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New Commuters Find Their Place at College of Charleston

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First-year commuters are often overlooked as residential students arrive on campus to decorate their new rooms and participate in fall welcome week activities. Various challenges, including lack of motivation to make the drive to school, are associated with the commuter experience at colleges and universities across the United States. As a result of these obstacles, commuter students often fail to develop long-term friendships for academic and social support. Commuters may also feel disconnected from the campus experience when they have long breaks between classes with no dedicated space to return to throughout the day.

Recognizing the need to create more connections for first-year commuters, the College of Charleston created the Freshman Commuter Collegium (FCC), a dedicated lounge space that provides a variety of educational and social programs integrating learning, presenting leadership opportunities, and promoting a sense of belonging. Collegium comes from the Latin word meaning "gathering place," and the FCC is designed to

- foster a sense of belonging by creating a space where first-year commuters have a sense of ownership and can build sustaining relationships;

- develop community identity in a space promoting the building of friendships by enabling students to study together, socialize, and participate in shared activities;

- encourage learning beyond the classroom by offering a broader educational experience for the student through an environment that promotes collaborative learning, gives access to resources, enables interdisciplinary interactions, allows for leadership opportunities, and facilitates social learning experiences within a community; and

- provide programming and student staff support encouraging academic and social directives using college resources with planned learning objectives.

The FCC offers first-year commuter students a space in which they can renew themselves between classes, meet with classmates and faculty, enjoy a snack, or

Faculty and staff interact with FCC student during PhotoVoice Project exhibit on commuter experiences. Photo courtesy of W. J. Bruce Fleming.

participate in a special activity. The space has a relaxing lounge-style atmosphere and is outfitted with comfortable furniture, individual and group workspaces, flat-screen TVs, and kitchen facilities. The Office of New Student Programs partnered with Residence Life to create the space, using a common area in a first-year residence hall that was vastly underused during the day. The FCC is centrally located, close to the major student support center housing Academic Advising, the Registrar, and Career Services, among other important offices. It is also directly across from a main commuter parking facility and next door to one of the campus dining commons.

In fall 2014, approximately 7% (233 total) of College of Charleston's incoming first-year students were commuters (defined as not living on campus and residing outside of a close proximity to the campus). These students were contacted throughout the summer of 2014, as they were starting to think about their transition into the College, and introduced to FCC and its purpose. Summer orientation sessions provided a vehicle for connecting with incoming students. Of the 233 invitations sent, more than half of the first-year commuters decided to join the FCC, which required completing a short biographical data sheet and signing a copy of the Community Commitments. The student incurs no additional costs.

The FCC uses New Student Programs' peer mentors who have previous work experience with first-year students and established connections across campus and Charleston to serve as academic and personal resources. Their role is to open and close the facility, welcome members, plan programs and events each week, and act as hosts in the space, which is open daily Monday to Friday. In essence, peer mentors are trained student staff members who perform duties similar to those of a resident assistant.

In 2014-2015, programs held at the FCC included presentations by academic or student success professionals from around campus about topics such as study strategies and Supplemental Instruction for certain classes. Other programs included "Selecting a Major That Is Right for You" and a Career Center resources presentation. Since commuter students may have less knowledge of the College than residential students because they are not embedded on the campus, the FCC offers information sessions on clubs and activities in the hope of getting commuters more involved. FCC programs combine academics, leadership, socialization, and faculty-staff engagement. Structured special events, such as lunch socials, career counseling afternoons, and study-skills presentations, bring first-year commuters together and help them establish peer-to-peer

> "The focus, however, is less on doing and more on being, allowing the community to develop organically at a pace and depth that is authentic and meaningful."

relationships. The focus, however, is less on doing and more on being, allowing the community to develop organically at a pace and depth that is authentic and meaningful.

