

Engendering College Student Success:
Improving the First Year and Beyond

Robert S. Feldman and Mattitiyahu S. Zimbler
University of Massachusetts Amherst

All beginning college students face enormous challenges, ranging from the academic to the social, and the first year of college marks the period of greatest vulnerability for student attrition.¹ For many students, the initial college year is the first time they are on their own, without close parental guidance. It is unsurprising that they are often ill-equipped to navigate the challenges endemic to the college experience.

For example, the intellectual requirements of college often differ significantly from those that they were expected to meet in high school. At the same time, the social freedom of college, while ultimately the source of exploration and growth, may lead first-year students down unproductive paths. From being responsible for managing their own finances, to organizing and structuring their time, to moderating their alcohol and drug consumption, life on campus presents college students with situations for which they may have little preparation and over which they must quickly achieve mastery.

Although most students are ultimately successful in navigating the first year of college, many are not. Indeed, the statistics are sobering:

- Twenty-eight percent of first-year students in four-year colleges do not return for their sophomore year. Forty-four percent of those enrolled in two-year colleges do not return for their second year.ⁱⁱ
- Students enrolled in open-admission institutions are at even greater risk for failure. Two-year schools with open admission report 45% dropout rates after the first year. (In comparison, highly selective colleges maintain a rate of 7%.)ⁱⁱⁱ
- Ultimately only 28% of students who attend a two-year public institution obtain a degree.^{iv}

Certain demographic populations are at even greater risk than the general population. Students from low socioeconomic levels are less likely to return for their second year and are also less likely to graduate after four years.^v Additionally, a great deal of research has concluded that minority undergraduates (excluding Asians) persist at significantly lower rates than their White counterparts, even after taking into account confounding variables such as SES and academic preparation.^{vi}

Furthermore, compared to women, men are at greater risk for leaving college prematurely. Women now make up more than half of today's student population and are ultimately more likely than male students to attain their degree.^{vii} One reason for this "success discrepancy" is that women persist into sophomore year at a much higher rate than men: In fact, research shows that **fully 70%** of all students who *were* retained into their second year were female.^{viii}

Why First-Year Students Do Not Succeed

In some cases, students fail because they are simply not intellectually or cognitively ready for the challenges of college work. Because their prior educational experiences have not prepared them adequately, they lack the background to succeed at college-level work.

However, many, if not most, of the students who fail to persist to the second year of college do not leave because they are intellectually unable to do the work. Rather, their failure is attributable to a lack of basic skills and of fluency in the strategies that lead to success in college, such as time management, writing ability, effective reading strategies, note-taking skills, and knowledge of test-taking strategies. In some cases, they simply do not know what adequate college-level work entails.^{ix} Furthermore, many students do not persist for reasons unrelated to academics and intellectual pursuits. In fact, some students cite a lack of social engagement with instructors or peers as the reason for discontent: They simply feel personally isolated and lonely.

Our largest institutions of higher education, which may accept thousands of students each year, perfectly illustrate the sorts of obstacles that first-year students often face. First-year students at these institutions are typically assigned to large lecture classes in which they may experience anonymity and a sense of disconnection from their instructors. Budgetary realities prevent their institutions from ameliorating this situation and in fact exacerbate it: Large public universities have few resources to dedicate to new students—at precisely the juncture in the collegiate career when students most need a helping hand. The consequence too often is that incoming students feel unsupported, unknown, and undervalued.

Yet the problem of social disengagement and lack of student support is not unique to large institutions. Smaller colleges too present settings in which engagement between students and instructors (and with course material) is minimal, and students at smaller colleges are often as innocent of effective study strategies and college-level basic academic skills as their counterparts in larger institutions.

A Solution: First-Year Experience (FYE) Programs and Courses

One solution to the dismal statistics on first-year persistence and persistence to degree are first-year experience (FYE) courses and programs. A growing body of research and evaluation data suggests an answer to the problem. Targeted seminars and programs that directly instruct students in effective learning strategies and critical thinking skills—and also provide opportunities for new students to engage socially with instructors and other students—produce a significant and demonstrable rise in student persistence beyond the first year in college. Furthermore, students who participate in FYE programs have higher grade point averages, are more satisfied with their college experience and institution, and have a stronger sense of community than those who do not.

While FYE courses are often looked on as a recent innovation in higher education, in fact they have a long history. The earliest FYE courses were taught in the late 19th century, and their popularity increased in the 1920s and 1930s as access to higher education became not just a vehicle for upward mobility in society, but also a necessity for sustaining social gains.

