

Student Experience Committee: Investigating the First-year Experience

March 2016

Introduction

President Crabill charged the Student Experience Committee (SEC) with investigating some of the College's existing processes and practices as the institution begins its work under Achieving the Dream. The ultimate goal is to look closely at all of our existing practices to see where improvements can be made to support student success. The Student Experience Committee (SEC) was charged specifically with investigating the feasibility of a comprehensive first-year experience program that could increase student retention and completion.

The College currently holds an optional first-year seminar as a course elective, and it provides many programs and services for our students, but the charge was to investigate a larger, more comprehensive first-year *experience* for our students.

The committee has looked into the College's current practices and reviewed relevant literature to develop these recommendations and answers to the many questions contained in the charge.

The Committee's Charge: Questions to be considered

According to President Crabill's correspondence with the SEC, many community colleges (and specifically those that are a part of Achieving the Dream) provide some sort of comprehensive, first-year experience program for their students. These programs have been found to increase retention, promote academic success, and aid in the completion rate for students.

President Crabill's specific questions to the SEC include the following:

1. What could/should the components of such a program be? How and by whom should they be delivered? What would the first year calendar look like? How does it relate to Onondaga Welcome? What research/models support your suggestions?
2. How should the College make these components available? How should/could the College handle attendance/participation? What policies would need to be put into place? What impact would this program have on the college calendar?
3. What resources would need to be made available (staff, facilities, budget, etc.) to take this program to scale? What metrics would be tracked to evaluate the success of the effort?
4. What internal resources (career services, advising/counseling, leadership development, etc.) could be tapped to support this program, and what – ideally – would their roles be?
5. What elements of programming, according to the research, have been found to be so valuable that they should be mandatory for all students?

Core Components of a First-Year Experience (FYE) Program

The committee is in favor of a comprehensive first-year experience and believes that a comprehensive program would help increase student retention, persistence, and completion.

Many programs are already in place to help our students during their first year at OCC—from their initial interest in the college through their first year. These existing programs should be reviewed and considered to be part of a comprehensive first-year experience. Existing programs and elements include the following:

1. Connect @ OCC (Includes components of orientation including registration, policies and procedures, financial aid, student records and privacy, transfer programs, degree requirements, sexual assault education, etc.)
2. Express Enroll
3. Welcome Onondaga
4. First-year Seminar
5. Living/Learning Communities
6. Clubs and Organization Fair
7. Retention Alert
8. Campus-wide Programming
9. Residence Life programs
10. Advising
11. Placement testing
12. Departmental- or program-specific initiatives (STEM, veterans, international students, etc.)

These individual programs and/or elements are run and managed by experts and dedicated professionals, but there is currently no *overall* campus-wide oversight of a single comprehensive first-year experience program.

In our discussions, members of the committee discovered that members of faculty and staff are not aware of the variety of programs already offered. Different programs have different purposes and unless faculty and staff have direct involvement with the programs, many people don't know how these programs work to help students. A lack of overall branding and recognition means that some very beneficial parts of our existing programs go unnoticed and unappreciated.

According to published research, “the absence of coordination fosters multiple and individual interpretations of factors contributing to attrition that may undermine retention efforts. Without coordination, planning, implementation, and assessment, retention strategies are, at best, left to chance” (Habley, p 47).

Recommendation 1: The College should create a separate position or office to coordinate the FYE initiative. While this position is responsible for coordinating the efforts, other offices may be directly responsible for the delivery of specific elements. This position or office would have the authority and responsibility to moderate and observe the variety of programs already in place and to track the performance of these different programs.

Recommendation 2: The first-year experience should be a *comprehensive, cohesive* and *branded* program consisting of a variety of programs designed to support our students during their first

year. The brand should be used across campus for all programs tied to the first-year experience and leveraged to create a culture of dedicated engagement with FYE initiatives by students and faculty and staff.

Recommendation 3: The first-year experience should be an initiative that begins as early as in high school where appropriate and lasts through the completion of the first year.

Impacts to the existing college calendar will vary depending upon implementation; however, this committee understands that the Programs and Academic committee is working on the college calendar and comparing Onondaga's calendar to other community colleges.

Recommendation 4: Incorporation of FYE programs into the academic calendar should be considered by the Programs and Academic Support committee as a way to potentially improve their effectiveness and accommodate some of the FYE elements that are recommended to be mandatory. Future calendar discussion should include considerations about FYE programming.

Attendance and Participation in Orientation Activities

Based on research focused on the success of orientation, mandatory participation is crucial to student success (Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011), but there is no consensus on what specifically should be mandatory for all students. Bers and Younger (2014) found that "two-year colleges typically limited orientation to a half day and did not require attendance" because of the "great numbers of part-time and nonresidential students whose time on campus is limited" (p 82). The authors conclude by saying that "the obstacles to 'longer' orientation required for new students are daunting" (p 83).

While we understand the challenges of communicating programs as "mandatory" with regard to practical issues (such as tracking, enforcement, etc.), the committee suggests that the campus would benefit from a stronger message to students about the importance of a campus-wide orientation program.

The committee agrees that having one, college-wide attendance policy for FYE program or components will be difficult to enforce, but having a web-based program could help facilitate active participation of many orientation activities. The offering of an online option has become commonplace for most institutions (McClenney & McClenney, 2007).

