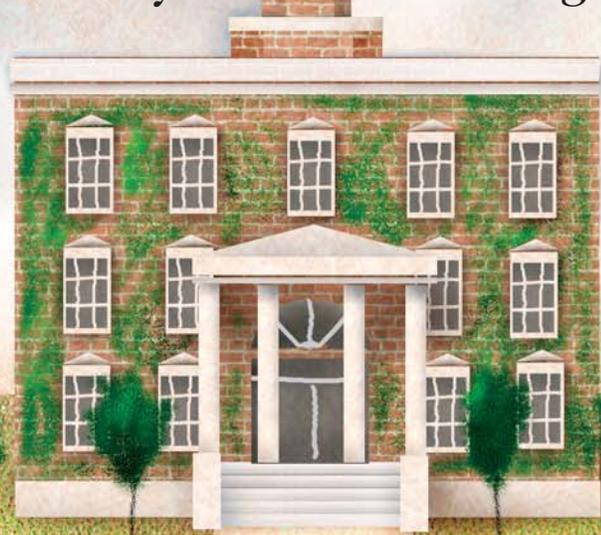


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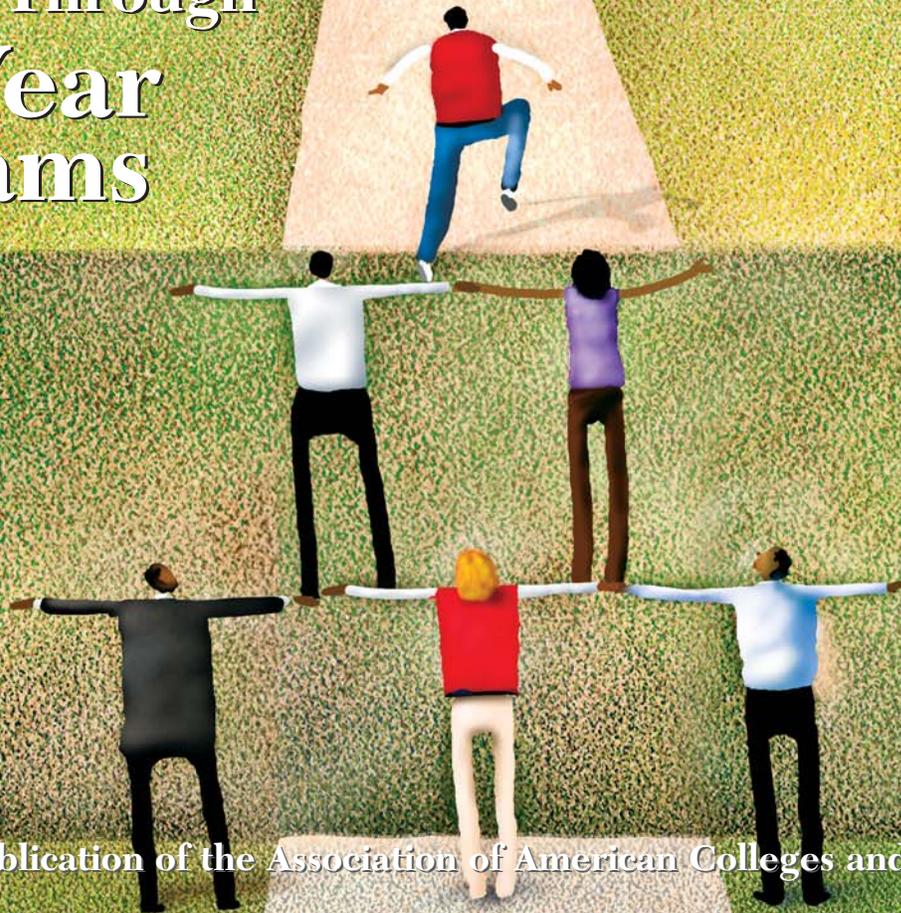
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Emerging trends and key debates in undergraduate education



Successful Transitions to College Through First-Year Programs



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Cover Illustration by Dave Cutler for peerReview.

“Give me one moment in time, when I’m more than I thought I could be. When all of my dreams are a heartbeat away and the answers are all up to me.”

—Albert Hammond and John Bettis

These lyrics from “One Moment in Time,” a song that is often sung at high school graduations, capture the optimistic spirit of the moment when students stand at the end of their high school days and at the beginning of their undergraduate path. However, students finishing high school are often unprepared for the challenges of the college classroom. According to AAC&U’s 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, as “colleges admit many more students, the professors who teach them report greater numbers underprepared for college work. The evidence supports these impressions. Less than one-half of high school graduates complete even a minimally defined college preparatory curriculum in high school, leaving colleges to remedy the educational gaps.”

As the parent of a student finishing high school this year, I approached my work on this issue of *Peer Review* with personal interest. My daughter Gillian’s senior year was filled with anxieties and excitement about college choices and decisions. As she and I visited a number of campuses, she began to define for herself the best choice for her next academic destination. At one institution’s prospective student day, a campus official advised students to investigate and consider the three “P”s of each campus—the people, the place, and the program. I found it interesting that as we participated in subsequent visits, we heard quite a bit about the place and the people on each campus, but most sessions did not go over the various academic programs in depth. While learning about the various options for room and board was of interest to us, we knew that the ultimate decision on where to apply would be based on the institution’s educational philosophy and program.

While on these campus visits, I was able to conduct an informal survey in which I questioned parents about their expectations of their child’s college choice. I found in my small-scale study that most parents’ top concern was that their child’s final school choice be a good match. In addition, almost all of the parents with whom I spoke wanted assurances that the appropriate academic measures would be in place to support their child throughout their college career—particularly during the first year.

Last fall, 263,710 first-year students entering 385 institutions participated in the 2005 Freshman Survey—a project of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program that is housed at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. One section of the survey asked students to predict their behavior while in college. When students were asked to make their best guesses as to whether they would earn at least a B average, 62 percent indicated that there was a very good chance that they would achieve this goal. However, only 32.5 percent of participants responded that there was a very good chance that they would communicate regularly with their professors. Clearly, there was a disconnect for many of the students who had high academic objectives but did not see frequent faculty interaction as a means to achieving these goals.

To provide students with guidance on how to take advantage of their college learning resources and experience, AAC&U recently produced a student publication on making smart educational choices in college. In the opening pages of his book *Why Do I Have to Take this Course?*, AAC&U senior fellow Robert Shoenberg advises students that “Making good choices as you begin your college experience means facing seriously some questions you may not have thought about much: ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Why am I willing to invest four years of my time and a great deal of money in seeking a college degree?’ ‘How do I want to be different at the end of my time in college?’”

For the past few years, first-year programs on college campuses have helped students begin to answer the questions posed by Shoenberg. These programs generally introduce students to the institutions’ learning expectations and address other first-year concerns, such as major selection, time management, and student life issues. This edition of *Peer Review* features articles from a range of institutions with programs that provide strategies for positive transitions into college for both traditional and nontraditional students. As my daughter stands with her class of incoming students this fall—each student making choices that will define his or her academic undergraduate career—the opportunity for these students to participate in first-year programs may make the difference between first-year floundering and a successful transition into a college career that will provide students with the outcomes they need to navigate a complex and challenging world.

—SHELLEY JOHNSON CAREY



Fostering Student Learning and Success through First-Year Programs

By Mary Stuart Hunter, director of administration at the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina—Columbia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undergraduate Research—The Winter 2006 issue of *Peer Review* is an excellent resource on undergraduate research initiatives. 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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Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. 1984. *Involvement in learning: Realizing the potential of American undergraduate education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

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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

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

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

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



Creating Common Ground: Common Reading and the First Year of College

By **Michael Ferguson**, AAC&U senior staff writer and associate editor of *Peer Review*

The practice of assigning incoming students “common reading”—asking them to read the same book before they arrive on campus—has gained popularity in recent years as colleges and universities have sought new ways to improve the first-year experience. Like similar public reading initiatives sponsored by cities, libraries, and television and radio shows, campus common reading programs rest on a simple idea: that reading the same book brings people closer together as a community by creating common ground for discussion.

