

By Betsy O. Barefoot

The First-Year Experience

Are We Making It Any Better?

TO THOSE who live it, the first college year, with its range of emotions, expectations, and experiences, is and always has been important—the stuff of literature and legend, of cartoon, film, and, most recently, even television (as portrayed in *Felicity*). Widespread institutional recognition of, and response to, the importance of the first year, however, is a late-twentieth-century phenomenon. Beginning around 1980 and continuing to the present, higher education in the United States has witnessed what Lee Upcraft and John Gardner term a “grass-roots movement” to improve the first college year (p. xiv). At the root of this twenty-year movement are many factors that span a continuum from institutional survival and self-interest to “doing the right thing” for the students themselves.

As we cross into a new century, we have a perfect opportunity to take stock of the range of initiatives that for two decades have attempted to enhance the first-year experience in U.S. higher education—things done

During the last twenty years, as higher education has turned its attention to first-year students, colleges and universities have put in place numerous freshman programs, from small seminars to full-fledged first-year courses. But how close are we to achieving our goal of truly improving the first year? The author explores this question and tells us where we need to go from here.

and things left undone. Many of us can point with pride to all we have accomplished: the programs we have designed, the funds we have “front-loaded,” and, most important, the individual lives we have influenced. But many of us also continue to be disappointed and frustrated with the pervasive high rate of student dropout between the first and second year and with the difficulty we face in mainstreaming our efforts and gaining support across the campus, especially from faculty ranks.

As a senior staff member in the University of South Carolina’s National Resource Center for the

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First-Year Experience, one of my primary responsibilities is to keep abreast of trends related to first-year students, such as how structures and programs, both in and out of the classroom, are changing for better or for worse. In some ways this is a daunting task because there are innumerable campus-specific program variations—each accompanied by the requisite acronym. But a close look reveals that the majority of initiatives are based on a small number of well-known themes drawn from research on college students. Of course, there also continue to be other first-year practices that appear over and over for a single reason: “because we’ve always done it that way.”

Another responsibility I share with colleagues at the center is to look carefully at whether and how colleges and universities define and measure the “effectiveness” of first-year initiatives. Although most programs can potentially achieve multiple positive outcomes for students and institutions, the most commonly used measure of effectiveness is improved student retention. Some institutions also assess first-year initiatives with respect to whether they have an impact on other factors that correlate with improved retention, such as student satisfaction, involvement, use of campus services, and so on. But such evidence, although it may be gathered internally, is rarely published or disseminated beyond the boundaries of a particular campus. And, currently, only a small fraction of first-year programs are put to any sort of objective test to determine whether they have achieved intended or unintended outcomes.

The following discussion is a broad view of the first year in U.S. higher education: how the academy and its constituent groups conceptualize the “first-year problem” and the common themes and objectives that guide the development of specific first-year programs or activities. However, a discussion of the first college year would not be complete without a focus on how we can improve the educational experience of first-year stu-

dents—how we can go about addressing the complex and intractable problems that I believe we must tackle in order to narrow the gap between an ideal first college year and what for many students is the disappointing reality. The closing section seeks to identify special challenges for both educators and institutions as we consider the first college year in the twenty-first century.

THE FIRST-YEAR PROBLEM

ASK MOST COLLEGE FACULTY what’s wrong with the first college year, and they will zoom in on the deficiencies of the students themselves. The complaints are legion: new students are disengaged academically, unmotivated, can’t write, can’t spell, have a ten-minute attention span, expect instant gratification. In a nutshell, they aren’t the way students “used to be.” Rarely is there a sustained focus on and acknowledgment of the strengths of contemporary students: their creativity, family values, work ethic, openness, tolerance, and technological savvy.

College-goers have changed in a number of significant ways since the time when most current faculty were themselves undergraduates; various forms of demographic, personal, academic, and social analysis confirm that reality. And yet the predominant “structure” of the first college year, to borrow a concept developed by my colleague John N. Gardner, is the same basic structure that was designed for a population of white, middle- or upper-class males who constituted the vast majority of college students until the last two decades of this century. For many of today’s new students, there is a serious lack of institutional fit, not of their making.

Ask most administrators what’s wrong with the first college year, and they will target student attrition—a nemesis of many open-admissions or moderately selective institutions, especially those that are highly tuition

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dependent. Student attrition and retention are complex phenomena with many root causes. This complexity is compounded by the inadequate way in which most institutions are able to measure student stopout, dropout, or transfer. And over the past two decades, literally thousands of first-year programs have been created with increased retention rates as the primary, if not the sole, desired outcome. Although many of these programs are, in fact, successful for certain student groups, as measured by upticks in campus-specific or group-specific retention figures, the overall national dropout rate of approximately 33 percent (as reported annually by the American College Testing Program) has been disturbingly consistent for the past several years. What do we make of this discrepancy between reported institutional retention improvements and the national attrition status quo? Perhaps there is much about the dynamic of student attrition that continues to escape our collective powers of control. Or perhaps the attrition rate would be much worse without our efforts that allow us just to stay even.

