THE FIRST FOUR WEEKS INITIATIVE: 
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS IN AN 
INTRODUCTORY CONSTRUCTION 
MANAGEMENT COURSE 

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Ensuring student engagement throughout their academic journey is crucial for their success. Monitoring early course performance and taking proactive measures can contribute to this engagement. This paper focuses on implementing the First Four Weeks (FFWs) initiative in a Construction Management (CM) course. The FFWs initiative aims to create a positive and inclusive classroom climate, ignite student interest in the subject matter, foster an effective learning environment, and prepare students to excel in high-stakes assignments. The course, where the FFWs initiative was implemented, serves as an introductory first-year course, providing students with fundamental knowledge of the construction industry, including career opportunities and essential skills for project planning and execution. The proactive measures outlined in the initiative include providing timely feedback, offering additional support, encouraging office-hour attendance, and connecting students with campus services. In particular, two strategies implemented in the course are highlighted in this paper because they have proven to enhance student performance in the course. The first strategy involves providing students with a performance and behavior checklist to establish expectations and encourage motivation. The second strategy consists of incorporating low-stakes assignments before the first midterm. Overall, the example strategies discussed in this paper aim to enhance student engagement, motivation, and early performance assessment, leading to a more fruitful learning experience. The FFWs initiative acknowledges the pivotal role of faculty members in supporting students' success and emphasizes the positive impact of intentional efforts in the early weeks of the semester.

Keywords: First-year course, Engagement, Feedback, Implementation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The beginning of a student's academic journey is crucial to their overall success, particularly for first-year students (Balster et al. 2010, Rinkevich 2011). Faculty members are responsible for monitoring students' early course performance and proactively assisting those who may be struggling to ensure their engagement and academic achievement (Murugan and Badawi 2020). Providing frequent and early feedback is essential as it helps students adjust and improve (Hanover Research 2014), and offering additional support, encouraging office hours attendance, and connecting students with campus services are effective strategies (Pattengale and Snyder 2010). Furthermore, identifying and addressing conceptual misunderstandings through feedback after testing can help students perform better (Garfield 1995).
Colorado State University (CSU) has implemented the First Four Weeks (FFWs) initiative since 2018 to support student success. FFWs initiative aims to engage students early in the semester and equip them with tools and assessments that prepare them for more challenging learning activities later (Dodge 2018). While the FFWs model was designed for first-year students, the instructional strategies it encompasses benefit students at all levels (Clemons et al. 2020). By implementing these evidence-based practices, faculty members can enhance student success and promote a positive learning experience. Over 400 faculty members have participated in FFWs workshops, which provide evidence-based tools and low- to medium-stakes assessments to enhance student success during the first quarter of the semester. As part of this initiative, in the summer of 2020, one of the co-authors attended a FFWs online course. Subsequently, he participated in the FFWs Train-the-Trainer program, collaborating with other CSU faculty to develop a workshop on student outreach. This workshop aimed to assist faculty members who face challenges finding time for student communications by utilizing graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). The goal was to share experiences and help faculty and GTAs implement the FFWs initiative in their courses.

Previous studies have primarily focused on incorporating low- to medium-stakes exams in the fourth week of the semester to keep students engaged (Wei and Baker 2019). This paper proposes a much more holistic approach by providing an overview of the FFWs initiative at CSU and its implementation in an introductory Construction Management (CM) course within a 16-week semester. The course was reorganized and updated based on these strategies, even amid the pandemic, as first-year classes were deemed critical for students' development. The latest iteration of the course took place in spring 2023. This paper details the FFWs initiative, the organization, and assignments in the CM course and shares the authors' insights and lessons learned. The subsequent section offers an overview of the FFWs initiative at CSU.

2 BACKGROUND

The FFWs initiative at CSU is grounded in the constructivism theory, which emphasizes learners' active role in constructing their understanding (Bodner 1986). Rather than passively receiving information, learners reflect on their experiences, create mental representations, and integrate new knowledge with their existing understanding (Ernest 1994, Bächtold 2013). This approach fosters deeper active learning as students construct meaning based on their experiences and prior knowledge, influenced by new concepts they encounter in college (Arends 1998). The FFWs initiative focuses on evidence-based instructional practices to enhance the success of first-year students in the early stages of the semester. Institutional data consistently demonstrate that grades earned in initial college courses strongly predict graduation rates (Dodge 2018). Within the first quarter of the semester, specifically the first four weeks, grades strongly correlate with overall course grades. An internal analysis at CSU revealed that failure to establish effective learning habits and meet academic expectations during these four weeks increases the likelihood of scoring below a D or failing to graduate (Dodge 2018, Long and Barone 2019).