For the faculty and administrators who design orientation activities and first-year programs, this emphasis on building community has made common reading especially appealing. Assigning a book during the summer gives incoming students, who often come from very different backgrounds, a shared experience. At the same time, moderated discussions of the reading can bring the diversity of student viewpoints to the fore and provide an occasion for modeling the intellectual engagement with different ideas that is expected in college.

Yet although common reading programs share similar educational goals, the kinds of practices developed to support those goals vary widely from campus to campus. All students read the same book before arriving on campus—then what? Which practices of common reading programs are most effective? And what role does common reading play in larger, systematic efforts to create a unified experience for first-year students?

Key Elements of Common Reading Programs

A brief survey of campus Web sites shows that almost all common reading programs have been integrated into new-student orientations; most, in fact, focus primarily or exclusively on the orientation period. Drawing on students’ shared experience of the reading, these programs aim to ease the transition to college.

Small-group discussion is the cornerstone of the majority of common reading programs. At some point during orientation, most campuses divide new students into discussion groups, which typically are facilitated by volunteer faculty or staff. The content of group discussions depends upon the selected book, of course, but often the campus committees responsible for book selection intentionally choose common readings that broach issues they want to address during orientation. Many campuses pick books that enable discussion of U.S. and global diversity. For example, Albion College, according to its Web site, uses common reading to “begin student understanding of differences” and “provide an entry for students into the ideas of global citizenship.” Other popular themes, like “rites of passage” or “fitting in,” are chosen for their relevance to the period of transition in which new college students find themselves.

Some campuses seek to enrich orientation discussions by deepening students’ engagement with the reading process during the summer. Temple University is one of the many institutions that give students study questions to consider as they read. Other institutions, like

Ball State University, host online forums where students can begin discussion of the reading before they arrive on campus. Some schools encourage students to write about the reading by holding a contest for the best new student essay (as Northern Arizona University does) or require students to write an essay about the book for an introductory course (as Otterbein College does).

Common reading programs also supplement small-group discussions with other orientation activities. Campuses sometimes introduce new students to library research by showing them how to locate resources related to the common reading, its author, and the issues it raises. Cultural events are another feature of many programs: films, performances, panel discussions, or exhibits related to the book may be part of orientation or part of first-year cocurricular programming. Author visits are particularly popular as the “culminating event” of such programming, and some schools make a point of selecting a book written by a living author who is willing to deliver a talk, reading, or lecture series on campus.

In addition to contributing to a sense of campus community, such orientation activities can communicate valuable messages to new students. According to Jodi Levine Laufgraben, associate vice provost at Temple University and author of *Common Reading Programs: Going Beyond the Book* (a monograph published this year by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition), well-planned common reading programs signal “the importance of reading in college” and of “discussion and

respect for diverse viewpoints.” More broadly, she says, activities like small-group discussion satisfy “the desire to have an academic component to orientation,” which often otherwise focuses exclusively on student life. In this sense, common reading programs—even when they exist solely as a part of orientation—can give students an early taste of academic life and set the tone for the first year of college.

From Orientation to the First Year

Campus common reading programs diverge significantly in their approach to the regular academic year. Some programs conclude entirely at the end of orientation, or offer only a few final cocurricular events during the fall, while others partially or fully integrate the reading into the first year.

Among campuses that seek to continue conversations about the reading beyond orientation, most encourage but do not require faculty to weave the reading into fall courses. This approach, because it leaves decisions about if and how a book will be used to individual faculty members, has the advantage of being easy to implement. It is most likely to be effective when campuses offer discussion guides or workshops to help faculty integrate the common reading into their classes. Baruch College, for example, provides faculty with a range of materials related to the reading—including general study questions as well as sample writing assignments, possible cross-curricular activities, and suggested further reading.

The danger of relying upon individual classes to extend discussion of the common reading is that, from a student’s perspective,

such an approach may appear uncoordinated. Colleen Boff, the librarian for Bowling Green State University’s First-Year Experience, notes that this approach creates “potential for redundancy” between classes; it also leaves open the possibility that some students will never encounter the reading again after orientation.

Such problems can be at least partially addressed by improving communication among faculty and with students. Bowling Green’s common reading program thus is developing an online forum to facilitate the sharing of course materials related to the reading and make faculty more aware of what their colleagues are doing in the classroom. Other programs are helping students make informed course selections by publishing lists of courses that feature further discussion either of the common reading itself or of the social, political, and cultural issues it raises.

A few programs ensure that students will have a coherent experience of the reading by tying the selected book to a rotating first-year theme. At LaGuardia Community College, for example, students last year read Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*—a graphic novel that deals with the Holocaust and memory—as part of their exploration of “Rescue and Recovery.” This theme, in turn, permeated many aspects of the first year, from selected courses that incorporated the reading to cocurricular events that examined topics such as genocide and human rights. (The extensive online resources that LaGuardia developed to support activities related to the reading can be viewed at www.lagcc.cuny.edu/maus.)



Otterbein College, another school that links the common reading to an annual theme, has taken this approach further by fully integrating the book into required first-year courses. Such integration of the common reading into the curriculum presents challenges. Kate Porubcansky, who directs the Center for Student Involvement at Otterbein College, notes that “full campus buy-in” is essential if a single book is to be used extensively throughout the first year. And the selection of the book, which always must be done carefully, then becomes even more important: in addition to providing a compelling theme that can sustain discussion for a full year, the book must be “challenging but not overwhelming” and must lend itself to discussion in different disciplinary contexts, says Porubcansky. At Otterbein, where discussion of the reading occurs throughout the school’s highly interdisciplinary core curriculum, the chosen book must also provoke the kind of integrative learning that will enable students to make connections across courses.

What Works?

A common reading program such as the one developed by Otterbein College obviously serves very different purposes than a program that is limited to orientation week, and what makes a common reading program effective will vary with individual campus goals. Programs that are purposeful in developing activities that advance their specific aims for common reading are most likely to engage students in meaningful ways.

For programs that focus on orientation activities, the greatest challenge may be clearly communicating the purposes of common reading to students. Programs that end when orientation ends risk leaving some students wondering why they were assigned the reading in the first place—especially if activities related to the common reading seem only incidental or “tacked on” to orientation. Connecting small-group discussion with larger campus events and linking the selected book’s themes to the campus’s academic mission are ways of making common reading seem more relevant to students.

Programs that continue conversations about a common reading for an entire year, meanwhile, must be creative in developing strategies to sustain student interest. At their best, these kinds of programs—because they compel students to consider the same reading from different perspectives and through multiple lenses—can help students understand the interdisciplinarity and integration that are at the heart of liberal learning.

Common readings programs of all types are helping bridge divides on campus: between disciplines, between student life and academic affairs, between the orientation period and the first semester. Although some critics might lament that the growth of common reading programs has coincided with a decline of reading in general, many campuses are finding that these programs offer a practical way both of promoting reading as a shared intellectual experience and of enhancing the first year of college. ■

What Students Are Reading This Summer

A Selection of 2006 Common Books

- *Caucasia*, by Danzy Senna (James Madison University)
- *Confluence: A River, the Environment, Politics, and the Fate of All Humanity*, by Nathaniel Tripp (Albion College)
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, by Mark Haddon (Northern Arizona University)
- *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner (Appalachian State University)
- *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Cornell University)
- *The Inextinguishable Symphony: A True Story of Music and Love in Nazi Germany*, by Martin Goldsmith (Otterbein College)
- *Into the Forest*, by Jean Hegland (Bowling Green State University)
- *An Island Out of Time: A Memoir of Smith Island in the Chesapeake*, by Tom Horton (Goucher College)
- *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- *Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich (City University of New York–LaGuardia Community College)
- *1984*, by George Orwell (City University of New York–Baruch College)
- *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*, by Jean-Robert Cadet (Northern Kentucky University)
- *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien (Bellevue Community College)
- *The Tortilla Curtain*, by T. C. Boyle (California State University Channel Islands)
- *When the Emperor Was Divine*, by Julie Otsuka (Temple University)

Evaluating Quality of Engagement in Hampshire College's First-Year Plan

By **Steven Weisler**, dean of academic development, and **Carol Trosset**, director of institutional research, both of Hampshire College

In 2002, Hampshire College inaugurated a new first-year plan that incorporates small, adviser-taught tutorials, a required eight-course load, a five-course distribution requirement, a first-year portfolio, and seven first-year learning goals. The plan replaced an older curriculum that combined coursework with independent projects distributed across the curriculum. The old curriculum had no clearly articulated learning outcomes, no year-end profiling of student work, and little overlap between classroom experiences and advising.