The student dropout rate, however, is not the only concern that frames first-year programs. Over the past five years, a number of highly selective institutions have experimented with first-year initiatives to improve the overall level of student intellectualism and to reduce behavior problems, such as binge drinking. In the fall of 1999, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill began a series of first-year seminars taught entirely by tenured faculty. The hope is that these elective seminars, offered on a variety of academic topics, will improve the level of interaction between first-year students and senior faculty and raise the overall level of academic discourse on campus. About five years ago, Duke University moved all its first-year students to East Campus (for many years, the women's campus) so as to restrict what Duke officials believed to be negative behavioral influences of upper-level students and to create an environment within which to design and deliver targeted residential programming.

Generally, change in the first college year tends to be piecemeal, and the impetus for change is often an immediate campus-specific concern focused on a "student

problem." The change process itself and the resulting new program or activity, however, may have an unintentional positive impact on the institution itself—for instance, bringing together academic and student affairs professionals to implement a program or course that straddles academics and cocurricular activities. And in spite of their piecemeal and often temporary nature, many of these programs represent real creativity on the part of educators who are passionate about helping first-year students.

FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMS ON SOLID GROUND

MUCH about the first college year has remained constant over time. After having been recruited and admitted, new students generally participate in some sort of orientation; many live in residence halls; most receive some form of academic advising; and all go to class. But over the past three decades, researchers and scholars have scrutinized the undergraduate years, studying the kinds of experiences that are highly correlated with student success. This body of scholarship and research provides a solid foundation that educators can and do use to structure first-year initiatives. Much of what now constitutes "the first year experience" in U.S. higher education are programs and activities that have the following overall research-based objectives:

- Increasing student-to-student interaction
- Increasing faculty-to-student interaction, especially out of class
- Increasing student involvement and time on campus
- Linking the curriculum and the cocurriculum
- Increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement
- Assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college

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Increasing Student-to-Student Interaction.

Alexander Astin's research has validated empirically what many of us experienced in college: "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). A significant number of first-year programs, including first-year seminars, learning communities, residence life activities, community service, and service learning opportunities, are intentionally designed to provide students the interaction with peers necessary for group bonding and affiliation. Increasingly conscious of the power of peer influence, educators are attempting, for better or worse, to channel or manage it, especially the influence of upper-level students. John Orr Dwyer's account of the history of the freshman year reports that upper-level students have alternately hazed or tormented and guided or befriended first-year students; the credibility and authority of these upper-level role models is legendary. Today, sophomore, junior, and senior "influentials" are working with first-year students as orientation leaders, residence advisers, academic advisers, mentors, one-to-one and group tutors, and coteachers. Creating structures wherein upper-level students mentor and support new students is especially important for students who are in one or more at-risk categories. Women, students of color, first-generation students, and other nontraditional students benefit from getting to know others who share their innate characteristics and who have been successful in higher education.

Through the use of learning communities, colleges and universities are changing the basic organization of the curriculum to achieve more student-to-student interaction and many other positive outcomes, such as improved retention and grade point averages. Learning communities, strictly defined, are two or more academic courses linked across the curriculum so that the same group of students enrolls in each course. Students participating in learning communities experience greater social connection and, if the courses are conceptually linked, less academic fragmentation than their peers who don't participate in learning communities. Although learning communities can be implemented at any level,

they are especially valuable for first-year students, giving them a needed sense of camaraderie built around academic course work. Learning communities are also highly adaptable and can be used with specific student subpopulations; in both two- and four-year settings; and, especially, in commuter institutions, where students have little opportunity for more traditional forms of social involvement. On residential campuses, some learning communities are linked with residence life so that specific student cohorts live in a single hall or on a single floor.

Current research conducted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience has found that over 70 percent of U.S. colleges and universities offer special first-year seminars to assure that new students have at least one small class in which a primary goal is the development of peer relationships. Although, as a course type, such seminars are over a hundred years old, every academic year yields a new crop of highly innovative seminar models. Their relative ease of implementation, in comparison with other more systemic changes such as learning communities, probably accounts for their popularity. But the fact that first-year seminars are add-ons, often "loosely coupled" with the institution, also accounts for the failure of many of them to survive over time and through successive cohorts of administrative leadership. Some seminars are abolished permanently; others may reappear a few years later, perhaps with a new tide and new leadership. In fact, some educators can track numerous iterations of a seminar as institutions seek the "ideal" model that will garner broad-based institutional support.

Increasing Faculty-to-Student Interaction.