To address this challenge, CSU developed the FFWs initiative as a collaborative effort between the Office of the Provost & Executive Vice President, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Institute for Teaching and Learning (TILT). The university aims to achieve an 80 percent six-year graduation rate by actively engaging with students during their first month on campus and ensuring they undertake a recommended course load throughout their first year. Additionally, the FFWs initiative aims to close the achievement gaps for first-generation and low-income students and students of color, making it a critical strategy for promoting overall student success (Dodge 2018, Clemons et al. 2020). As part of the FFWs initiative, CSU encourages faculty teaching lower-level undergraduate classes to assess student performance within the first four weeks of classes. This
early assessment allows students to evaluate the effectiveness of their study habits and reflect on their knowledge acquisition. Moreover, faculty are encouraged to create an inclusive classroom environment that promotes active student involvement in learning and fosters a sense of community (Bennett et al. 2012). The FFWs initiative at CSU provides five key recommendations for faculty (Todd 2013):

i) Establishing relationships and cultivating a sense of belonging among students
ii) Setting clear expectations and motivating students
iii) Promoting active and engaging learning strategies
iv) Integrating student support services into their learning experiences
v) Providing early and constructive feedback enables students to gauge their progress.

For example, regarding providing early feedback, faculty members are advised to administer a low-stakes, graded assignment within the first four weeks of classes. This assignment serves as an opportunity to provide students with early feedback on their performance, familiarize them with the course structure and difficulty, and offer guidance on effective study practices. By providing early assessments, students clearly understand how they will be evaluated, preventing potential surprises or disappointments later in the semester (Todd 2013). In the next section, the authors provide an overview of the implementation of the FFWs initiative in an introductory construction course, delving into its implementation and impact on student outcomes.

3 COURSE CONTENT AND ALIGNMENT WITH FFWS INITIATIVE

CON 101 is a course that introduces the construction industry, including methods, practices, trends, careers, and constituencies involved in the design and construction process. The main course objectives are for the students to:

- Describe the various segments of the construction industry and the roles and responsibilities of all constituencies involved in the design and construction process
- Describe the different methods of project delivery and project selection
- Explain the project management functions of estimating, scheduling, quality management, and safety management
- Describe current trends in construction technology
- Explain concepts of sustainable construction practice

Table 1. Course outline during the FFWs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Lecture Topic</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Course Introduction, Scope of the Industry</td>
<td>Online Discussion #0 (Intro and Class Norms)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historical Perspective</td>
<td>Online Discussion #1 (Const. Historical Perspective)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry Sectors and Project Players</td>
<td>Personal Data Sheet</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry Image and Career Opportunities</td>
<td>Textbook reading assignment</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Construction Management Defined, The Construction Project, What a Const. Manager Does, Typical Career Tracks</td>
<td>Online Quiz #1 (Chapter 1 and Syllabus)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Online Discussion #2 (Project Delivery Types)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Textbook reading assignment</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Finding the Work, How We Play the Game -- Making the Bid/No-Bid Decision</td>
<td>Assignment 1 (Career Path Paper)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Textbook reading assignment</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Contract Documents (Drawings and Project Manual)</td>
<td>Online Quiz #2 (Chapters 2 and 3)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contract Types and Exam Review #1</td>
<td>Online Discussion #3 (Bid Solicitation)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Textbook reading assignment</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first four weeks of the course are summarized in Table 1, which includes the main topics and assignments covered, along with the corresponding point values. The course's grading system is out of 1,000 points, and the assignments completed in the first-month account for 14% of the total grade. In addition, Table 2 includes the course strategies that align with the FFWs initiative.

Table 2. Examples of FFWs strategies implemented in the course (Adapted from Todd 2013).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Build and Encourage         | - Learn as many of your students' names as possible or have students use name tents.  
| Relationships               | - Share and practice the CSU Principles of Community concisely and meaningfully, highlighting 2-3 principles that help build community.  
|                             | - Express to students that you believe in their potential as a faculty and want them all to succeed. Ensure this is a regular practice.  
|                             | - Share something about yourself and your passion for the subject content.  
|                             | - Facilitate small group interactions and conduct icebreakers to encourage students to share contact information.  
|                             | - Allocate time for group engagement at least once a week, such as through comparison discussions, concept understanding check-ins, assignment check-ins, or Q&A sessions.  
| Set Expectations/Motivate   | - Collaboratively establish class norms, community standards, or ground rules.  
| Students                    | - Provide context or the "big picture" of your course, briefly describing the topics that will be covered and explaining the relevance of the course in students' academic, professional, and personal lives.  
|                             | - Clearly communicate the expectations for success in your course through class discussions or by posting them on the course platform (e.g., Canvas). Alternatively, have students write notes to next semester's students on how to succeed in your course and share these notes with the new students.  
|                             | - Involve students actively in understanding the course syllabus. Consider methods such as a syllabus quiz, small group discussions, PoliEverywhere.com, Kahoot classroom quizzes, etc.  
| Promote Active Engaged      | - Incorporate at least one classroom assessment Technique per week, such as minute papers or muddiest point exercises.  
| Learning                    | - Consistently engage students in at least one active learning strategy per class, such as think-pair-share, concept mapping, clicker questions, jigsaw activities, magic moments, or service learning.  
|                             | - Connect learning activities to the assigned readings that students should have completed before class.  
| Integrate Student           | - Direct students to relevant student resources at strategic times, such as TILT, the Writing Center, campus life services, the library, counseling services, career and employment services, cultural and resource centers, or online resources.  
| Support into Learning       | - Anticipate and address potential challenges students may face, such as childcare, transportation, heavy work hours, or lack of home computer access. Provide appropriate referrals and links within the course learning management system (e.g., Canvas).  
| Experiences                 | - Offer suggestions on how to study specific concepts in your course.  
| Ensure that Students        | - Clearly communicate your course grading policy, including late submissions or academic misconduct.  
| Know Where They Stand       | - Develop rubrics that define grading criteria for each assignment and provide them to students when assigning the task.  
|                             | - Within the first two weeks, have students complete a brief in-class writing assignment or quiz worth a few points. Grade and return this assignment promptly, including helpful suggestions for improvement or providing a list of common errors and positives to distribute to students.  
|                             | - Discuss students' progress in the first couple of weeks and guide what they need to do to succeed in your course. Direct them to available student resources that can support their academic success.  

