

# External Review of the First-Year Seminar Program Review

Pitzer College

*Submitted by*

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of a standard external review of the Pitzer College First-Year Seminar Program following a self-study by members of the First-Year Seminar (FYS) Program and a virtual visit by the External Review Team in September-October 2021. Informed by a thorough analysis of the documents provided and a week of meetings with a full range of participants and stakeholders in the program, this report outlines strengths, areas that could be strengthened, and recommendations, grouped under the subheadings identified in our charge.

### 1.1. Summary of key strengths

The First-Year Seminar Program at Pitzer College delivers writing instruction in a format identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as a “[High Impact Practice](#).” AAC&U notes that “the highest-quality first-year [seminars] ... place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies.” The First-Year Seminar Program at Pitzer College also includes a model of student advising that is common at small liberal arts colleges, including at Drew University. At the very least, when advisors also teach students in an FYS, they have a familiarity with the students, their learning habits, and their writing skills that equips them to help students make intentional choices as they navigate the curriculum until they declare majors; at its best, the connections built in the FYS facilitate deeper mentoring, support, and retention. Faculty are provided with a course release to support this two-year advising commitment. They are also supported by the Writing Center and undergraduate mentors. We find the overall program design to be strong, staffed by dedicated faculty members who continue to innovate and add value to the student experience at Pitzer College.

### 1.2. Summary of key areas that could be strengthened

We identify three areas of concern that were also listed in the [2012-2013 FYS Report](#): general buy-in to the course philosophy and outcomes, administrative support and transparency, and recruitment of faculty to teach in the program. These are the foundation from which our recommendations flow. Faculty and staff we met expressed uncertainty or conflicting opinions about the mission and desired outcomes of the FYS along with how it is funded, and these things prevent the broad buy-in necessary for a healthy and sustainable program, reduce the likelihood of meaningful assessment, and create unevenness across sections of the course.

To address this, we believe it is essential to increase faculty ownership of and responsibility for FYS, beginning with a commitment to a shared mission, goals, and regular assessment of the writing, communication, and advising components of FYS. We believe that these things need to be articulated and approved by the faculty, guided, we suggest, by a FYS Advisory Committee. In addition to continuing the commitment to teaching writing, the revised FYS outcomes should also reflect the commitment to broader communication skills, in particular oral communication. We also recommend that faculty continue to serve as advisors to students in their FYS, receive more faculty development opportunities around this aspect of their work, and continue to be compensated for it (financially and through course release); they should also receive recognition for advising and mentoring as a form of teaching, not service. We recommend a greater role in the FYS leadership for the Director of the Writing Center; strengthened faculty development around writing and oral communication; a coherent and actionable assessment plan; and course embedded writing fellows in place of the various student mentors (directed by the Assistant Director of the Writing Center in a revised position). Finally, we urge the college to dedicate the finances necessary to fully support the FYS program and share that budget with the faculty.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

This report by Sandra Jamieson (Drew University), Stacey Sheriff (Colby College), and Vershawn Young (University of Waterloo) is part of a standard external review of the Pitzer College First-Year Seminar Program. The review was conducted via Zoom over the week of September 27 to October 1, 2021. In preparation for this process, members of the First-Year Seminar (FYS) Program completed a self-study (submitted in November 2020), which, along with relevant documents, was provided to the External Review Team in good time via a secure platform (Pitzer.Box.com). Links in this document are to materials made available electronically through that platform. The Review Team was provided with questions from the Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Allen Omoto, in addition to those listed in the self-study (Appendix i), and we have organized this report in a way that we hope will address them all.

In spite of the limitations of meeting via Zoom and of spreading the meetings over an entire week rather than focusing our attention on the college in the usual immersive way, we believe we had access to the people and materials necessary to identify program strengths and to offer recommendations to make it stronger. We found the self-study to be thoughtfully written and very informative and the core of it informed our understanding of the program and the strengths and challenges we saw when we visited. During our Zoom-mediated experience with the Pitzer community, we had the opportunity to speak with tenured and tenure-line faculty, part-time faculty, and staff as well as students (see Appendix ii), and further feedback was provided in a survey from faculty unable to attend our meetings.

### **2.1. The Review Process**

#### ***2.1.1. Background and process of the review***

In early February 2020, Phil Zuckerman, Associate Dean of Faculty at Pitzer College, reached out to Stacey Sheriff at Colby College, Vershawn Young at the University of Waterloo, and Sandra Jamieson at Drew University, about the possibility of conducting an external comprehensive review of the First-Year Seminar Program in Spring 2021. The review was ultimately postponed until Fall 2021 and was conducted via Zoom over the week of September 27 to October 1, 2021 (See Appendix ii, FYS Program Review schedule). In preparation for this process, a First-Year Seminar Self-Study Committee was formed, made up of Sarah Gilman, Andrea Scott, Andre Wakefield, Claudia Strauss, Alayna Sessions-Goins, and Nicole Selassie. The committee submitted the self-study to the APC and FEC committees in November 2020 ([“Report of the First-Year Seminar Self-Study Committee to APC and FEC”](#)), and that self-study along with five appendices, faculty CVs, a collection of FYS syllabi, and an extract from the Faculty Handbook on Program Reviews was provided to the Review Team in good time via a secure platform (Pitzer.Box.com). We were also provided with additional questions for review and, after the week-long virtual visit, the results of a survey of faculty who could not meet with us at the scheduled times. In addition to the questions listed in the self-study, the charge from the Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Allen Omoto, included questions for the committee (see below), and we have organized this report in a way that we hope will address all three sets of questions.

#### ***2.1.2. Committee charge and organization of this report***

We have organized our report according to the format provided by Dean Omoto under the following four headings, which allowed us to address the questions in the “Report of the First-Year Seminar Self-Study Committee” and those included in the Dean’s letter (Appendix i.): Program structure, staffing, and financial

support; Teaching, learning, and assessment; Advising and related faculty development; Co-curricular and peer mentoring; budget and financial support.

## **2.2. Quality and rigor of the self-study report and supporting evidence**

We found the “Report of the First-Year Seminar Self-Study Committee to APC and FEC” to be comprehensive, spanning 57 pages and organized into nine sections (eight primary sections and an Appendix); cohesive, with component parts that worked well together to provide an account with the necessary specificity; and reflective, including relevant questions at the end of each section. The report provides rich data, including statistical analyses of faculty and student surveys, graphs of polling information, charts related to the organization, lists of courses, and historical and institutional information. Each of the eight sections is centered on key questions and analysis of some relevant data that bears directly upon the issues. The Appendix provided full data sets from some of the material presented in earlier units, such as student surveys, faculty surveys, and student advising responses by demographic group. The report enabled us to identify the key elements of the program and provided the information the Review Team needed to consider how the parts of the program function together without competing, what’s working among them, what’s not working, what needs to be kept, and what needs to be tweaked or revised. The questions helped frame the foci of our interviews and discussion.

## **3. OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM HISTORY AND SUPPORT OF PITZER’S MISSION**

### **3.1. A brief history of prior program reviews that have been conducted**

This invited external review is the first comprehensive review of the FYS program at Pitzer. The FYS program was last reviewed in 2012-13, at the request of students on the 2011 College Council, by a task force convened by the Academic Planning Committee (APC). Many of the recommendations from that review were taken up, including linking FYS and two years of advising (piloted in 2014, fully implemented in fall 2015); putting more emphasis on developing student writing as a primary goal; and changing staffing to tenure-line and long-term faculty. It is worth noting that ongoing challenges and unfulfilled recommendations from the 2012-13 review appear again in the 2020 Self-Study that preceded this review and in our own recommendations. These latter include assessment, common rubrics and articulation of the philosophy and goals of the FYS Program, and institutional support and the challenge of recruiting sufficient numbers of faculty also still remains. We hope that these issues will be considered more seriously having been made by two separate review teams.

### **3.2. The FYS program’s support of Pitzer’s mission**

Pitzer College’s mission statement declares that:

Pitzer College produces engaged, socially responsible citizens of the world through an academically rigorous, interdisciplinary liberal arts education emphasizing social justice, intercultural understanding and environmental sensitivity. The meaningful participation of students, faculty and staff in college governance and academic program design is a Pitzer core value. Our community thrives within the mutually supportive framework of The Claremont Colleges, which provide an unsurpassed breadth of academic, athletic and social opportunities. (“[Mission and Values](#)”)

The First-Year Seminar (FYS) program supports this mission through courses that introduce students to a theme or problem, rather than a discipline, and to the intellectual life of the college. Faculty are involved in

this academic program as teachers, advisors, and through the FYS Director role, while students are involved as course participants and as Fellows.

### **3.3. A brief description of the faculty, curriculum, and resources supporting FYS**

First-Year Seminar courses are taught by continuing faculty in all field groups and in the Keck Science Department. To give faculty time to learn the curriculum and get oriented, faculty in their first-year do not teach FYS. There are staffing expectations for each field group, determined by the number of tenure-line faculty, which range from offering 1 to 3 sections every 2-3 years. The Science department offers two sections annually, as per their negotiated Governance Agreement. While most field groups meet their expectations, the self-study shows that (from 2014-2019) five field groups did not meet their expectations and at least four field groups significantly exceeded theirs. There are also 1-2 staff who regularly and voluntarily teach FYS.

