



THE FIRST-WEEK EXPERIENCE

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Learning Abstracts March 2017 Volume 20 Number 3

In the list of high impact practices championed by several organizations as programs and practices that will work to achieve the goals of the Completion Agenda, the first-year experience is highly recommended. And, rightly so. A growing body of research over the past three decades reports universally positive findings on the impact of the first-year experience on increases in persistence, performance, engagement, and student satisfaction. No wonder 94 percent of the nation's four-year colleges offer some form of this program to at least some of their students (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). Initiated as a course—University 101—in 1972 by the University of South Carolina to “improve the educational experiences of first-year college students,” the first-year experience has evolved into one of the most successful innovations in decades.

In 1983, the faculty director of University 101 at Carolina, John Gardner, organized the first annual Conference on the Freshman-Year Experience that attracted hundreds of participants. A national resource center was established in 1986 at Carolina by Gardner, and the idea came to be known as the first-year experience. Today, hundreds of four-year colleges and universities have created programs designated as the first-year experience, first-year seminar, freshman-year experience, etc.; such programs are very popular in the nation's community colleges. The goal of these programs is to assist new students in learning how to successfully navigate the college experience to ensure retention and completion. Additional models of programs have emerged with basically the same goal: learning communities, student success courses, bridge programs, early alert, and one-stop services, among others.

Many community colleges have embraced the first-year experience, which works for students who continue their enrollment for a year. But a great number of community college students drop out in the first year. Research from Achieving the Dream indicates

that 14 percent of community college students do not earn a single credit in their first term, and only 15 percent of those students enroll for a second term. Nationally, 25 percent of students who begin in the fall do not return for the spring term, and close to 50 percent do not return for the second year (McClenney, 2011). According to the American Association of Community Colleges and the Center for Community College Student Engagement, there are no national data regarding the percentage of students who begin the admissions process but who do not enroll or who begin classes and drop out in the first week; these figures may be quite high.

Eric Westervelt (2015) reports that “National and Valencia Community College (FL) figures show that if students withdraw from or fail even one of their first five course attempts, their chance of graduating is cut in half. Fail or withdraw from two classes, and those chances are cut in half” (para. 24). These failure rates are alarming for an institution that is now committed to making student success as much a priority as student access. It is one thing to open doors for students to experience new opportunities; it is quite another to keep them around long enough to help them become successful. So, while the first-year experience is helpful for those students who stick around, another approach is needed to address some of the special needs of community college students who drop out early in the process.

The First-Week Experience

For many years, John Roueche has asked his many community college audiences: “What is the most important day of the new term?” The answer is always, “the first day.” He also asks, “What is the most important week of the new term?” And the answer is always, “the first week.” His audiences always seem to understand and agree why this is so. Maybe it is time for us to create and implement a program to reflect this common wisdom—the first-week experience—a series of practices and activities designed to energetically engage students their very first day and throughout their first week to increase their chances for retention and success that will lead to completion.

Most community colleges already implement various elements of what should constitute a first-week experience, but few have cobbled these elements into an integrated program like the first-year experience that could be communicated to faculty, marketed to students, and funded and evaluated by the institution. Briefly, here are some of the elements that need to be considered by college leaders who want to create a first-week experience for their students:

Implement On-Time Registration

According to Ford, Stahl, Walker, and Ford (as cited in CCCSE, 2012), research now shows clearly that the traditional systems of late registration “correlate with lower grades, lower completion rates, and lower re-enrollment the following term” (p. 12). Hundreds of community colleges have now abandoned late registration as one of the major barriers to student success; in a few cases where enrollment dropped slightly, it soon returned to previous levels and increased.

The case for implementing on-time registration is strong. Colleges that redesign their registration and intake procedures to eliminate late registration will:

- Improve persistence and retention rates for their students;
- Send a message to students and to faculty that learning and instruction are important every day and every week of the term;
- Establish expectations for students to meet deadlines and live with the consequences of their decisions, which may translate into improved workforce habits for some students;
- Permit faculty to begin the process of instruction the first day of class without the interruption of swirling students; and
- Realize increased revenues based on FTE and ADA as persistence and retention rates are increased. (O'Banion & Wilson, 2013, para. 17)

It is not possible to design and implement a substantive first-week experience program in colleges where late registration is still the norm. If students are swirling in and out of classes during the first week, instructors cannot create connections, apply early alert systems, make assignments, record attendance, and begin teaching in earnest.

