

Panther Camp Florida International University

The Institution and Its Students

Florida International University (FIU) is a public four-year, majority-minority, Hispanic-serving institution in Miami, Florida. FIU is a primarily commuter campus with 10% of students living in on-campus housing. FIU's full-time enrollment (FTE) for the 2006-2007 academic year was 24,605 students with the following ethnic and racial breakdown: 55.7% Hispanic, 17.8% Caucasian, 12.9% African American, 3.6% Asian, and 9.8% international or unidentified. The average age of the undergraduate student at FIU is 22. Women comprise 56.3% of the total student population, while men comprise 43% of the student population.

Description of the Initiative

Panther Camp is a three day leadership and involvement retreat for incoming first-year students at Florida International University. The program was piloted in the summer of 2006, with 25 students. In 2007, Panther Camp increased its attendance to more than 130 students. In 2008, 167 students attended Panther Camp. Panther Camp 2008 was held at Gold Coast Christian Camp in Lake Worth, Florida. Two sessions of the camp were held in August, before the start of classes.

The purpose of Panther Camp is to provide a fun and meaningful transition into college life by helping students increase their confidence and become more knowledgeable about the campus resources and involvement opportunities available to them. The camp is designed to help increase institutional affinity; knowledge of campus traditions; and students' confidence in their communication skills, time management skills, and their ability to form new relationships among their peers.

The program is coordinated entirely through a peer educator system, including a six-member student executive board and a 22-member student facilitator team, both of which are selected through an application and interview process. Student leaders involved with Panther Camp must maintain a 2.5 cumulative GPA, and executive board members must serve one year as a facilitator to meet the requirements for a director position. The facilitator team and the executive board both participate in group trainings and retreats to prepare them for their leadership positions. The trainings and retreats focus on small-group facilitation, student development theory, team-building activities, values clarification, traditions, diversity and multiculturalism awareness, inclusion, self-awareness, and leadership theory and practice. Additionally, the facilitators meet every week for eight months to create learning outcomes, educational programs, and activities for the camp.

The camp consists of four educational programs based on (a) campus traditions, (b) diversity, (c) leadership and involvement, and (d) academic life. These programs are student planned and student facilitated. The camp also features a wide array of team-building activities, followed by time for processing. Additionally, the campers are

divided into “families” and are assigned two facilitators. The families spend time together creating songs, team flags, and discussing their transition to college.

The facilitators and the executive board members receive frequent feedback and performance evaluations, both by the advisor team as well as through a process of peer review. The coordinator of New Student Programs at FIU supervises both groups directly; however, many collaborating units from student affairs and academic affairs units such as the Offices of Campus Life, Residence Life, Sorority and Fraternity Life, Alumni Affairs, Undergraduate Education, the Women’s Center, and the Center for Leadership and Service are also involved in the process.

Research Design

Panther Camp uses research and assessment not only to develop a meaningful program but also to measure the success of the program. A pretest was administered to every camper prior to attending the camp, using a Likert-scale psychometric questionnaire. The pretest questionnaire asked questions to gauge (a) the students’ overall comfort with their transition to college, (b) their intention to graduate from FIU, (c) their likelihood of getting involved on campus, and (d) their overall excitement about attending FIU. The Likert-scale pretest questionnaire also measured the students’ self-perceived knowledge of campus resources, campus traditions, involvement opportunities, and campus administrators. Lastly, the pretest assessed the students’ confidence in their time management abilities, communication skills, ability to work within a team, appreciation of diversity, leadership skills, and ability to make friends. The pretest questionnaire also incorporated a short response section to gauge students’ familiarity with campus organizations and administrators (Appendix A).

The posttest assessment incorporated many of the same questions as the pretest, which allowed researchers to track changes in students’ perceptions, knowledge, and comfort level as a result of Panther Camp. The posttest assessment was administered to the camp attendees immediately following their camp experience (Appendix B). A short answer portion was incorporated into the posttest, which allowed the campers to talk about what they found to be the most meaningful part of their Panther Camp experience.

Data from the Panther Camp study were then cross compared with data from the overall student population. Finally, camp attendees and peer educators were interviewed after their camp experience to determine how effective Panther Camp was in creating an environment that is conducive to a successful first college year.

