

Eastern Connecticut State University:
The Birth, Growth and Maturation of
a First-Year Program

Martin A. Levin, Director
 First-Year Program
 Eastern Connecticut State University
 J. Eugene Smith Library, Room 426
 Willimantic, CT 06226 USA
 Phone/Fax: (860) 465-5589/5588
 Email: Levin@easternct.edu

Eastern Today

- Located in Willimantic, CT
- Connecticut's Only State Supported, Liberal Arts Institution
- One of the Four Institutions in the Connecticut State University System
- Total Fall 2007 Enrollment: 5137
- 33 Undergraduate Majors
- Graduate Programs in: Accounting, Education, Organizational Management, Educational Technology



ECSU Library and Home of the First-Year Program Office

Established as Willimantic State Normal School in 1889 with 13 Students



First WSN building opened in 1894 and served as the only classroom and administration building until 1943



A Two-Year Institution



Unfortunately, the building burned down in 1943, almost ending the Institutions short life

Photos from ECSU Archives

Name Changes Reflected Changing Missions

- 1939 - Willimantic State Teacher's College
- 1959 - Willimantic State College
- 1968 - Eastern Connecticut State College
- 1983 - Eastern Connecticut State University

Enrollment Grew, Especially in the late 1960's, 1970's and 1980's

- 1889 to 1945 - 13 to over 247 students
- 1945 to 1959 - 247 to 576 students
- 1959 to 1983 - 576 to more than 3700
- 1983 to 1990 - 4475 students

Campus Growth

- Growth was slow until the late 1960's
- From 1970 to 1976 - 9 new buildings
- From 1977 to 1984, no campus growth
- In 1984, a new residence hall

University Reaches a Turning Point

- In spite of increasing enrollments, the State of Connecticut considered closing the institution between 1977 and 1988
- The University had a poorly defined mission and a mediocre academic reputation
- In 1988, a new President, David Carter was hired
- From 1988 to 2006, enrollment reached 5200
- 15 new buildings transformed the campus
- Mission defined as the States "Public Liberal Arts Institution" in the mid-1990's; approved by the Board of Trustees in 1998
- Academic reputation enhanced; now an institution of "First Choice"



David G. Carter,
President of Eastern
from 1988 to 2006;
currently Chancellor of
the Connecticut State
University System

The "Conception" of Eastern's First-Year Program - Sept. 9, 1996



Letter from the University President to the "Senate President

Eastern will develop a first-year program that will provide opportunities for students to pursue interactive learning. Innovative and thematic approaches to the first-year program will become a focal point of an Eastern education. The program will be distinguished by very close interaction among students, groups of faculty and support staff. Program activities will promote learning communities, critical thinking, writing and quantitative skills, student participation in artistic and intellectual events and activities, and global and cultural awareness.

The University should require a first-year, one-semester seminar similar to John Gardner's First Year Seminar Program for all first-time, full-time students to facilitate their adjustment and orientation to the University.

*All curricular issues must go through the University Senate

Early Planning Stages: Fall 1996 to Summer 1998

- Senate approval for First-Year Program Planning Committee
- Public forum
- Senate approves a "Pilot Program"
- Faculty recruited and trained
- The Programs find an administrative home and is called the "Blue Sky Program"
- A faculty member given 1/4 load to run the program; responsible for faculty and student recruitment, course planning

Program Goals and Objectives

- Transition students to college
- Appreciation of diversity
- Create a culture of academic excellence, creativity, and pride in the University
- Accentuate Eastern's Liberal Arts Mission and emphasize success
- Involve students in academic and co-curricular programs
- Establish Learning Communities
- Develop academic and survival skills
- Increase retention rates

The Fall 1998 Pilot Program

- Six "Learning Communities" each consisting of
 - 25 students (140 students total)
 - 2 full-time faculty
 - An Administrative "Associate"
 - A peer mentor
- Faculty to work with students during the summer; students to keep portfolios
- Three integrated courses
 - Two specially designed, 3-credit, 7-week seminar courses taken during the first and second 7-weeks, team taught by two faculty members
 - One, 1-credit "*Resources, Research, and Responsibilities*" course (the "3R" course) similar to University 101
- In the Spring 1999 semester, the same group of students to take another "3R" course

The "Blue Sky Committee" and Student Affairs Wanted these Skills to be Taught in the "3R" Course:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing Skills • Portfolio Presentation (students required to maintain portfolio) • Library Use • E-mail use • Internet Use • Critical Thinking • Time Management • Multicultural Awareness • Civility Commitment • Emotional Well-Being • Physical Well-Being • Spiritual Well-Being • Academic Decisions • Career Possibilities • Social Decision-Making | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-curricular Activities • Reading for Comprehension • Effective Note-Taking • Dealing with New Autonomy • Cooperating in New Situations • Making Good Decisions • Committing to the Eastern Community • Understand Leadership • Using Campus Resources • Develop Life Skills • Using the Library • Using Computers • Drug/Alcohol Education • Campus Safety • Dealing With Stress • Student Government and Clubs |
|--|--|