Unfortunately, FYE courses largely fell out of favor toward the end of the 1930s. Ironically, this change was due at least in part to the success of efforts to increase access to college. An influx of student applications found institutions generally unprepared to satisfy the needs of their new applicant pool. Faced with unprecedented numbers of increasingly diverse students—many with little parental or family experience of college—many colleges developed a "sink-or-swim" attitude toward their new undergraduates. Even had they decided to lend a hand, the colleges mostly had insufficient resources to devote to helping this utterly novel student body prepare for, transition to, and succeed in college. The result was predictable: While college admissions numbers increased, retention numbers, particularly for first-year students, grew disturbingly low.

In the 1970s, when admission criteria changed even more radically, and the diversity of campus populations increased even more dramatically, the correspondingly wide range of academic preparedness underlined the importance of FYE courses. The number of first-generation students enrolling in college was unprecedented; such students simply did not have the educational or personal background to prepare them for college life. It was becoming increasingly clear that an orientation program designed to provide first-year students with a structured introduction to college that could ease the transition to campus life was a necessity, not a luxury.

In 1972, John Gardner initiated the modern era of FYE programming when he created a new FYE course designed, in part, to ease civil unrest on the campus of the University of South Carolina. In the 1980s, Gardner continued to stoke interest in the nascent grass-roots FYE movement by holding a summit of educators to discuss the importance of first-year courses. One outcome of this meeting was the inauguration of FYE programs on an increasing number of college campuses.

Varieties of FYE Programming

FYE courses and programs come in a variety of forms. Consider, for example, some of the FYE courses found on our own campus of the University of Massachusetts Amherst:

- *Power Up for Student Success*. For this one-credit class, first-year students come to campus three days before the start of school. They are exposed to strategies for dealing with large classes, techniques for time management, and tips for effective test taking. They also receive campus-specific information, including proven procedures for navigating this large and initially intimidating campus.
- *Faculty First-Year Seminars*. These are one-credit courses that University faculty teach in their area of specialty. These seminars cover a large, discipline-specific range of high-interest topics. Recent offerings include "Media, Fashion, Culture, and Style", "Feast or Famine: Agriculture and Disease", and "Civil Liberties and the Supreme Court."
- *OASIS First-Year Seminar* is a one-academic-credit course designed for entering students who have not declared a major. Not only does the seminar cover the transition to college life, it also provides activities designed to help students begin the process of choosing a major.
- *Discipline-specific courses*. Many schools, colleges, and departments have first-year experience courses that are specific to their discipline. For example, the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts provides an "Isenberg Transitions Seminar" for all first-year students in the fall semester. It provides opportunities for self-exploration and an introduction to the resources of the School. In the spring, students take a second course focusing on business, networking skills, and opportunities for students.

Although first-year courses take a variety of approaches, there tend to be several common elements, particularly for those FYE courses that focus on academic and study skills. Such courses typically include time management skills, strategies for reading a textbook, test-taking strategies, techniques for writing papers, values exploration (including considering why one is going to college), taking effective notes, and technology and information literacy. In addition, courses may cover non-academic "soft skills" that relate to career and life success, including decision-making, relationship and diversity issues, health and stress, and—increasingly—financial literacy skills.

The National View

Today, the majority of institutions across the United States have implemented some form of a FYE program. According to a survey by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, FYE programs are playing an increasing—and increasingly dynamic—role in higher education. Eighty-five percent of the surveyed schools offer a FYE course, and 92% of FYE courses are offered for academic credit. In fact, nearly half of the institutions offering FYE courses have made them a requirement for all incoming students. Today the movement is achieving longevity: The majority of schools with FYE courses have offered them for at least three years, and almost half have offered them for more than 10 years.^x

The surveyed institutions report building a variety of innovative components into their FYE programs. Prominent among these is a new emphasis on digital learning. Some 49% of the surveyed institutions have one or more online elements (such as podcasts, blogs, Wikis, and other new media) in their FYE programs—up from just 13% the last time the survey was taken. More than 10% of the schools give students the option of taking an online-only FYE section. Other, non-digital innovations include adding requirements for students to engage in community service activities; creating learning communities around FYE courses; and using FYE courses as an opportunity for students to build personal relationships with faculty members outside the classroom.^{xi}

The survey also found great variety and innovation in FYE course objectives. Not surprisingly, the two most common objectives are developing fundamental academic skills and familiarizing students with campus resources and services. However, many schools also make "encouraging self-exploration and personal development" FYE priorities.

