

Mediated Learning

A Newsletter by and for the Instructors of The University of Montana



The Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program

Mary Kay Kriley

Director, Freshman Interest Group Program



Professor Mary Kay Kriley

Each summer as we welcome new freshmen and their parents to The University of Montana Missoula, we introduce them to the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program at their Orientations. During those few minutes of sound bites we try to explain what FIGs are all about. Sometimes our former FIG students themselves—the ones in the trenches—are more articulate; students from the 2001 *Journalism* FIG designed and built their own website, their presentation of “FIGs.” Below is the title page from their site: www.geocities.com/umfigs.



A FIG is a group of students with a similar major participating in the same group of classes and a discussion group. And you probably thought it was just a fruit.

Washington. UM's program would offer freshmen the opportunity to participate in a First-Year Experience by joining a FIG. In these small learning communities students could more easily become acclimated to the academic and social culture of campus.

UM freshmen may register for a FIG during their first semester. As a FIG student he or she is part of a cohort of about twenty-five who co-enroll in the same cluster of courses. Thus, students in the same FIG take the same sections of four or five courses (ten to twelve credits) together. Almost all of the courses fulfill General Education requirements. The courses are linked by a common theme, e.g., "Journalism," "The Foundations of Health Science," and "Business Skills and Concepts." Many of the FIGs are tailored for students thinking of specific majors; all of them are designed for General Education. Twenty-four Freshman Interest Groups were offered for Autumn Semester 2003. Twenty of the blocks include at least one small-enrollment general education course, like ENEX 101, COMM 111A, or DRAM 111A.

A one-credit FIG Seminar anchors each FIG. The seminar is designed to help freshmen get off to a strong start academically within their small community. In the seminar freshmen learn about organizational skills, registration processes, campus and community resources,

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In the early 1990s The University looked at more ways to improve rates of student retention and degree completion. With these goals in mind, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences proposed a Freshman Interest Group Program, modeled after programs at the University of Oregon and the University of

Teaching Profile: David Moore, Department of English

*Katherine Sather
Junior, Print Journalism*



Professor David Moore

"I remember as a student the pleasure of listening to a professor profess when they're really in love with their topic."

Students in professor David Moore's classes know all about the blues. The 52-year-old English instructor makes it a part of his curriculum. Earlier this semester he carted out an acoustic guitar, more often found in his office, to his American Literature class and propped it on his knee to croon the blues: "No one loves you when you're down..." The activity corresponded with the a lesson about the years from 1910 to 1940 in the United States, in which students read works from Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes and W. E. B. DuBois. "I really try to link literature to human lives and the community," Moore said. "One way to do that is to find expression that is more than on the page - the idea is to bring life off the page and one way to do that is through music."

Moore was raised in a family of innovative thinkers. In 1949, his parents founded Pacifica Radio in Berkeley, Calif., where he was born. Pacifica is a listener-sponsored radio program that promotes free speech and broadcasts progressive news and music. He attended high school at the United Nations International School in New York, an institution that prided itself on its diversity. "I was raised with a sense of pushing for peace past conflict," Moore said. "My parents were pacifists in WWII, pretty radical thinkers, poets and philosophers."

Moore traveled to New Mexico to begin working towards his degree, but took time off in 1969 to travel. He met a writer who was conducting research for a book on American Indians and accompanied him to reservations in Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. He was inspired by the people he met. In South Dakota he befriended a famed Lakota spiritual leader named Fool's Crow, who introduced him to the history and spirituality of American Indian culture. "He set my life in line," Moore said. He remained in South Dakota to finish both his bachelor's and master's degree while maintaining his connection with the Indian community. He got his start in the field of teaching by instructing special services classes to American Indians at the University of South Dakota.

In 1981 he moved to Montana and began teaching English courses at Salish Kootenai College, where he remained for almost a decade. While at the University of Washington to study for his Ph.D., he met his wife, who is from the Fort Peck Reservation. They taught at Cornell University in the early 1990s, but returned to Montana in 1999. He joined the English department at the University of Montana in that year. "I left the Ivy league to come back to the Indian communities in Montana," he said. At UM, Moore teaches American Literature, Native American Literature, Literary Theory and a graduate seminar on tribal sovereignty and American identity, the topic of a book he is writing.