Over the last five years, the FYS curriculum has offered an average of 18 sections/year across field groups. There are also two special sections of FYS offered annually: an I-Scholars section for international I-Scholar students and a section for New Resource Students and transfer students. The professors who teach these sections are not tenure-line and the courses are not counted among the FYS staffing or enrollment data we were provided but listed separately. These sections are not included in the FYS staffing expectations.

The financial resources supporting FYS are substantial. Faculty who teach in the FYS program and advise their students for two years can elect a course release or a stipend equivalent to the course overload compensation of \$7,500. Each FYS also has a \$650 course budget that faculty can use for co-curricular activities. Not all courses make use of this individual course budget funding, so the remainder is often applied to faculty development and assessment activities.

The Pitzer Writing Center also plays a significant role in supporting FYS. As noted in the self-study report, approximately half of all first-year students take their work to the Writing Center, and a majority of these sessions focus on writing for FYS. The Writing Center Director supports the FYS Director in the development and running of faculty development workshops and provides support for faculty as they develop and deliver the writing component of the seminar.

## **4. PROGRAM MISSION, STRUCTURE, STAFFING, AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

### **4.1. Introduction and guiding questions**

As with any college-wide program, the structure and support of the program is fundamental to its success, and recommendations about all aspects of the program from curriculum to assessment need to be placed within and flow from broader contextual frameworks. For this reason, we have placed this section at the beginning of our review. It responds directly to a number of questions in the self-study report, and indirectly to others in the study (such as the matter of faculty recruitment) and our charge from the Dean. The three specific questions addressed here include improvements that could be made in the organizational structure that supports FYS, the structure of FYS leadership and the FYS Directorship, and the model of financial support (see [Appendix i](#) for the full list of questions posed to the review team). These questions are all related to the broader question the Dean asked us to consider: To what extent are processes in place to ensure that curriculum and instruction are current and relevant to program goals?

#### **4.2. The organizational structure that supports the Pitzer FYS program**

The FYS program is directed by a Pitzer faculty member who receives a course release and a small stipend as compensation. The Directorship rotates among faculty members, and there has been quite high turn-over in the last few years with each director bringing a different vision and approach to the position. The primary responsibilities of the Director are described in the self-study as faculty recruitment, faculty development (primarily around writing), collaboration with the Associate Dean for Academic Advising, and collaboration with the library to facilitate information literacy instruction. The study notes that the director also serves as a liaison with groups offering FYS-related programming such as the Pitzer Art Galleries, Career Center, and IGLAS program. Other responsibilities vary depending on the interests and concerns of the director, including assessment of student writing and working with the Office of Student Affairs on new student orientation. Each of the components of the FYS has been discussed separately in this report, but they also need to be discussed together as part of the overall structure of the FYS and the FYS Director's responsibilities.

The model of FYS directed by a rotation of faculty members is a common one at liberal arts colleges, including Drew. Challenges in staffing programs with required writing across the curriculum courses are also almost universal and there are many models used to ensure adequate staffing. The Pitzer model of expecting each field group to commit to a certain number of seminars each year is more of a top-down model than at many institutions, and does not seem popular for a variety of reasons, most notably the sense that there is not adequate parity between the groups. The self-study identifies both of these areas as in need of review.

The self-study also indicates a need to more clearly articulate the relationship between the Writing Center and the FYS program. After the 2012-2013 review, the primary goal of the FYS has been to accomplish Pitzer's "Written Expression Requirement," and that end has been served by the hire in 2013 of the first tenure-track Writing Center director and assistant professor of academic writing (awarded tenure in 2019). With the increased centrality of the Writing Center as a resource for the FYS program and for Pitzer students overall (meeting more than 37% of all students at least once in 2017 - according to the Self-Study, p. 26) it is surprising not to see liaison with the Writing Center Director included in the job description of the Director of FYS, and, as the self-study notes, this relationship should be clarified -- especially as the research area of the current Writing Center Director is so directly relevant to the FYS. As indicated in the section on advising above, the model of the solo director of the FYS is not the only possibility.

Faculty and students express support for the overall structure and organization of the FYS, but students in particular express concerns about the broad differences between the seminars in terms of workload, kind of work, and degree of writing instruction. Some of this may suggest the need to rethink the overall organization and structure of the FYS Program. The Review Team was asked to consider what improvements could be made in organizational structure that supports FYS.

#### **4.3. Strengths of the FYS Program**

The self-study notes that "slightly more than 72% of current faculty" taught FYS between 2015 and 2019, although 44% had only taught it once in that period. The number of faculty who had not taught FYS at all in that period was down from 29 (47.5%) in the period 2009-2013, to 19 (28.8%) in 2015-2019 (Table III-3, p. 14). Given the importance of the FYS as an introduction to and reflection of the Pitzer "brand," this increased involvement is a positive sign and may be in part a response to the changes made after the 2012-2013 review, particularly the course release for advising. If one goal of the FYS is that it provides a foundation for writing,

critical thinking, oral communication, and other valued habits of mind for the remainder of the time students spend at Pitzer, it is obviously valuable for all faculty to have received the same faculty development and advising training through the FYS. This is especially true for writing, which is most effectively scaffolded throughout the curriculum if faculty use at least some elements of a shared language and generally aligned terminology to speak about writing in all of their classes. The introduction of genres of writing and concerns about audience in the FYS serve that end, and familiarity with them allows faculty to help students build on what they have already learned.

#### **4.4. Challenges and areas of potential growth**

##### ***4.4.1 Clarity of the role of the FYS program in Pitzer's curriculum and mission***

The FYS has been through many evolutions over time, as is the norm at most liberal arts colleges with similar programs. We support the recommendation of the 2012-13 review that FYS emphasize teaching writing and communication, but we heard some resistance to that during our conversations with faculty, and we also heard a range of descriptions of the role and purpose of the FYS from faculty and students. Pitzer's catalog language is also inconsistent and unclear. The "[Educational Objectives](#)" page of the Pitzer website states Pitzer has six objectives, including -- under the tripartite heading "Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, and Effective Expression" -- the objective that, "By writing and communicating orally, students acquire the ability to express their ideas effectively and to persuade others." The "[Guidelines for Graduation](#)" page the Pitzer website lists five guidelines, including number four, "Written Expression," which refers to "the ability to write competently by completing one full-credit writing-intensive course" and omits oral communication. There seems to be some slippage between this guideline, which also states all students are required to complete a FYS, and the language of the educational objectives in a way that reflects broader concerns we heard from faculty and students about the role and desired outcomes of the FYS.

Pitzer has a group of very dedicated FYS faculty and supportive staff and students who clearly care about the goals the FYS is designed to achieve; however, they do not all agree on what those goals are. We heard from a small but vocal group of faculty who had never taught FYS, or had not taught it in the last decade and believe the current model to be too restrictive. They seem to reflect a larger tension between the open and independent spirit valued by the faculty that is reflected in individually designed courses and the all-college commitment to the shared goals and expectations of a writing-focused FYS and advising that distributes responsibility and participation across field groups. We also heard from an overlapping group who articulated very different goals of the FYS: either introducing students to Pitzer and the "available co-curricular resources of the college" or introducing students to academic habits of mind, in particular written expression.

Until this tension is resolved and faculty come to broad consensus about what the FYS is and what they want it to accomplish, we predict that there will not be coherency across sections or the broad buy-in to the program necessary to fully staff the program with faculty who volunteer to teach regardless of institutional expectations. While a majority of faculty we spoke with felt a strong sense of ownership of FYS, some did not. Aligning the mission of the FYS program with Pitzer's mission, educational objectives, and graduation guidelines and articulating what the FYS should accomplish in addition to writing and advising is a messy process, but a necessary one every decade or so anyway. These conversations, ideally, will ultimately increase faculty commitment to the program, even if some of the valued elements are lost in the process.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

**FYS institutional role and mission:** We recommend that the College clearly articulates for faculty, students, and administrators the place of FYS in the overall Pitzer education and the way it aligns with Pitzer's curriculum, educational objectives, and mission. Moreover, we recommend that the writing and communication focus of the FYS be consistently emphasized across these elements of a Pitzer education and the FYS program's mission. We encourage all concerned to approach this process as generative and reflective of the commitment to shared governance so prized at Pitzer.

#### **4.4.2 Program Directorship**

One of the questions the Review Team was asked to address concerns the nature of the program directorship, whether it should remain a faculty position, whether it should be combined with other roles/offices at the College (e.g., the Writing Center), and in general whether there are other models to explore. This question was on the minds of many we met with, although for different reasons. One of the concerns we heard raised in several of the meetings we attended was that the transition from one FYS Director to the next is not always smooth and the change in focus can be disconcerting or directly problematic for faculty as they move in and out of the program, especially those who do not teach frequently. This lack of continuity has also led to resources generated by other faculty and staff not being passed along to or by new directors.

