

Just What is This “First-Year Experience” Fuss All About Anyway?

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FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE MEETING

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Sam Houston State University

- Just one lesson I learned from Sgt. Small, my drill sergeant in Texas!
- Statement of purpose(s)—as suggested by your sponsors (NYT, AASCU/ADP/USC)
- Disclaimer: I was almost not retained in my “freshman” year. How about yours?

My Connections with Our Sponsors

- USC
- AASCU
- SHSU
- The New York Times
- Join me on another trip down memory lane: how The New York Times helped to change my life.
- What can you give to your students that might be life changing?

Why is the beginning college experience important?

- the undergraduate curriculum
- choosing a major
- establishing a good GPA
- learning good study habits
- developing “economies of time”
- developing positive attitudes toward faculty
- getting in the habit of interacting with faculty outside of class
- developing positive attitudes toward the campus
- developing long term relationships that will last through and beyond college
- deciding on which groups to affiliate with
- acquiring behaviors that may carry over beyond college
- redefining roles between students and family members, and employers
- introducing students to civic engagement
- providing a baseline for assessment of student characteristics, behaviors, and learning outcomes

What is the First-Year Experience?

- Means very different things to different people, institutions
- What I mean is everything that a PSE institution does to, for, and with, intentionally and unintentionally, its beginning college students
- Intentional interventions/efforts that a campus has undertaken to improve the beginning college experience
- An intervention or “program” for new students, most typically a first-year seminar
- Still used interchangeably by many educators and campuses with the predecessor concept of “the freshman-year experience”
- Both are registered trademarks owned by the University of South Carolina

Background and History: Big Picture Context of The FYE

- And in the beginning there were.....
(A rapid history of the first year in American higher education, according to the gospel of John (Gardner))
- Prior to 1965
- Post 1965

Historic purposes of the first-year

- Make money
- Weed out
- Allow the most senior members of the community (if they so desire) to ignore first-year students

What are the Problems now of the First Year

The basic problem(s):

- Unacceptable levels of student failure and attrition during or immediately after the first year
- Attendant expenses of remediation, repeating failed courses, prolonged time to degree completion rates, recruiting new replacement students
- Negative student behaviors and outcomes related to attrition: absenteeism; lack of enthusiasm for the core intellectual mission; boredom; anti-intellectual behaviors including cheating and plagiarism; and dysfunctional student behaviors such as vandalism, alcohol abuse, physical abuse, health problems, loan default.

Usually is no clear first-year
purpose/philosophy that is
articulated or prized by the
institution

Status of first-year students is low,
as is status of many who work with
and advocate for them

First year is not designed for students we actually have; instead, is conceived of in terms of students we either think we used to have, would prefer to have, or think we used to be.

Historically, first-year customs,
traditions designed for full-time,
residential, New England,
property owning, white, male,
Protestant, middle and upper
middle class people

Long established tradition (to 1586)
of thinking of these students as
“freshmen” (now only in the US)

**Culture and belief in academic
social Darwinism remains strong
– engenders high tolerance for
failure**

Lack of central authority and direction for first year. Usually means that nobody is in charge; little or no coordination; and no central advisory mechanisms for stakeholders and advocates

Usually no central plan, no grand design, no core principles or standards for the first year (and hence more difficult to measure institutional performance)

**Insufficient attention from senior
policy makers/leaders and
therefore insufficient resources
directed to first year (necessary to
maintain cash cow) and
insufficient rewards for those who
might want to invest more efforts
in new students**

Paying more attention to the first year is optional: most campuses, can remain viable without doing so. Is not perceived as a “must do” as would be, for example, obtaining reaffirmation of accreditation.

(Confession: I want to integrate the two!)

Many of those charged with responsibility for first-year students do not hold faculty rank and tenure; their activities are largely at the margins of real academic life and not the center (e.g. in the first-year classroom)

**There have been extensive efforts
made to combat these problems
over the past quarter century**

**Most corrective actions have
primarily been at the “program”
level as opposed to the
institutional level**

On some campuses majority of
corrective attempts have been
outside the academic,
instructional, faculty driven
contexts, and instead primarily
within the purview of Student
Affairs

Thus, to the extent that there has been assessment of institutional performance it has largely been at the program level, and more typically of lower status programs leaving excluded many bastions of “assessment free zones”

Program level “reform” while well intentioned is not institution wide and thus is not combined with any systematic attempt to assess the first year in its entirety and related student outcomes

Most institutions, in spite of first-year problems, have never undertaken a comprehensive institution wide study of the problem where the unit of analysis is the institution and its first year (an unimaginable state of affairs, for example, in corporate or military organizations)

High school isn't working for many—especially in math preparation—the key intellectual competency for all the pre-wealth majors! Need to declare war on disgraceful college math failure rates.

