



Making a Smooth Transition to University Life

By Brittany Long

High school to university — how do freshmen make the transition? At Texas Wesleyan University, the answer lies in a course called Freshman Experience, or “Freshman Homeroom” as professor Joe Brown affectionately calls it.

The course offers guidance on studying, taking lecture notes, managing their time and finances, staying mentally and physically healthy, and — most of all — succeeding in college. Brown, the unofficial director of the GST (general studies) program for freshmen, said, “Retention studies show that the first semester is very important to the student.” Texas Wesleyan has offered a freshman transition course on and off for the last 23 years.

The course, known as GST 1111, typically has 15 students per class and the professors can identify students who are in jeopardy of failing or dropping out and give them the extra help they need. Due to Freshman Experience, the freshmen retention rate at Texas Wesleyan University has risen more than eight percent. “The key to our success,” Brown said, “is a close coordination with Ashley Milligan and Katherine Prater in the Freshmen Advising Center. Ashley can help us contact those struggling so we can wrangle them back in.”

Professors from various fields of study help teach the GST classes. Current and past teachers have included: Stacia Neeley, English professor; Tom Smith, marketing professor; and Brown, theatre and speech professor; Elizabeth Alexander, history; Lisa Dryden and Aileen Curtin, education; Sandra Hart, business; Lisa Hensley, psychology, Bruce Benz, biology; Glynn Mathis, Academic Resource Center; Katherine Prater, chemistry. GST professors are chosen because they are “freshmen focused,” meaning they are sensitive to students’ needs, easily accessible through office hours and e-mail, and have a strong track record in their willingness to work with students.

“I tell them to e-mail me any question. We’re here to help you succeed. There aren’t any stupid questions,” said Brown. “My personal style is to be very, very accessible to the student, especially through e-mail and cell phone. And I think the faculty we have does that.”

In addition to teaching two to four sections of GST each semester, Joe Brown coordinates the GST program on campus. He helps identify faculty to teach the classes, troubleshoots for all the GST teachers, and helps create the syllabus for all GST classes. Even though this class has a syllabus, the course is far more flexible and

student friendly than most, said Brown. “I tell the other teachers, if the students have something they want to talk about, let them. The lesson plan comes second.” This class revolves around students and making sure freshmen know they have support in the unfamiliar world of university life.

“Because the Texas school system needs revamping,” Brown says, “students don’t know how to study, read, write, or manage time properly. Our GST classes help them learn the skills needed to survive the college workload.” Freshman Experience teaches students time management skills, how to communicate with other students and professors, how to identify and understand their own personal learning styles, and most importantly, how to adapt their learning styles to their professor’s teaching methods.

Joakim Söderbaum, freshman Sport Medicine major, was taken aback by how useful the class was. “As an international student, I spent a lot of my time studying at first. In class, I learned how to be able to have fun as well, and to my surprise, I performed even better in school after that.”

Brown’s relaxed teaching style encourages students to be themselves and to learn from their mistakes. Sometimes called Pro-Joe, he uses a lot of humor and visual aides to create a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. “The best part of the class was the openness of it,” said Jonathan Towne, freshman psychology major. “We could talk about whatever we needed to. If we had a problem with a professor, we could talk about it. If we had some personal problem, we could talk to the professor and he would help us or direct us in the direction we needed to go.”

To help his students feel more comfortable, Joe Brown decorated the room he teaches in. In addition to a red wall, yellow tables, and splashes of bright colors around the room, Brown posted inspirational quotes on the walls to help keep his students motivated. “I wanted a place where freshmen would want to come; it should be secure, safe, and inviting,” Brown said, “The GST spirit is to let the students talk freely, it’s not really meant to be an academic setting. This room shows that.”

Teachers from all fields of study have come together to make this program a success and each adds his or her own personal touch to the course work. This class teaches students the skills that will help them throughout their university life. “I think more than just freshmen should take it,” Ashley Spencer, freshman music major, said, “I think it would be beneficial to everyone.”