Although the new plan represented a radical shift for Hampshire, we regard it more as a change in our methods than as departure from our mission. An innovative college founded in the 1970s, Hampshire is a testing ground for progressive ideas in American liberal education. We are committed to interdisciplinary, inquiry-based education and to forward-looking approaches to pedagogy and curricula that are in tune with emerging areas of knowledge. Our academic structure maximizes student engagement—after completing the first year, one's entire course of study is self-designed in consultation with a faculty committee. Students have enormous freedom to match coursework to their interests. We encourage them to delve into subjects they care about, and assume students will be intensely self-motivated.

It became clear in the 1990s that we were not consistently achieving these goals for the first year of the Hampshire education. Persistence rates were

unacceptable, first-year students were insufficiently engaged with our academic and social expectations, and worries mounted about whether advising was well integrated into academic life. Members of a first-year task force boldly asked whether our first-year curriculum was working well. Their inquiries and subsequent proposals, developed over a two-year period, resulted in Hampshire's new first-year plan.

Systematic Assessment

A change of this magnitude demands a systematic assessment. We developed an "assessment grid," in which first-year outcomes, program goals, implementations, measures, and targets were identified and linked. For example, one intended outcome was an improved graduation rate. An associated program goal was an increase in academic engagement. The eight-course requirement constituted one implementation intended to achieve this goal; the relevant measures included the average number of courses completed in the first year, and our target was an average of seven courses per student by the end of the inaugural year of the new plan.

These efforts led us to investigate how well we foster academic engagement among our students. We employed the College Student Expectations Questionnaire and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire combined with a homegrown first-year survey to measure student expectations and self-reported patterns of engagement. We supplemented



these instruments with direct measures of engagement derived from transcript analysis, course evaluations, assessments of academic progress, and patterns of distribution. Our guiding insight, that deeper engagement in an integrated academic and social environment leads to higher achievement and ultimately to lower attrition, inclined us to base our evaluation paradigm on quantitative measures of this sort.

By these measures, our first-year plan was a substantial success. In its initial year, the percentage of students successfully completing eight courses more than doubled to 70 percent, and the percentage of students in academic difficulty at the end of the first year fell by over 20 percent. All but six continuing students began their concentrations “on time,” and the distribution of first-year students across the curriculum flattened out, with many more students successfully completing courses in the cognitive and natural sciences. Over the next few years, our six-year graduation rate improved by almost 20 percent.

Still, other considerations suggested a less rosy picture. Third-semester persistence was essentially unchanged, and although course completion was up, students’ self-reported progress on Hampshire’s learning goals was unchanged from previous years. More disturbingly, anecdotal evidence derived from hallway conversations and opinion pieces in the student newspaper indicated that while the quantity of student engagement was improving, the quality of that engagement was not.

Quality of engagement refers not to the extent that students are engaged with their studies, but to the extent to which they *feel* so engaged. This type of evaluation requires supplementing standard quantitative methods of analysis with qualitative methods. Triangulating measures of course completion, good standing, and academic progress with data from student and faculty focus groups, ethnographic interviews, and analysis of other qualitative information (e.g., comments on course evaluations or open-ended questionnaires), fills in many important gaps in our analysis. In addition to looking at the numbers, we need to listen to the students. We illustrate this approach by briefly discussing the evaluation of two aspects of Hampshire’s first-year program: distribution requirements and the first-year tutorial.

Distribution Requirements

Since 2002, first-year students have been required to complete one course in each of Hampshire’s five “schools” (cognitive sciences, humanities/arts/cultural studies, interdisciplinary arts, natural sciences, and social sciences). Prior to this requirement, course-taking patterns were heavily skewed across schools. Under the new program, these patterns have evened out, so that measures of student behavior indicate equal engagement across the curriculum. However, qualitative inquiries indicate that many students remain harshly critical of having to take courses in areas in which they lack strong interest.

Our work reveals a significant tension between Hampshire’s mantra, “learn what you love,” and the equally important goal

of achieving a broad liberal arts education. Student interviews show that while some students find new interests by taking distribution courses, others remain disengaged, preferring to “learn what they *already* love.” Students disconcertingly describe such courses as “a waste of time,” or “totally irrelevant to me,” even though they are choosing from a great many alternative courses within each interdisciplinary school. Here is an illustrative interview excerpt in which a first-year student comments on his degree of effort in distribution courses outside his area of interest:

I don’t work as hard. I feel poorly about that. I don’t think it is fair to the professor, to the class, and to me because I do enjoy learning. I do enjoy the work if I can get into it. I think the entire student body feels that way. If it is a good class, if they are interested in it, and if it is what they want to study, then they will do it. If not, then—forget it. And it shows.

There may be an interesting developmental aspect of this phenomenon. Interviews with Hampshire alumni indicate that many recognize that what seemed at the time to be an unnecessary requirement turned out in hindsight to represent a powerful learning experience. Here is one such comment drawn from a recent interview:

I was afraid of math; I was never good at it in high school. I took a science course to fill Hampshire’s distribution requirement, and I did some math in that course. It was hard, but I came out of that experience a much

stronger learner and more confident in my ability to do academic work.

I've sometimes thought since, maybe I should have done more science.

Now I teach math, and I enjoy it.

It is important for the college to address these aspects of student and alumni culture and to explicate our apparently contradictory messages (“be broadly educated” and “create your own education”). Hampshire is currently involved in a systematic study of the “open curriculum” funded by the Teagle Foundation to try to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of curricula without distribution requirements. We hope to report on this work at a future date.

First-Year Tutorials

Under the new first-year plan, every new student is assigned to a tutorial—a first-semester seminar taught by the student's adviser. Tutorials combine the general goals of a first-year seminar with the additional aim of integrating advising and teaching. In many ways, the adoption of the tutorial has been advantageous. Advisees meet advisers in a rich academic context, group advising promotes many efficiencies, and the tutorial cohort creates a peer network for first-year students. Interestingly, students rate tutorials ahead of other 100-level courses in course evaluations on measures of course excellence, the professor's excellence, and the extent of learning that occurs.

Mean scores for first-year survey questions pertaining to advising have also shown small but consistent improvement.

Once again, qualitative data indicate a current of dissatisfaction that runs underneath these positive trends. The following excerpt from interviews with first-year students identifies one problem clearly:

Your adviser is really important. . . .

While I absolutely love my adviser and think he is amazing and think that he is very supportive, I think that it would be much more beneficial to me if I had an adviser in the School of SS [Social Science] who knew a lot about law schools and knew a lot about exactly what courses I need to be taking.

Although the college assigns first-year students to general advisers who guide them through the general education requirements of the first-year program, our work reveals a trend at Hampshire in which students increasingly want to be assigned advisers in their presumed area of concentration at

the earliest opportunity. Once revealed, it was easy to improve the situation. By developing a tutorial registration algorithm that maximizes student preference for as many students as possible, under-enrolling each tutorial by two students, and allowing tutorials to participate in the online add/drop system, we have greatly increased the odds that first-year students will enroll in the tutorial of their choice.

Lessons Learned

Our evaluation of Hampshire College's first-year plan suggests three conclusions. First, quantitative methods that investigate student engagement should be supplemented by qualitative methods that reveal how students experience involvement in college life. Positive evidence encoded in many standard measures of success can mask important issues that contextualize these outcomes. Second, when we did this kind of mixed-method research, we sometimes found that the college is sending students inconsistent messages. Improving teaching and learning will require resolving these inconsistencies to develop a more coherent institutional position. Finally, we recognize that when students select an institution, they may not understand or agree with all of the principles that shape its curriculum and other aspects of student life. Communicating these principles clearly to students is an important institutional responsibility and is essential to providing a high-quality education. ■





Frontiers of Science and the Core Curriculum of Columbia College

By Darcy Kelley, Howard Hughes Medical Institute Professor of Biological Sciences, codirector of Frontiers of Science, Columbia University

The usual approach to undergraduate science education is to segregate “science” from “non-science” students. Actual and potential science majors are pushed into departmental programs to fulfill major requirements; non-science students make do with distribution requirements. Recently, however, science educators have envisaged courses that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. For example, the National Research Council’s report *Bio2010* (2003) imagines “a truly interdisciplinary course used as an introductory first-year seminar with relatively few details and no prerequisites.” This course is designed to “introduce students to many disciplines in their first year, and to hold the interest of first-year students who are taking disciplinary prerequisites.” Similarly, the National Research Council’s 1999 *Transforming Undergraduate Education in Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology* promotes introductory courses that explore fundamental and unifying concepts and emphasize evolving processes of scientific thought and inquiry.