Peer mentors and first-year students using the FCC reported (a) making connections with other new commuter students and upper-division students alike, (b) having a more relaxing environment to spend time in, and (c) learning about areas of campus that commuter students are generally unfamiliar with. In the 2014-2015 academic year, weekly visits to the FCC averaged 135, and programming was well attended. Fall visits totaled 3,474, and spring visits totaled 2,575 (Figure 1).
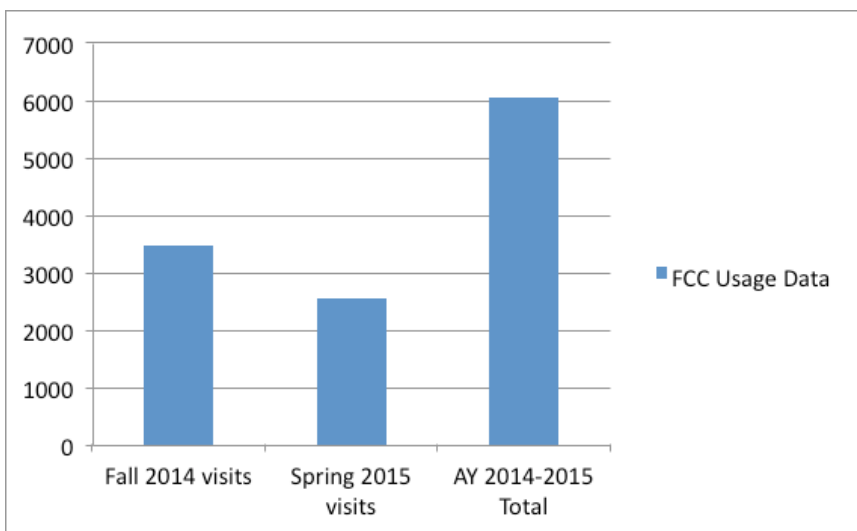

Figure 1. FCC usage data, academic year 2014-2015.

Second-year commuter students who enjoyed the experience during their inaugural year on campus are now clamoring for something similar for year two. As a result, finding a place on campus that can be dedicated to a Sophomore Commuter Collegium is now a priority.

For those institutions interested in developing a collegium model, good inter-departmental relationships are critical. In the College's case, developing the FCC incurred little cost, as many of the materials (e.g., room, furniture) were already in place. The main expense was the staffing of the FCC by peer mentors. Additionally, some schools may choose to adopt this model within specific academic majors or programs (e.g., engineering or nursing collegiums) or for populations beyond commuter students (e.g., international student or graduate student collegiums). Overall, the College of Charleston's FCC has proven to be an effective way to engage its first-year commuter students. e

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Defining the First-Generation College Experience

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First-generation college student is a term commonly used to identify individuals who are the first in their families to attend college, but institutions differ in how they use it. At some colleges and universities, first-generation students are defined as those whose parents have not completed four-year degrees in the United States. Other institutions have more narrow definitions; for example, some may exclude students with siblings who have attended college or whose parents have some college experience regardless of level or location. It is important that higher education professionals know which definition their campus uses so they can clearly explain the term for their students.

While *first- generation* or *first-gen* has currency with most postsecondary educators in the United States, many students are unfamiliar with the expression and unaware of first-gen studies as an emerging field of research. The key terms described below can be useful starting points for conversations among faculty, staff, and students on what it means to be a first-generation college student. Many of these phrases are also used within the fields of psychology, sociology, and cultural studies, demonstrating the extent to which being a first-generation college student incorporates diverse social identities and experiences (Davis, 2010). Becoming familiar with these concepts can help students develop a vocabulary to express their experiences within the context of a larger social identity.

Key Terms

Hidden curriculum refers to the set of rules, guidelines, or expectations about college that students are expected to know but are often not taught directly. This knowledge is sometimes referred to as the *unwritten rules* of higher education. As an example, many first-generation college students are unfamiliar with university orientation programs, including the camp-style community building activities, residence hall move-in, and class registration. Not being prepared for typical college experiences may cause shame, embarrassment, frustration, or anger. These feelings can be compounded by the sense that one's peers seem to have insider knowledge about university life, which can lead first-generation college students to feel like outsiders during their initial transition to college. Many resourceful students are reluctant to ask for help or may turn to their own informal network of older peers, siblings, and others for information that can sometimes be outdated or inaccurate. To facilitate a smooth transition for all populations, university processes and policies must be clear, transparent, and communicated in language that is accessible for all college students and their families (Margolis, 2001).

College culture shock is a common state of anxiety or frustration that new students may feel as they learn what is expected of them in higher education. Culture shock may occur when a student is adjusting to an increased academic workload compared to high school or community college. Students might also feel overwhelmed or homesick

when interacting with new peers from different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. It is important to note that many new students experience some initial culture shock, regardless of whether they are first-generation college students; hence, faculty and staff who work with this population must frame these adjustments as a normal part of the college experience, so that students do not internalize their anxieties or assume their experiences are individualized.