Achieving the kind of "academic and social integration" described by Vincent Tinto requires not only interaction between students but also sustained, informal interaction between students and faculty. This level of interaction is far more likely to occur routinely on the small college campus. At research universities faculty who willingly spend precious discretionary time with students out of class run the risk of reducing their chances for tenure and promotion. In spite of obvious

disincentives to tenure-track faculty for spending extra time with first-year students, some large universities recognize the value of increasing this interaction in a way that is consistent with their research mission. Undergraduate research programs at the University of Michigan and the University of Texas, El Paso, give new students the opportunity to collaborate with faculty members on scholarly research. At the University of Virginia and the University of South Carolina, residential colleges provide some students (including first-year students) the opportunity to live in residence halls where informal interaction with resident faculty members and their families is part of the regular living environment. Harvard University and Pennsylvania State University involve tenured faculty in a comprehensive first-year seminar program so that new students have the opportunity to interact in a small group with the institution's most senior professors. In many such seminars, at least one meal or other function at a faculty member's home is common practice.

Increasing Student Involvement and Time on Campus. A central focus of many first-year initiatives, both in and out of class, is to increase the amount of time students spend on the campus and to increase their involvement in activities or programs organized or sanctioned by the institution. Student affairs professionals expend enormous amounts of creative energy devising ways to get or keep today's students involved. However, student involvement, in spite of its correlation with many positive outcomes of college, is becoming an increasingly elusive objective at institutions where all or the majority of students commute and where off-campus work is the norm rather than the exception. And, as if those challenges weren't enough, the unflagging movement toward more use of technology and distance education will challenge our interpretation of what involvement really means and will require us to reevaluate the impact of synchronous time and physical space on student learning. Currently, many faculty who teach first-year courses and who believe in the importance of student involvement are including "involvement requirements" on course syllabi, building into regular courses out-of-class activities that have historically been optional and under the purview of student affairs.

Linking the Curriculum and the Cocurriculum. Concerns about the various disconnections in the U.S. college and university are nothing new. Nevitt Sanford in the 1960s and Ernest Boyer in the 1980s lamented the disjointed nature of academic life and called for connections between all parts of campus life so as to better represent, in Boyer's words, "our democratic way of life" and "our dependence on each other" (p. 8). Gerald Grant and David Riesman in 1978 called the undergraduate college "a skillfully coordinated department store" (p. 377). The degree to which students experience campus life as coherent or fragmented, linked or separate, depends on a number of factors: institutional size, mission, core values, and, to some degree, student attitudes and expectations.

Although first-year students themselves may not value or even recognize a coherent college education, advocates of experiential learning argue that linking what goes on in class with students' out-of-class activities creates a synergy that potentially compounds student learning. Strategies such as first-year seminars, learning communities, and "living-learning" programs in residence halls have been successful in achieving that coherence.

One of the most exciting pedagogical tools that links in-class and out-of-class experiences is service learning, in which organized service activities are a component of discipline-based courses. Campuses that invest in service learning are addressing one of the historic goals of higher education in the United States: educating students for citizenship and public service. Princeton University involves new students in Urban Action, a weeklong community involvement program that includes group dialogue about students' experiences and the relationship of those experiences to broader topics.

A well-organized service-learning program requires the commitment of faculty and student affairs professionals to work together to conceptualize and design meaningful experiences both for students and for the service recipients. Edward Zlotkowski, a professor at Bentley College, with the support of the American Association for Higher Education and The Pew Charitable Trusts, is currently authoring an eighteen-volume

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series on service learning across disciplines. This series will provide conceptual foundations and specific examples of how service activities can be integrated into virtually any academic discipline.

Increasing Academic Expectations and Levels of Academic Engagement. Whether today's college students are more or less academically engaged than previous generations is a question open to debate. But current concerns about new students' view of college as a round-the-clock party are widespread and cut across all sectors of higher education. New student orientation, whatever its precise form and structure, offers campuses a unique opportunity to change student attitudes and expectations by including academic programs and activities during the time period when new students form initial impressions of what college is going to be about. In pursuit of this goal, colleges and universities of all sizes and types are intentionally integrating a “summer reading experience” or “first-year reading experience” into orientation activities. James Madison University, the University of Central Arkansas, Castleton State College, Augustana College, Wartburg College, the University of Connecticut, and the University of South Carolina are among the schools where common reading programs are being implemented successfully in presemester orientation.