Most students (“science” and “non-science” alike) enter college having written essays and poems, solved equations, and analyzed historical issues. Very few have actually planned, carried out, and analyzed an actual scientific experiment, in part because what scientists really do is not included in most secondary school curricula. Students view science as a collage of facts to be regurgitated on demand. In reality, however, science is

a way of thinking about and making sense of the world. Real science is not what is known but what is to be known. In addition, while the push to interdisciplinary science courses is usually focused on students already within a science trajectory, this perspective is equally important for new students who do not see themselves as connected to science. Frontiers of Science—Columbia’s new core curriculum science course—is designed to address both of these issues.

The Challenges of Connecting All Students to Science

Founded in 1754 as King’s College, Columbia College is an undergraduate liberal arts college of Columbia University. In 1919, the college began the development of a set of courses that introduces students to essential ideas of music, art, literature, philosophy, and political thought. To foster active intellectual engagement, courses in the core curriculum are taught as small seminars beginning in the first year. As of 2003, the core (specific courses taken by all students) included Contemporary Civilization, Literature Humanities, Art Humanities, Music Humanities, and University Writing. The core curriculum is the hallmark of a Columbia College education.

From the inception of the core, the omission of a science course in the curriculum evoked comment. In 1933, Herbert Hawkes, then dean of the college,

stated, “Ever since the course in Contemporary Civilization was offered fourteen years ago, the perennial question of the relation of the sciences to this kind of course has been discussed.” It took close to ninety years, however, for those debates to bear fruit. *Frontiers of Science* entered the core curriculum as a five-year experiment in fall 2004.

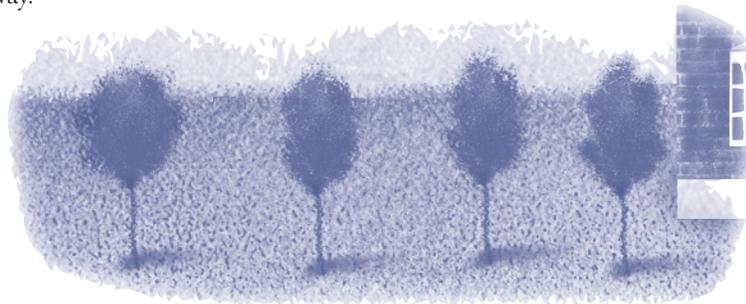
Why did it take so long? Dean Hawkes outlined several goals for a core science course in the 1933 annual report: “Meeting the need of all students for a fund of knowledge and a set of intellectual tools that would be applicable in all of their thinking and that would better them as persons” (58). Faculty fights over the new science course erupted right away.

Content was a major issue: What constitutes a real core of knowledge in the sciences? Which areas should be included? What about mathematics? Should “science” students be educated together with “non-science” students?

Since agreement on content could not be reached, the faculty put together a roster of four courses, half from the physical sciences and half from the life sciences. All were intended for non-science students, none were required, and all courses abruptly ended in 1941 as the war began.

The dormant issue of science in the core arose again after the war ended. From discussions, it became clear to then-College Dean Harry Carman that even though the course would be approved, most of the science faculty strongly

opposed it and, since they would be responsible, the original vision could not work. The recommendation reverted to a version—remarkably similar to the 1930s sequence—to be offered at “the earliest opportunity”; that opportunity never arose (127). The science requirement eventually returned to a distributional form: two science courses in one department (for depth) and one in another (for breadth). Since that time, Columbia’s small, distinguished science departments have focused on teaching large service courses and smaller courses to their own majors. Many departments did not even attempt to mount a third, stand-alone course that could fulfill the distribution requirement.



Breaking the Science Pyramid

If there is any place where adding science to a general education requirement should be feasible, it is Columbia, home of the much-vaunted core curriculum. Why was science left out? Why was (and is) teaching a broad course in science so hard? One factor was the general consensus among the faculty about what a proper science education should be, a consensus adopted and reinforced by the professional schools, particularly medical schools. This consensus has been most

vividly described by Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman’s metaphor comparing traditional training in science to a pyramid. In this model, students must complete a foundation of introductory science courses before they can progress to more specialized courses and more engaging scientific questions.

Let’s say, for example, that a student is interested in the way the brain handles language. What must she do to take a course on that subject? If she pursues her interest via a biology perspective, she must first take a year of chemistry, then a year of introductory biology, an introductory sequence in neuroscience, and then, finally, she is allowed to enroll

in the course that interested her in the first place.

However, that first year of chemistry often discourages all but the most determined, which means our hypothetical student might never make it to her original goal.

Suppose that we could break the pyramid. Suppose that it were possible to present the neurobiology of language in a rigorous and insightful way along with other topics at the frontiers of science: global climate change, the origins of the universe, quantum mechanics, molecular motors. This attempt to “break the pyramid” is a defining characteristic of *Frontiers of Science*. It is at the heart of faculty excitement about the course, but it is also the aspect of the course that arouses the strongest opposition from members of the science faculty.

Steeped in the guild-like tradition of the sequence of courses required to become a physicist or a chemist or a biologist, many science faculty members think that it is impossible to be both interesting and rigorous in presenting difficult subjects to entering students. Further, many view the prospect of teaching outside of their own disciplines (having a biologist teach quantum mechanics or an astronomer teach neuroscience) as either pointless or extraordinarily difficult from the point of view of faculty expertise. As a scientist advances in training, his or her expertise tends to become narrower and narrower. For example, many astronomers, though well versed in mathematics and physics, have not taken a biology course since high school.

What has changed recently is the acceptance of the idea that, to be optimally effective, scientists must acquire cross-disciplinary skills. Nanoscience, the realm of 10^{-9} m (which is on the scale of atomic diameters), is a superb example of a cross-disciplinary forum: at this scale, physics, biology, and chemistry meet and scientific interactions can produce truly novel insights. Most scientists would agree on the importance of educating their replacements; such an education will have to be cross-disciplinary. Students at Columbia can begin to be trained that way through *Frontiers of Science*. This kind of scientific collaboration, moreover, can be tremendous fun for the faculty, and teaching *Frontiers* provides a built-in collaborative forum for some of Columbia's best scientists.

A second impetus for the creation of *Frontiers* was provided by the realization that all students should learn about the analytical tools that scientists use. We all need the ability to critically examine scientific evidence if we are to make wise choices about today's most pressing issues—climate change, stem cells, nuclear technology, transplants—and the problems that we cannot now imagine but that we will have to solve in the future. This set of tools is outlined in *Frontiers* codirector David Helfand's Web-based text, *Scientific Habits of Mind*. This text provides a unifying theme across the physical sciences and life sciences components of the course. The students meet in seminars to use these analytical skills to tackle scientific problems from the current literature. Their summer reading list before matriculation now includes Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

The high school curriculum typically focuses on the recognized pillars of science: biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics. The college curriculum follows these precepts for science students by requiring courses in each discipline for its majors. Modern science, however, is not limited to these subjects and is now strongly cross-disciplinary. Understanding this synergistic approach is as important for students who pursue majors outside of science as it is for the budding acolytes. By introducing students to different areas of science together with the analytical tools used by all disciplines, *Frontiers of Science* deals head-on with the real challenges of understanding science today. Students gain an appreciation

of areas outside of the traditional curriculum (earth sciences, neuroscience) as well as the way in which knowledge from one discipline can inspire another.

