



## Overview of Essays

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Increasing enrollments, reductions in funding for higher education, and greater diversity of new students continue to shape the work of instructors and administrators of first-year students at American colleges and universities. Taking pride in “flunking out” large numbers of students is a distant memory on most campuses. Instead, institutions of higher education have increasingly embraced their obligation for assisting students with the transition to the college learning environment. Over the past two decades nearly every campus in America has launched initiatives specifically designed to improve the success of new students. It might be said that the challenge of the last two decades of the 20th century was to disseminate good practices in first-year education and to encourage institutions to embrace their responsibilities for the success of their students. That challenge has, in large measure, been accomplished. The challenges facing educators in the first decades of the new century are to perfect those good practices launched over the last decades, adjust practices to accommodate a more diverse student population, and increase the cost efficiencies of services to new students. These new challenges call for greater knowledge about assessment practices. It is simply not enough to collect anecdotal stories of student success—the refinement of good practices requires systematic and ongoing evaluation of outcomes.

The First-Year Assessment Listserv (FYA-L) is one way that educators are developing their knowledge of assessment tools and techniques. The idea of a listserv focused on first-year assessment was conceived by John N. Gardner and Betsy O. Barefoot as part of a grant application to The Pew Charitable Trusts. That proposal outlined a new organization intended to extend the work of the National Resource Center on The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition with a new focus on assessment as a means to improving the first college year.

The task of establishing the proposed listserv fell to me early in 2000. I accepted the challenge with mixed feelings as it was clear that educators were hungry for help with assessment but, it was also clear that many listservs fail to do more than fill subscribers’ inboxes with disorganized and unhelpful chatter. I decided that an effective listserv needed to deliver meaningful content to busy educators as well as provide opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing of ideas and concerns.

FYA-L was launched in early 2000 with a promise that subscribers would receive, at least twice a month, an invited,

edited essay from an assessment professional or practitioner on a topic relevant to assessing the first college year. Undergirding the concept for these invited essays was a simple philosophy—busy educators could benefit from a brief essay, about 1,000 words, focused on a single “good” assessment idea that could be read and understood in five minutes or less. The essays would be delivered via e-mail and also stored on a web site to enhance the ability of subscribers to retrieve ideas later or to share them easily with others.

This new concept of a listserv as a kind of online magazine caught on. More than 300 subscribers signed on during the first three days of the listserv. The number rose to more than 600 subscribers by the end of the first month and topped 1,200 subscribers within a few months. FYA-L grew to have the largest number of subscribers of any listserv on the topic of higher education assessment—even though the list continued to specialize in assessment topics focused on the first year of college. Those initial essays were collected in a monograph, *Proving and Improving: Strategies for Assessing the First College Year*, published in 2001 by the National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina.

While that first monograph was moving to press, FYA-L continued to deliver invited essays focused on assessment tools and techniques. With the assistance of my colleagues at the Policy Center—Betsy O. Barefoot, Marc Cutright, John N. Gardner, Samantha Landgrover, Michael J. Siegel, and Angie Whiteside—additional invited essays were collected, edited, and shared with subscribers. FYA-L continues to operate as a joint venture of the Policy Center and the National Resource Center under the editorial leadership of Michael J. Siegel and Steven W. Schwartz.

Essays from FYA-L along with a number of new contributions comprise this second monograph, *Proving and Improving Volume II: Tools and Techniques for Assessing the First College Year*.<sup>1</sup> Written for educators with little or moderate experience assessing first-year students and initiatives the monograph provides an overview of assessment and specific ideas for a variety of assessment activities. The monograph also includes a detailed typology of first-year assessment instruments which will be helpful to even experienced assessment practitioners. The monograph includes the following sections.

- “An Introduction to First-Year Assessment” provides a primer on assessment that identifies good practices, steps, and structures for starting an assessment initiative and tips for organizing assessment efforts.
- Part I is built on the premise of using existing data before collecting new data and focuses on how institutional records can be used in first-year assessment.
- Part II provides advice about methods for collecting, analyzing, and using the “student voice”—captured through student interviews or journals—in first-year assessment.
- Part III focuses on methods to evaluate a first-year initiative using focus groups or classroom environment inventories.
- Part IV contains essays about a variety of specific assessment survey instruments.
- Part V contains a discussion of instruments and structures designed to examine cognitive development in students.
- Part VI offers essays on instruments designed to examine specific student traits.
- Appendix A provides a typology of instruments commonly used in first-year assessment efforts. The typology includes contact information and is cross-referenced to essays in this monograph.

Whether read from cover to cover or used as a reference guide to assessment instruments, Volume II provides a wide array of ideas and resources for gaining new perspectives on the first college year. These essays share a common element—they are presented not as a call to conduct assessment for assessment's sake but rather for assessment to be a means to the greater end of improving the first year of college for all new students.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks are extended to Tracy L. Skipper, Editorial Projects Coordinator at the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Tracy's editorial skills greatly improved every essay in this monograph. She created the organizational structure for the monograph and oversaw the full production process. Simply stated, this monograph was guided and moved forward at every step of the process by Tracy.