US lacks requirements for national service and has no tradition of a gap year. Thus there's more immaturity in new students. This is one more reason for you and your courses to get aboard the civic engagement movement.

There is a “male problem”
although few leaders seem to
really want to talk about this
(e.g. men less likely to
participate in civic engagement
activities)

Today's students don't learn the way we teach (implications for faculty development)
Need to consider civic engagement as a pedagogy.

Primary tenet of any calls to action is the mantra of retention, which isn't selling at the rank and file level, a tired, stale, unintellectual, minimum standards approach.
Let's look at this.

Is Student Retention a Shared Goal?

Common Points of Dissension

- Improving retention = admitting better students
- Retention = lowering standards, coddling
- “Student success” = code for retention
- Retention = someone else’s job
- Many students don’t belong in college

Is Student Retention a Shared Goal?

- More students than we can accommodate
= why worry about retention?
- Retention focus = consumerism or
“customer service”
- Retention = a topic that is banal and lacks
intellectual substance

Nationally---an occasion for self
congratulations: retention is
essentially flat—that's an
accomplishment.

There is consensus that institutional retention rates understate individual student rates—question is by how much?

A central question is “Who is responsible for student retention?”

The most common answer is: not me, not the campus, but the student.

Note: Same question could be asked re civic engagement.

I argue, we have to take responsibility for student learning

- As individuals
- As an institution
- Versus “blaming the victim”
- Same argument re civic engagement

Policy makers and faculty on and off campuses have little empathy for students least likely to be retained, for our college experiences were so different, and we think should be normative.

Retention is our value but not necessarily a high one for many students.

We don't offer majors or degrees in retention!

**Students are highly mobile and
lack loyalty to a brand, just like
other Americans**

Efforts to Address these Problems

- By USC
- By AASCU
- By The New York Times

USC

- It all began as a riot (1970)
- Creation of “University 101”
- 1982 First National Conference (on the first-year seminar)
- An epiphany: one of those roller board, bottled water moments
- 1983 First National Conference on The “Freshman” Year Experience
- A messianic vision
- 1986 Promoting an international movement
- 1987 Founding of the National Resource Center
- Developing a scholarly literature base
- Addressing spin-off transitions
- Importance of name changes—from “freshman” to “first-year”

AASCU

- ADP project
- Concern about retention and graduation rates
- Partnership with The Times
- Focus on the first year in AASCU institutions

The New York Times

- Role of strategic planning
- Developing the “next gen” of readers of national newspapers
- Strategic decision to focus on the first year
- Strategic decision to partner with AASCU
- Strategic decision to focus on civic engagement

Other Major Players and Contributing Factors

- Demographic changes
- Consumer and quality movements become intertwined
- AAHE's focus on improving undergraduate education
- Influence of blockbuster reports in the 80's
- Birth of the assessment movement (1985)
- Founding of Campus Compact (1985)
- Emergence of the service learning movement under leadership of Edward Zlotkowski and AAHE/Campus Compact, 1995
- Influence of regional accreditors
- Accountability movement

Other Major Players and Contributing Factors (cont.)

- Establishment of Washington Center for Undergraduate Education, 1990, and its expansion to disseminate learning communities in 1996
- The Student Learning Imperative, 1994 (contributions of student affairs)
- 1995 Change article on “The Teaching/Learning Paradigm”
- Role of the Pew Trusts and Russ Edgerton’s focus on student learning
- Birth of NSSE, the Policy Center on the First Year of College, and HLC’s AQIP.
- Marriage of self interests between the needs of the academy and for-profit companies (e.g. Noel Levitz, the textbook publishers, etc.)

Other Major Players and Contributing Factors (cont.)

- Influence on practitioners of the higher ed research literature
- Uses of Federal monies to influence the first-year: Title IV, TRIO, Title III, Title V, NSF's AMP, FIPSE, etc.
- Influence of other professional associations, e.g. AAC and U
- Role and shifting sands of foundations: Ford, Pew, Atlantic Philanthropies, and most recently, Lumina Foundation for Education
- And the significant contributions of some of you in this room! (a call for examples)

What have been the most characteristic interventions to improve the first year?