A running joke in *Frontiers* is that we must have a *New York Times* spy; it is uncanny how the paper's weekly *Science Times* section tracks *Frontiers* topics and themes. This coincidence demonstrates that it is possible to enrich faculty members' interdisciplinary knowledge while teaching cutting-edge science to eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. We acknowledge that the caution of generations of Columbia science faculty was well placed: teaching *Frontiers* is probably the biggest educational challenge that any faculty member has ever faced. A seminar that includes an Intel science winner and a student who is afraid of math is difficult to get right; it is worth attempting, though, and is tremendous fun. ■

Editor's Note—This article is based on a plenary presentation given at the pre-conference symposium at the 2006 AAC&U annual meeting.

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

By **Scott Evenbeck**, dean of the University College; and **Sharon Hamilton**, professor of English, Chancellor’s Professor, and associate dean of the faculties; both of Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

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



Why Teaching First-Year Students Is Rewarding for Everyone

By Catherine F. Andersen, professor of communication studies, director of the First-Year Experience, Gallaudet University

The First-Year Experience program at Gallaudet University continues to evolve. In a ten-year time period, by making use of best practices in the first college years, building on existing resources, and using assessment to guide change, the program has become a central, effective part of the undergraduate experience. It has improved retention of first-year students by 15 percent. And yet, our work is not done. We look to the future, to find better ways to meet the changing needs of students.

Providing Quality Educational and Social Experiences

Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, is the world's only liberal arts university for deaf and hard of hearing students. It was founded in 1864 by an act of Congress, and its charter was signed by President Abraham Lincoln. Enrollment is approximately 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Deaf and hard of hearing undergraduate students choose from more than forty majors leading to a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree. While in many ways Gallaudet is unique, it is faced with the same challenges as any other college. What can we do to be sure our students are learning and persisting? All of the scholarly work on student persistence leads to a few simple principles. Students who stay in college have quality educational and social experiences. Retention of students is not in and of itself a goal. The goal should be to enhance students' social and intellectual development.

For the past twenty-five years, as a result of the work at the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, a huge body of research and practical information has evolved on how best to teach and work with new students. In addition, the Policy Center on the First Year of College, an outgrowth of the National Resource Center, was established to study assessment in the first college year, and later to determine the characteristics of colleges and universities that "got it right." We learned from these "Institutions of Excellence."

As our program developed, we faced many challenges. The most pressing challenge was gathering information to show that students' success was connected to what we were doing. Ten years ago, Gallaudet's fall-to-fall first-year persistence rates were comparable to those of similar institutions. It was easy to discuss a "good year" or a "not so good year" in terms of the characteristics of admitted students. We tried interdisciplinary courses, problem-based learning, and learning communities, but often these initiatives would come and go as new and more pressing priorities emerged. We needed evidence to validate our efforts, and data to support our belief that the first year should be a priority. Thus, in 1995, after two years as a special assistant to the president to explore retention, I became the individual to direct our first college year. Over the next ten years, I collaborated with many campus units to develop a strong first-year experience program.



What We Did

We were challenged with the daunting task of maintaining our academic focus while creating a first college year that helped students to see the benefits of the wealth of programs and services available on our campus. Central to this change was our First-Year Seminar (FYS) course. Begun in 1995 as a three-credit elective, this seminar later (after the faculty were presented with data showing an 11 percent higher persistence rate for students who took the course) became a general education requirement. Since becoming required, first-year retention has continued to improve.

Why is the course effective? First-Year Seminar has become the venue where students can develop academic skills and access campus programs in meaningful ways.

Academic advisers are assigned to FYS sections; FYS sections are linked with other courses to form learning communities.

Learning communities expose students to a wide range of faculty, and the development of learning communities also provides an opportunity to share with faculty common outcomes for first-year students. At Gallaudet, faculty development opportunities have been created over the lunch hour and during the summer through teaching and learning initiatives. We have partnered with the honors program and cross-pollinated whenever possible.

Gallaudet has designed active learning activities that require students to look at multiple perspectives and make connections between and among disciplines. Students explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and college success, and are

constantly asked to connect what they learn about themselves and others—to self-assess and reflect in their writing and discussions.

To further community building, we have targeted peer interactions and faculty and student interactions outside of class for enhancement. Faculty are given free cafeteria passes for meals with students. A movie night program allows faculty and students to view films of common interest. Other activities require students to work together and explore campus resources. We have designed ways, in conjunction with the Career Center and Advising Center, to help students learn about them-

selves through the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator, the Baron EQ-i assessment of emotional intelligence, and our Majors and Career Project. Peer Health Advocates come to the classroom, and workshops are held in the dorms about relevant topics for first-year students. Students are given credit for attending extracurricular events and reflecting on what they learn.

FYS students are assigned faculty or staff mentors. Students meet librarians in the library, where they learn how to search for information to complete a required FYS assignment. Carefully selected junior- and senior-level students are assigned to FYS sections as teaching assistants, and

work closely with FYS instructors. These students help first-year students navigate the system in ways that faculty cannot, by serving as role models and invaluable sources of information. Thought-provoking readings are assigned and students are constantly reflecting and writing.

First-Year Initiatives

In addition to the course content and delivery, other initiatives contribute to the first-year experience. Gallaudet established a common reading program, which involves the entire campus community in activities related to a book selected for incoming stu-

FYS has become the venue where students can develop academic skills and access campus programs in meaningful ways.

dents, including an author visit. A new student convocation has been established to welcome new students into the campus community. Every spring, twenty “Fantastic First-Year Students” are chosen by faculty and staff for recognition. Most recently, students who participated as leaders for new student orientation became the teaching assistants for FYS classes, further strengthening the seamless transition into and through the first year. A summer bridge program allows students who may need additional work in math or English to come to campus early. Special sections of FYS are designated for non-traditional students and students who are new to sign language.



In conjunction with academic advising, an early alert system was developed to intervene with students in need. FYS instructors carefully track attendance and contact students with excessive absences to let them know they are concerned. Students' advisers are contacted so they can check on attendance in other classes and if necessary, schedule a meeting with the student. Finally, we have a strong relationship with our academic technology staff. They help FYS instructors make the best use of technology, so that students have 24/7 access to course information and can easily connect with classmates and instructors.

Collaboration with many campus units is critical to this plan. To ensure ongoing input from a cross-section of the campus, Gallaudet established a First-Year Council comprised of faculty and staff from academic and student affairs. Through monthly meetings, we find and implement ways to better work together.

Were We Successful?

If persistence is one measure of success, our campus-wide effort in the first year works. Over ten years, persistence has increased 15 percent during a period when overall retention rates nationwide are not significantly improving. However, continuous assessment of each initiative and program has been necessary. For example, we know whether the book we choose for common reading each year engages a wide variety of our students. We know if they read it and why they do or do not. We know if the summer bridge program is effective and how to improve it. We still

use the traditional measures of persistence, along with grade point average, grades in First-Year Seminar, and attendance, but in addition, we have used the First-Year Initiative (FYI), our home-grown First-Year Experience Survey, and the wealth of student feedback from specific prompts we designed for their midterm and final reflective essays.

We also use the FYI, a tool developed by Educational Benchmarking in conjunction with the National Policy Center, as part of our assessment strategy. In addition to providing national benchmarking comparisons with other participating institutions, longitudinal data can help assess whether or not new initiatives are working. For example, in 2003, we made some significant changes to our FYS course. We targeted specific goals that included the following:

- academic and cognitive skills
- sense of belonging
- critical thinking
- connections with faculty
- connections with peers
- out-of-class engagement
- engaging pedagogy

In an effort to enhance these areas, we implemented a number of programs and activities through which we

- expanded learning communities (by linking FYS with another course);
- used students' expanding knowledge of self (MBTI, Emotional Intelligence knowledge) as an overarching approach to achieving course goals;
- developed weekly active learning activities to make the "covert become overt";

- provided weekly training for instructors and teaching assistants;
- used articles from a thematic reader that reinforced learning outcomes;
- used "dialogues journals" between student and instructor;
- developed out-of-class opportunities for faculty and students;
- expanded writing assignments.

When we compared 2003 and 2004 FYI data we found a statistically significant improvement on every factor. For this same student cohort, first-year retention was the highest in ten years, with a 5 percent increase from 2003.