There is a steep learning curve for new directors, and no matter how extensive their expertise in faculty development, writing instruction, and assessment, the first-year will inevitably be a challenge. One possible solution we heard was to have an administrative director instead of rotating faculty. This would parallel the Associate Dean of Advising and would allow the Director to build long-term and consistent relationships with others in fixed positions, most notably the Writing Center Director. While this is often the model at larger schools, and on the face of it is an attractive and apparently efficient solution, it is less frequently the case at liberal arts colleges where faculty engagement is prized. The tenor of programs changes significantly when they are no longer seen as under faculty jurisdiction. This is especially the case for academic programs, and does not seem well aligned to the commitment to faculty governance we heard repeated in multiple meetings from Pitzer faculty.

A second option we heard was to keep the model of faculty director, but not make it rotating. One way to do that is to focus on the writing emphasis of the FYS and align it more closely with the Writing Center by having both directed by the same person, on a faculty or administrative line. This option is more complex and we could make arguments for or against it. A writing specialist is in possession of many of the skills required to direct the FYS, especially faculty development around writing and assessment. On the other side is the fear that the FYS will be seen by many faculty as solely a writing class rather than a writing intensive seminar that also includes advising and co-curricular elements. This may dissuade faculty already slightly resistant to teaching writing from agreeing to teach an FYS. If this is a direction the college considers, we suggest thorough investigation of the impact this will have on faculty (using anonymous surveys and faculty focus groups) before any change is made.

A third option, and the one we recommend, is to maintain the rotating faculty directorship but establish a FYS advisory or steering committee to work closely with the director. Such a committee might most effectively include faculty from different field groups on rotating terms, along with permanent membership by the Associate Dean for Advising, the Director of the Writing Center, and perhaps someone charged with overseeing assessment. Ideally, the director would be drawn from the faculty on this committee, providing consistency and institutional memory balanced with a healthy introduction of new leadership and approaches. This model is in place in some FYS programs, and is also common in Writing Across the Curriculum



Programs. The committee takes a leadership role in advising the Director, planning ongoing faculty development, and leading programmatic assessment. A faculty-led committee of faculty may also make some headway in the process of standardizing the FYS to the extent that students feel they receive a shared educational experience while also being introduced to engaging content selected by each individual faculty member. A committee charged with helping to ensure coherence across the FYS program will be able to support the director, rather than leaving one person to take on this task alone. Another timely charge of the committee should be to lead faculty in the exploration of anti-racist pedagogy underway in writing studies, and a deeper understanding of the diverse needs of students in line with the deeply rooted culture of social justice embraced by the Pitzer faculty.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:**

**FYS Advisory Committee:** We recommend that Pitzer explore the establishment of an FYS Advisory Committee, chaired by the FYS Director or the Writing Center Director, and made up of a cross section of FYS faculty and previous FYS Directors, the Associate Dean of Advising, and whomever else is deemed relevant. The Writing Center Director should play a key role on this committee if she does not chair or co-chair it. This committee will serve a vital role facilitating the smooth transfer from one FYS Director to the next, providing continuity of resources and institutional practice, and ensuring that curriculum and instruction are current and relevant to program goals. Moving forward, the committee should work with the Director of the Writing Center and the Assistant Dean of Advising to plan faculty development and recommend revisions to SLOs as necessary. Typically, advisory committees collect and study course syllabi to assess the range and commonalities across the FYS, and work with faculty on syllabus design and annual assessment activities. They also serve as ambassadors for the program to other faculty who might teach in it.

**4.4.3 *The role of the Writing Center Director and Assistant Director***

We were also asked to consider the role of the Writing Center Director, and how Pitzer can foster a stronger relationship between the Writing Center and the FYS program, particularly in the area of faculty development. We were impressed with the work the director, Andrea Scott, has done with the Writing Center, the FYS program, and other related activities on campus. Her work and the support and leadership she provides were applauded by faculty, who speak of her with respect. Of all of the positions on a college campus, the location of the person with the expertise to guide the institution and the faculty as they implement policy and curricula for writing is the most context-specific. On some campuses, that person is the director of the Writing Center, on others, the director of writing or director of FYS. On some campuses, the person in this position takes responsibility for assessment and/or faculty development; on others these tasks are more collaborative and may be steered by committees. The exact nature of the position tends to evolve with shifts in the institution's scope, the needs of the students, curricular innovation, and the expertise and interests of the person occupying that position. Such appears to have been the case at Pitzer, and we think the expertise of the current Writing Center director may be under utilized. We believe that the Writing Center director should play a larger and more clearly defined role in the FYS. We also believe that role should be accompanied by an additional course release in line with other institutions. While it is beyond the scope of this review to make other recommendations about the role of the current Writing Center Director, we suggest that the Dean's office explore with the current director whether there are ways her expertise may serve the campus more fully. To facilitate these changes, it may be appropriate to change her title to Director of Writing.

In addition, we would like to commend the work of the Assistant Director of the Writing Center, Stephanie Liu-Rojas, whose expertise also seems to be underutilized. She plays an essential mentoring and tutoring role and is clearly qualified to pick up more of the day-to-day work of the Writing Center as the director takes on more responsibilities with the FYS program. She is also qualified to run the course embedded writing fellows program we propose in place of other forms of peer mentoring (see Section 7.3.3 of this report and **Recommendation 16**). Of course, these additional responsibilities would necessitate a review of her position, and while it is beyond the direct scope of this report, we would like to recommend a promotion and related increase in compensation to reflect her contributions to the program and broader support for students.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**The role of the Director of the Writing Center:** We recommend that the Director of the Writing Center be given a clearly defined role in the FYS program and, in particular, more responsibility for planning faculty development around writing and assessment of writing produced in the FYS. We also recommend that the position of Director of the Writing Center be granted an additional course release to support this work in a manner that reflects the First-Year Seminar program's institutional importance.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:**

**The role of the Assistant Director of the Writing Center:** We recommend that the Assistant Director of the Writing Center be afforded more recognition for the contributions she makes to the Writing Center and also be given more responsibilities appropriate to her expertise. In particular, we recommend that she be charged with running the course embedded writing fellows program we propose. We emphasize that this recommendation and the additional responsibilities it entails will necessitate a review of her position, which we imagine would include a promotion and related increase in compensation to reflect her new supervisory role.

**4.4.4 Program staffing and financial support**

Another question the Review Team was asked to address concerns the challenge of staffing the FYS program. Staffing all-college course requirements that depend on faculty from across the curriculum is a challenge at many small liberal arts institutions. The fact that almost three-quarters of the faculty have rotated through the FYS program in a five year period is to be celebrated; however, we heard some concern about the unequal burden placed on some field groups and individual faculty by the staffing model currently in place. This issue is tricky because without clear expectations some field groups probably would not volunteer faculty to serve in the program; on the other hand, stronger incentives might induce more faculty to teach more regularly, thereby increasing the overall stability of the program. As we recommend in Section 5, a clear articulation of the purpose, goals, and expectations -- the mission -- of the FYS program and broad faculty engagement in the process of determining and approving that mission may increase the sense of ownership and commitment to the program.

In addition, and perhaps more important, a continued financial commitment and shared budget from the Dean's office will signal institutional support for the program along with the continuation of the course release for advising. Yet, as the size of the first-year class grows, the challenge of finding sufficient faculty to staff each section of FYS and maintain the optimum course cap of 14 students will also grow. To address that, it will probably be necessary for the Dean's Office to reevaluate the institutional commitment to the FYS program and the expectations for participation, both by asking faculty to rotate through the course more frequently, but also by recognizing the additional work involved in doing so. Pitzer faculty have many commitments, and taking on a FYS and related advising is a significant undertaking. Participation should

therefore be recognized and rewarded in faculty reviews as service to the College above and beyond normal teaching.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

**Budget and financial support:** We recommend that Pitzer identify a dedicated budget, managed by the FYS Director, for faculty development in support of teaching the First-Year Seminars, rather than using unspent course funds from the previous year's FYS sections (Self-Study p. 12).

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6**

**Budget transparency:** Related to Recommendation 5, but worthy of additional emphasis given the concerns articulated in the Self-Study and by faculty we met with that funding for the program is not secure, we recommend that the source of funding for the program and course releases be clearly articulated to Pitzer faculty. To be successful, the program needs adequate resources to support high quality teaching and learning and student success, but also an assurance that there is institutional commitment to providing these resources and support for the program as noted in several recommendations.

The FYS program plays such an important role in the first-year experience of students at Pitzer, and we hope our recommendations will help to emphasize the centrality of the program in the Pitzer education. We also hope this will help to develop a culture where teaching an FYS is perceived to be part of the identity of a Pitzer faculty member, one that is recognized, supported, and rewarded. Clearly identified student learning outcomes and support to realize them may also encourage faculty to teach in the program and to teach more frequently, and the advisory committee may increase a sense of faculty ownership of the program.