This section also highlights two strategies implemented in CON 101 that have proven to enhance student performance in the course. The first strategy involves providing students with a performance and behavior checklist to establish expectations and encourage motivation. This checklist consists of recommended actions students can take to excel in the course. It was developed based on feedback from previous students, lessons learned from the course, and the instructors’ teaching experience. Previously, the checklist was distributed a week before the first midterm. However, it is now distributed in the first week of class, requiring students to meet with the instructor during office hours to discuss their results. This approach not only encourages students to engage with office hours early on but also allows the instructor to understand students' needs better and provide additional resources related to study skills. The second strategy involves incorporating low-stakes assignments before the first midterm. These assignments encompass a variety of activities, such as small group discussions on class norms, constructing historical perspectives, and making bid solicitation decisions. Additionally, low-stakes online quizzes on the learning management system are included during the first month to reinforce the reading material and content covered in class. These quizzes serve as a tool for students to maintain consistency in reading the textbook and give them an idea of the format for the first midterm. This strategy aligns with ensuring that students know where they stand in the course early in the semester.

Furthermore, during the third week, students are required to submit a one-page write-up based on the first two chapters of the textbook. This assignment prompts students to describe which construction industry sector they find most interesting and how their career track might develop within that sector. The assignment is designed as a low-stake to help students connect with the content covered thus far. In addition, as part of this assignment, the grading rubric is shared with the students, who are encouraged to seek feedback from their classmates and make any necessary corrections. The aim here is to encourage peer interaction, fostering a sense of community and engagement among the students. This peer review process also ensures that students know the grading rubric and expectations for the assignment.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The FFWs initiative at CSU recognizes this potential and extends beyond the initial weeks of the student experience. It aims to build academic confidence, foster a sense of belonging, and promote academic excellence throughout students' entire university journey (Long and Barone 2019). The FFWs initiative acknowledges the pivotal role of faculty members in supporting students' success and emphasizes the positive impact of intentional efforts in the early weeks of the semester. One effective strategy highlighted by the FFWs initiative is the establishment of classroom norms on the first day of class. By setting clear expectations and fostering an inclusive learning environment, faculty members can empower students and cultivate a sense of ownership (Barkley et al. 2014). These norms serve as a reference point throughout the semester, reminding students of the agreed-upon standards and identifying any deviations that may hinder their progress, such as lack of participation or late assignment submissions.

In addition to establishing classroom norms, the FFWs initiative emphasizes the importance of engaging students in in-class and online discussions. Online small-group discussions allow students to provide constructive feedback to their peers, promoting reflection on missing concepts and encouraging collaborative learning. In-class discussions following the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) approach foster deeper engagement as students think about the topic individually, share their thoughts with partners or small groups, and engage in whole-class discussions. This interactive strategy empowers students to participate in their learning actively and promotes a collaborative learning environment.
This paper provided an overview of the FFWs initiative and shared examples of that initiative as implemented in a CM course with the ultimate goal of promoting this initiative within the academic community. CM faculty members and those in similar fields should consider using the FFWs checklist and implementing the recommended strategies. It is important to provide students with early assessments that are comprehensive and timely, similar to other course summative assessments. Creating an inclusive environment from the start is also crucial. This will help students evaluate their knowledge and adjust their study skills. They will also be more receptive to feedback and can contact faculty for extra support. Future research includes collecting longitudinal data to assess the impact of FFWs initiative on graduation rates. Additionally, future research can examine how to streamline the feedback to the students using learning management systems (e.g., by using Canvas Learning Analytics).

References