



# Fostering Student Learning and Success through First-Year Programs

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Educators with graying hair may recall their first college years as a more Darwinian time. Many tell stories of being asked during their opening collegiate convocation to “look to the left and look to the right” and then recall being told by the imposing dean that “one of these two classmates will not be here this time next year,” as if that would indicate a job well done by faculty. Thankfully, these stories are largely the stuff of history. Today, faculty and staff at most institutions take seriously their mandate to help first-year students succeed, delivering on an implied moral obligation to both challenge and support those to whom they grant admission. But helping students to succeed can be difficult. What do we know about learning that can help students overcome these difficulties?

## The Transition to Postsecondary Learning

Attention to the first year of college has increased significantly since the early 1980s. The release of *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Undergraduate Education*, a report from the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education sponsored by the National Institute of Education in 1984, focused attention, perhaps for the first time on a national level, on the first-year experience. It called for increasing student involvement in higher education and it asserted that “college administrators should reallocate faculty and other institutional resources toward increased service to first and second year students.” Many educators interested in the first year

applauded this recognition of the importance of the beginning college experience. Since then, countless students have benefited from this increased attention.

The first college year is not “grade 13.” Incoming students, whether they come to college from high school or from the world of work, enter a new culture. Consider the college culture through an anthropologist’s lens. For new students, college presents a foreign set of norms, traditions, and rituals, and a new language and environment. The high school and the college educational cultures are quite different. It is no surprise that student transition is difficult as well. Making the transition from being a high school student to being a successful college student does not happen instantaneously, and it certainly does not occur by simple osmosis. As college educators, we must keep in mind that we chose higher education for our life’s work at least in part because we were comfortable in an academic environment. Many of our students today are not. They will not become successful college students simply by “being here.”

Student success requires intentional efforts by those of us responsible for the academy. Higher education is not unlike many other large and complex organizational systems. Fortune 500 companies invest significant time and resources into management training for their new employees. All branches of the armed forces have extensive basic training programs to produce competent soldiers. Why should higher education be any different? We also need to effectively assimilate new members into our complex

organization. Should we not also provide intentional programs to teach new students how to be effective students and not leave this important transition to serendipity?

## From Retention to Student Learning and Success

Institutions in all sectors of higher education are attempting to increase student success by focusing on student retention. External demands and growing competition among institutions are fueling the retention fire. Institutions know that retention rates are affected by the congruence of institutional mission and student goals, so admissions officers are becoming intentional about communicating with prospective students in their decision-making process. Student involvement and connections to the campus community are factors positively correlated with retention, so institutional initiatives are being created to increase student involvement and enhance feelings of community on campus. The integration of academic learning and daily life is known to positively affect retention, so campuses are forming partnerships to increase opportunities for such integration.

Yet many in the academy find efforts that focus on retention distasteful because they see institutional mission as focused on teaching and learning rather than retention and graduation rates. Some take solace in knowing that intentional admissions policies, initiatives to enhance student involvement, efforts to achieve strong campus communities, and integrative learning curricula are desirable in and of themselves. The fact that student retention is a likely outcome of such initiatives

is a more palatable way to view retention. More recently, attention has focused on the simple, comprehensive, and fundamental concept of student learning: students who learn are students who succeed.

## Defining First-Year Student Success

Defining success can be an elusive proposition, and students, institutions, and external agencies may all have different definitions. There are certainly different perspectives. So, success according to whom? The student? The institution? External agencies? Luckily, success can't be defined or benchmarked by any one single marker, so there

is likely some truth in all these definitions. Success involves the whole student and is multidimensional. It certainly goes beyond cognitive or academic success alone.

Upcraft, Barefoot, and Gardner (2005) suggest that first-year students succeed when they make progress toward developing academic and intellectual competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health and wellness, developing civic responsibility, considering the spiritual dimensions of life, and dealing with diversity. This is indeed a comprehensive definition.

## Resources for Institutional Initiatives

**New Student Orientation**—The National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) provides education, leadership, and professional development in the fields of college student orientation, transition, and retention. [www.nodaweb.org](http://www.nodaweb.org)

**First-Year Seminars**—The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition provides myriad resources on first-year seminars. [www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr](http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr)

**Residence Education**—The Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) is the preeminent professional association dedicated to supporting and promoting the collegiate residential experience. [www.acuho-i.org](http://www.acuho-i.org)

**Academic Advising**—The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) is an association of professional advisers, counselors, faculty, administrators, and students working to enhance the educational development of students. [www.nacada.ksu.edu](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu)

**Learning Communities**—The Washington Center at Evergreen State College hosted the National Learning Communities Project and still provides ample resources via its Web site. [www.evergreen.edu/washcenter](http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter)

**Summer Common Reading Programs**—The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition provides resources and Web links to information on summer reading programs. [www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr](http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr)

**Peer-Assisted Study**—Supplemental Instruction is an academic assistance program in which students learn how to integrate course content and study skills while working together in historically difficult courses. [www.umkc.edu/cad/SI](http://www.umkc.edu/cad/SI)

**Undergraduate Research**—The Winter 2006 issue of *Peer Review* is an excellent resource on undergraduate research initiatives. [www.aacu.org/peerreview](http://www.aacu.org/peerreview)



But if it is embraced as an acceptable definition without thought, it is little more than words on a page. If, on the other hand, this definition becomes a catalyst for discussion and is examined in the context of an individual institution, then real change can be initiated. Such a discussion should involve a broad group of campus constituents, including faculty, staff, and students, who together wrestle with defining student success within the framework of their own institutional mission. With a well-developed, broadly accepted, and widely articulated definition of first-year student success, institutions are more likely to see their students succeed.