The variety of FYE programs is exemplified by the following descriptions of particularly successful programs:

1. *An immersive and highly structured first-year experience at Appalachian State University.* This first-year program recruits first-years with the promise of a “premiere comprehensive university and model learning community . . . (based on) . . . academic excellence, a living laboratory, a community of educators, of scholars, an academic atmosphere that is serious, but supportive . . .”^{xii}

All first-year students participate in a first-year seminar that provides interdisciplinary engagement and involves multiple modes of inquiry. Experienced faculty teach small seminars designed to develop critical and creative thinking, communication skills, and the use of research methods and tools. In addition, every seminar involves the use of a common book that all students read during the summer prior to their enrollment.

The program also features early warning systems to monitor academic progress and provides dedicated first-year learning communities for most new students. These communities encourage student contact with peers and faculty, and they offer clear avenues for further advising. Since instituting this proactive first-year program,

enrollment, retention, and graduation rates have improved at Appalachian State. Moreover, the university has won numerous awards: *Time* magazine cited the institution as an Exemplary Model for Freshman Learning (2001), the Policy Center on the First Year of College named Appalachian State an Institution of Excellence (2002-2003), and the institution received a Lee Noel and Randi Levitz Retention Excellence Award (2002).^{xiii}

2. *Boundary-busting residential living at The University of Michigan.* The Michigan Community Scholars Program (MCSP) was developed to “bring together . . . some of the best features of engaged learning in undergraduate education by building a diverse, innovative scholarly community.”^{xiv} What developed was a residential living/learning program involving 150 students (approximately 100 first-years plus peer advisors, mentors, resident advisors, and course facilitators) who apply based on an interest in community service, academic excellence, leadership, diversity, and community.

Open to all first-year students, the program historically consists of about 50% students of color and international students and 50% White students. The focus on engaging diversity and differences works to create a community built on the concept of boundary-crossing. Results have been encouraging. For consecutive years, 100% of underrepresented students of color who participated in the MCSP program returned for their second year, while the retention rate for the program as a whole has remained above 95%. Additionally, the MCSP program has found considerable success both in helping to alleviate racial segregation on campus as well as in producing future leaders on campus and post-graduation (the program boasts a disproportionate number of student leaders, particularly in the fields of civic engagement and racial/ethnic relations).^{xv}

3. *A learning community at Wagner College.* The Wagner Plan implements a learning community concept with the major goals of beginning “the process of liberal learning through (a) critical analysis; (b) improvement of reading, observational, and writing skills; (c) recognition of cultural diversity; and (d) service to the community.”^{xvi}

Under the mantra “reading, writing, and doing,” the Wagner Plan creates small cohorts of students with similar interests who enroll in a package of related courses. One of the three required classes in each package is a Reflective Tutorial that is reading- and writing-intensive, as well as directly related to both the theme and the concurrent experiential learning assignment of the community. Moreover, involved faculty serve as the undergraduate advisors to their learning community (until students declare a major), and each cohort has a dedicated peer writing tutor and peer research tutor to help first-year students make a smooth transition to college-level coursework.

The results have been impressive. Implemented in 1998, the Wagner Plan has seen increased participation in the campus community and increased satisfaction and connection to the curriculum. In 1998, 19% of students felt the experiential learning component made their classes more meaningful. In 2004, that number grew to 64% (the belief that the program benefited students also rose from 46% to 78%). Most impressively, in 1998 Wagner College reported a second year persistence rate of 77%.

Since the implementation of the Wagner Plan, persistence rates have climbed to 90% in 2003 and 89% in 2004.^{xvii}

4. *Community learning at Kalamazoo College.* Kalamazoo College has purposefully blurred the hierarchy and separation between students and faculty to create a “Fellowship of Learning.” Former President of the College (1922-1935) Allan Hoben summed up the educational philosophy: “Through interplay of minds both past and present and in friendly contact with faculty members, students evolve their best selves and therefore their charters of service to mankind.”^{xviii} This partnership is solidified for first-year students through orientation, summer common reading, first-year seminars, first-year advising, first-year forums, student and faculty mentoring, and completion of a student portfolio (a requirement intended to help students reflect and track their educational experience).^{xix}
5. *Living and learning at Iowa State University.* Iowa State University has created 14 academic–residential learning communities housed inside their first-year residence halls. Each community is coupled with a relevant academic unit, and serves to provide students with more chances for group learning, academic achievement, and interaction with the faculty. The learning community residences were implemented to increase first-year retention and strengthen community bonds.^{xx}

Essential Elements of Successful FYE Programs and Courses

Obviously, there are considerable differences among the FYE programs and courses described above. Yet there are common threads too. A growing body of research suggests that successful FYE programs and courses share several key elements:

Provide Structure and Intentionality

One effective method of helping first-year students feel welcomed and prepared for college is by opening up lines of communication with them **before** their arrival on campus. With course listings and orientation materials in hand the summer before classes start, undergraduates can seek assistance from their family or the advising office before they arrive at school. Additionally, by taking a proactive approach to maintaining consistent contact with first-year students, the university increases its chances of reaching and supporting them before they encounter difficulties.