Imposter syndrome is the feeling of inadequacy, despite evidence to the contrary. Historically, imposter syndrome has been seen as a gendered phenomenon reported more frequently by female students who felt compelled to compare their abilities against those of their peers (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968). Today, high-achieving individuals from a variety of historically underserved backgrounds may fear being found out as a fraud, believing that everyone else around them possesses knowledge, skills, and competencies they do not. These individuals often feel they do not deserve the success they have achieved and may downplay their accomplishments as luck or timing.

Survivor guilt, within the field of psychology more generally, refers to the shame and remorse one may feel as a result of emerging from traumatic events without permanent injury or loss. In higher education, this concept describes the feelings of guilt associated with leaving family and friends behind in pursuit of new opportunities. Consequently, students experiencing survivor guilt may be reluctant to participate in activities with additional costs above tuition (e.g., study abroad or other school-sponsored trips), downplay their successes, visit home more regularly, or use financial aid to supplement the family income. It should be noted that survivor guilt can be self-imposed or the result of external pressures from relatives or other loved ones.

Border living describes the act of operating regularly within two (or more) cultures that promote distinct and sometimes opposing values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices. By learning the social codes connected with these cultures, an individual can develop a divided social identity, or what is sometimes referred to as a *double consciousness* (a term in use for more than a century to describe the psychology of race). Departmental silos can perpetuate border living by overly normalizing field-specific conventions and practices so that a student is left with the impression there are right and wrong, rather than culturally situated, ways of operating at the college or university. When students begin to understand the higher education system as encompassing multiple discourse communities whose languages, practices, and behaviors they can learn, they may feel more empowered to engage with their new environments.

> *"Hidden curriculum refers to the set of rules, guidelines, or expectations about college that students are expected to know but are often not taught directly."*

Conclusion

As higher education professionals continue interdisciplinary conversations on the first-generation college experience and identity, it is critical that students are invited to participate in the development of the theoretical framings that define their experiences. Institutions can help mediate some of the major transitional challenges first-generation college students face by promoting open dialogue about college expectations, including parents and families in these discussions, and providing regular opportunities for students to share their experiences with peers in similar situations, as well as with empathetic professional staff and faculty.

Together with supportive educators, peers, and family members, first-generation college students can begin to understand themselves as part of a rich and vibrant community and learn to recognize the valuable forms of social capital they possess. The acknowledgement of their unique skills and strengths—resilience, resourcefulness, and determination, among many others—can help students to develop code-switching strategies that ultimately will aid their transition into college and promote success in their academic and professional lives. e

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Faculty Collaboration Supports Integrative Education in a First-Year Learning Community

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Many first-year seminars are embedded in learning communities (LCs), which allow students to take two or more linked courses as a group and explore a common topic through the lenses of different disciplines (Kuh, 2008). Drago-Severson et al. (2001) suggested that interpersonal relationships developed in a cohort learning environment made a critical difference to peers' academic learning, emotional and psychological well-being, and their ability to broaden their perspectives. To truly achieve a cohort learning environment, instructors must work closely together to ensure the course content and assignments in the LC are fully integrated, which requires consistent communication and ongoing collaboration. At Kennesaw State University (KSU), faculty teaching in LCs work together to develop unique methods for integrating learning across disciplines, often spending time in one another's classes.

The LC described in this article includes a first-year seminar with a global leadership focus, a world regional geography course, and an introductory English composition course. Enrollment in this LC includes 25 first-year students majoring in business. Each course earns three credit hours and counts toward degree requirements. By using a collaborative approach, the instructors are able to create activities and assignments that build synergy in the courses across the LC while meeting larger program outcomes. A participatory research method (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) is used as the framework for describing the approach faculty took to develop curricular and cocurricular components promoting integrative learning across all of the disciplines in the global leadership LC. The four basic phases of the participatory approach include (a) *constructing* or exploring context and purpose, (b) *planning action* or describing how to implement the action, (c) *taking action* or implementing plans and creating interventions, and (d) *evaluating action* or examining the outcomes of interventions (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

Constructing

The instructors met several times before the semester began to discuss ways in which assignments and cocurricular activities in the individual courses could be designed to promote integrative learning. For each meeting, one instructor would take the lead to select the time and location and set the agenda. Meetings,

Students with the tour guide at the KIA Motors Manufacturing plant in West Point, Georgia. Photo courtesy of Linda M. Lyons

which frequently took place over lunch, included updates on LC-specific activities; reports on students' progress; and opportunities to share ideas, suggestions, challenges or concerns with each other.