Additionally, the Panther Camp facilitators and executive board members were assessed after their peer leader experience to determine how they were affected by their leadership experience. They were given a Likert-scale postevaluation that assessed their perceived growth in 20 functional areas (see Appendix C), most of which were derived from CAS standards on leadership and transition programs. Examples of functional areas assessed include their perceived increased ability to

- Work with diverse groups of people in team settings
- Speak in front of groups of people
- Serve as a positive role model and mentor to first-year students
- Identify their academic goals

- Make autonomous decisions
- Serve as a mentor to peers in the process of transition
- Communicate effectively in various settings
- Identify their values and beliefs and how they affect their leadership style

Findings

Significant results were seen in the areas of (a) comfort with transition to college, (b) likelihood of getting involved, (c) likelihood of graduating from FIU, and (d) overall excitement about FIU; all of which increased as a result of the Panther Camp experience (see Figures 1-3). Focus groups revealed that the students' perceptions of their camp experiences were congruent with the posttest results. Overall, students perceived that by attending the camp, they were more prepared for their first year of college and experienced a more successful transition into the collegiate environment. Students also noted that the camp helped to develop their self-confidence and self-awareness, which in turn compelled them to get involved on campus. One student stated that Panther Camp gave her "the opportunity to grow as a person. During Panther Camp I learned about myself, and also about others. Panther Camp reinforced values I already had, and it also opened the doors to social involvement." In reference to the camp facilitators, one student said, "They wanted to impact my life, and they did."

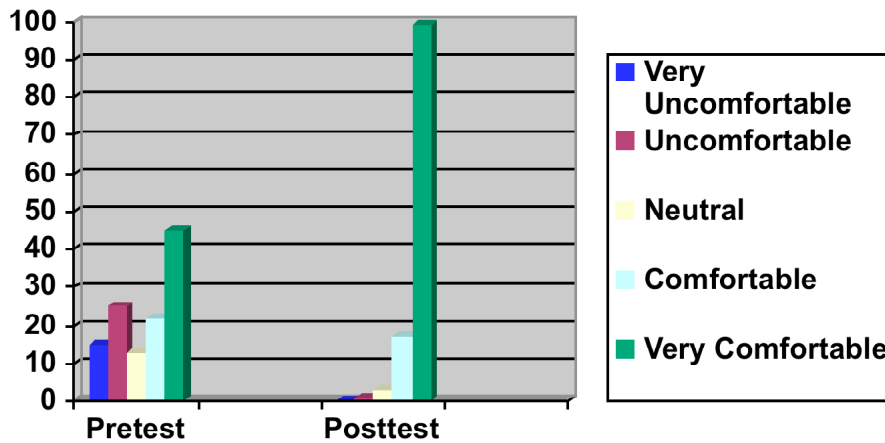


Figure 1. Pretest and posttest comparison of Panther Camp attendees' level of comfort with transition to college.

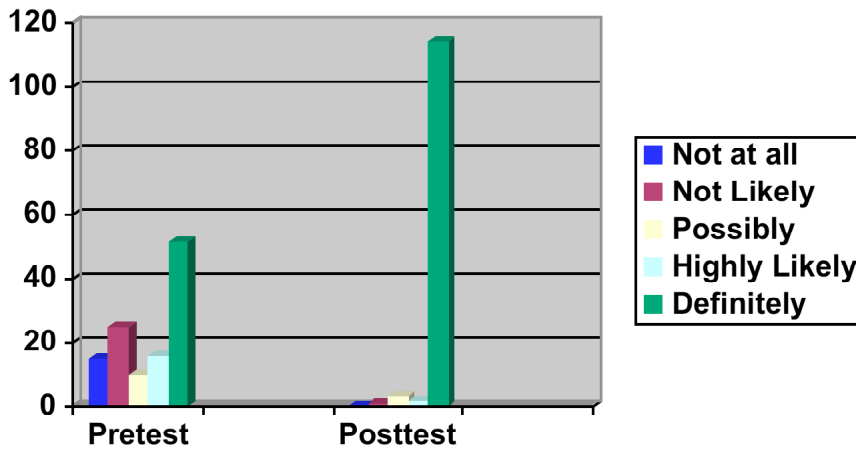


Figure 2. Pretest and posttest comparison of Panther Camp attendees' self-perception of getting involved on campus.

