does that academic transition look like for first year students?

And are there strategies that [00:04:00] instructors can use to help students with that transition?

[00:04:02] **Maria Widmer:** Absolutely. So I think the first thing to recognize is that this transition to college is a period of really complex transformation for first year students. For many, the research suggests that this adjustment can be characterized by a big academic shock of sorts.

Students in their academic life start to realize that habits that may have helped them to succeed in high school. Wrote memorization highlighting, just rereading notes. Those aren't always sufficient for college level courses and workloads. And so this realization for some can lead students to start to question their identity as learners start to wonder whether they belong in college, whether they're cut out for a college level education.

And so one strategy that instructors can use is to make use of class time to explicitly model and practice the study behaviors or disciplinary ways of [00:05:00] thinking and engaging that students are gonna need to succeed in their class and in college more generally. Last year we had a chance to talk with Professor Greg Downey from journalism and mass communication in the high school.

And Professor Downey talked a bit about a large enrollment undergraduate course that he's taught a number of times, which tends to have a large number of first year students. He noted that his students, especially those first years, often didn't know exactly what to do with the relatively large number of readings that he tends to assign in his courses.

They didn't know how much time to spend on the readings. They didn't necessarily know how to find something of value in the text or even what the purpose was of doing those readings. So Greg indicated that he would spend time at the beginning of the semester explicitly explaining what they were doing and why and linking it to the course learning outcomes, and then he would give his students tips about how to approach college level [00:06:00] reading things like giving themselves enough time in their schedule to work through the readings.

Getting clear with themselves about what they understand and don't understand in the text. Getting comfortable with admitting when they didn't understand and being able to bring that perspective into the course conversations.

[00:06:16] **Molly Harris:** Thanks. That's a great example. One of the things that really struck me when I was reading the article was the image of the W curve.

Could you tell us a little bit more about the W curve and what that means?

[00:06:30] **Maria Widmer:** The W Curve is a really interesting model that comes out of some work by two psychologists, William Zeller and a Robert Moser, and it's useful for understanding the ways in which the transition to college isn't just a linear process, but rather students undergo complex waves of up and down emotions and feelings over time.

And so if you can picture in your mind the shape of a w. This can be used to [00:07:00] represent students' experience, including their social emotional wellbeing when they first

arrive at campus. There's sort of a honeymoon period where students are really excited to be there. There's lots of new semester programming and that's, that's a high point as they start to begin their time at college as they ease into the semester and maybe start to learn.

Ways that prior skills or ways that being aren't necessarily serving them in the way that it used to. There's a, a bit of a culture shock adjustment, and so if you can imagine the way this is when we start to go down as students then start to get comfortable. Learn strategies that are working better.

There's an adjust initial adjustment period where they're gaining some new skills but maybe aren't quite thriving exactly as much as they had been at the AT during that honeymoon period. And then one really important point in their transition tends to be around midterms. [00:08:00] And so leading into the second half of the semester period, Zeller and Mosier suggested is a time of mental isolation for students.

That's a really important moment. In the transition process when interventions, either academic or social emotional, can be really powerful and impactful.

[00:08:20] **Molly Harris:** Thanks. That's a really helpful image for understanding this transition for students. You mentioned that this transition is not just academic, but also social and emotional.

Is this something that matters in the classroom for instructors and why should instructors be thinking about that element in addition to. The academic side,

[00:08:42] **Maria Widmer:** the research suggests that this really does matter, both relationships among students themselves and between students and instructors. One of the instructors that I had the opportunity to speak with was Marjorie Ryan, who teaches English 100 Introduction to College Composition, [00:09:00] and she offered a really interesting exercise where on the first day of the semester, she has students work in groups to generate a list of recommendations about how to succeed in college that they may have heard from family, friends during SOAR advising.

Residence hall meetings. It's a fairly quick exercise, but the activity accomplishes a number of things. It begins to build community. By having students talking to each other right away in the course, it sets the expectation that they all have something to share, and so they should feel confident and sharing their voice in the classroom, and then they leave on the first day having had a conversation with a few people.

So they already have started to form the important relationships that can carry forward into the semester. And it also gives them some new success strategies that they can consider using in their courses as they move forward.

[00:09:53] **Molly Harris:** Yeah, I really like that example because it's easy for the instructor. It doesn't take a huge amount of [00:10:00] preparation.

It's fast and it accomplishes so many things and could be done in really any classroom. Are there any examples that you have of how to keep this going throughout the semester?

[00:10:11] **Maria Widmer:** If we think back to that W curve of the transition, there is some research that suggests that the period immediately following the midterm exams is a time when students are especially receptive to encouragement and guidance.

And so even a small intervention or a small instructional move like. Opening up a few more office hour times or building in time once students get their scores back, to have a peer-to-peer conversation. I think if instructors wanna try one thing or pick one time to try something new, that time right around the midpoint of the semester would be a great time to do it.