## **5. TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ASSESSMENT**

### **5.1. Introduction and guiding questions**

The specific questions addressed in this section of the report include two from the self-study and an additional question shared in the Dean's charge. We were asked to consider the learning goals for FYS and Pitzer's written expression requirement, assessment and faculty development, and grading practices for FYS (see [Appendix i](#) for the full list of questions posed to the review team). These questions are also related to the broader question the Dean asked us to consider: To what extent are student learning and program outcomes assessed and in ways in which results are incorporated in curricular planning, instruction, advising, and other areas?

### **5.2. Strengths of teaching, learning, and assessment in the Pitzer FYS program**

The FYS program at Pitzer follows best practices in many ways in the incorporation of writing and the attention to faculty development and writing pedagogies. Moreover, a survey of forty FYS faculty in 2020 revealed a high level of confidence in their ability to structure class activities and design assignments appropriate for a writing-intensive course, provide useful feedback on drafts, and grade writing assignments fairly. Both the documents shared with us and our meetings with faculty revealed a core of dedicated faculty committed to teaching first-year students and facilitating their intellectual development. Those faculty offer a variety of courses with engaging themes that made us wish we, too, could sign up for them as well.

Moreover, the faculty who teach in the special I-Scholars section and the New Resource Students sections provide targeted support that reflects Pitzer's commitment to these groups of first-year students. Indeed, we think there are more opportunities for collaboration and exchange among field group FYS faculty, the faculty who teach these targeted FYS courses, and the Writing Center. (for example, by integrating the Academic Director of the I-Scholars program into faculty development workshops or by sharing insights from these students' Writing Center experiences with faculty who teach these sections.)

Though assessment of writing and learning in FYS has not happened consistently since 2013, available data collected between 2011-2013 show an increased emphasis on drafting and revising, with 71% of students reporting that they received feedback on 10 or more pages of their drafts in 2013 (Self-Study, p. 19). Students we met reported working on their writing in the FYS with faculty and with peers in drafts. The majority of students also spoke positively about their seminars, although all were currently in an FYS early in their first semester at Pitzer, so we lacked the reflections of those in the process of building on the FYS course. The self-study work collecting data from FYS faculty and students is an important effort that the FYS program should continue building on to identify questions and areas for follow-up research and assessment.

### **5.3. Teaching in the Pitzer FYS program - challenges and areas of potential growth**

The 2020 self-study revealed some faculty's uncertainty around the teaching of writing, dissatisfaction with the FYS writing goals, and desire for increased faculty development and support. We found similar concerns reflected across our FYS faculty conversations. This mix of commitment to teaching writing well and uncertainty that they are doing so, speaks to the need for clear programmatic guidelines and ongoing faculty support and development. We applaud the faculty and the program for their commitment, but we do see several challenges and room to build on the commitment. The first is a focus on teaching. Although the questions we received focus on student learning, learning and course outcomes depend on effective teaching, and that -- as the faculty noted in response to the 2020 survey -- requires robust faculty development.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 7**

**FYS Faculty development:** We recommend that Pitzer strengthen and fund a robust program of faculty development in support of teaching the First-Year Seminars and, in particular, the writing and oral communication components. We further recommend that the Director of the Writing Center and a group of FYS faculty (ideally, a formal FYS advisory committee) work with the Director of the FYS to organize this faculty development and that substantial time and attention are given to writing and related issues (such as assignment design and feedback). Faculty development that includes workshops, reading groups, regular informal meetings, and review of sample student writing will help to increase faculty buy-in and consistency across FYS sections.

Recent scholarship has explored models of ungrading and questions of grading in the context of social justice, so it is not a surprise to see this issue raised at Pitzer. We agree with the sentiment of the self-study committee that "a single grading option for all FYS sections would reduce students' confusion," and while we sympathize with the importance that Pitzer places on faculty autonomy in teaching, we heard concerns from students that not all FYS were offering the same forms of grading. Within each course, a mix of ungraded, graded, and contract graded work seems reasonable, especially if the faculty assign drafts, "write-to-learn" activities, and oral presentations. However, it is uncommon for a course -- like FYS -- required of all students and connected to a graduation requirement to not be letter graded. If a P/NC with the option of a grade were adopted across all FYS sections, it would require considerable education and guidance

for students as they weigh their options and to help address concerns about transcripts and GPA impact. We believe strongly that the question of whether students receive a letter grade for FYS needs to be consistent across the entire program.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 8**

**Grading:** Given the importance of the FYS to the curriculum and Pitzer's educational outcomes, we recommend that the grading method needs to be consistent across the entire program. The FYS faculty may benefit from a doing some reading about different grading methods and the justification for ungrading -- an example of a task that could be led by a Faculty Advisory Committee -- but ultimately we recommend that the same method be adopted for all sections of the class, and related education about how to use and respond to the system selected be provided for students and faculty.

### **5.4. Learning goals and outcomes - challenges and areas of potential growth**

#### **5.4.1 Lack of clarity around FYS course expectations and oral communication**

The First-Year Seminar is defined as a required, writing-intensive course that is also the means for students to meet Pitzer's fourth educational objective for graduation, "Written Expression." As per Pitzer's [guidelines for graduation](#), "[i]t is assumed that most students meet the objective by successfully completing a First-Year Seminar course. These seminars have been designed as writing-intensive courses and are required of all students." But the definition of "writing intensive" in these guidelines is actually just a list of three parameters that allow faculty to designate a course as such:

- (1) at least 25 pages of written work are included among class assignments,
- (2) they comment extensively on the writing quality of at least 10 of those pages and
- (3) they allow students the opportunity to re-write those pages in light of instructors' remarks (the remaining 15 pages may be journal entries, essay exams, or non-graded exercises, such as in-class free-writing).

While these parameters seem to be well known -- faculty referenced them in our conversations -- they are quite open-ended and have not been the subject of formal assessment or discussion among all FYS faculty (Self-Study, p. 16). The source, for instance, of these page guidelines is unknown and not the product of FYS faculty discussion in at least a decade. Given that the FYS *are* the writing intensive courses at Pitzer, we think that this outdated definition of "writing intensive" should be replaced with a more useful and specific set of shared FYS course expectations that define for faculty how FYS is a writing-intensive course.

Moreover, while we endorse the focus on writing and communication in the FYS program, the exclusive focus on written communication on the list of aspirations and in discussions of the role of the FYS diminishes the larger commitment to communication skills. The Pitzer catalog describes the "Student Learning Outcome for Written Expression" as follows: "By writing and communicating orally, students acquire the ability to express their ideas effectively and to persuade others" (Self-Study 13). Similarly, the [web page](#) description of the FYS Program begins, "Pitzer's first-year seminar (FYS) program is designed to help students become more literate people who think, read, write, and speak both critically and competently." This connection between speech and writing is in line with best practices in the field of college communication and writing studies; however, oral communication is largely missing from all other descriptions of the FYS including this list of FYS aspirations. Oral communication and fluency in verbal expression are not addressed in the discussions of the FYS or in the self-study. We recommend that the FYS retain its focus on writing and

written expression, but that it more consistently incorporates oral communication and support for instruction in both.

### **RECOMMENDATION 9**

**FYS course expectations and oral communication:** We recommend that the brief and outdated definition of “writing intensive” in Pitzer’s curriculum be replaced with a more useful and specific set of faculty-created FYS course expectations that define for faculty *how* FYS is a writing-intensive course. As part of this effort, FYS faculty should also incorporate course expectation(s) for integrating and supporting oral communication as well as writing.

#### **5.4.2 Need for revision and faculty approval of FYS student learning outcomes**

The self-study identifies the First-Year Seminar program’s list of “student aspirations” for FYS as its formal student learning outcomes. However, this list of aspirations is not well known among all FYS faculty, and its uses and pedagogical implications are not clearly defined. Some FYS faculty we spoke with were not familiar with or did not have this list. We also noticed inconsistencies in whether the aspirations are presented as a list of three, five, or fifteen distinct outcomes. The [FYS Program page](#) includes a list of fifteen “student aspirations” that it is instructive to list here in full:

1. Engage in an ongoing process of intellectual inquiry and “conversation” through writing: [sic]
2. Grapple with the ambiguity and complexity found within texts, which range from the written word to film, art, performance, and beyond; respond to texts critically and thoughtfully.
3. Regard learning to write well as a life-long pursuit, not the accomplishment of a single semester or even an entire undergraduate career.
  1. Appreciate and experience the creativity, independent thinking, and intellectual risk-taking involved in effective academic writing.
  2. Craft thoughtful and insightful questions worthy of investigation; raise significant problems.
  3. Recognize and contend with alternative viewpoints/counter-arguments.
  4. Identify research/information needs.
  5. Locate appropriate scholarly and popular sources.
  6. Engage with, evaluate, and draw inferences from sources.
  7. Craft a clear, arguable, and compelling thesis.
4. Experience writing as a complex social interaction between writer and reader:
  1. Participate in an intellectual community of peers where writing and ideas are exchanged and critiqued.
  2. Rethink and deepen ideas through a recursive process of discussing, drafting, receiving and giving feedback, and revising at any and every point along the way.
  3. Gain awareness of audience and of voice.
5. Practice writing as a form of critical thinking, rather than merely the achievement of sentence-level correctness.

