

From “My Course” to “Our Program”: Collective Responsibility for First-Year Student Success

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We may all be familiar with Yeats’s assertion that “education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire”; however, our institutional structures and practices are not always as intellectually incendiary as we might want. Undergraduate students often see general education as a coerced initiation into the academy, something to be endured, not celebrated, and checked off in terms of requirements and courses having little to do with their interests and little perceived relationship to their respective majors or intended life goals. One major challenge for undergraduate education is to create intellectually engaging contexts for learning that vest students in their learning, expand intellectual curiosity, and foster intellectual development throughout the undergraduate years.

At Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), an urban public research university located in downtown Indianapolis, we have addressed this challenge both structurally and pedagogically. One key campus goal, articulated as part of a concerted effort to double our capacity for diversity as well as to double the number of graduates over the next five years, is to *expand powerful pedagogies and academic and student support programs to increase retention, targeting . . . first-year students*. The programs in place to achieve that goal for first-year students in particular include learning communities, themed learning communities, ePort (our electronic student portfolio), our gateway program, and the supported implementa-

tion of powerful pedagogies such as study abroad programs, internships, undergraduate research, service learning, integrative learning, and cocurricular learning.

Principles of Undergraduate Learning

We believe that the primary way to connect students with their learning is to consider “all” of a student. Psychologists posit attitudes, behaviors, and cognition as aspects of our existence—what we value, what we do, and what we know. Building on that understanding, we further believe that, in order to accommodate complex global dynamics of communication, economic development, and social mobility, undergraduate education must meaningfully integrate what students already know, value, and do into curricular and cocurricular programs. At IUPUI, the conceptual framework for that integration is provided in six Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs):

- core communication and quantitative skills
- critical thinking
- integration and application of knowledge
- intellectual breadth, depth, and adaptiveness
- understanding society and culture
- values and ethics

In 1998, after six years of intense deliberations, our faculty stepped boldly away from our outmoded distributive model when they approved the PULs, defined the skills and ways of knowing embodied in them, and developed campus-level outcomes for each of them.



The goal is for these PULs to serve as the intellectual framework for all curricular and cocurricular programs for all IUPUI students. As a University of Michigan Student said:

So you get here and they start asking you, “What do you...want to major in? ... what courses [do] you want to take?” and you get the impression that’s what it’s all about—courses and majors. So, you take the courses. You get your card punched. You try a little this and a little that. Then comes GRADUATION. And you wake up and you look at this bunch of courses and then it hits you: They don’t add up to anything. It’s just a bunch of courses. It doesn’t mean a thing.

Our goal at IUPUI is for students to realize right from the start—even as early as in orientation—that they are engaged in a coherent program intentionally designed and optimally scaffolded for their needs, not a jumble of courses and requirements. Achieving that goal has required a sea of changes in faculty and staff perceptions, moving away from “my course” or “my activity” to conversations about and curriculum planning for “our program.” Taking a programmatic view in our curricular and cocurricular learning experiences is a key part of our efforts to improve student success and retention.

Our story of shared responsibility for first-year student success and retention includes administrative structures, policies, and processes, such as enrollment management, orientation, and placement; curricular structures, such as learning communi-

ties and thematic learning communities; cocurricular structures such as student leadership programs and Unity Day (a student organized “fair” on students’ explorations of diversity within their first-year seminars); and faculty development structures such as the Gateway Program and Communities of Practice. The PULs are the common element in each of these institutional structures. We employ multiple forms of assessment to ensure the effectiveness of each of the above structures, but our most innovative and comprehensive approach to assessing curricular and cocurricular learning, in terms of both improvement and achievement, is ePort, our electronic student portfolio. Our major institutional structure for first-year student retention and success is University College, whose faculty and staff represent all the administrative and curricular structures mentioned above.

Marsha Baxter-Magolda’s research, a long-term qualitative study of student intellectual development, suggests that students often report that they learn in contexts outside the classroom. Long-standing practices of internships and apprenticeships have always provided aspiring professionals with such contexts to apply their learning, places where students bring their “all” to their learning. Yet, for entering students, the contexts in which learning occurs have too often been classrooms where students experience formal learning as the accumulation of facts to be presented back to the faculty on examinations, then promptly forgotten. Now faculty at IUPUI delineate learning outcomes at the

programmatic level with reference to the PULs and articulate what students will know and be able to do during and at the conclusion of their major.