Planning Action

At KSU, LCs are expected to feature at least one out-of-class engagement activity (e.g., potluck dinners, sporting events, concerts, and off-campus volunteer service projects) to help students feel connected to the instructors, each other, and the campus. Minigrants are offered to LC faculty to help support and fund these cocurricular activities. For the global leadership LC, the faculty decided to focus the out-of-class activity on globalization in business industries, as it was relevant to the theme and scope of the LC. They planned a field trip to KIA Motors Manufacturing Georgia, Incorporated (KMMG). Faculty also identified specific assignments and classroom activities (described in the sections that follow) that would integrate the three disciplines represented in the LC courses. These included a reflective essay sharing thoughts on the visit and how it helped align with learning across the courses in the LC, a classroom and/or online discussion addressing prescribed questions from the instructors, and student feedback on the value of the out-of-class experience.

Taking Action

After the LC instructors applied for and received the minigrant award, they made arrangements with KMMG representatives to tour the facilities and planned lunch at a restaurant near the plant for the group to experience authentic Korean cuisine. During the lunch, students were asked to share knowledge gained from touring the facility as well as their thoughts on the Korean food. The students were also asked to reflect on how the experience aligned with their sense of intercultural competence, the impact of globalization on doing business in America, and how field trip related to the topics being discussed in the LC courses. Instructors collaborated on a series of reflection questions intended to integrate the different disciplines in the LC and initiate student thinking about globalization. Students were asked to respond to the following:

1. What did you notice about the facility that incorporated both the American and the Korean culture?

2. How do you think technology will advance in the future for this company's industry?

3. How will this advancement impact leadership roles and the use of human capital?

4. How has the way the Korean culture conducts business in their country influenced the way the business is being conducted in the United States?

> "LCs are expected to feature at least one out-of-class engagement activity … to help students feel connected to the instructors, each other, and the campus."

First-year students at the Korean BBQ Restuarant in West Point, Georgia. Photo courtesy of Linda M. Lyons.

Evaluating Action

Following the trip, each LC instructor continued to draw from the out-of-class experience in class discussions and assignments. For example, a reflective essay assignment in the English course asked students to assess the quality, worth, or value of their experiences. Themes from the essays suggested that although the tour did not focus directly on the Korean culture, information shared indicated the long history of the company and its impact on the economy of the surrounding community. Furthermore, the students recognized that upper-management at KMMG consisted of both Americans and Koreans to create synergy between the two cultures while maintaining KIA's international brand. Each of the 50 Korean workers at the plant was partnered with an American coworker and signage throughout the plant was in both Korean and English, encouraging the blending of the two cultures in the work environment. Additionally, students indicated that having the opportunity to experience a traditional meal in an authentic Korean restaurant enhanced their curiosity to try other foreign cuisines. Given the students' comments expressed in this assignment and their immediate reactions to the field trip, the LC team concluded that the out-of-class activity was successful and added value to the integrative learning process. Specifically, the LC team found students might not have shared these specific observations without the out-of-class learning experience. The structure of the trip, the debrief over lunch, and follow-up assignments emphasized the integrative learning process.

Through this particular out-of-class initiative, the LC instructors were able to achieve their goal of enhancing the students' cultural awareness, knowledge of foreign businesses operating in the United States, and connection to issues of globalization. Establishing a collaborative relationship among the faculty in this first-year LC was essential for successfully integrating innovative activities and assignments into the curriculum. Additionally, the use of a collective approach provided a foundation for partnerships to occur across the various degrees of experience and knowledge that each instructor possessed within his or her area of expertise. e

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Valencia College Creates Culture of CARE Over Early Alert