Assisting Students Who Have Insufficient Academic Preparation for College. This final conceptual category for first-year programs encompasses many structures, such as learning skills centers, full-blown study skills courses, workshops, summer “bridge” programs, and even programs that extend into the high school. Tinto's concept of academic integration implies that students must possess the requisite academic skills to do college work in order to engage in ongoing academic conversation and to feel validated as a member of the academy. Many students who are offered admission to higher education, however, do not have those skills. Hence, we have seen the recent growth of myriad academic assistance programs—some for specific student subpopulations, some linked to specific skills (such as writing or math), and some attached to other courses (such as supplemental instruction). Generally, programs or courses that serve “developmental” or “at-risk” students struggle for credibility and survival. They consti-

tute higher education's “hidden curriculum” and are considered by some to be a necessary evil that diverts precious institutional resources. But for the students they serve, these initiatives make the essential difference in their ability to attend, and ultimately graduate from, a college or university.

IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

ALTHOUGH IT IS EASY to cite an extraordinary array of creative first-year initiatives and to bask in the glow of all we have accomplished, a cold shower of reality is useful every now and then. It is often easy for us to become complacent and proud of our achievements, reinforced in those feelings by the warm feedback we receive from the first-year students themselves. But complex issues remain that continue to make the first year a difficult experience for students and institutions alike. In addition, even those first-year initiatives that are highly popular among students or those that are correlated with improved student retention and academic achievement sometimes vanish almost overnight, falling victim to a change in administration, shifting institutional priorities, or budget cuts.

A pervasive and central problem is that many of the programs and activities that constitute the “first-year experience” are in a continuous battle for status within the academy. Generally, they are housed in marginal facilities and managed by entry-level employees, never becoming a central, sustainable part of the institution's fabric. First-year programs often have a single champion rather than broad-based institutional support and frequently operate with a minimal budget or no budget. With the exception of a few innovative strategies used in discipline-based courses, these activities are most often centered in student affairs and involve few faculty (the ultimate determinants of legitimacy in the academy).

Another significant unresolved issue is the nature of first-year instruction within the disciplines. For increasing numbers of commuting and part-time students, the first-year experience is limited to whatever happens in their regular classes. Unfortunately, on many campuses, first-year classrooms are the institution's cash cow. Learning goals (to the degree that they exist) are

sacrificed to cost-effectiveness: teaching assistants or other low-cost faculty teach as many students as possible in survey classes in which the exclusive mode of instruction is, of necessity, the lecture. Often institutions and new students strike a sort of implicit bargain—don't expect too much of us, and we won't expect too much of you. It's no wonder retention is a persistent problem.

A more systemic issue relates to our spectacular lack of success in creating the kinds of alliances with high schools and middle schools that would yield more college-bound students who are better prepared for the academic and social demands of higher education. It's easier to point in the direction of the feeder high schools as the source of the "student problem" than it is to engage in the kind of collaboration that might ameliorate the problem. We simply must find a way, collectively, to address the issues of the transition from high school to college.

Finally, we need more information about what works, as well as tested models and tools for assessment. We need evidence—not assumptions and not tightly held beliefs based on our own experience. Even classic student development and retention theories, which many of us seem to believe are timeless and irrefutable, need to be reevaluated in light of the changing characteristics of today's students: the way these students conceptualize involvement, the degree to which they want or need to be assimilated into "the college way," and their many options for learning environments in addition to the traditional college classroom.

And we need to go beyond simply measuring student retention. Although retaining students is important to institutions and to students themselves, the primary objective of the collegiate experience is, after all, learning—both in and out of the classroom. Developing an institutional culture of assessment, especially as it relates to learning in the first year, is neither quick nor easy. Subjecting our programs and procedures to objective scrutiny is instead a bold, painstaking process, the results of which may require us to alter the status quo in ways that are discomfiting to faculty, staff, and students.

As a first step in assessment, institutions, with input from all constituent groups, should develop specific objectives for student achievement during the first college year—their own definition of "freshman success." Although many learning objectives cannot be measured completely in the short run, incremental progress, or lack of progress, toward the accomplishment of objec-

tives will provide essential information for institutions as they build a first year that is a strong foundation for the undergraduate experience.

With all that we don't know about what the new century will bring, we can be sure of one thing: there will continue to be first-year college students seeking higher education for upward social mobility and for the intrinsic joy of learning. Those students will also continue to pose challenges to the institutions of higher education in which they enroll. But to what degree will the structure of the first year on the traditional campus continue to pose challenges and unnecessary barriers to new students?

This once-in-a-lifetime turn of the century seems an auspicious time to ask some simple questions: If we were to start from scratch to create a system of higher education focused on student learning in the first year, how would it look? Who among us would we choose to deliver knowledge, however it is defined, to the newest members of the academy? What structures or techniques would we use in the transmission of knowledge? And how would learning be measured? In order to "do the right thing" for students and in order for higher education as we know it to survive in this new world of limitless options for knowledge acquisition, each college or university must consider these questions. The resulting dialogue will be a springboard for reshaping the academy and its critical first year for new generations of students.

NOTES

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