

### **Vision Statement**

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition will serve as the trusted expert, internationally recognized leader, and clearinghouse for scholarship, policy, and best practice for all postsecondary student transitions.

### **Mission Statement**

Building upon its history of excellence as the founder and leader of the first-year experience movement, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition serves education professionals by supporting and advancing efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education. We achieve this mission by providing opportunities for the exchange of practical and scholarly information as well as the discussion of trends and issues in our field through the convening of conferences, institutes, workshops, and online learning opportunities; publishing books, research reports, a peer-reviewed journal, electronic newsletters, and guides; generating, supporting, and disseminating research and scholarship; hosting visiting scholars; and administering a web site and listservs.

### **Core Commitments**

- Importance of student transitions
- Connection between research and practice
- Inclusion
- Collaboration
- Lifelong learning

## **Recent Findings and New Directions for Research on High-Impact Educational Practices in the Transition to College**

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### **Roundtable Discussion--Thursday, November 18, 2010, 1:45-2:30 pm Association for the Study of Higher Education 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**

For decades, issues surrounding student access and success have been of perennial interest to college educators and researchers. However, more recently our field has recognized and addressed the first-year of college as a significant leakage point in the educational pipeline. This increased awareness in the early success of new students stems from changes in the higher education landscape, including demands from regional accrediting agencies for greater accountability; changing demographics and differential success rates among new student populations; and a realization on the part of institutions about the importance--both financially and in meeting their commitment to students--to retain their currently-enrolled students. As such, institutional budget officers, policy makers, and others who invest in new student success, either through scholarship or institutional practice, are searching for research and resources to help inform data-driven decision making.

In order to provide information regarding best-practices for the adjustment and success of students in transition and the effective use of high-impact educational experiences and programs, The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) has conducted national surveys of several commonly-used educational practices such as first-year seminars, peer leadership and education, and sophomore-year initiatives. This original research agenda is complemented by the clearinghouse function the NRC serves as a publisher of research in the field of student success and transitions, including a scholarly journal and four editions of an annotated bibliography of research on the first-year experience in American higher education. These resources provide a springboard for a discussion about:

- what we know about the effective utilization of high-impact educational practices in the students' adjustment to college,
- what gaps exist in our practical and scholarly understanding about the integration and utilization of these recommended practices in students' transition to college, and
- what new questions and directions this information suggests for research in our field.

Through this discussion of these findings and resources, roundtable participants will be invited to examine and discuss the ways in which this evidence can advance our understanding and utilization of the practices identified by AAC&U as "purposeful pathways" to college student success as well as chart the future of the research agenda on the first-year experience and students in transition.

## Purposeful Pathways: Helping Students Achieve Key Learning Outcomes

“There is an emerging consensus among many stakeholders concerning the important outcomes of a college education for the twenty-first century. This report examines findings of the Greater Expectations Forum on Twenty-First-Century Liberal Arts Education Practice in four of these outcomes:

- Integrative learning
- Inquiry learning
- Global learning
- Civic learning

Each represents a complex set of behaviors and knowledge that can best be developed through intentional educational practice from high school through college.

Discussion of the intertwined nature of learning in the four outcomes shows how an intentional approach to planning can create instructional and curricular efficiencies for achieving these outcomes. For example, all four outcomes

- Require critical questioning;
- Draw upon multiple resources or perspectives to guide thinking and action;
- Can involve complex problem solving and application to ‘real world’ issues;
- Require acknowledging, grappling with, and probing into differences (be they in disciplines, cultures, social groups, research results, etc.)

Individual institutions both described and advanced the outcomes in their own unique ways, reflective of mission, student body, and history. Nonetheless, a set of eight educational practices was often identified as particularly effective, sometimes to advance more than none of the outcomes. These recommended practices include

- Learning communities;
- First-year experiences;
- Senior capstones and culminating experiences;
- Service learning;
- Experiential learning;
- Authentic tasks (such as collaborative projects, student research, and creative projects);
- Problem-based learning;
- Interdisciplinary instruction.”