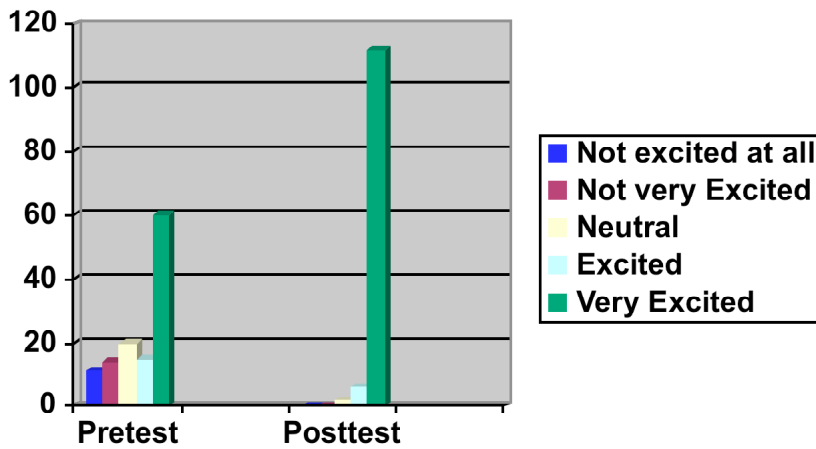


Figure 3. Pretest and posttest comparison of Panther Camp attendees' excitement about attending FIU

Perhaps the most impressive discovery is that 100% of Panther Camp attendees persisted into their spring semester. Additionally, 100% of Panther Camp attendees became involved in at least one campus organization. The data also indicate that students who attended Panther Camp demonstrate success in achieving the following learning outcomes associated with the camp experience: (a) greater institutional affinity, (b) more confidence in their ability to graduate from FIU, (c) a greater level of comfort with their transition from high school to college, (d) a greater likelihood to become involved on campus, and (e) greater knowledge about campus resources. Additionally, the posttest analysis indicated that students who attend Panther Camp were more confident in their time management abilities, their ability to work effectively in a team, their leadership

skills, and their communication skills. This research also shows that students who attend Panther Camp also have a greater appreciation for diversity and a greater knowledge of FIU traditions.

As a result of their peer educator role, 100% of the Panther Camp facilitators and executive board members reported through the postcamp evaluation that their peer educator role resulted in their having increased confidence in all 20 of the functional areas assessed. Additionally, participants were interviewed in a focus group, and their remarks were in direct correlation with their postassessment results. In regard to increased appreciation for diversity, one executive board member said that her leadership role helped her to

accept all types of people. My appreciation for diversity grows when you see other students who have never been exposed to differing opinions and ideals, accept new ways of thinking, and open their minds to their new peers. This is when being in this leadership position is completely worth it to me, because someone is able to look outside of themselves and see another person's perspective and accept them for it.

Another student said,

If there's one thing in my life that I would say has helped me develop the most as a person and as a leader, it's being a Panther Camp facilitator. I have learned how to work in groups, speak in public, and develop my leadership skills.

Additionally, focus group results revealed that many Panther Camp facilitators are now aspiring to work in the field of higher education as a result of their peer mentor role.

Implications

Although the results show positive developments in all areas delineated within the desired learning outcomes, no true connection between the Panther Camp experience and academic success has been established. Attendees maintain approximately the same average first-semester GPA as nonattending students. Changes are being made to the program to incorporate a greater focus on academic success. In partnership with the Office of Undergraduate Studies, an academic success session with a focus on time management and campus resources is being developed to be included in the camp curriculum. As with other sessions, it will be planned and led by student facilitators.

Overall, findings indicate that Panther Camp is a very successful program for FIU. Although the research is based primarily on a minority student population (i.e., Hispanic students), results suggest this program could be beneficial for all college students. Recommendations to implement a similar program on other campuses include (a) establishing goals or learning outcomes, (b) developing an administrative advisory board composed of numerous collaborative professionals from across campus, (c) selecting peer facilitators to create and maintain the program, and (d) developing a training program for the peer facilitators.

Conclusion

The peer educator program has met with great success at FIU, both for the students attending Panther Camp and for the students who have taken a leadership role within the program. Panther Camp continues to expand and improve at FIU and can serve as a successful model for other institutions across the country.