This list includes important writing skills and practices, and we endorse the faculty’s role in shaping and revising it initially. However, we note that many of these aspirations would be difficult to directly assess and that aspirations relating to oral communication are absent.

Of even greater concern with respect to these FYS aspirations is the fact that this list “did not go through a formal, faculty-led process of approval within the shared governance system (e.g., a vote in a faculty meeting and college council...)]” (Self-Study, p. 15). This lack of faculty participation in the college-wide process likely contributes to both confusion about the goals of FYS and some faculty’s undermining belief that these aspirations “have been imposed administratively from without” (15).

A lack of ownership of the process and outcomes for a required course that all faculty are expected to teach is problematic at any institution. But at an institution like Pitzer that prides itself on faculty autonomy and shared governance, it seems to us to be at the root of other challenges -- from faculty buy-in to inconsistencies in writing and workload across sections to continual experimenting with co-curricular add-ons. It takes leadership, time, and resources to achieve consensus on the vision and mission of a first-year seminar, and complete consensus may be impossible. However, we believe that the conversation about the ways the FYS program can and should support the institution's objective to help students develop strong written and oral communication abilities is essential.

We suggest that the FYS Director hold a discussion about the outcomes and create a body to help review and revise the list of FYS aspirations. To begin, the body might find it helpful to compare the revised WPA "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" to the writing aspirations, look at course syllabi for shared pedagogical strategies, and solicit one- or two-sentence summaries of the most important learning outcomes from faculty. Reading representative, anonymized samples of FYS student writing is also particularly useful to grounding the process of articulating student learning outcomes. Once revised, a draft of these aspirations (for the sake of clarity, renamed as student learning outcomes) should be circulated broadly among all FYS faculty for discussion and revision, followed by a formal, faculty-led process of approval within the shared governance system as recommended in the self-study (p.15).

#### **RECOMMENDATION 10**

**FYS Learning outcomes:** We recommend that the faculty conduct a thorough review of the fifteen "[First-Year Seminar aspirations](#)" and the "Writing Goals" (see Self-Study Table IV-2) and create one list of Student Learning Outcomes that flow from the FYS mission (see also **Recommendation 1**). The group conducting this review could also identify and describe how students will engage in both writing and communicating orally to meet the stated goal to "acquire the ability to express their ideas effectively and to persuade others" (Self-Study, p.13). Once revised, the FYS student learning outcomes should go through a process of formal faculty approval through Pitzer's shared governance process.

### **5.5. Assessment - challenges and areas of potential growth**

The self-study and our conversations confirm the general lack of assessment within the FYS program both in terms of pedagogical approaches, outcomes, and advising (see section 6). This is not surprising given the uncertainty about the overall mission and goals of the FYS program. We applaud the assessment that has been done using NSSE data and surveys, and encourage the faculty and FYS leadership to design a more focused, consistent, and generative assessment program moving forward. As already noted, we suggest that a way forward would be the establishment of an FYS Advisory Committee (See section 4.4.2, **Recommendation 2**), which we hope can be involved in a clarification of the broader FYS program mission (**Recommendation 1**) and work with faculty to articulate learning outcomes (see section 5.4.2, **Recommendation 10**). To further build consensus among FYS faculty and clarity among the students, once these things are written, we recommend annually reviewing the FYS mission, learning outcomes, and assessment from the previous year and discussing revision or faculty development to strengthen areas as needed.

There are many approaches to writing and writing program assessment. We recommend the FYS program use the College Composition and Communication's "[Writing Assessment: A Position Statement](#)" to guide the development of an assessment plan that is connected to FYS goals and pedagogies, locally-derived, and based

on multiple measures (both direct and indirect), and connected to an annual faculty development cycle. Models we have found helpful include annually collecting and anonymizing writing from all FYS sections and inviting faculty to directly assess writing for selected student learning outcomes. Such faculty-led assessment ensures ownership of the process and should conclude with both the possibility of revising learning outcomes that are difficult to assess and broader discussion of FYS assignments and pedagogies to support outcomes with which students struggle. Assessment might also include indirect data gathered from writing- and research-related questions that are already included in surveys administered as part of ongoing institutional research (e.g., the NSSE survey; HEDS surveys; or student exit surveys that include questions related to writing, revision, and research). Such survey data can also be enhanced by seeking input from current Pitzer students, through focus groups, Writing Center evaluations, and other qualitative and quantitative inquiries of the kind the FYS program initiated through the self-study process.

Once there is broad consensus on the mission and goals of the FYS, we believe that Pitzer's institutional culture, which as the self-study puts it "sees the teaching of writing as a shared responsibility and values collaboration, qualitative data, and inclusive decision-making" will embrace assessment as part of that process.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 11**

**FYS Assessment:** Once the student learning outcomes for FYS are clarified, we recommend that the FYS faculty select at least one SLO each year to directly assess the writing component of FYS. The goal of such assessment is less to provide statistical data and more to gain a deeper understanding of the ways FYS is taught, the work students produce, and the ways the course or faculty development might be revised to better accomplish the SLO. The FYS Director should also request information about writing and FYS outcome-related questions that may be administered as part of ongoing institutional assessment. The FYS Director, with support from the Writing Center Director, should lead this initiative.

## **6. ADVISING AND RELATED FACULTY DEVELOPMENT**

### **6.1. Introduction and guiding questions**

Both the self-study and our charge from the Dean emphasize the importance of the advising component of the FYS, and we were asked to suggest ways to strengthen advising and help to ensure consistency across sections. Like Pitzer, most colleges initially identified advising as a central part of student retention, especially first- to second- year retention. More recent research argues that the goal of advising should be loftier than simply retention, though. Vincent Tinto, in *Leaving College*, asserts that retention should be considered a "by-product" of "a successful and engaging college experience" rather than its goal and includes advising as one aspect of creating that experience. Pitzer's FYS Self-Study echoes Dean Omoto's observation to the Review Team that the purpose of linking faculty advising to the FYS is no longer just for retention. This makes the questions we were asked to consider about the need for clear educational outcomes for advising and strategies for improving advising and for faculty development around advising very timely, and we applaud Pitzer for asking them (see [Appendix i](#) for the full list of questions posed to the review team). These questions are all related to the broader question the Dean asked us to consider: To what extent does the advising provided by faculty support students in transitioning to College and in making academic progress?



## 6.2. Strengths of the current advising program

As the self-study notes, optional modules on advising included in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provide a valuable base-line assessment tool for advising. The self-study traces “a clear increase in the percentage of students identifying their assigned advisor as their primary source of academic information” beginning with the 2014 cohort, when the FYS-advising connection was piloted, jumping from 17.4% in 2012 to 40.7% in 2014 (Self-Study, p. 27). The 2020 FYS survey also showed significant support for the current model, with an 87% support rate among faculty who had participated in the program and 90% of students surveyed supporting the model (Self-Study, p. 28). When we met with faculty and asked what is to be celebrated about the current program, advising was noted as significant and a logical connection with the FYS.

It is particularly impressive that the program includes substantial financial support for those who agree to take on a two-year advising commitment as part of FYS in the form of the course release or monetary compensation, and we were pleased to learn that this support is now part of the Dean’s overall budget rather than the spoils from an unfilled faculty line (as many faculty still believe). We commend the college for recognizing the intellectual work that goes into successful advising and compensating it accordingly. Indeed, according to Richard Light, academic advising may be one of the most “underestimated characteristics of a successful college experience” (*Making the Most of College*). Light and others demonstrate that, at its best, academic advising increases the overall value of students’ college experience.

Susan Campbell and Charlie Nutt observe that “the challenge for academic advising is significant; facilitating the development of coherent educational plans across a student’s educational career is no small task and requires those who are committed to the intellectual and social development of students both in and outside the formal classroom” (“[Academic Advising in the New Global Century](#)”). The foundations for this work are in place at Pitzer, and the self-study and our visit indicate widespread satisfaction with the linkage between FYS and first-year advising and a general understanding of what areas need to be addressed to enable this component of the FYS program to continue to develop.

## 6.3. Challenges and areas of potential growth

### 6.3.1. Ensuring that all students benefit from effective advising

The self-study surveys reveal that more than 90% of the students asked their FYS advisors for help with “core advising topics such as graduation requirements, course selection in their first-year, and course selection for a major or program with their advisor” (44). Yet the proportion of students who found their FYS advisor “moderately helpful” and “very helpful” is lower in these areas (65.9% for understanding graduation requirements, 59.5% FY course selection, and 48.1% for course selection in major/program). Students’ assessment of their FY advising was also notably lower than the proportion of faculty who rated their ability to advise in these areas “fairly well” and “very well” (95% for graduation requirements, 92.5% for FY course selection, and 87.5% for advising courses appropriate to particular majors or career areas ) (Table VII-2). This disconnect suggests that many students are somewhat dissatisfied with their FY advisors’ assistance with core advising topics, but their advisors may not be aware of such perceptions.