- Let's look at this conference's "Checklist Describing First-Year Experience Programs"
- *"Our campus is beginning conversations about or actively engaged in designing first-year experience initiatives, e.g.":*
 - *Orientation*
 - *First-year seminars*
 - *Learning communities*
 - *Living learning units*
 - *Academic advising*

Note what is missing here:

- Service learning
- Other first-year service/civic engagement initiatives like ADP
- Assessment initiatives
- Redesign of first-year courses
- Developmental education
- Supplemental Instruction
- Foundations of Excellence self studies and improvement plans
- National newspaper “college readership” programs
- Other academic/student affairs partnership efforts
- Federally supported initiatives like TRIO, Title III, V, and AMP

“Our campus has launched one or more first-year experience initiatives within the last five years”

“We have one or more first-year initiatives on our campus that operate independently of one another”

- Silo effect
- Alternative is integration, coherency, intentionality
- Another alternative: sharing of resources for space, faculty, faculty development, student affairs support
- Raises key questions about coordination and who’s in charge, if anyone
- Is connected to one of key objectives of Foundations of Excellence project—Foundational Dimension on “organization”

“We have one or more first-year initiatives on our campus that are integrated with each other or with other units or programs on campus”

- Some keys to making this happen are special administrative units for new students like University/General Colleges, and the role of the CAO

“We have a centralized unit or office on our campus responsible for coordinating all first-year initiatives

- Start with an informal task force/committee of stakeholders for the first year (e.g.’s Indiana University, Ball State University, FOE campuses)

“The first-year initiatives on our campus connect both student and academic affairs units in an effort to promote learning and student success both in and out of the classroom”

- Long history of initiative being taken on this by student affairs and their national professional organizations (NASPA and ACPA)
- Leadership shifting to CAO's
- Implications for administrative structures and especially teaching pedagogies (e.g. service learning)

**ONE CRITICAL DIFFERENCE IN
MOTIVATION FOR CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT VS MORE
ATTENTION TO FYE: THE
MANTRA OF RETENTION**

**SO WHAT ARE THE INTERSECTIONS
BETWEEN THE LARGER
MOVEMENT TO IMPROVE THE
FYE AND THE AASCU-
ADP/USC/NYT INITIATIVES?**

- First-year is the “foundation”—period to start students in formative directions
- All use strategies to be more intentional about achieving institutional mission
- All relate to goal of improving student retention, even though there is no research yet supporting that via service learning; key elements of s/I are proxies for retention inducing behaviors
- All seek to increase active learning
- All encourage experiential and applied learning which are more preferred learning styles of today’s students
- All encourage more outside-of- “class” faculty/student and student/student interaction
- All see linkage between first year and civic engagement to vocational selection and therefore motivation/aspirations

- All are striving for greater “engagement” behaviors on part of institutions and students
- All want to connect what goes on in “class” to what goes on in “real world”
- All realize need to connect and integrate the curriculum with co-curriculum, the cognitive with the affective
- All recognize value of and need for broader view of how to achieve educational goals through partnerships of faculty and student affairs officers (e.g. distribution of The Times in residence halls)
- All realize that attainment of goals is connected to providing faculty development
- All recognize logic of marriage between goals of first-year initiatives and civic engagement and thus incorporation of civic engagement activities into first-year “programs”
- All seek to maintain and further develop the interest students display in civic engagement during high school once they come to college
- All benefit by cross over of educators who are committed to, believe in, engaged in both lines of work

Intersections of the ADP/USC FYE Work with NYT's Larger Interests

- The Times is deeply invested in the education of the “next gen” of readers and citizens
- For there to be any demand for national newspapers (of which there are only three), there has to be a college educated, engaged, civically active citizenry
- For a business like The Times to thrive for another 150 years, there has to be a society that recognizes the importance of its quality of in-depth reporting and coverage and it takes colleges and universities to produce these kinds of people
- To achieve its “national” circulation potential, The Times has had to reach outside its historic base, including beyond the elite sector of a higher education; it understands that AASCU educates 4 million students a year

- The Times understands that the first year is the foundation; therefore, if we want to have college students reading national newspapers, need to start in the first year.
- The Times understands also, that enrollments of first-year courses are typically larger than upper division classes in the majors where it historically was most likely to be used
- The Times understands that we must raise levels of expectations for intellectual engagement above those students experience in last year of high school

What are Some Next Step Considerations?

- How to improve intentionality of efforts
- More coordination, integration, sharing
- Reduction of silos
- Moving “FYE” and ADP concerns from more marginal programs into the core of first-year courses
- Need for more and better assessment of impact
- Dissemination of ADP philosophy and programmatic components both within and beyond AASCU context
- Linkage of ADP participants and proponents to broader efforts to improve beginning college experience
- Further contributions to growing an important literature base on ADP/FYE connection
- Institutionalization of ADP (so that it carries on beyond George and current campus administration)

AND NOW.....

- Discussion
- Reflection
- Possibly a drink?
- Dinner
- Sleep
- Action

Thank you!