Assessment

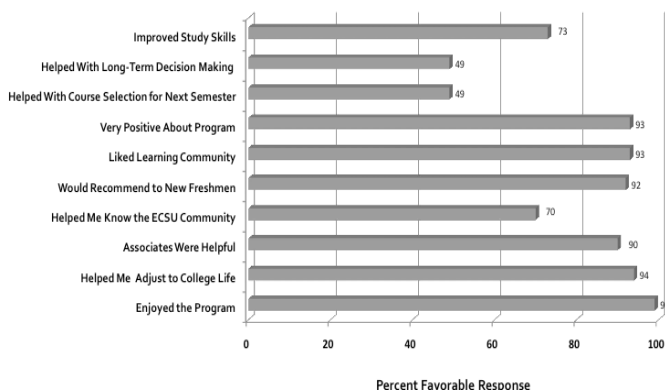
- Survey was administered to students
- Due to contractual issues, could not evaluate instructors or associates in the program
- Outcomes measurement for programmatic changes only

Program Problems

- Some faculty did not make assignments
- Portfolio development was not practical
- Many faculty did not like required team-teaching
- Faculty felt 7-week course structuring was difficult in terms of organization
- Faculty did not use peer mentors
- Faculty could not cover all “skills” in the “3R” course
- Impossible to achieve some programmatic components/goals, e.g., getting the same “Learning Community” together for the Spring “3R” course was not practical

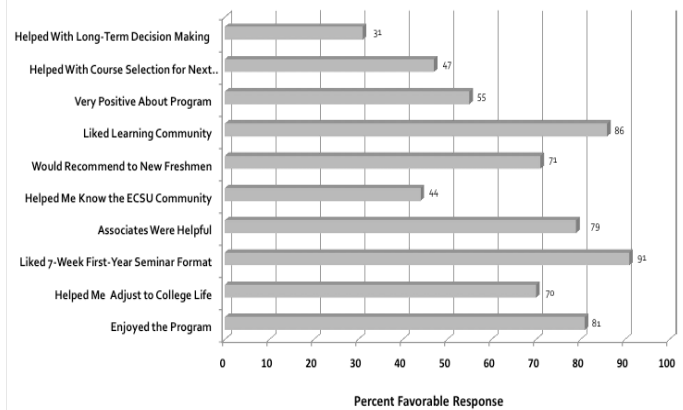
1999 - Blue Sky Program Survey

(147 Respondants)



1998 - Blue Sky Program Survey

(71 Respondants)



The Fall 1999 Pilot Program Modified Version of Fall 1998

- Peer mentors, team teaching requirement, 7-week courses, summer assignments, student portfolios and spring semester components either discontinued or optional (mostly discontinued)
- Eliminated specially designed 3-credit seminar courses
- For Fall 1999, a Learning Community consisted of:
 - Two, 3 (or 4)-credit existing General Education Courses
 - Faculty instructed to link these courses thematically
 - One, 1-credit “3R” with same goals and content as before
 - “Associates” used in each “3R” class
 - 150 students enrolled

Fall 1999 to Spring 2001: The First-Year Program Planning Committee Seeks Approval for Permanent Program

- Curriculum Committee has concerns
 - Program will drain resources from existing programs
 - Sees support as weak
 - “3R” course too difficult to teach
 - Concern that Director may be administrative position
- Senate does not approve program; tells Planning Committee to address concerns and resubmit proposal to Senate
- Senate approves the proposal in Spring 2001

Eastern Has a Permanent First-Year Program Called the *Blue Sky Program*

Elapsed Time from Conception:
5 Years!