What We Really Learned

What we learned is that it *does* take a village to make a difference. By learning from experts, building on what we already had, assessing, reassessing, and changing, we improved the first year of college. And as I conclude this article, I am reminded of what is on our "to do" list for tomorrow. Tomorrow we will work on the implementation plan for electronic portfolios, and expand ways to build on the success we had this past fall in helping first-year students develop their emotional intelligence skills. Our work is not done. It never should be. The title of this article, "Why Teaching First-Year Students Is Rewarding for Everyone," is so true. As faculty and staff, we are also lifelong learners. We constantly look for ways to be better educators, and the reward of seeing students succeed is one that reminds us of why we got into this business in the first place. ■

Intertwining College with Real Life:

The Community College First-Year Experience

By **Renee Cornell**, First-Year Experience coordinator, and **Mary Lou Mosley**, dean of instruction, both of Paradise Valley Community College

I came into FYE fearing college and not knowing what to expect. In this class you will have nothing to fear except for learning and new experiences.

—FYE student comment, fall 2000

The First-Year Experience program (FYE) was piloted at Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC) in fall 2000 and has been offered consistently each fall semester for the past six years. FYE provides students with a holistic education to help them understand how college intertwines with real life. In this program, classroom content is integrated with campus life; with student services, such as advising and tutoring; and with service-learning opportunities outside the classroom. Course content is linked to help students see the relationship between academic disciplines and college activities.

Students enroll as a cohort in an FYE block of three or more courses that meet Monday through Thursday mornings in one classroom. The four courses in the FYE block are Freshman English, Introduction to Sociology, Strategies for College Success, and Introduction to Computers. This block is organized around a thematic focus and approach. In fall 2005, the FYE block theme was “Exploring Your Options in a Changing World.” Previous FYE blocks included one that was fully integrated around a problem-based learning approach and another that was focused on strategies for success in developmental math and English compo-

sition. Once students have completed the first semester of FYE, they have the option to continue in a two-course block in the second semester.

Practices for Successful Student Learning

The Paradise Valley Community College FYE program is designed around principles of “best practices” in learning from the twenty-year-old national first-year experience movement. The program’s design also reflects the college’s mission and goals and the needs of our student population. At PVCC, 86 percent of all students are classified as first-year students and half of our students are age twenty-eight or younger.

The goals of the FYE program are to

- increase student retention/persistence to the second semester and second year of college;
- increase preparedness for future academic coursework and academic engagement;
- identify connections between college coursework and future plans and goals;
- build relationships and community, and help students to engage in campus life.

In FYE, students find a supportive environment to ease the transition to college. Students have the same



block of teachers, so any learning difficulties can be identified early, discussed by the teaching team, and quickly resolved. Instructors also serve as advocates for students by answering a variety of questions related to academic and college life. Because students spend so much time together, they form strong relationships early in the semester. Furthermore, FYE allows college services to be provided more efficiently. For example, an academic adviser visits the FYE classroom in both the fall and spring semesters to advise students, and scholarship and honors course

FYE increases student learning, as evidenced by retention and persistence data, student survey results, and student comments.

information is discussed in the classroom. The pilot FYE teaching team added a peer mentor whose role was to provide guidance and support to students. The peer mentor now serves as an integral part of the college experience, helping students become more self-confident in their personal goals and academic lives and talking with them about academic requirements, resources, and services.

The FYE program embodies proven practices for successful student learning. Faculty use experiential and active learning techniques, provide complex problems for students to solve, and focus on collaborative opportunities for both faculty and students to engage each other as a community of learners. FYE increases student learn-

ing, as evidenced by retention and persistence data, student survey results, and student comments. In one cohort, the process of completing the final project led a student to reflect that “I made it through finals and it was one of the hardest weeks of my life. I am exhausted and weak, but I am happy. It feels good to know I can do what I want as long as I set my mind to it.” In FYE, students take responsibility for their own learning and the results are depicted in a variety of ways. Students use creative methods to demonstrate their learning, including papers, PowerPoint

presentations, Web pages, group projects, and posters. The learning that occurs in FYE is deep, long lasting, relevant, and transformative.

Cocurricular Activities

FYE cocurricular activities have been built so that students integrate and apply content and skills from their classes and from their experiences in the community. During the fall semester, the two cocurricular activities are “Cultural Quest in Phoenix” and “Service Learning.” The “Cultural Quest in Phoenix” consists of teams of three-to-four students who are required to visit a club, museum/cultural center, restaurant/market, and place of worship identified by the faculty. The objectives are to raise cultural

awareness, connect students to the larger community, teach them about other cultures in a “real-world” setting, link diverse classes and assignments into one comprehensive project, and provide a cooperative learning experience. Each team takes photographs with a disposable camera, collects materials, and writes descriptions to produce a poster display that represents their experiences.

Each course has a specific part of the assignment. For the Introduction to Computers class, students keep an electronic journal in which they answer questions such as “How do traditions of your own family compare with traditions you observed while doing research for this project?” For the Freshman English component, students report findings when they are assigned tasks such as “Ask the cashier at the ethnic market what his or her favorite food item is that is sold in the market.” Students also answer a concluding question after finishing the project: “What did this project teach me about my community?”

The other fall-semester cocurricular project, “Service Learning,” requires students to volunteer for twelve hours in an animal care/environmental, health/social services, or educational area. The students keep a reflective journal, write a reflective essay, and make an oral presentation using PowerPoint.

The spring-semester English and anthropology FYE cohort participate in one cocurricular activity, “Exploring Connections in the Global Community.” Students choose activities related to cultural

anthropology—for example, viewing a film at a local film festival or visiting a nearby museum. Students then write one-page papers using their English composition skills to describe their experiences and observations in terms of cultural anthropology. A student stated, “I have attained an immense amount of knowledge in the FYE due to the coordination of class projects and topics.”

Program Challenges and Strengths

PVCC has found that the major challenges in running the FYE program are primarily administrative. The biggest challenge is securing faculty from the different disciplines who are able to work closely together. To ensure a successful program, faculty must be willing to spend extra time planning and meeting, both to get the FYE block ready and to communicate and make adjustments during the semester. Other challenges revolve around scheduling a block of classes—especially in one classroom—and designing special registration processes so that students enroll in all classes in the FYE block. Advertising the FYE block to both faculty and students involves employing a variety of methods that are critical to the program’s success. First, advisors need to understand how FYE is structured, how it contributes to student success, and the kind of students who should be in specific FYE blocks. Working with the advisors is an ongoing activity. In addition, the FYE faculty reach out to the high school counselors and parents of high school seniors to explain the advantages and opportunities FYE provides for students.

Despite such challenges, the FYE program has benefited the faculty and the students. Faculty discover each other’s disciplines and teaching styles, and they experience professional growth as they create program curricula and attend conferences as a learning team. And the FYE program has consistently produced a variety of positive outcomes for students:

- Deep student learning occurs because students are involved as a community around engaging projects and linked classes.
- Students develop strong relationships with each other. Students persevere to the end of the semester because of their commitment to other group members and because of the friendships that develop. Outside of class, students meet socially, study together, and carpool to their service learning commitments.
- Students develop strong relationships with faculty that continue into the next semester and next year. Many of the students continue to meet with instructors who are not teaching in the FYE during the spring semester. Just as importantly, students not enrolled in the spring FYE program continue to visit with faculty, ask for advice, and share successes.
- High expectations combined with faculty and student support helps students achieve success. As one student put it, “In my case, FYE helped me tons. I not only had to adjust to college, but in a way, I also had to adjust to a new culture and all the teachers

were really helpful. The group projects also helped because I interacted with people I never approached in class. The assignments also made us get to know new places and each other.”

- Student support and intervention are easier to provide when a group of faculty has the same students and can easily identify problems and patterns as well as follow students’ progress in the FYE courses. Retention from one semester to the next and to the following year is higher for FYE students. Within the semester, 90 percent of the FYE students are retained and 89 percent enroll for spring semester. Eighty-five percent of fall FYE students enroll in classes the next fall semester, as compared to 43 percent of non-FYE students.