Create Immediate Connections

New situations are challenging for most human beings, and for first-time, first-generation community college students, college is a very new and often very challenging situation. If they are first-generation, there is no family culture of college experiences to provide a framework. Many are not familiar with the language of college and do not understand what registration, assessment, orientation, advising, placement, and student services mean. Coming from high schools that meet five days a week for most classes, they are not familiar with schedules in which classes meet three days a week or for three hours on Tuesday night. As one student said,

This college is like an airport in a foreign country. There are a whole lot of people rushing around, looking as though they know where they're going. But even when I see signs telling me where to go, they're written in a language I don't understand. (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012, p. 60)

These students need an immediate connection with someone to feel welcome. When a telephone operator responds appropriately and politely the first time a student calls the college, a connection is made. When a security guard greets a student warmly on the first day and helps her find the right place to park, a connection is made. When student ambassadors are roving the campus to welcome and direct new students, connections are made. When a secretary in a kiosk smiles, asks the student's name, and answers his question, a connection is made. When a faculty member stands at the door to greet students on the first day of class and then creates a sense of community among students through planned collaborative exercises, connections are made. When the college deliberately creates opportunities for students to get acquainted with faculty and with

other students through social media and through group activities included in orientation and academic advising—the first day and the first week—connections are made. One of the most effective practices for faculty to make connections with students is to learn their names before the end of the very first week. There are numerous practices which will help faculty learn the names of all their students. Consider the impact on college culture and retention when the majority of faculty learn the names of a majority of their students the first week of classes.

The cumulative effect of such connections will increase retention and persistence. When faculty members follow up the second day of class and in classes the next week and the next to cement, expand, and deepen these connections, students are much more likely to stick around for the grand prize—and the grand prize comes for students (and for faculty) when students begin to make connections to ideas, values, perspectives different from theirs, and with their own selves. We must take steps to keep our students in class before we can get to the really good stuff—an education that helps students make a good living and live a good life.

Create a Guided Pathway for Every Student

Every community college student needs a tailored Guided Pathway as a roadmap he or she can use to navigate through programs, courses, activities, policies, and services. The college must design roadmap templates students and advisors can use to map out from the time they first contact the college exactly what students need to do to meet their goals. Ideally, the roadmap is created while students are still in high school, during orientation and advising sessions in the summer, or a few days before classes begin. When students have worked out a plan with an advisor they have a clearer direction of what lies ahead, they feel more connected with the college, they feel more confident going forward, they have a flexible contract they can change; the Guided Pathway is visible evidence that the student is “in college.” (See the Pathways Project coordinated by the American Association of Community College for more information.)

In a major study by Davis Jenkins and Sung-Woo Cho of the Community College Research Center, their analysis:

...shows not only that students must enter a program of study to earn a credential but also that it is critical that they do so as quickly as possible. Students who do not enter a program of study within a year of enrollment are far less likely to ever enter a program and therefore less likely to complete and earn a credential. (2012, p. 3)

A program of study is the heart of the Guided Pathway. It is the plan of courses that constitutes the student’s major. If a student knows exactly what his or her career plans are or if the college requires a specified core of general education, signing up for the program and designing the pathway become easier. If students can complete the initial design of their Guided Pathway with an advisor before classes begin, their chances for success and completion may be considerably enhanced.

But what about students who are unsure or undecided about a program of study or who want to explore the curriculum before they decide? In the past, they have often earned credits they could not use to transfer or count toward an associate's degree or certification. Their costs increase with little return on investment. They have been allowed to hack their own way through the jungle of courses and options, and many drop out in frustration.

There is a better option. Students who are unsure or undecided about next steps toward a career or more education should be required to enroll in a program of study for undecided students for their first term. If students can enroll in only one course their first term, that course should be a student success course; if they can enroll in three or four courses that package could include a student success course, college English, psychology, and, perhaps, an experiential course in career exploration. These courses could be organized into a learning community focused on the special needs of undecided students. As one student advised community college leaders, "If you know what students need, and we don't, why don't you make us do it?" (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012, p. 57)

The goal here is to create a framework—for students who know their major and for students who are undecided—so they can pocket a roadmap the day they begin classes, or at least during the first week of classes.

Conclusion

These three components are just the tip of the iceberg, but they provide a foundation for those who wish to design a first-week experience. In addition, college leaders will need to figure out how to connect and integrate the first-week experience with all the intake and onboarding services such as admissions, assessment, orientation, counseling, and registration. Academic advising is the heart of these services for students and will need special attention. So is financial aid. Early alert systems and technological support are especially important. Linking and integrating successful developmental education strategies is a key issue. And staff and faculty development cannot be left to business as usual.

Designing an innovation does not happen overnight. Years are required to brainstorm, design, field test, modify, evaluate, fund, and embed a new idea into the culture of any institution. Fortunately, we can build on the success of the first-year experience to create the first-week experience, motivated by our understanding of the special needs of community college students for immediate and intensive engagement the first day and first week if we are to increase their persistence, completion, and overall success.

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