

Wisconsin Teaching Fellows (2005-06) Final Report  
Denise Bartell

**Part I - Abstract:**

In my Wisconsin Teaching Fellows project I substantially revised a large, introductory course that typically enrolls majors and non-majors and freshmen through seniors. In the past, I struggled with a lack of engagement on the part of students in the class, and assumed that this problem stemmed both from the sense of student anonymity present in these large classes, and the passivity that is tacitly promoted by the predominant use of lecture in such classes. So the objective of my project was to foster a sense of community in a large introductory course, and through that sense of community, to increase engagement with and learning of the course material. To achieve these goals, I developed a groups-within-a-class structure. In the spring of 2006, I (randomly) broke students into 5 groups of 20 students each. Students remained in these groups for the entire semester, and even sat with their group in specific sections of the lecture hall, thereby creating a mini-community for them of familiar students within the context of the larger class. Each group was led by a team of two undergraduate teaching assistants (UGTA's). The UGTA's sat with their group in class each day, served as additional contact people for the students in their groups, took attendance, answered questions, facilitated on-line discussions between their group members, worked with them on in-class activities and discussions, and led bi-weekly discussion classes for their groups (in separate rooms around campus) in which students had the opportunity to discuss, apply, integrate the course material in a small class setting. The objective of this structure was to create a sense of community among the students by providing them with these smaller groups, and to increase engagement with the material through fostering this sense of community, as well as by the opportunities the structure provided to engage in substantial course-related interaction with other students in the class.

To assess the effectiveness of this course structure in meeting my objectives, I examined course evaluation and class performance data from students in the Spring 2006 class, and compared this data with "control" data from the Spring 2005 class wherever possible (in which I taught the same content but in a more traditional, large lecture format without student groups). The results of these analyses clearly indicate that students perceived the group format more favorably than the traditional large lecture format. As compared to students in the traditional lecture class, students in Spring 2006 reported a significantly greater sense of community in the class. They also reported significantly greater perceived learning of and interest in the course material, a greater amount of intellectual effort required to complete the course requirements, and a more positive impact on their critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students also perceived me, as an instructor, more positively in the group format course, reporting greater enthusiasm, friendliness and knowledge about the course material, as well as a more effective style of presentation and more positive instructor-student relationships in Spring 2006. And, although exam performance did not differ significantly between the two semesters, the average rate of attendance in the Spring 2006 class exceeded 91%, a rate far higher than what I achieved in the large, introductory classes I have taught in the past. In conclusion, I feel that the group-within-a-class structure developed in this project was quite successful in increasing students' sense of community in, and their engagement with, the course material, and that this format might be valuable for others who wish to increase student engagement in their classes.