Recommendation 5: The committee recommends that at least a part of a student's experience at Onondaga should include a mandatory orientation program. Orientation provides an opportunity for the student to complete necessary paperwork, register for courses, and to create a connection with peers and college staff.

Recommendation 6: Variations on orientation sub-models should align with our diverse student population (such as full- versus part-time, non-traditional, veteran status, ESOL, etc.).

Recommendation 7: Orientation should have an online presence that would include features such as live chat, an interactive check list, and student reminders about due dates and missing or incomplete paperwork.

The First-year Seminar

A large part of the first-year experience is the first-year seminar. The college currently offers a one-credit optional first-year seminar, but according to recent assessment (2013-2014 academic year) the course does not seem to be meeting the needs of our students. The committee has discussed why assessment results have been disappointing and may be due to a lack of consistency among course sections.

Recommendation 8: A first-year seminar should be a mandatory part of the first-year experience.

Recommendation 9: Each section of the first-year seminar should use the same text, have the same learning outcomes, and be taught by full-time faculty members who receive continuous training and development specifically for leading these seminar sessions.

Recommendation 10: A quality FYS requires significant professional development. In order to offer an effective FYS, a well-constructed training program is needed. Training sessions for seminar instructors must ensure uniform quality across all sections offered. FYS training should be ongoing and should undergo assessment procedures along with those for the course and institutional outcomes.

Recommendation 11: The first-year seminar should be writing-intensive, promote collaboration with peers, help connect students with faculty members and College resources, promote critical thinking, and have a significant online presence.

First-Year Seminar Focus

A majority of community colleges offer some type of first-year seminar or college success course. The model differs from campus to campus—some are mandatory just for developmental students, some provide career exploration, others are designed around learning communities. Barefoot, Arcario, & Guzman (2011) report that “students who participated in first-year seminars were more likely to be retained than similar nonparticipants” (p 103).

Based on this committee’s review of literature from the Community College Research Center, we have determined six factors that are generally considered to have the maximum impact on student success and retention.

1. The course must have narrowly defined content with prioritized learning outcomes.
2. Staffing must be deliberate and outcomes driven. For example, using disciplinary faculty to staff these courses would help bridge the gap between academic and non-academic skills.
3. The content of the course must be taught using strategies that emphasize application and sustained practice. Students must be given the chance to actually apply their skills to situations outside of the course itself and in ways that are directly relevant to their academic lives.
4. There must be common course assignments geared toward reflection, application and practice. The assignments should encourage students to dig deep into whatever they do. Assignments

should provide meaningful group work or reflective writing that has students engaging in something relevant.

5. Student learning objectives in the first-year seminar course must be reinforced in academic courses.

6. There should be a connection between student services functions and the outcomes for the FYS course. For example, the learning goals of the FYS course ought to overlap with those of Student Services programs (at least in part).

Recommendation 12: Onondaga's first-year seminar should be modeled on the best practices presented by the Community College Research Center.

College Transition Courses in the High School

College transition courses offered in high schools are a relatively new concept but have shown promising results according to an article "What we Know About Transition Courses" from the Community College Research Center. CUNY's At Home in College program showed a 5% increase in college ready students (defined as students placing into college level math, reading and English) for those who participated in the program, and Tennessee's SAIL program resulted in 71% of its participants placing into college-level math. Many states such as Florida, West Virginia, Illinois, Tennessee and New Jersey have gone as far as implementing statewide college transition course offerings.

Only 40% of high school graduates in New York State last year were deemed ready for college according to NYS Department of Education Data. Many communities in Central New York fell well below even that average (Briedenbach, 2016). College transition course formats vary but many successful ones include a hybrid of both coursework to prepare for college-level math and writing as well as embedded course content focusing on "knowledge and skills needed to do well in authentic, college-level tasks and assignments" (Burnet, 2016, p 2). By working with K-12 to make more students college ready by extending FYE programming into the high school, OCC can expect to improve retention, persistence, and completion.

Recommendation 13: The committee recommends that the College develop and implement a college transition course based on best practices and research outlined by the Community College Research Center to be delivered to local high school students through its current College Credit Now program.

Required Additional Resources

Although specific budgets are not included for these recommendations, the committee carefully considered the impact on financial resources, as well as physical and human resources, that these recommendations could potentially have. Any of the recommendations are feasible, but the following items should be noted as potentially having an impact on resources:

Recommendation 1 – Creating an office of first-year experience or assigning an overall management-level position will require the addition of a new position and would have a financial impact.

Recommendation 9 – Requiring full time faculty only to teach FYS courses would increase the course load of those faculty members. Departments would likely have to assign some existing course load to adjunct faculty members.

Recommendation 13 – Offering the first-year seminar as a College Credit Now course could be a revenue generator. In order for this to be feasible for the College, this course should be formatted as a credit course so that it can generate enough revenue for the College to offset its delivery cost.

Linking to Other College Priorities

The most recent version of the College’s mission and vision statement states that we are a “partner in education for success” and that achieving that mission relies on our ability to retain students to completion and to promote academic excellence. Likewise, Achieving the Dream is focused on reforming community colleges to better focus on student success. This committee is convinced that a comprehensive first-year experience program with mandatory orientation and some type of college success course fits the student-focused model that will help eliminate barriers to student achievement.

Recommendation 14: The design and implementation of a comprehensive first-year experience should be a College initiative, in alignment with Achieving the Dream and Strategic Plan.

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