A key strength of FYE is that it can be replicated at any campus and designed specifically to meet the needs of any target group of students. Through collaboration among faculty and partnerships between academic and student affairs, the resources of any college can be leveraged to increase student learning and success for first-year students. The First-Year Experience program has brought together PVCC faculty, staff, and students as a community of learners. As one student put it, “FYE will be an experience you will never forget if you take advantage of the opportunities that will come your way. For me it opened my eyes up to realize you can do anything you put your mind and heart to.” ■



First-Year Seminars Increase Persistence and Retention:

A Summary of the Evidence from *How College Affects Students*

By **Kathleen Goodman**, doctoral student and research assistant, Center for Research on Undergraduate Education, and **Ernest T. Pascarella**, Mary Louise Petersen Professor of Higher Education and codirector, Center for Research on Undergraduate Education, both of the University of Iowa

First-year seminars have become ubiquitous in the past two decades, finding homes in institutions of every type and size. We believe that these programs are vital for our students' achievement, yet the research documenting positive outcomes of first-year seminars is still in its inaugural stage. A review of relevant studies synthesized in the first and second volumes of Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini's *How College Affects Students* (1991; 2005) provides an overview of the current research and indication of a research agenda for the future.

Among the changes between the first and second volumes of *How College Affects Students* is the increase in the number of research studies about first-year seminars. When the first volume was published in 1991, the trend to focus the needs of students in their first undergraduate year through various programs had existed for fewer than twenty years, and there were few research projects to review. By the time the 2005 volume rolled off the press, Pascarella and Terenzini had been able to synthesize a considerable amount of research focused on first-year seminars. They found substantial evidence indicating that first-year programs increase persistence from the first to second year of college.

Pascarella and Terenzini observed that first-year seminars vary greatly in form and function across insti-

tutions. Yet these seminars have become quite prevalent and can be found at 95 percent of four-year institutions in the United States. The element that is most common to first-year seminars is a regularly scheduled meeting time with a specific instructor for new students.

Elements that vary include the frequency and duration of class meeting times; content, pedagogy, and structure; credit hours and grading; and whether the course is required or an elective. The common goal of first-year seminars is to increase academic performance and persistence through academic and social integration. The long-term goal is increased degree attainment.

Persistence and Retention

Studies of first- to second-year persistence dominate the research, which has multiplied since the late 1980s. For example, the University of South Carolina–Columbia found that students who participated in their first-year seminar between 1973 and 1996 were more likely to persist into their sophomore year than students who did not participate in the seminar. The differences were statistically significant for fifteen of the twenty-three years. Several other studies of the relationship between first-year seminar participation and first- to second-year persistence found similar results.

While statistical significance tells us that it is unlikely these results would be found by chance, effect size can be a more useful indicator because it measures the magnitude of a result. Two studies at single institutions specifically matched first-year seminar participants on characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, high school achievement, and admissions test scores, which allowed Pascarella and Terenzini to measure the effect size of the seminar impact. They found that the chance of participants returning for a second year of college was 7 percentage points greater than for nonparticipants. Another study, based on random assignment of students to first-year seminars, found that re-enrollment for the second year of college was 13 percentage points higher for the seminar participants.

Through a synthesis of more than forty additional studies, Pascarella and Terenzini found that first-year seminar participants are more likely to graduate within four years than nonparticipants. The estimated effect size indicates an advantage of 5 to 15 percentage points for the students who take the seminars. However, a note of caution is warranted regarding these results because none of these studies controlled for students' precollege characteristics. Factors such as grades, commitment to education, and educational attainment of parents are likely to be confounded with the effects of participating in the seminar. When precollege characteristics are controlled for, the magnitude of advantage tends to shrink, although it does not entirely disappear.

One method of controlling for precollege characteristics is to match both seminar participant and nonparticipant groups on these characteristics. Studies that employed this method conclude that participation in first-year seminars for undergraduate students does promote persistence into the second year and beyond. Another way to control for precollege characteristics is by using various statistical procedures. Studies introducing controls using these methods also concluded that first-year seminar participation has a statistically reliable positive influence on persistence and degree attainment.

A third method of controlling for precollege characteristics is to employ a true experimental research design in which participants are randomly assigned to "treatment" groups. In this case, the "treatment" is the first-year seminar. Random assignment into a seminar or non-seminar condition creates two groups that should be similar in all respects except for their participation or nonparticipation in the first-year seminar. Thus, one can reasonably conclude that any statistically reliable differences found between the two groups can be attributed to participation in the seminar. Researchers at the University of Maryland, College Park used a true experimental design to study the impact of seminar participation during four semesters. They concluded that first-year seminar participants were significantly more likely to persist than similar students who did not participate in the seminar.

Who Benefits from First-Year Seminars?

Educational research is often concerned with "conditional effects"—do different types of students benefit from a program or service differently? The weight of evidence suggests that first-year seminars have provided positive benefits to all kinds of students and that such seminars are a good all-purpose intervention to increase persistence from first to second year.

Evidence indicates that students who have benefited from participation in first-year seminars include both males and females; both minority and majority students; students of various ages; students from various majors; students living on or off campus; and regularly admitted students and at-risk students.

The research on first-year seminars has also found positive outcomes in addition to persistence and retention. For example, several studies have concluded that students who participate in first-year seminars experience more frequent and meaningful interactions with faculty and with other students. Other investigations indicate that participants become more involved in cocurricular activities, while still others show an increased level of satisfaction with the college experience. Academically, students who participate in first-year seminars have more positive perceptions of themselves as learners. They also achieve higher grades in college.

Suggestions for Future Research

There is still important work to be done if we are to fully understand the impact of

first-year seminars on student persistence and retention. Research design, in particular, will be of crucial importance in future inquiry. In order to estimate the true impact or value-added of first-year seminars, the influence on persistence that is attributable to actual participation (versus nonparticipation) in the seminar must be separated from the influence of the individual characteristics of the students.

True experiments in which students are randomly assigned to participation or nonparticipation in first-year seminars are, unequivocally, the best way to accomplish this. However, it is frequently the case that conducting experiments in which students are randomly assigned to different experiences in college is neither practical nor desirable. The next best approach is to employ a longitudinal research design that uses statistical procedures to “control” for students’ precollege characteristics (e.g. measured ability, high school grades, socioeconomic status, and degree aspirations) that might confound the relationship between participation in a first-year seminar and subsequent persistence.

Although some of the studies conducted so far have employed variations on this design, the design used by the typical study in the existing body of research has been discernibly weaker. These kinds of longitudinal studies are, admittedly, more difficult and time-consuming to conduct than either cross-sectional investigations or investigations that do not take student precollege characteristics into account. Yet if we wish to create a credible body of evidence about the benefits of first-year seminars, there is

simply no substitute for longitudinal investigations. A good example of a recent study that controls for students’ precollege characteristics is the cross-institutional survey of first-year seminars conducted by Stephen Porter and Randy Swing (2006), which estimates the impact of specific seminar components on intent to persist.

The body of research on first-year seminars has expanded considerably over the past fifteen years, providing substantial evidence that persistence and degree attainment has increased as first-year seminars have been implemented. Evidence also suggests that first-year seminars have benefits for students, irrespective of differences in gender, ethnicity, age, major, and the like. The seminars may encourage additional positive outcomes, including increased student–faculty interaction, increased involvement in cocurricular activities, and increased academic satisfaction. Yet there is still a need for additional research to clarify whether first-year seminars can be causally linked to various desirable outcomes. In this regard, we have suggested the crucial importance of longitudinal designs in future research. ■

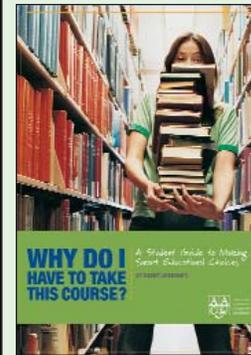
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My Son, the Reader:

One Story of What Can Happen in the First Year of College

By **Cheryl B. Torsney**, associate provost for academic programs and professor of English, West Virginia University

MMy nineteen-year-old son, Ben—the 6' 6" sophomore forward whose fluidity on the court and well-defined biceps make me whisper, “From whence did that godlike creature emanate?”—is taking his first college English course at Allegheny College.

Although he took honors and AP English in high school, I don't believe he ever read a book all the way through. Internet savvy, he could get a pretty good sense of the plot, characters, and critical history of *The Scarlet Letter* without reading much, if any, Hawthorne. He reached the state basketball semifinals and high school graduation on the strength of his rebounding acumen, not his enthusiasm for reading.