Though we were not able to ask students about this directly, the 2020 surveys also revealed that, across the board, female students found their first-year advisors less helpful than male students did. Female students were also less likely to ask their FY advisors about advising topics “outside the core” of academic advising than male students. Though the numbers in the survey sample were very small, there was also some

indication that a similar trend exists for first-generation to college and Latinx students, who also found their FY advising experience somewhat less helpful than other student groups (44).

It will be important to educate students about the ways that advisors can help, especially first-generation and minoritized students who may be reluctant to ask for help or unfamiliar with their options. Scholars stress the importance of helping students recognize that advising is a crucial part of the educational process. Drawing on the work of George Kuh, Campbell and Nutt argue that “encouraging students to take advantage of learning opportunities that are designed to challenge their intellectual and social development and add value to the college experience is central to good academic advising and at the heart of student engagement,” adding that “effective academic advising practices are especially important for ... first-generation students” ([“Academic Advising in the New Global Century”](#)). Faculty and student education around these issues generally seems in need of strengthening, and we believe this question should shape both faculty development and assessment of advising.

### **6.3.2. Clear outcomes and best practices for assessing advising**

The Review Team was asked to address the question of whether Pitzer should identify clear educational outcomes for advising, and the simple answer is yes. Once the scope and outcomes of advising are clearly articulated, future surveys will be able to focus on the issues students might seek help to address. Not only will this provide clearer assessment data, but it will also help to communicate to students what they can expect from their academic advisors.

While many colleges have clearly stated goals for advisors, assessment of advising is less universal -- and faces some resistance from faculty if they do not own the process. Once the goals are agreed upon and faculty know what is being assessed, realistic assessment practices can be developed from those goals, and the process is seen as more generative. Arguments for it are made by professional organizations such as the AAC&U and NACADA. In a NACADA Faculty resources document, Cathay Kennemer and Bob Hurt note that once goals have been established, assessment is important for three reasons: general program improvement, faculty development, and the establishment of a recognition and reward system for faculty. Noting that “performance feedback is an essential part of the assessment process, [without which] faculty advisors are unlikely to improve their skills,” Kennemer and Hurt stress that “a sound program assessment plan can be a launching pad for discussion of individual advisor praxis [and] create the deliberate opportunity for dialogue about the extent to which students are achieving the expected outcomes established by the faculty in consultation with various constituent groups” (Kennemer and Hurt [“Faculty Advising”](#)).

## **RECOMMENDATION 12**

**Faculty assessment of advising:** Following the development of goals and best practices for advising, we recommend that an ad hoc committee or advisory group be formed from the FYS faculty, chaired by the Associate Dean for Advising, and including the FYS Director, to articulate an assessment plan for FYS advising. We believe this process will improve the overall quality of advising and support for students transitioning to college and making academic progress through robust and ongoing faculty development.

### **6.3.3. Faculty development to enhance advising**

Faculty development around advising flows from clearly stated outcomes and goals. It is not unusual to find one third of a multi-day FYS faculty development program devoted to best practices in faculty

advising and mentoring, with additional time for addressing issues of wellness and introducing faculty to representatives from various offices who can answer questions about when and how to refer students. Effective advising workshops also discuss diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) topics and focus on broader elements of pedagogy and mentoring rather than (only) administrative issues and graduation requirements.

Campbell and Nutt argue that “we must explicitly develop and articulate the curriculum for academic advising [...] and identify the expected outcomes for student learning within the context of the academic advising experience” (“[Academic Advising in the New Global Century](#),” AAC&U). The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) also stresses that faculty who want to be good advisors need access to training and development activities related to academic advising and provides a list of [concepts](#) to guide thinking about what constitutes effective advising. The AAC&U and NACADA both have recommended best practices for academic advising, as does SLAC-WPA, the organization for writing programs at small liberal arts colleges.

### **RECOMMENDATION 13**

**Faculty development for advising:** We recommend that an ad hoc or advisory committee (see Recommendation 2), working with the Associate Dean for Advising and the FYS Director, study best practices for academic advising and articulate guidance for FYS advisors that will also form the basis of enhanced faculty development around the advising component of FYS. Funding should be available to allow this faculty development to incorporate external speakers and or readings to facilitate discussion.

#### **6.3.4. Faculty recognition and compensation for advising**

In the self-study and in conversation with faculty, we heard uncertainty about the funding for the advising course release. The terms laid out in the 2015 proposal are widely assumed to still apply (perhaps especially because the vacated position was never filled). In our meeting with Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Allen Omoto, we learned that this funding is derived directly from his budget. This disconnect is of concern to us because the uncertainty around compensation may influence the decision of some faculty not to teach in the program and reduce the perceived importance of the FYS to the curriculum. Clear transparency about the budget process, the overall budget allocated to the program, and a commitment to provide that budget will both signal the institutional commitment to the program and increase its stability and, possibly, attractiveness. We recognize the FYS budget process is complicated by which faculty teach in the program and how much each program must be compensated for their reassignment to FYS; however, we consider transparency around the budget to be an important signal of institutional commitment (see **Recommendation 6**).

Recognition should extend beyond just a recognition of the time necessary for effective advising. Equating it to teaching, professional organizations also call for recognition of advising as intellectual rather than service work. In addition to stressing the importance of robust faculty development and assessment, NACADA argues that faculty who want to be good advisors need to know that “weight [will be] given to faculty advising in reappointment / promotion / tenure decisions.” We agree with the AAC&U statement that “just as faculty are accountable through the review process for the quality of their teaching, they need to be accountable in review, tenure, and promotion processes for the quality of their advising—and rewarded for it, too” (Roche, “[Advising is Teaching](#)”). To enable consistent advising that supports its role in FYS and to respond to student concerns, Pitzer should determine ways to recognize advising as more than just service.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 14**

**Faculty recognition for advising:** We recommend that the course release for advising in FYS remain in place, a best practice identified by the AAC&U. Moreover, we recommend that its source of funding be clearly articulated to Pitzer faculty. Following the recommendation of the NACAD and AAC&U, we also recommend that Pitzer faculty establish clear structures for recognizing faculty engaged in advising alongside teaching as part of the evaluation, promotion, and tenure process.

## **7. CO-CURRICULAR AND PEER MENTORING**

### **7.1 Introduction and guiding questions**

It is not unusual for First-Year Seminars to include co-curricular activities like field trips, films or theatre visits, or lectures as well as work with academically oriented co-curricular programming from libraries, writing centers, and career and civic engagement centers. Often a small stipend is available to support faculty-led co-curricular activities, as it is at Pitzer (currently a quite generous \$650 per FYS). As the self-study notes, “[c]o-curricular learning is a centerpiece of Pitzer College,” which has also been more recently articulated as important to the college’s strategic plan (30). As a result, Pitzer’s FYS has been linked with two major co-curricular initiatives, the first, the Global-Local Mentoring Program (GLMP) ran from 2013-2016. The second, the Institute for Global/Local Action and Study Fellows Program (“IGLAS Fellows”), was piloted in 2016 as a mechanism for helping incoming students navigate the new graduation requirements in social responsibility, social justice, and intercultural understanding. This section considers ways to balance co-curricular components of the FYS and possible models for peer mentoring related to writing (see [Appendix i](#) for the full list of questions posed to the review team)

### **7.2 Strengths of previous and current co-curricular initiatives**

As noted, each FYS course is allotted \$650 to spend on activities such as field trips, class dinners, guest speakers, and tickets to public events. This is evidence of institutional commitment to the co-curricular element of FYS, which can strengthen the sense of community and provide students with important opportunities to learn about the college and form new relationships. The self-study reports that 70% (28 out of 40) of surveyed faculty indicated that they included a co-curricular event outside of regular class time. The most common types of activities were attending a Pitzer or 5-College event (60%) or a class meal or other social activity (50%). More than half (55%) of faculty reported that they completely used or exceeded their allotted funds and another third of the faculty reported using at least half of the funds. In addition to these faculty selected events, the FYS serves as a vehicle for programming by a wide array of Pitzer and 5-College groups and offices, which range from brief presentations to full-class workshops (Self-Study Table VI-1).

### **7.3. Challenges and areas of potential growth - Co-curricular and peer mentoring**

#### **7.3.1. Competing models of the FYS**

The majority of faculty we spoke with support the current model of a writing-intensive First-Year Seminar that includes academic advising. But we did hear of a competing model, sometimes expressed directly and sometimes indirectly, of FYS as “a platform to introduce entering students to the available resources of the college” (30). Depending on which model people prefer, they ask why all of those *other* things are in FYS.