Focus on Academic and Social Engagement

Success in college depends as much on the social and personal dimensions of college life as on particular classroom skills. It is essential to consider the social challenges that new students face the day they arrive at college. Alone for the first time, first-years must navigate a new setting and new peers, and they must usually do so without a network of established relationships. While they must not neglect academic expectations, their initial task is simply fitting in. Given that one-third of first-year students seriously consider dropping out during their initial semester, the first step in truly supporting them is helping them feel connected to the people around them and giving them a sense of belonging in their new home. Significant numbers of schools report that encouraging students to form support networks and to identify with their fellow first-year students is a key objective of their FYE courses. This strategy recognizes that engagement in one's community sets the stage for engagement in the academic process.

Provide Opportunities to Engage Beyond the FYE Course and Program

The more students interact with other students, faculty, and campus resources, the greater their chance of persistence. While perhaps the most important factor in student retention is positive interactions with a peer group on campus, persistence has also been positively associated with student–faculty non-classroom interaction, participation in extracurricular activities, participation in Greek life, participation in intercollegiate athletics, and the use of academic advising resources.^{xxi}

Integrate FYE Programs and Courses within the Larger Framework of the Students' First-Year Experience

Many of the most successful programs integrate faculty, staff, and administrators into the FYE program to put new students in touch with as many resources as possible while they navigate their first weeks of college life. Incorporating faculty and administration into first-year initiatives not only reinforces the university's commitment to student success, but also brings together the groups whose combined expertise and support can effectively strengthen first-year students' progress in the years to come.

Address the Specific Needs of Individual Students

Having successfully attracted a heterogeneous student body, an institution would be imprudent if it provided one-size-fits-all student services. FYE courses are a crucial component of the curriculum with the flexibility to meet the needs of the full range of first-year students. By recognizing and accounting for individual undergraduates' unique strengths and weaknesses, FYE programs can help overcome differences in academic and social preparation.

Incorporate a Broad Curriculum Involving both Academic and Social Skills

Successful FYE programs and courses provide a broad curriculum, focusing on both academic skills and practical skills.

For example, an effective FYE program recognizes that students generally come to college lacking basic financial management experience. Many students have never had a checking account, and now they must balance one. Credit card offers tempt them every day, and yet the only credit card they have had access to probably belonged to their parents. They have never had to manage complex financial transactions, and yet they now must grasp the financial responsibilities that come with loans, work-study positions, and bank accounts.

For these reasons, FYE courses have begun to broaden their definition of *college skills* to include the basics of financial responsibility. By immediately offering incoming students the tools to open a bank account, make a budget, and live within their means, the institution shows that it recognizes the complexity of earning an education while simultaneously accepting financial independence. Such courses can go a long way toward lessening students' emotional burdens and practical anxieties.

Engage in Ongoing Evaluation

Colleges should implement FYE programs only after setting specific and measurable goals and expectations. The process of clearly defining expectations gives program administrators specific benchmarks to aim for and milestones to observe and measure. Then, having set clear expectations, administrators must commit to ongoing measurements that rely on multiple sources of input. Far from being automated systems that can be designed, initiated, and ignored, FYE initiatives must be conceived as works in progress, subject to ongoing evaluation and fine-tuning.

Evaluative information should be aggressively sought from students, faculty, and staff—and after several years of program operation, from program alumni as well. Program managers must encourage and honor candor throughout the evaluation process and as long as the program is in operation. Because the needs of college students constantly change, and the requirements of college courses change as well, it would be misguided to regard a run of positive feedback as either definitive or lasting. The “work-in-progress” attitude should be invoked continuously as a way to effect a commitment to ongoing improvements and program revision.

