

Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence in the First Year of College



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SACS-COC Summer Institute on Quality Enhancement
July 28, 2008
Orlando

- The central focus of this session is on the question: what is excellence in the first year of college?
- This means the focus is not on the more common question: how can we improve student retention?
- That is a minimum standards question.
- This is an aspirational question instead.
- The possible answers to this question focus more on institutional practices, policies, and behaviors than what the students do
- The advantage of this approach is that it is a focus on what we (higher educators) control

For me, this question has been a 36 year journey:

- from the founding of University 101 at the University of South Carolina in 1972
- to the use of aspirational standards of excellence starting in 2003 to develop strategic plans to transform the first year and to reaffirm accreditation

- One of the big, take away ideas here is to combine something you don't have to do with something you do have to do!
- Most of you don't have to improve the beginning college experience
- But you do have to reaffirm your accreditation
- My agenda is to integrate the two and to be transparent about it! This will give first year improvement efforts much more priority and traction!

- First thing you have to do is to understand why the first year matters (and then act on that understanding)
- Why does the first year matter?

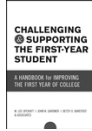
It is the FOUNDATION for:

- the undergraduate curriculum
- choosing a major
- establishing a good GPA
- learning good study habits
- developing "economies of time"

- developing positive attitudes toward faculty
- getting in the habit of interacting with faculty outside of class
- developing positive attitudes toward the campus
- developing long term relationships that will last through and beyond college
- deciding on which groups to affiliate with
- acquiring behaviors that may carry over beyond college
- redefining roles between students and family members, and employers
- introducing students to civic engagement
- providing a baseline for assessment of student characteristics, behaviors, and learning outcomes
- in short, **THE FIRST YEAR MATTERS**

Topical/Programmatic Model for the First Year

- First-year seminar/student success courses
- Learning communities
- Academic advising
- Counseling
- Academic support (e.g., Supplemental Instruction, learning centers)
- Orientation
- Developmental education
- What's missing? – Instruction, course design



Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot. (2005) *Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student*, Jossey-Bass.

Next attempt to focus on “Best Practices”

- To illustrate “best practices” the challenge is what Alvin Toffler once called the problem of “overchoice”

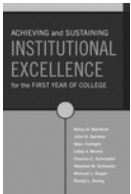
- First-Year Seminar
- Learning Communities
- Supplemental Instruction
- A focus on the high risk course as opposed to the high risk student
- A focus on redesign of introductory college courses
- On-campus residence—and rethinking “housing” to integrate residential living/learning into the curriculum
- Summer bridge
- Early alert/attendance monitoring
- Encouraging/requiring assistance seeking behaviors

- Encouraging the “volunteer syndrome”
- Service learning
- Full-time vs part time enrollment, even if it means taking on debt
- On-campus employment
- Outside of class interaction with faculty
- Improving orientation
- Raising academic expectations (e.g. Common/summer reading experiences)
- Leveraging the influence of outstanding peer role models
- Increasing “honors” opportunities
- Undergraduate faculty/student research

Next effort: Focus on Institutional Exemplars

- Identifying campuses that model best practices across the curriculum and co-curriculum

Barefoot et al. (2005) *Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College*. Jossey-Bass.



Defining & Measuring First-Year Excellence

A Project of the Policy Center on the First Year of College

**Institutions of Excellence
Selection Process**

- Open to all accredited 2- & 4-year institutions
 - 130 nominations received
 - 54 semi-finalists
 - 13 finalists
- Selections made by national panel of experts
- Each portfolio read & ranked by 4 reviewers
- Not a ranking system!

Criterion # 1

Evidence of an intentional, comprehensive approach to improving the first year that is appropriate to an institution's type and mission.

Spans curriculum & co-curriculum

Relationship to mission & student characteristics

Central & systemic

Attention to curriculum

Criterion # 2

Evidence of assessment of the various initiatives that constitute this approach.

Data-driven continuous improvement

Attention to learning outcomes

Assessment reported & used for decision-making

Methods vary; Findings are published

Criterion # 3

Evidence of broad impact on significant numbers of first-year students, including, but not limited to, special student sub-populations.

A "reasonable" level of participation

Initiatives address needs of "average" students as well as the best and worst

Criterion # 4

Strong administrative support for first-year initiatives, evidence of institutionalization, & durability over time.

Initiatives institutionalized & enjoy high status

Effective organization & coordination

Initiatives receive equitable share of resources

Criterion # 5

Involvement of a wide range of faculty, student affairs professionals, academic administrators, & other constituent groups.