Maybe there is a third model, but it seems to us that the FYS can't do all of these things, and once the Pitzer faculty agree on what they want from this signature course, they can explore what could be somewhere else. We have already recommended this exploration and articulation of FYS learning outcomes and expressed our support for the writing and communication / habits of mind model (see **Recommendation 1** and **Recommendation 10**).

If the FYS is to maintain an academic focus, then the emphasis needs to be squarely on the habits of mind faculty identify as essential, which would probably include writing, thinking, readings, speaking, research, and perhaps also multimodal skills. In this model, advising would focus on core academic areas, such as planning courses and developing majors. Co-curricular elements that are beneficial to students without distracting from the coherence of the seminar would include engagement with academic programs like the library, Writing Center, and career services as well as intellectual and community-building activities planned by faculty. The designated budget provides a valuable opportunity for FYS instructors to build relationships with their students that facilitate advising and teaching, and we encourage faculty to share ideas for use of this fund and perhaps pair with other seminars to plan and share activities. This kind of community-building is obviously important in the wake of the pandemic, but it is of broader value as students find and build community and make friends in their first semester.

Based on student responses in the self-study and our conversations with students, the FYS program is not taking full advantage of the shared Tu/Th class meeting time. Students expressed interest in more opportunities for collaboration with other sections and informal lunch gatherings after class. Combining sections for advising sessions, writing activities, or group presentations from key academic programs might also be an efficient way to reach students.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 15**

**FYS content:** While it is tempting to see a common course as the place where students are introduced to everything that is significant about a college education, to overload the FYS in this way prevents giving any of these issues the attention they deserve. We recommend that the FYS retain its focus on writing, more consistently incorporate oral communication, provide support for instruction in both, and retain the academic advising component. We also recommend the FYS program faculty take greater advantage of the shared time period for co-curricular and advising purposes. Finally, we recommend that the institution explore other ways to continue the important work begun by the GLMP and IGLAS, not as part of the FYS.

#### **7.3.2. *Alternative ways to integrate co-curricular activities into the life of the college***

Adding co-curricular components that do not relate to the class theme can make some seminars feel less coherent. The fact that faculty perceive these to be add-on components also results in differing levels of adoption and commitment. Instead, we urge Pitzer to find other ways to integrate co-curricular activities and initiatives into the first-year experience outside of the FYS program. The AAC&U "High Impact Practices" include a number of co-curricular activities that could be integrated into a broader first-year experience program of which the FYS is only one part. In addition to the FYS, some institutions include a 1-credit course in the first semester designed to facilitate student integration into the college. Such a course could also incorporate elements of the GLMP and IGLAS programs, with the benefit of being able to focus on a few intended outcomes that would allow them to most effectively serve the needs of students.

### **7.3.3. Peer mentoring more directly related to the writing component of the course**

The IGLAS and New Student Guide (NSG) programs demonstrate the important role peer mentoring can play within the classroom in addition to within stand-alone programs like the Writing Center. While students and faculty had generally positive experiences with the peer mentoring component of the IGLAS programs, the mandatory programming elements and co-curricular mentoring programs were less easily incorporated into the FYS, becoming more of a distraction than a benefit. Both the self-study and staff and faculty we talked with identified the NSG as a valuable component of the FYS and one that could be expanded to support the students more fully as they make the transition to college.

Pitzer also has a successful program of writing fellows that support the Fellowship program and we suggest that program be replicated in the FYS with a course-embedded writing fellow assigned to each seminar. Such a model would draw on the long-standing models at Brown, Moravian, Hobart-William Smith Colleges, Lafayette College, and both Colby College and Drew University. Colleges that use writing fellows in this way train them to work with writing, but also to be attentive to moments where they can help students navigate college and the necessary skills and habits of mind. They might meet with students to review presentations in addition to papers, and offer student perspectives on the registration process and programs and services students should be aware of. In this way they support the writing and the advising components of the seminar, but all other peer mentoring should be placed elsewhere. As noted in Section 4.4.3, **Recommendation 4**, it is our belief that the Associate Director of the Writing Center would be the logical person to train and oversee these Writing Fellows, but for this to happen, the position and compensation will need to be reassessed to recognize this managerial and professional work. This promotion is a move we would endorse.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 16**

**FYS Writing Fellows:** To provide writing- and communication- related support for faculty and students and reduce disparities in student learning across the FYS program, we recommend the replacement of peer mentors currently assigned to FYS with course-embedded writing fellows similar to the Writing Center Fellowship Consultants (and those in long-standing models at Brown, Moravian, Hobart-William Smith Colleges, and both Colby College and Drew University). Writing Fellows can take over some of the responsibilities of the academic guides, helping students transition to college writing, and increasing the consistency of writing skills across sections.

## **8. BUDGET AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FYS**

Finally, we were asked to consider models for providing finance support for FYS and more broadly, to what extent adequate resources are available to support high quality teaching and learning and student success in this program (Appendix i).

The first question speaks to an element of uncertainty that we do not believe to be good for the program. In our conversations with the Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs, we were assured that financial commitments were in place for many of the things faculty were concerned about losing. As a result, we urge much more transparency around the area of budget (see Section 4.4.4, **Recommendation 6**). Both questions seemed to us to be most logically answered within our broader discussion of the program, where we recommend increased investment in staffing both directly in a change of role for the Assistant Director of the Writing Center (See section 4.4.3, **Recommendation 4**), and indirectly in the form of an increased course

release for the Director of the Writing Center (See section 4.4.3, **Recommendation 3**) and a continuation of the course release/compensation model for FYS instructors who serve as academic advisors (See Section 6.3.4 **Recommendation 14**).

We also recommend additional funding for faculty development, in writing pedagogy and assessment (See section 5.3, **Recommendation 7**), and advising (See section 6.3.3, **Recommendation 13**). Finally, we recommend that peer mentors be replaced by course-embedded writing fellows in all FYS courses (See 7.3.3 **Recommendation 16**). It seems to us that this latter may most logically be funded by an increase to the Writing Center budget.

In other words, we recognize that many of our recommendations come with a price tag and necessitate a larger financial commitment than has already been dedicated to the FYS Program. We make these recommendations in spite of that fact because, in our opinion, the excellence of this signature program and the fundamental role it plays in the education of Pitzer students merits robust and ongoing financial and administrative support. We hope this report is helpful as you move forward in developing, discussing, assessing, and teaching in Pitzer's FYS Program.

## Works Cited

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September 19, 2021

FYS External Review Team  
First Year Seminar Program  
Pitzer College

Dear External Review Team:

I write first to thank you for assisting Pitzer College in reviewing our First Year Seminar Program (FYS). As the self-study report details, following a previous review, this program was revised in 2015 to incorporate academic advising by tenure-line and continuing staff as a key component of the program and as a bridge for students to academic advising in a selected major. In addition, FYS courses are writing intensive courses by design and also intended to help introduce students new to Pitzer to the College and Claremont Consortium community.

As you dive deeper into your work, and especially in advance of your visit to Pitzer, I would like to call your attention to some of the issues that I hope that you will address in your final report. I have attached a general outline for your final report to assist you in structuring your review. You do not have to use this outline for your final report, but it lays out major sections for your report, and central questions to be addressed in each section. Having a structure like this in mind before your visit, I hope, will facilitate your in-person meetings and provide some direction to the information-gathering sessions that you will conduct as part of your review.

In addition to this broad framework, the self-study report lists several questions that it recommended you consider. Not surprisingly, these questions revolve around the main goals of the program and include questions about the role of the Writing Center and writing in general in FYS courses, advising assessment and supports both for faculty and students, and co-curricular activities and peer mentoring programs. The self-study report also raises questions about the College infrastructure for supporting FYS and longer-term concerns about program sustainability. Please note that the self-study did not include Finance Office input and I am not asking you to comment on budget matters, although these are some of the issues raised by the self-study group.

Since completion of their report, the self-study team has forwarded to me two additional issues that it would like your review team to take up. Specifically, they would like to solicit input on the FYS Director position: Should this be a faculty position? Should it be combined with other roles/offices at the College (e.g., the Writing Center)? Are there other models to explore? Second, they would like to ask about best practices for grading a FYS course and the extent that there should be student and faculty flexibility in the grading system(s) employed? For example, should FYS be graded with traditional letter grades, Pass/No Credit, or using some alternative system (e.g., narrative assessments)? Although there is not a lot in the self-study report on these issues, it would be helpful if you could address these concerns, even in a speculative way, in your final report.

At this time, we are planning your review meetings during the week of September 27, 2021. Although we had originally hoped for an in-person visit, we are now planning to host you for a series of virtual meetings with campus groups and individuals. These sessions will provide you with opportunities to gather information about Pitzer College and the FYS program that goes beyond the self-study report you have received. Based on



recommendations from the self-study group and some initial feedback from your committee, we have proposed a schedule for your visit (see attached). I ask that you please confirm that this draft schedule meets your requirements. Accordingly, we will begin to notify the campus community and constituencies about the meeting schedule. In some cases, and as we learn more about the number of people who can attend, we may need to schedule alternative meeting times.