Russ Edgerton, a former director of the Pew Undergraduate Forum, delineated a list of powerful pedagogies (a list akin to the *U.S. News* listing of best practices, that attempted to get beyond measures of resources and selectivity as indices of excellence). While no pedagogy is, in itself, either powerful or empowering, particularly if it is practiced in isolation, these approaches, when part of a coherent, intentionally developed curriculum for learning, have been proven to increase student engagement and enhance student learning. Early data on our campus indicate that they also have an impact on student retention. The powerful pedagogies that are a formal part of our approach to undergraduate learning include the following:

- learning communities (uc.iupui.edu/staff/research_learnComm.asp)
- thematic learning communities (www.opd.iupui.edu/units/coil/tlc.asp), which includes service learning (csl.iupui.edu/)
- undergraduate research (www.urop.iupui.edu) and internships (www.solutioncenter.iupui.edu/internships.htm)
- study abroad (www.iupui.edu/~oia/SA/studyabroad)

Students in internships or apprenticeship roles bring with them knowledge and skills from the classroom that, coupled with attitudes and values, make for a wholeness of experience. Students constantly create



knowledge by learning and interpreting what they experience in terms of what they bring to the learning context. When students are in these involving contexts, they are much more likely to learn. Through exposure to the aforementioned pedagogies, first-year students are now in community contexts to make their learning their own.

First-Year Engagement

Service learning has become one of the most powerful pedagogies in undergraduate education. It not only fuses attitude, behavior, and cognition but also builds for citizenship. The American Democracy Project, the AAC&U Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement, and other national projects are helping our undergraduate institutions understand and articulate the importance of education for citizenship. Our students have launched “Democracy Plaza” where they speak out on key issues via chalkboards outside and inside the building. Students at all levels participate in the Democracy Plaza, which provides public forums with opposing sides of key issues. What is most exciting is that several of our first-year students in themed learning communities participate in these forums as part of the cocurricular expectations for their community. One in particular, “Communication, Reflection, and Action: Students in a Democratic Society,” uses the Democracy Plaza for curricular as well as cocurricular learning.

Sometimes there are serendipitous occurrences when students are in service learning contexts. For example, our first-

year seminars for prospective business majors included experiences in elementary schools where college students engaged with their young charges in talking about business and the economy in our country. We had several reports of these students changing to education majors.

Some campuses are providing short international experiences within the student’s first year of study, a means of encouraging later study abroad. These short, intensive experiences are often the first times our students have an international experience. They often come back reporting that they have learned more about themselves than the places they visited. Entering students are now in diverse communities, sometimes in international contexts, where they make their learning their own.

Likewise, offering students the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research in their first year can engage them early in their college career. The Department of Biology hires entering students as fledgling laboratory assistants, bringing them into the laboratories as neophyte employees—giving them both academic and work experiences. Entering students are now in laboratories, not waiting until they are completing independent research projects as seniors, where they make their learning their own.

A multitude of factors contribute to student success and retention, many of which we can only minimally influence. Curricular and institutional structures,

however, are factors that we can intentionally shape, using institutional data to maximize the intellectual capacity of the learning environments we create for our students. While the story of IUPUI’s first-year program is not a story of unqualified success, it is a story of steady, incremental progress to increased retention and increasing student success. ■

AAC&U CALENDAR

In addition to its annual meeting, AAC&U offers a series of working conferences and institutes each year. Additional information about the upcoming meetings listed below is available online at www.aacu.org/meetings.

Network for Academic Renewal Meetings

October 19–21, 2006
Diversity and Learning: A Defining Moment
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

November 9–11, 2006
Faculty Work in the New Academy: Emerging Challenges and Evolving Roles
 Chicago, Illinois

AAC&U’s Annual Meeting

January 17–20, 2007
The Real Test: Liberal Education and Democracy’s Big Questions
 New Orleans, Louisiana