(Leskes & Miller, 2006, pp. iii-iv)

## 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

In fall 2009, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted the eighth National Survey of First-Year Seminars. The purpose of the survey was to gather the most current national information on the characteristics, course types, goals, and assessment of first-year seminars.

Presidents as well as chief academic and student affairs officers at regionally accredited two- and four-year institutions across the country were invited to participate in this online survey. A total of 1,029 responded to this survey.

Selected findings from these data related to the tactics identified by AAC&U as purposeful pathways include:

- Continued widespread use of first-year seminars (approximately 85% of institutions) of all five types: extended orientation, academic courses with variable content, academic courses with uniform content, pre-professional courses, and those focused on basic study skills.
- Extended orientation first-year seminars continue to be offered most frequently but academically-focused seminars are becoming more common and appear to most closely align with best practice in high impact learning activities.
- There is increasing use of seminars that blend multiple types into a hybrid format to address several first-year student learning outcomes.
- Evidence shows that the impact of first-year seminars may potentially be undermined by common structural elements of these seminars, such as limited involvement of tenure-track faculty as instructors, over-utilization of a one-credit course models, and a slow but steady increase in class size.
- First-year seminars are often used as the cornerstone of a first-year experience program that includes many other high-impact practices such as residential life initiatives, service learning, learning communities, common reading programs, supplemental instruction, and advising. However, these different experiences “may not be intentionally structured to capitalize on their potential to help students achieve new century learning goals” (Skipper, 2010, p. 21).

## 2008 National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives

In fall 2008, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted the second National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives. The purpose of the survey was to gather the most current national information on the kinds of student success initiatives offered in the second year of college, the longevity of those initiatives, the goals of sophomore initiatives, and assessment related to them.

Chief student affairs officers at regionally accredited two- and four-year institutions across the country were invited to participate in this online survey. A total of 315 institutions responded to this survey.

Selected findings from these data related to the tactics identified by AAC&U as purposeful pathways include:

- Approximately one-third of institutions are offering programming intentionally designed to facilitate the success of second-year students.
- Career planning, leadership development, academic advising, and class events are the most frequently offered second-year success programs and had the longest history on campuses. As such, these four initiatives represent the foundation of most sophomore-year experience programs.
- Survey responses identified areas where institutions are less likely to offer high-impact activities for sophomores, including learning communities, credit-bearing courses, and undergraduate research opportunities.
- Second-year initiatives are not generally integrated as an overall program for sophomores and are also somewhat disconnected from first-year student success programming, which can diminish their impact.
- Assessment and research practices for first-year and students in transition programs have largely been focused on retention, grades, and student satisfaction. Fewer research studies and accounts of assessment plans have focused on more complex measures of student learning and engagement such as the four areas identified as critical competencies necessary for success of undergraduates in the 21st century.

## 2009 Peer Leadership Survey

In spring 2009, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted a pilot administration of a new, national, student survey to learn more about the experiences and impact of peer leadership, mentorship, and education. This survey yielded quantitative and qualitative responses from 1,972 students at 145 institutions across the country.

For the purposes of this research, a peer leader was defined as “an undergraduate student who has been selected as a mentor or peer educator to other students through a position with a school-run organization.”

Selected findings from these data related to the tactics identified by AAC&U as purposeful pathways include:

- Although historically peer leaders have been primarily used in the co-curriculum, these data show a rapidly increasing use of peers in academic role such as first-year seminar leaders, tutors, academic mentors, peer advisors, and teaching assistants.
- Outcomes from peer leadership experience suggest that they are an educationally purposeful activity for both the peer leaders and the students being served by them.
- Findings on the benefits to first-year students who work with peer leaders suggest nearly uniform positive benefits of this relationship, particularly with respect to persistence, satisfaction, and feeling of belonging.
- Peer leaders indicate gains in most personal skills, feeling of belonging at the institution, motivation, as well as interaction with other peers, faculty, and staff but report the lowest gains in academic outcomes.
- Peer leader experiences that effectively integrate the leadership role, peer-leader’s academic and career interests, and needs of the students being led have the greatest impact on the learning outcomes of both peer leader and student being led. The most challenging peer-leadership experience in which to create an integrated experienced is residential life.