Finally, I hope that you will target completion of an initial draft of your final report for roughly 4-6 weeks after your campus visit. If you require additional analyses or data after your visit, please let me know and my office will assist providing that information. It is also perfectly reasonable for you to ask for clarification or to pose questions in your draft final report. I will ask the self-study group to respond to any questions you have in your initial draft report, and to do so in a timely manner. After you receive that feedback, I hope that you will be able to deliver your final report, along with specific recommendations, to my office within a few weeks. This schedule will permit completion of this review and report process before Thanksgiving, and in time for us to consider implementing some of your recommendations before we begin making concrete plans for the next academic year. Your final report will be shared not only with the self-study group but also eventually with our Academic Planning Committee and Faculty Executive Committee. We all look forward to your assessment of our FYS program and to your recommendations for how to improve this program for the future.

In advance, let me thank you for your work and please know how much I personally and professionally appreciate your time and interest in participating as a member of this external review team. I look forward to meeting with you. Should you have any questions along with way, please feel free to contact me at [dean\\_faculty@pitzer.edu](mailto:dean_faculty@pitzer.edu) or Assistant Dean Shelva Paulse ([shelva\\_paulse@pitzer.edu](mailto:shelva_paulse@pitzer.edu)). Dr. Paulse will be your point of contact from my office for this review, including for handling logistical details and substantive support. I wish you the very best and thank you for this professional service.

Sincerely,



Allen M. Omoto, Ph.D.  
Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs

## Potential Framework for Program Review Final Report

- 1) Program History
  - a) Provide information on Pitzer's mission and how the FYS program is intended to support it
  - b) Provide a brief history of prior program reviews that have been conducted
  - c) Provide a brief description of the faculty, curriculum, and resources supporting FYS
- 2) The Review Process
  - a) Describe the process that the review team utilized to gather, review, and interpret evidence
  - b) Who were the stakeholders who participated in the process?
  - c) Provide an analysis of how well the review process aligned with the lines of inquiry that the review team prioritized for its visit
- 3) Quality and Rigor of the Self-Study Report and Supporting Evidence
  - a) Provide a description of the key elements/highlights of the self-study report
  - b) Provide a description of the supporting data/evidence provided in the report
    - i) How relevant was the evidence in addressing reflective questions in the self-study report?
    - ii) To what extent was evidence provided that related to assessing student learning outcomes at multiple (e.g., course, program, institutional) levels?
    - iii) How consistent was/were the analysis(es) and conclusions presented with the evidence?
  - c) Provide an overall assessment of the extent to which the self-study report was helpful and/or effective in framing lines of inquiry for the program review visit
    - i) What evidence was most helpful?
    - ii) What evidence was not provided that would have been helpful to include?
- 4) FYS Strengths: Curriculum & Instruction, Advising, Student Learning & Program Outcomes\*
  - a) Based on the evidence provided and gathered, what aspects of the FYS program are notable as areas of strength and/or models of excellence?
- 5) Areas for Improvement: Curriculum & Instruction, Advising, Student Learning & Program Outcomes\*
  - a) Based on the evidence provided and gathered, what aspects of the FYS program were identified as areas for improvement?
- 6) Specific Recommendations: Curriculum & Instruction, Advising, Student Learning & Program Outcomes\*

\* Questions to consider in identifying the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations:

- a) To what extent are processes in place to ensure that curriculum and instruction are current and relevant to program goals?
- b) To what extent does the advising provided by faculty support students in transitioning to College and in making academic progress?
- c) To what extent are student learning and program outcomes assessed and in ways in which results are incorporated in curricular planning, instruction, advising, and other areas?
- d) To what extent are processes in place to identify, understand, and address potential disparities in student learning and program outcomes?
- e) To what extent are adequate resources available to support high quality teaching and learning and student success in this program?

## Specific Questions From the Self-Study Report

1. Do the learning goals for writing--and Pitzer's written expression requirement--need to be refined further to support the culture of writing at Pitzer and align with current research in writing pedagogy?
2. What would a good assessment and faculty development plan for the writing component of FYS look like? Does the external review committee have suggestions for assessment practices that support Pitzer's institutional culture, which sees the teaching of writing as a shared responsibility and values collaboration, qualitative data, and inclusive decision-making?
3. What improvements could be made in organizational structure that supports FYS? What should be the roles of the FYS Director, Writing Center Director, and Associate Dean for Advising? How can Pitzer foster a stronger relationship between the Writing Center and the FYS program, particularly in the area of faculty development?
4. Pitzer has never identified clear educational outcomes for advising. What are best practices among liberal arts colleges in this respect?
5. How could faculty development for advising first-year students be improved?
6. How can Pitzer improve advising experiences for all first-year students, including minoritized and first-generation students?
7. What co-curricular activities enhance FYS? How could we integrate co-curricular activities into the life of the college if we don't use FYS as the vehicle?
8. Should the current peer mentoring programs be more directly related to the writing component of the course?
9. Given the uncertainty of continued financial support for FYS and the continued challenges in staff FYS, what financial models do other successful FYS programs use?

Please note the same Zoom link will be used for all meetings this week

<https://drew.zoom.us/j/91725081971>

Meeting ID: 917 2508 1971



**FYS Program Review**  
**Monday, September 27, 2021**  
**8:00 AM – 1:15 PM PST**

8:00 – 8:30 am	<i>Director of First Year Seminar Program</i> Sara Gilman, Professor of Biology
8:30 – 8:45 am	Break
8:45 – 9:30 am	<i>Writing Center</i> Andrea Scott, Faculty Director of Writing Center Stephanie Liu-Rojas, Assistant Director of Writing Center
12:00 – 12:30 pm	<i>Pitzer Faculty Who Have Taught FYS</i>
12:30 – 12:45 pm	Break
12:45 – 1:15 pm	<i>Former Director of First Year Seminar Program</i> Brian Keeley, Professor of Philosophy

**Tuesday, September 28, 2021**  
**10:00 AM – 11:00 AM PST**

10:00 – 11:00 am	<i>First Year Seminar Self-Study Committee</i> Sara Gilman, Director of FYS, Professor of Biology Andrea Scott, Associate Professor of Academic Writing Andre Wakefield, Professor of History Claudia Strauss, Professor of Anthropology Alayna Sessions-Goins, Assistant Dean of Campus Life
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Please note the same Zoom link will be used for all meetings this week

<https://drew.zoom.us/j/91725081971>

Meeting ID: 917 2508 1971

**Wednesday, September 29, 2021**

**8:00 AM – 9:00 AM PST**

8:00 – 9:00 am      *Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs*  
Allen Omoto, Professor of Psychology

**Thursday, September 30, 2021**

**9:00 AM – 11:45 AM PST**

9:00 – 9:30 am      *Academic Planning Committee*  
David Bachman, APC chair and Professor of Mathematics  
Timothy Justus, Associate Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science  
Sumangala Bhattacharya, Professor of English & World Literature  
Michelle Hernandez, Pitzer Student

9:30 – 9:45 am      Break

9:45 – 10:15 am    *Associate Dean of Academic Support Services*  
Gabriella Tempestoso, Associate Dean & Director of Academic Support Services  
Connie Helland, Academic Coach

10:15 – 10:30 am    Break

10:30 – 11:00 am   *IGLAS Associate Dean & New Resource Students Representative*  
Nigel Boyle, IGLAS Associate Dean and Professor of Political Studies  
Michael, Ballagh, Associate Vice President, Study Abroad & International  
Programs Ann E. Pitzer Director of International Programs

11:00 – 11:15 am    Break

11:15 – 11:45 am   *Associate Dean of Students & Director of Campus Life*  
Alayna Sessions-Goins, Associate Dean of Students and Director of Residence  
Life and Conference Services

**Friday, October 1, 2021**

**8:00-12:00 PM PST**

8:00 – 8:30 am      *Student Meeting*

8:30 – 8:45 am      Break

Please note the same Zoom link will be used for all meetings this week

<https://drew.zoom.us/j/91725081971>

Meeting ID: 917 2508 1971

8:45 – 9:15 am	<i>Current and Previous Associate Dean of Advising</i> Phil Zuckerman, Associate Dean of Advising and Professor of Sociology Melinda Herrold-Menzies, Professor of Environmental Analysis
9:15 – 9:30 am	Break
9:30 – 10:00 am	<i>Associate Dean of Faculty</i> Adrian Pantoja, Associate Dean of Faculty, Chair of Racial Justice Initiative, and Professor of Political Studies
10:00 – 10:15 am	Break
10:15 – 10:45 am	<i>International Scholars Program</i> Leah Herman, Language Lecturer and Academic Director, International Scholars Program
10:45 – 11:00 am	Break
11:00 – 11:30 am	<i>Institutional Research</i> Marco Antonio Cruz, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment
11:30 – 12:00 pm	<i>Exit Meeting</i> Allen Omoto, Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs Shelva Paulse, Assistant Dean of Faculty for Academic Affairs

### Key Contacts

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