Moore encourages his students to generate discussion in the classroom by distributing discussion question handouts. He believes that students learn more by participating than listening. "Usually they focus on most of the things I intend to bring to their attention," Moore said. "And what I have to say finds a more active listener." He tries to incorporate social and historical issues that relate to the literature into their discussions as well. But he values lectures as well as classroom discussions. "I remember as a student the pleasure of listening to a professor profess when they're really in love with their topic," he said.

Junior Will Cleveland, a journalism student, has enjoyed Moore's American Literature class this semester. His class studies work published after 1865. "He's shown us a lot of different texts you wouldn't associate with American literature from Latin, Native American and African cultures," Cleveland said. In the 29 years since Moore entered the teaching profession in South Dakota, he hasn't regretted his career choice. Almost two decades ago he remembers telling a friend that he could die happy because of all the wonderful exchanges and responses he's had with students. "It's that sense of discovery that makes me happy in education—it's incredibly rewarding," Moore said.

FIGs

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and communication with faculty. They complete a class project and other assignments, which may include a service-learning component.

Departments and programs from across campus nominate their distinguished upper-level students to lead/teach the FIG Seminars. (Also, this fall faculty members are teaching the seminars in three "Faculty FIGs.") During spring semester, the seminar leaders complete a mandatory FIG Leader Training Seminar to prepare them to teach the following fall. As seminar teachers, they embrace the opportunity to apply their leadership skills. They plan, organize and present a weekly class, design and execute a class project, facilitate small group discussions, and evaluate their students. They effectively articulate an understanding of the curriculum and procedures that freshmen need to learn for a healthy academic life. The FIG leaders expand their own educational background by teaching in a college classroom during their senior year.

The success of the program depends on these volunteer leaders, who call upon their own experiences to guide freshmen during the first semester. As upper-level student role models FIG leaders may be the first people on the other side of the desk to know the names of and personal information about their first-year students. The leaders promote student-to-student interaction by involving their freshmen in collaborative learning related to the theme of their FIG. Interactions inside and out of the classroom lead to greater social connection among students' peers and increased campus and community engagement, which help achieve positive outcomes: academic success and higher retention rates.

Preceptors, faculty who volunteer to act as mentors to the FIG Seminar leaders, and the volunteer Associate Director, also contribute to the program. The preceptors work closely with the leaders and meet with students in informal, small group settings. With their presence and advice, they foster an attitude of personal involvement and accessible faculty-to-student interaction. Both faculty and

student leaders introduce first-year students to potential career choices and relate those choices to academic pursuits.

Typically, 400-500 freshmen (21-26% of traditional freshmen) register for a FIG block of courses. The FIG Program has served more than 3950 students since its beginning nine years ago. Although many of the reasons why students stay in college seem to be beyond the university's influence, first-year programs like FIGs have a positive impact on academic and personal reasons for staying. There has been no specific, scientific study of the Freshman Interest Group Program at The University of Montana, but the one-year retention rate (1999-2000) for first-time freshmen who enrolled in a FIG in 1999 was 82.4%, compared to a 69.8% average retention for non-FIG first-time freshmen.

Students affirm that their FIG experience contributed to their satisfaction and involvement at UM. Their most frequent responses are that they established positive friendships by getting to know classmates who share similar interests. They felt that the FIG and their "helpful, informative" leader made their transition into college easier. As one student wrote, "I feel connected through the members of my FIG. I feel that I am an important part of UM, because I have successfully made it through my first semester."

A first-year experience such as the Freshman Interest Group Program reflects the significance of notable beginnings, the impact of learning in small groups, and the value of strong mentoring. If the program strengthens students' performance, participation and self-satisfaction, it will help create a campus environment that contributes to their academic success and the community's well being.

Reference

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Center for Teaching Excellence
Mark S. Cracolice, Director
The University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula, MT 59812

Phone: 406-243-4475
Email: mark.cracolice@umontana.edu

www.umt.edu/cte/

The Center for Teaching Excellence

Mark S. Cracolice, Director

Angel Smith, Production and Distribution
Manager

James Staub, Associate Provost

Arlene Walker-Andrews, Associate Provost

Lois E. Muir, Provost

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