Which is why his response to his introduction to literature course has so surprised and gratified me. As it turns out, my son is, in fact, the sort of reader I'd hoped he'd be, beginning with *Good Night, Moon* and *Good Dog, Carl*. He's curious; he connects the texts he's reading with other texts he knows; and he finds pleasure in exercising his brain.

During Ben's first year of college, his philosophy professor assigned a text by African American feminist bell hooks. Ben called home wondering what the hell the crazy lady was trying to say and why he had to read what he termed “such crap.” I laughed, knowing that surely hooks would be amused (and validated) by such a response from a privileged white boy.

Interestingly, he's read more of hooks's work this year, and one measure of his intellectual

growth is his response. One of the drafts he asked me to look at includes the following sentence: “In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, hooks explains step by step how male domination, especially white male domination, oppresses the hell out of women.” While the diction is a little rough for a formal paper, I didn't have the heart to point that out to him. The authenticity of his expression spoke volumes about his personal engagement with the material.

This English class, though, has marked a watershed in our mother-son relationship. It has signaled the first time Ben has ever asked me for the benefit of my knowledge and experience rather than for money or the keys. It has allowed him to pass along titles he thinks would give me pleasure.

I treasure our e-mail and our follow-up phone conversations. One might imagine how the following messages in my in-box provided not only teaching opportunities but also loving opportunities:

9-3: Mom: What does it mean when my teacher asks the style of a poem? I know there are a lot of couplets in the poems I read. Do you think he also wants like meter and that stuff because if he does I have no idea. Ok. Love ya.

9-12: You have to read that short story I was telling you about. It is by Liza Ward and it's called “Snowbound.” It is one of the craziest stories I have ever read. Check it out. It is in the O. Henry Prize stories. Love ya. Oh, and what's ambiguity?

11-2: I remember the name and author of the short story I thought you should read. The title is “The Drowned Woman” by Frances de Pontes Peebles. I suggest you read it and tell me what you think about it. You could help me out. HAHA. Love ya.

I ran out and read “The Drowned Woman.” He was right: it’s a great story, which I read as a meditation on colonialism. Ben’s essay, however, argued that while postcolonial Brazil is the setting, the story is really about the oppression of women in traditional Catholic cultures and how a lack of education plays into the oppression. Our congruent readings suggested that we were two attentive readers focusing on slightly different details.

His last assignment for the term was Louis Nordan’s *Sharpshooter Blues*, a Southern gothic novel that Ben described to me as “twisted.” His essay discussed the power of a gun “to end lives, take control of others, and liberate.” He’d called to talk with me about it. While I had yet to read it—it had arrived the day before from Amazon.com—I referred him to Emily Dickinson’s poem 754, “My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun,” figuring the poem might further stimulate his thinking, especially the closing lines, “For

I have but the
power to
kill,/Without
- the power to
die -.”

I could

detect real excitement when I read it to him over the phone: “Yeah, Mom. That’s good. That’ll work. Cool.”

Word from Ben last week was that he thinks he might even take another English course next year, maybe a course in American literature, my field of specialization. No, he’s not majoring in the subject, but he really likes the instructors, the reading, the class discussion, and even the writing.

Whether we admit it or not, we often think of our undergraduates as our kids. While we don’t cover their health insurance and don’t celebrate their birthdays, we do care about them. When they graduate, earn honors, go on to successful careers, we celebrate. We like to believe they have benefited from our engagement with them.

Our own children, however, are ours. We don’t expect them to consult us on our academic specialty, but when they do, we plotz. When they perform what we believe to be academic miracles—even if it’s simply writing an insightful essay—we kvel. Surely, this must be how my mother felt when I received my PhD. She had tried to explain to me the overwhelming nature of her gratitude, pride, and love, but I didn’t understand. Now I think I do. ■

First-Year Reflections

By **Carol Sun**, student, University of Maryland, College Park

As soon as my mother drove away last August, leaving me at the University of Maryland, alone, I began my journey of becoming an adult; at least I feel like I did. I remember walking into the building where I was going to live for the next year, feeling really old. “I am a college freshman,” I thought to myself. I did not know what to expect out of my freshman year. They say that college is a time of self-discovery, full of both trials and prosperity, and lasting memories and friends. Little did I know, my first year of college would bring about so many experiences, both positive and negative, that would forever change me.

The first couple of weeks were a complete party. All freshmen around me were completely enthralled by the newfound freedom that college came with. We could stay up and out as late as we wanted to without any questions. We could eat whatever we wanted and have our rooms as messy as we wanted. We were with friends twenty-four hours a day, creating close bonds and friendships. Freedom does not come without a struggle, and we as freshman had to struggle with high school, parents, and even petty drama for the freedom we obtained the minute we walked onto the college campus. Some people went a little too wild with their newfound freedom, regretting many of

the things they did with the freedom.

Others proceeded with caution, sometimes a little too much. I like to think that I found a healthy medium between the two.

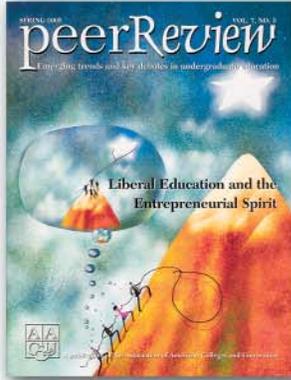
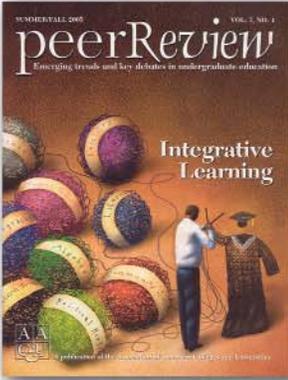
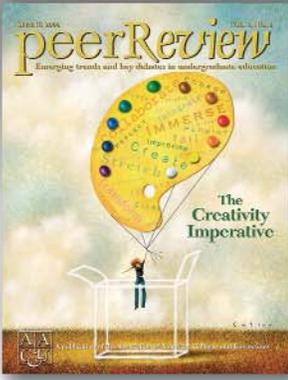
In high school, I considered myself smart. Things came easily. Nothing was too much of a challenge for me. Therefore, coming to college, I did not expect that things would be much harder. What made me find myself terribly mistaken was my first English paper. I worked hard on it and expected a good grade. I got a C. Upon receiving my grade, my heart dropped. It was hard and not to mention new for me. I did not get bad grades. Ever. I considered my work to be “A” work, especially by my own standards. Even so, I was very misguided in the mindset of the work I had to do in college coming to school. It is not supposed to be easy, as nothing in life is. Even though the grade was upsetting at first, it provided me with a spark. I pushed myself harder, harder than I ever had to work. I spent countless numbers of hours on the following papers, drafting, writing, and editing in an endless cycle. It paid off; I saw improvement with each paper. Although I ended up not getting the coveted “A” I sought, I got a proud “B+,” the hardest “B+” I ever had to work for. From my experience with my first of many col-

lege-level English classes, I learned a lot, both academically and outside of the classroom. I learned much about writing and rhetoric. But more importantly, I learned two essential things: nothing comes easy and learning the material is far more important than the grades I received.

The classroom is not the only place where learning takes place. I have learned so much from the relationships I have made. I have made incredible bonds with the amazing people I met this year. From each and every person, I have learned a different thing, whether it is something from their religion or culture or the way in which they view and live their life. I feel that chance has brought me here to learn from them, and I must take it for what it is, being incredibly lucky to have such pleasure to broaden myself and my personal views and knowledge.

The experiences and memories are priceless. There is nothing I could ask for in exchange for the things I have both learned and been through here at Maryland. My advice to the incoming class of 2010 is to make lasting memories. Take chances. Be careful. Work hard. Learn in class and out of class. Open your mind. Take what comes at you for what it is. And most importantly, live the life you have been given. ■

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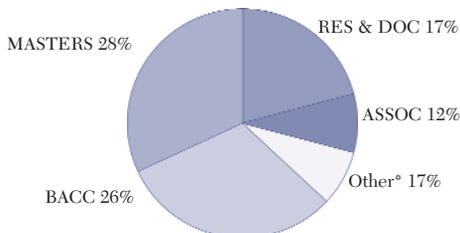
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