Involvement in design, implementation, & maintenance

Partnerships cross divisional lines

Institutions of Excellence

- Comm College of Denver
- LaGuardia Comm C
- Kalamazoo College
- Eckerd College
- Drury University
- US Military Academy
- Elon University
- Lehman College-CUNY
- Texas A&M-Corpus Christi
- Appalachian State U
- Ball State University
- IUPUI
- University of South Carolina

What We Learned

- Valuing the first year and being accountable
- Leadership on multiple levels
- Cultures that encourage ideas and innovation
- Achieving a critical mass of student participation
- Direct involvement of faculty
- Attention to pedagogy in first-year courses
- Clarity of mission; respect for students
- Improving continuously through assessment
- Creative acquisition & judicious use of resources
- Willingness to learn from and share with others
- Valuing partnerships

Summary to this point

- Problem: all of the above approaches are valuable, but taken individually, they do not represent a coherent, integrated, intentional grand design for the beginning college experience
- What is needed is a plan, a strategic plan for the new student experience
- This leads to the standards model

Now we are ready for a search for
excellence: the standards model



The Standards Model

Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year
Rationale

FYE—a 20 year old reform movement

A victim of its own success

First-year orientation seminar

Focused on retention

Fragmented activities

Foundations Project—an attempt to move beyond narrow,
program-level assessment

Aspirational model

Measurement model

First-year experience as a distinct unit of analysis

Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year

Project began in 2003 with four-year sector
(with 124 pilot and 24 “Founding Institutions”)

Extended in 2005 to two-year institutions
(with 88 pilot and 10 “Founding Institutions”)

Currently, 13 four-year and 13 two-year participants

To date, 117 institutions, both four-year and two-year,
have participated in Foundations of Excellence

Project Focus

The Institution

This process evaluates what institutions do, rather than focusing on entering student characteristics or student-level outcomes.

Process includes program-level analysis but is not limited to program analysis.

Nine Foundational Dimensions®

- Philosophy
- Organization
- Learning
- Transitions
- Faculty/Campus*
Culture
- All Students
- Diversity
- Roles & Purposes
- Improvement

(*Two-year/Four-year difference)

Philosophy

- *The problem:* Many approaches to the first year have no underlying philosophical base, no purpose beyond retention.
 - *Why this Dimension is important:* The experience of first-year students should be crafted with a sense of educational purpose.
 - *Performance Indicators:*
 - Whether the campus has a philosophy/rationale
 - Whether it has an influence on policy/practice
 - Whether it is disseminated
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Organization

- *The problem:* No one in charge; inefficient and confusing “silos”
- *Why this Dimension is important:* Organization is essential to the realization of purpose.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - Existing organizational structure(s); evaluation
 - Level of funding
 - Whether structure provides an integrated approach
 - Role of structure in faculty/staff development

Learning

- *The problem:* Inadequate attention to learning
- *Why this Dimension is important:* Learning is the primary purpose of going to college.
- *Performance Indicators*
 - The existence (and assessment) of articulated first-year learning goals
 - Use of effective pedagogies in high-enrollment courses
 - Measures of out-of-class learning
 - Appropriate course placement

Transitions

- *The problem:* Uneven attention to elements of successful transition
- *Why this Dimension is important:* The success of the initial transition predicts future collegiate success.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - The quality of communication to students – setting appropriate expectations
 - The quality of communication to support networks
 - Helping students establish connections
 - Academic advising

Faculty/Campus Culture

(Four-Year/Two-Year)

- *The problem:* Need for more meaningful faculty and staff involvement with first-year students
- *Why this Dimension is important:* Without involvement of faculty and staff, first-year initiatives are difficult to launch and sustain.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - Institutional or unit encouragement of faculty and staff involvement
 - Expectations at the point of hire
 - Rewards for first-year involvement

All Students

- *The problem:* Many initiatives reach only certain students; others do not reach populations with special needs.
- *Why this Dimension is important:* All new students have developmental needs that should be addressed.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - What you know about the needs of particular students
 - What you do to meet those needs
 - How well you meet the needs of *all* students

Diversity

- *The problem:* Institutions vary in the degree to which they successfully address diversity issues.
- *Why this Dimension is important:* Education about human difference is an important component of the beginning college experience.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - Students' exposure to diverse ideas
 - Students' exposure to diverse people
 - Whether the institution conveys "standards" for behavior in a civil and open environment

Roles & Purposes

- *The problem:* Students' narrow view of the purpose of higher education
- *Why this Dimension is important:* The first year is the time for exploration of roles and purposes.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - How well you communicate the institution's notion of purpose
 - Whether you provide students the opportunity to explore their motivation for higher education
 - How well you communicate the institution's rationale for its requirements – courses, skills, competencies

Improvement

- *The problem:* Too few initiatives are subjected to rigorous assessment. Institutional isolation – lack of exposure to others
- *Why this Dimension is important:* Improvement is vital to sustainability and effectiveness.
- *Performance Indicators:*
 - The practice of assessment
 - The use of assessment for improvement
 - Other strategies for improvement

A Generic Self Study Template

- 1) We specifically recommend that a campus undertake a “self study” (yes, the two most dreaded words in the higher ed lexicon!)
- 2) And that this self study be conducted by a campus-wide task force charged to develop a strategic action plan for improvement
- 3) Evaluate institutional performance using some aspirational measures (we suggest those of excellence, and connected to the institutional mission statement)
- 4) Collect existing and new evidence, educate task force members, and use to make judgments and **recommendations**

- 5) Conduct an inventory of current policies, practices, high enrollment courses, high DWFI courses and student characteristics
- 6) Engage in a collegial, inclusive, intellectually stimulating process of analysis and decision making
- 7) Affirm what is working well
- 8) Recommend changes for what is not working well
- 9) Develop a vision, an intentional plan for your beginning college experience

Key Elements of a Generic Study of the First Year

- Make the first year a unit of analysis-- in its entirety.
- Discover and USE the data that you already have about the first year.
- Develop, implement, and continually evaluate your plan.
- Consider linking with SACS procedures for assessment incorporated into reaffirmation of accreditation.

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