The First-Year Program Planning Committee becomes The Blue Sky Program Committee

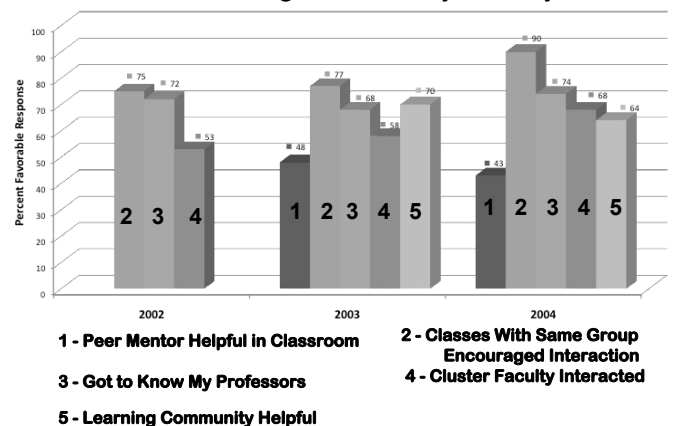
Fall 2001 to Spring 2004 Academic Years

- Fall 2001, new 1/4 load director
- University President wants all students enrolled in the Blue Sky Program by Fall 2005
- Committee tightened up the goals of the “3R” course; although still difficult to cover everything
- Increased emphasis on faculty recruitment and training
- Fall 2003, “Associates” discontinued
- Fall 2003, Reinstated student peer mentors
 - Training of peer mentors was limited
 - GPA above 2.5
 - Paid a salary

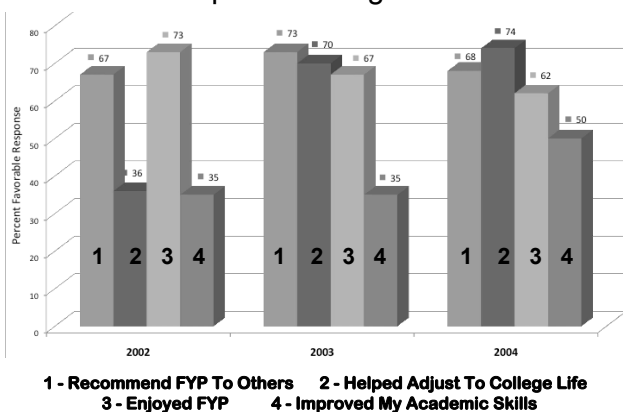
2001-2004 continued

- Funds became available for “field trips”
- Faculty satisfaction with the program was generally high, but no “rewards” for participation
- Grew from 225 participants in Fall 2002 to 305 in Fall 2004
- Name of program changed to “First-Year Program” in Fall 2004
- As program grew, Administration refused to provide additional load hours for the Program Director; Director resigned in spring 2004

Falls 2002, 2003, 2004 Selected Learning Community Survey Items



Falls 2002, 2003, 2004 Selected Top Correlating “Recommend”



Fall 2004 to Fall 2006 a Pivotal Period

- New 1/4 load faculty member hired as Program Director in Fall 2004
- Enrollment figures
 - Fall 2004 - 305
 - Fall 2005 - 353
 - Fall 2006 - 423
- The 1/4 load Director could not handle increasing workload
- FYP Committee increasingly ran the program
- Need for a full-time director was made known, but not fully appreciated by the administration until Fall 2006
- Many important details of program administration were neglected due to lack of oversight (e.g., during falls 2005 and 2006, student class assessments were improperly handled)
- Although growing in size, major administrative problems

Major University Changes Bode Well for the FYP

- Dec 2005, Senate approves a new *Liberal Arts Core Curriculum*
 - A spring, First-Year Liberal Arts Colloquium now required of all freshmen
- May 2006, a new President, Elsa Nunez
- Sept 2006, Senate modifies FYP
 - Liberal Arts Core courses in fall clusters
 - New required colloquia are under the jurisdiction of the FYP
 - The “3R” course is updated; now academic skills are stressed as well as co-curricular activities
- **The President announces FYP to have a full-time director**
- June 2007, full-time director is hired



Elsa Nunez, current President of Eastern

Strategic Plan 2008-2013 Approved Fall 2007



1.1 Strategic Initiative: Fully implement and integrate Eastern's Liberal Arts Core and First-Year Program

Benchmarks:

- 1.1.1. Implement a plan for allocating faculty resources, including consideration of faculty workload, that ensures appropriate staffing of LAC and FYP courses. (AY 2008-2009)
- 1.1.2. Enroll all incoming first-year students in the FYP. (AY 2010-2011)

The First-Year Program Is Embedded!

Eastern's First-Year Program Today

The Fall Learning Communities:
Now Recommended, To Be Required of All Freshmen by Fall 2010

Learning Community

- The same 20 to 25 students are enrolled in each course; Fall 2008 scheduled for 500 seats (20 clusters)
- A “Community” consists of two full-time faculty members, the students in the class and a “well-trained” peer mentor
- Two academic courses from the *Liberal Arts Core Curriculum* combined with a one-credit “3R” academic skills course (FYR 174 *Resources, Research, and Responsibilities*)
- The three courses are linked by a common theme
- Some clusters are specialized for specific majors

Peer Mentoring : An Academic Program

- Minimum GPA - 3.0; for Fall 2008 the average GPA is above 3.5
- Must sign a contract
- Attend training sessions with faculty
- Enroll in a fall 2-credit Peer Mentoring evening class
- Meet with “3R” course instructor weekly
- Attend “3R” course weekly
- Organize social events outside of class
- Attend all cluster activities (e.g., field trips and other excursions)
- Encourage the students in their cluster to attend campus cultural activities
- Give classroom lectures
 - Mentors receive training in their evening class in such areas as plagiarism, advising and registration as well as other areas
 - Other good topics for short presentations include residence life, coping with exams, etc.