Program evaluation must depend on the collection of multiple measures of student success. While retention rate is both important and readily measurable, it is by no means the only outcome of importance. Sole reliance on maximizing retention rate can actually be counterproductive if program quality and academic rigor are sacrificed to keep retention high. The point of FYE programs is not simply to ensure that first-year students move on to their sophomore year, but to ensure that they make real, measurable progress within a challenging academic and social environment. Therefore, evaluation should depend on multiple, diverse sources of information that focus as much on program quality and student academic performance as on retention. The use of multiple measures and indicators of achievement enables program administrators to double-check preliminary conclusions and gather diverse information to guide intelligent program revision.^{xxii}

Institutional Buy-In at Every Level

The more human resources institutions commit to their FYE initiatives, the greater the likelihood that the programs will have the intended effect on incoming students. Often, first-year programs are established as standalone entities housed in separate administrative departments isolated from the larger institution and bereft of a unifying philosophy. This can be problematic because students will sense that the orientation experience is a step-relative disconnected from the larger university system into which it purports to help them assimilate.

One key element of a good solution is to assign FYE courses to members of the faculty rather than to graduate students or adjunct instructors. Having faculty members—or even faculty advisors—teach FYE courses in a setting that encourages conversation and connection can build important bonds between the institution and its students, and can help the university present a unified educational philosophy.

The Ultimate Benefits of First-Year Initiatives

It is clear from the research that students who enroll in FYE courses have more success in college than their peers who do not. A significant percentage of institutions report that students who take FYE courses show increased persistence to the sophomore year.

Furthermore, the effects of FYE programs and courses continue throughout students' academic careers. Significant numbers of schools report that FYE courses improve student grade point averages, build general academic abilities, and increase student persistence to graduation. For example, a study at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania provides a dramatic example of the effectiveness of FYE courses. Wilkes University designed a mandatory FYE program specifically for conditionally admitted students, students who generally need additional coursework in basic academic skills before they can be offered full admittance. The Wilkes University study found that as a result of their program, the conditionally admitted students often had *higher* GPAs by the end of their sophomore year than students who had received unconditional acceptance.^{xxiii}

The benefits of FYE courses are not limited to the classroom. Survey data show that students who enroll in FYE courses acquire skills that help them thrive in many aspects of college life. For instance, a large percentage of the surveyed institutions report that students who take FYE courses connect better with their peers, are more satisfied with their collegiate institutions, are more satisfied with their faculty, make better use of campus services, and participate more often in campus activities. These findings show how successful FYE courses are in achieving objectives that relate to the non-academic challenges of college life.

Overall, research demonstrates that FYE courses can play a significant role in helping undergraduates succeed in college. Most obviously, they help students during one of the most difficult periods of college—the first year. But successful FYE programs have been found to improve a student's college experience all the way to graduation. FYE courses help individual students adjust academically, socially, and personally to the challenges of college life. Just as importantly, they help build cohesion among first-year students by bringing them together with faculty in a shared experience with their first-year peers.^{xxiv}

Recommendations for the Implementation of Future FYE Programs

Moving forward, we urge that FYE programming become a required aspect of the first-year college experience. The proven track record of first-year initiatives, for both the university and its students, lends strong support for more widespread implementation. We recommend the following key points when designing and constructing future FYE programs:

- Award course credit(s) for the completion of FYE programs.
- Make use of online and digital resources (e.g. online FYE courses, podcasts, etc.) to reach as many incoming students as possible.
- Establish learning communities to increase student interaction and faculty contact, while also more deeply engaging students in relevant course material.

- Integrate a service component or community service project to engage undergraduates with their local and global community.
- Maximize opportunities for new students to build personal relationships with peers, instructors, and the administrative support network.

Conclusion

There is, of course, no way to guarantee that any student will succeed in college. However, FYE courses have been shown to put students, regardless of their background, in the best possible position to be successful. For this reason, their prominence and importance is likely to grow.

The impetus for this white paper is the fact that we as an educational community have already begun implementing first-year programs throughout the nation. Some of these attempts have been successful, others less so. This process has continued to the present, and we now have a clearer idea of what does and does not work in transitioning high school students into college. We know that no one solution will work for every school, and we have an idea of which sorts of programs work best in various institutional frameworks.

From an administrative perspective, research strongly suggests that FYE courses not only increase first-year retention and improve graduation rates, providing both reputational, administrative, and financial benefits to a school. But FYE courses also provide significant psychological benefits to students entering their first year of college. . From a new student's perspective, these courses help to create a sense of belonging while also providing a safety net in case of adjustment problems. These programs can minimize the feeling of loneliness and helplessness often experienced by first-year students by not only highlighting where support can be found, but also by creating situations whereby students interact with those resources early and often after arriving on campus.

It is time to move from research to implementation. It is critical that the system entrusted with educating our nation's people uses all of the knowledge at its disposal to maximize its effectiveness. It is no longer enough simply to know what works; it is time to implement what we know works by encouraging the development of first-year experience courses and programs driven by our understanding of the research on best practices.

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