### **First-Year Experience Initiatives**

Every student has a first-year experience, whether it is an experience desired by campus leadership or not. The term “first-year experience,” as advocated by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, describes a comprehensive and intentional approach to the first college year. It comprises both curricular and cocurricular initiatives. It is the sum of all experiences students have in their first year at college. The “first-year experience” is far more than a single event, program, or course.

Institutions that achieve excellence in first-year student success employ a wide variety of initiatives. Collectively and singularly, these initiatives vary from campus to campus because successful programs reflect institutional mission, student demographics, and campus culture. Programs and initiatives commonly considered to be a part of

an institution’s first-year experience efforts include, but are certainly not limited to, recruitment and admissions efforts; new student orientation programs; welcome week activities, rituals, and traditions; first-year, summer, or common reading programs; first-year seminars; academic advising; academic support centers; supplemental instruction; undergraduate research initiatives; learning communities; service learning; and residence education initiatives.

### **A Campus-Wide Responsibility**

Student learning and success is a campus-wide responsibility. The days of leaving students’ intellectual development to the faculty and everything else to student affairs offices is long past—separating the head from the heart and the rest of a student’s being is impossible. The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Greater Expectations initiative recognizes that the whole student is an intentional learner who is empowered, informed, responsible, and able to integrate learning. Soon after the release of the *Greater Expectations* report in 2002, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the American College Personnel Association released *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (2004). This document calls for the collaboration of academic affairs and student affairs divisions in developing the whole student and asserts that the holistic development of the student should be a primary concern.

For many years, well-meaning and caring faculty and student affairs adminis-

trators developed programs and initiatives aimed at easing the transition to college and improving first-year students’ success. Many of these varied efforts have yielded impressive results. The assessment movement in American higher education of the past decade has generated significant information on the outcomes of programs and initiatives and has contributed to continuing improvement and program refinement. But something more is needed.

One welcomed aspect of our postmodern world is that discrete boundaries are blurred. Moving beyond isolated initiatives is no longer an option; it is a necessity. Campuses that truly value efforts to improve student success are now taking a broader and more comprehensive approach to their first-year experience. On these campuses, the first year serves as a unifying, affirmative focus.

### **Resources for Educators**

Most campuses have myriad resources to support the first-year experience already in place. Countless other resources are readily available beyond the campus. Professional organizations and disciplinary associations provide conferences, academic periodicals, and networking opportunities for faculty and staff. Topics on the first college year are now found on the agenda of meetings and in publications in a wide variety of organizational settings. Developing a mechanism for sharing such information across campus can be a useful endeavor. National centers and institutes also exist to provide research, professional development, publications, and networking for educators interested in the



first college year (see sidebar). Commercial textbook and trade book publishers, software developers, consultant and speaker bureaus, and newsletter publishers also provide resources for professors and instructors.

But looking beyond the campus is not always necessary—many of the resources that support efforts to improve the first-year experience already exist on our own campuses. Simply looking at these resources from the perspective of the first-year experience reveals rich assets. Campus offices of institutional research or campus-wide assessment committees frequently have abundant untapped information about first-year students. Making use of information that already exists can be a powerful first step toward improving the first-year experience on campus. Campus teaching and learning centers can support faculty and staff in their work. Special programs can easily be developed and delivered on first-year student characteristics, learning approaches for first-year students, and instructional delivery modes that engage millennial students. Campus newsletters and magazines aimed at faculty and staff are excellent methods for communicating valuable information on topics related to first-year student success initiatives. Campus leaders who encourage lifelong learning among faculty and staff through professional development activities can focus support of such activities on the first college year.

Perhaps the most overlooked and underappreciated resource available to us are the students themselves. It is far too common for campus officials to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy developing strategies to improve the first college

year without ever asking for student involvement. Not only can students provide valuable information to inform our work, but they can also be highly effective partners in the delivery of programs and services.

### **Realizing Our Institutional Potential**

The first year underpins the entire undergraduate experience. Attention to first-year students and their transition to our institutions is essential if we are to fulfill our obligation to our students and to realize our institutional potential. We must be very intentional and proactive in our efforts, and we must incorporate ongoing and formative assessment into our work. We must customize our efforts to reflect our students, our institutional mission, and our definition of first-year student success. And our efforts must be broad-based, coordinated, and inclusive of the entire campus. We have definitely moved beyond the “look to your right and look to your left” approach of years gone by. If we are to move our institutions and our students to the next level, we must now look deeply within and around our own campus. In partnership with the entire campus community, our efforts will make our institutions better places to work, live, and learn. ■

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### **External Institutes and Centers for First-Year Programs**

**The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition** supports and advances efforts to improve student learning and the transition into higher education through its conferences, institutes, teleconferences and Webcasts, publications, Web resources, and research. [www.sc.edu/fye](http://www.sc.edu/fye)

**The Policy Center on the First Year of College** engages postsecondary institutions in a model for voluntary, comprehensive self-study and development and implementation of an intentional action plan designed to enhance the effectiveness of the first year. [www.firstyear.org](http://www.firstyear.org)

**The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles** serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education and is home of a forty-year-old longitudinal study of freshman characteristics and behaviors. [www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri)

**The Center for the Study of Higher Education at Penn State** conducts theory-based research that informs efforts to improve higher education policy and practice. [www.ed.psu.edu/cshe](http://www.ed.psu.edu/cshe)