First-Year Program: Fall 2007 Assessment Data

Collection and Tabulation of Data for Fall 2007

- Assessments were distributed to each class and collected by FYP staff
- Data for approximately 450 students
- Only *combined data was used

*To adhere to the Collective Bargaining Agreement, we do not tabulate individual data.

More Than 50% :

- Felt the FYP helped them adjust to college life
- Would recommend the program to incoming freshmen
- Felt the FYP helped them feel comfortable with their professors
- Felt the FYP enhanced their ability to:
 - Use campus services
 - Study effectively
 - Use WebCT
 - Work with other students
 - Adjust to the academic demands of college
 - Develop close friendships with other students
 - Get to know faculty

*We generally did OK in:

- Research/library use
- Career development
- Decision making
- Time management
- Critical thinking
- Oral Communication
- Written Communication
- Note-taking

*Higher percentage of students agreed than disagreed, but still room for improvement in some areas

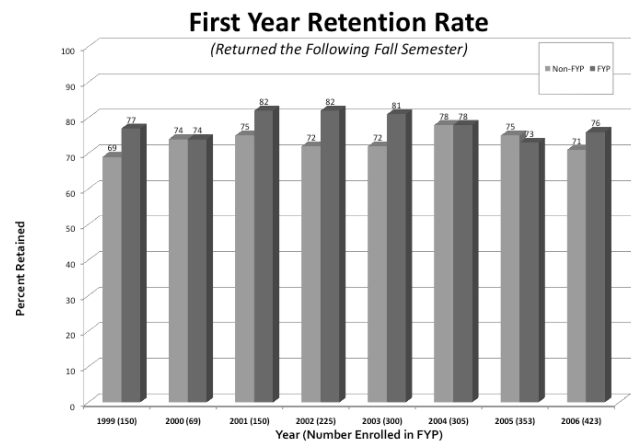
The Spring Semester

Liberal Arts Colloquia:
Required of All Freshmen for
the First Time in Spring 2008

Discussion-Oriented Colloquia

- First required by all freshmen in Spring 2008
- 20 or fewer students per class
- 3.0 to 4.0 credits
- 42 sections offered this past spring for the first time
- Offered by faculty from any discipline on an contemporary topic; some examples are
 - “Personal Finances”
 - “Global Warming”
 - “Lessons of the Holocaust”
 - “Diet, Health and Nutrition”
 - “Deconstructing Disney”
- Goals of all colloquia are to develop the skills of good scholarship - critical reading, logical thinking, and effective communication
- Subject matter is secondary; used to develop skills

Retention Data 1999 to 2006



Challenges Ahead

- Faculty must have additional load credits for teaching in clusters
- Obtain adequate Funding
 - Had to beg, borrow and “steal” funds for this past year
- *Strategic Plan* calls for all freshmen to be enrolled in the fall and spring components of the FYP
 - A Fall Learning Community is now recommended, but not required; Fall 2008 - 500 seats; need 1000 seats by Fall 2010
 - Spring Colloquia are now required; had sufficient seats for Spring 2008
- Colloquia have been popular with faculty, but at what cost?
 - 42 new colloquia for Spring 2008 have severely limited faculty hours to teach in a Fall 2008 Learning Communities
 - Recruitment efforts failed to increase number of seats from what was offered in Fall 2007
- May have to offer different types of fall programs
- Hope to link Learning Communities to residential housing
- Need for more staff
 - Administration wants to link freshmen advising to the FYP
 - Wants FYP to monitor freshmen course compliance issues

Summary

- Administrative support (programmatic and financial) were vital
- Sought out input. “Buy in” important.
- Committees important, but sometimes not realistic
 - Eliminated all redundancy with other institutional offices or programs
- Program Assessment
 - Assessment started from the beginning; identified problem areas and worked towards fixing them
 - Recognized union contract/faculty handbook issues related to renewal, promotion, and tenure process
 - Now return assessment forms and data to faculty
- Program development took many years
- Faculty and Peer Mentors have to be adequately trained and compensated
- Programs cannot grow in numbers of students serviced without growth in staff
- Program now embedded in the curriculum