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Appendix A

Panther Camp 2008 Pre-Assessment

Name: _____

Please list any involvement you had in high school:

What **level of competency/knowledge** do you possess in the following **skills**? Rate the skills below on a scale of 1-5. 1 = Very Poor, 2 = Poor, 3 = Good, 4 = Strong, 5 = Very Strong

Confidence:

Time management skills	5	4	3	2	1
Making new friends	5	4	3	2	1
Working in a team	5	4	3	2	1
Appreciating diversity	5	4	3	2	1
Compromising	5	4	3	2	1
Problem solving/troubleshooting	5	4	3	2	1
Communicating	5	4	3	2	1
Leadership skills	5	4	3	2	1

Knowledge of:

FIU's campus resources	5	4	3	2	1
FIU's traditions	5	4	3	2	1
FIU's student organizations	5	4	3	2	1
FIU's involvement opportunities	5	4	3	2	1
Your personality type/characteristics	5	4	3	2	1

*What level of **comfort/likelihood/confidence** do you have for the following? Rate the skills below on a scale of 1-5.*

How comfortable do you feel about beginning your first year at FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your level of comfort to begin your first year at FIU:

How comfortable are you with your ability to transition from high school to college?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your level of comfort to transition:

How likely is it that you will be involved in an on-campus student group?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your likelihood to get involved:

How excited are you about attending FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your excitement to attend FIU:

How confident are you in your choice to attend FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

How confident are you that you will graduate from FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

Name 3 on-campus student organizations: Name 3 student leaders at FIU:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Name 3 FIU administrators:

Appendix B

Panther Camp 2008 Post-Assessment

Name: _____

What **level of competency/knowledge** do you possess in the following **skills**? Rate the skills below on a scale of 1-5. 1 = Very Poor, 2 = Poor, 3 = Good, 4 = Strong, 5 = Very Strong

Confidence:

Time management skills	5	4	3	2	1
Making new friends	5	4	3	2	1
Working in a team	5	4	3	2	1
Appreciating diversity	5	4	3	2	1
Compromising	5	4	3	2	1
Problem solving/troubleshooting	5	4	3	2	1
Communicating	5	4	3	2	1
Leadership skills	5	4	3	2	1

Knowledge of:

FIU's campus resources	5	4	3	2	1
FIU's traditions	5	4	3	2	1
FIU's student organizations	5	4	3	2	1
FIU's involvement opportunities	5	4	3	2	1
Your personality type/characteristics	5	4	3	2	1

*What level of **comfort/likelihood/confidence** do you have for the following? Rate the skills below on a scale of 1-5.*

How comfortable do you feel about beginning your first year at FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your level of comfort to begin your first year at FIU:

How comfortable are you with your ability to transition from high school to college?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your level of comfort to transition:

How likely is it that you will be involved in an on-campus student group?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your likelihood to get involved:

How excited are you about attending FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

Comments on your excitement to attend FIU:

How confident are you in your choice to attend FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

How confident are you that you will graduate from FIU?

5 4 3 2 1

Name 3 on-campus student organizations:

Name 3 student leaders at FIU:

Name 3 FIU administrators:

Please respond to the following questions regarding your Panther Camp experience. Rate the skills below on a scale of 1-5.

Overall Panther Camp experience:

Helpfulness of facilitators	5	4	3	2	1
Helpfulness of advisors	5	4	3	2	1
Overall information provided at camp	5	4	3	2	1
Overall enjoyment for camp	5	4	3	2	1

What was your favorite educational session at Panther Camp and why?

What was your favorite activity at Panther Camp and why?

Would you recommend Panther Camp to future FIU first-year students? Why or why not?

How can we improve next year's Panther Camp experience?

Appendix C

2008 Panther Camp Facilitator/Executive Board Post Evaluation

As a result of my experience as a Panther Camp Facilitator/Executive Board member, I feel more confident in my ability to...
(1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. Motivate others in a positive manner	1	2	3	4	5
2. Develop meaningful relationships	1	2	3	4	5
3. Work with diverse groups of people in team settings	1	2	3	4	5
4. Speak in front of groups of people	1	2	3	4	5
5. Serve as a positive role model and mentor to first-year students	1	2	3	4	5
6. Understand my leadership style and its application to my education	1	2	3	4	5
7. Appreciate strengths and weaknesses of different leadership styles	1	2	3	4	5
8. Identify my academic goals	1	2	3	4	5
9. Make autonomous decisions	1	2	3	4	5
10. Identify how my decisions may affect other people	1	2	3	4	5
11. Serve as a mentor to peers in the process of transition	1	2	3	4	5
12. Transition through various stages in my personal development	1	2	3	4	5
13. Organize and plan large-scale events	1	2	3	4	5
14. Communicate effectively in					

various settings	1	2	3	4	5
15. Identify campus resources and utilize my networking skills	1	2	3	4	5
16. Identify my values and beliefs and how they affect my leadership style	1	2	3	4	5
17. Balance academic, employment, and cocurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5
18. Identify campus traditions	1	2	3	4	5
19. Participate actively in campus involvement opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
20. Make a positive impact on campus	1	2	3	4	5