[00:10:51] **Molly Harris:** You mentioned at the beginning when we started opportunities for first year students, such as fgs, our first year interest group program, or residential [00:11:00] learning communities, first year seminars. But we also know that a lot of first year students are enrolled in some of the biggest courses on campus, and those courses might have hundreds of students.

Did you find any strategies in your research or examples from instructors that work particularly well in those larger settings?

[00:11:19] **Maria Widmer:** I think here about two instructor examples. I talked a little bit already about Professor Greg Downey's interview from last year, but I was really struck by something that Professor Downey said, which is that belonging and inclusion for him are more than just student to instructor relationships.

It starts with student to student relationships, and so even something like building in small moments where students turn to a partner. Introduce each other by name and start to get talking with one another. Those kind of classroom friendships can be important even if they don't extend beyond the classroom.

And then [00:12:00] for the article, I had a chance to talk with Dr. Melissa Lindsay, who is the Director of Instructional Staff Operations in the Department of Mathematics. And Dr.

Lindsay teaches inner L&S 1 44 success in your math course, which is a class that's taken largely by first year in transfer students.

And it's not a huge class, but it's a pretty big class. Around a hundred students enroll each fall. Dr. Lindsay describes how she offers a really interesting model for office hours where she requires students to have. Just a short 15 minute one-on-one coaching meeting with her, and that's part of students' final grade.

And so that assignment involves a pre-meeting survey, the brief meeting, and then a post-meeting survey. And in that survey, they just tell Dr. Lindsay what they'd like to get her input advice, her feedback [00:13:00] on. After the meeting, that post-meeting survey has them reflect on whatever goal or next step that they set together during the meeting.

And so this to me seemed like a pretty resource and time intensive process, but Dr. Lindsay said that it really paid off for her and for her students. And by having those just be a quick 15 minute check-in, it was manageable for her and for her students. She offered a small incentive by having it be part of their final grade, but if the student couldn't pull it off, it wasn't gonna totally tank their score.

But I thought this was really interesting as an exercise in a large enroll course, because as she describes it, it was a small step in helping students to practice the skills of meeting with an instructor, having some sort of self reflectivity about. Where they need advice or what they could use help on.

Those are skills that when they are working in a class [00:14:00] that as she describes it, where the stakes might be higher, they've already gotten practice of what it looks like to go to instructor's office hours and have that kind of academic conversation.

[00:14:10] **Molly Harris:** So we've covered a lot of ground today, Maria. We have instructors who are listening to this conversation who are teaching first year students.

What do you think their next step should be if they're looking to improve their course?

[00:14:23] **Maria Widmer:** One simple next step could be to take a look at a slide deck that was developed by colleagues in the Department of Sociology. Sociology created series of slides that are designed to help instructors uncover the hidden curriculum for students at UW Madison.

A fair bit of the research that I did about first year students. Talked about this idea of the hidden curriculum. It basically refers to the kind of unspoken norms and expectations

that tend to be privileged in higher [00:15:00] education institutions and some, some call these like the rules of the game, which are not always explicit to some extent courses.

Assume that students might have knowledge about how college works coming in, but we know that's not the case, especially as we think about such a diverse group of first year students as we have at UW Madison. And so some of the research that I found in working on this article suggested that being really explicit and direct in explaining those rules of the game in your course can help to set a common knowledge base among your students.

And set them up for success. So the Department of Sociology created these really short slides that can be pretty easily integrated into your own course. They take about five to seven minutes to cover, and they address topics like academic skills, time management, how to read a syllabus, what resources are available at UW [00:16:00] libraries, mental health services, and then just sort of general aspects of college life.

What are office hours? What does it mean to go to office hours? And what's amazing is that they have offered these slides for instructors across campus to use them and make them their own. And so teaching is really a collective exercise of building on the knowledge that we have gained as instructors.

And so sharing this resource from the Department of Sociology is one way to build on something that someone else has done, adapt it for our own context. And do that for the benefit of our students.

[00:16:37] **Molly Harris:** That's really lovely. Thank you so much, Maria, for joining us today.

[00:16:41] **Maria Widmer:** Thanks for having me.

[00:16:43] **David Macasaet:** This has been the L&S exchange.

You can find the Design for Learning article on our website, idc.ls.wisc.edu. There you'll also find the show notes page for this episode, which features conversation starters, [00:17:00] resources, and links. Two insights from previous L&S Exchange guests. The exchange is brought to you by L&S, teaching, learning and Academic Planning, and produced

[00:17:12] **Maria Widmer:** by the L&S Instructional Design Collaborative.

[00:17:16] **David Macasaet:** We record this podcast on the UW Madison campus in Van Heist Hall, which sits atop a ridge overlooking Lake Mendota. It's a beautiful spot. And

has a deeper significance because everything that resides here rests atop ancestral HoChunk land. A place their nation has called De job since time immemorial.