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Early-alert interventions for students within higher education have become a popular strategy for improving retention rates and increasing student engagement. However, the effectiveness of this strategy continues to be widely debated. A review of existing literature on early-alert programs revealed that institutions often depend too heavily on electronic systems, which promise significant outcomes from very simplistic data (Jungblut, 2015; Pfleging, 2002). A 2014 Hanover Research Report found "institutions are more likely to use remote communication (e.g., phone, e-mail) to intervene with students than they are to use face-to-face meetings" (p. 18). Additional findings suggest early-alert initiatives commonly rely on program designs that are not authentic to the learning process and do not result in meaningful or real engagement between students and educators (e.g., faculty, learning support staff, advisors). Not surprisingly, only 40% of respondents to a national survey indicated early-warning or academic-alert initiatives on their campuses led to increased persistence and retention, and less than half realized cost and educational benefits (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). As such, Hanover Research concluded that early-alert systems form a necessary but insufficient component of a successful retention strategy.

Unsatisfied with the traditional approach to early-alert implementation in higher education, a team of faculty and administrators at Valencia College has been working to design an early-alert model rooted in a culture of continuous assessment and responsiveness engagement (CARE). Valencia's CARE initiative builds upon the College's Six Big Ideas program for student success, which centers on providing the right kinds of support, such as offering deliberate and meaningful faculty-student interaction.

Valencia has a highly collaborative culture. In keeping with this tradition, the development of CARE began with an exploratory process involving key stakeholders, including students, faculty, learning-support personnel, and student affairs professionals. Kicking off the work, in fall 2012, faculty participated in conversations with their newly installed East Campus president. Among the emerging themes from these sessions was the need to establish a systematic process (often referred to as early alert or academic alert) for identifying and supporting struggling students. Subsequently, a program design team, made up of faculty and staff, was formed to explore strategies that would be authentic to Valencia and support its learning-centered mission. After months of research, discussion, and consideration of promising national innovations in the area of early alert, the design team agreed to pursue a process that would rely heavily on faculty involvement, be rooted in shared purpose, and build on the cultural values of the institution.

While researching the early-alert design strategies of several institutions, the CARE team noted that many systems are unable to reach their full potential due to significant program design shortcomings, such as

- low faculty-student interaction,

- lack of ongoing assessment and reporting by faculty,

- reliance on a transactional process with little personalization,

- lack of interdepartmental information sharing,

- an open communication loop with disconnected interventions and fragmented support for students,

- eTool dependence and systems that are not user-friendly for faculty or staff, and

- inadequate faculty-student and faculty-advisor collaboration.

In addition to the limitations noted in existing research, Valencia's CARE team also worried faculty would resist any system that was too prescriptive. With this in mind, the team discussed very flexible and fluid approaches to create their own individualized CARE plans based on their teaching styles, the unique dynamics of their classes, and the needs of their students. Faculty participated in an intensive six-week course and received a template (Figure 1) guiding them through the process of developing a CARE plan. Inviting faculty to the design process at the beginning, rather than trying to convince them to adopt a model that had been developed by administrators, allowed for authentic faculty involvement and higher levels of participation.

Instructors who participate in the course receive an orientation to the literature on faculty engagement, find out about the learning-support and student-service resources available at the College, and meet with academic advisors and tutors to discuss the needs of their students. They also learn best practices in the area of retention strategies from national reports, connect with other faculty at the College who are currently engaging (informally) in this work, and design their own CARE plan for implementation.

Since fall 2014, more than 35 instructors have participated in the training to develop CARE strategies for their courses, and over 60 are projected to join this work in the 2015-2016 academic year. Existing CARE plans include designing personalized learning plans and assessment strategies, scheduling faculty-student conferences, providing referrals to academic support resources, offering continuous check-ins throughout the term, and distributing postcourse surveys.

Once an instructor has developed a CARE plan, the strategy or strategies are implemented in the course to increase student academic performance. Depending on the plan and desired outcomes, the faculty member and the student work together to develop individualized procedures to help improve course performance. For example, students

"early-alert systems form a necessary but insufficient component of a successful retention strategy."

Instructor:	Date Submitted:	Course Number & Prefix:
Campus:	Term to Implement:	

I. Contemplation	At-risk behaviors
Identify specific at-risk behavior(s) that seem to be interfering with students' success in your class.	
Explore possible causes and collect evidence of the cause.	*Hint: This is a good place to use formative assessments to discern reasons for students' performance issues.*
Identify the specific literature and Valencia support services reviewed in previous modules that you will use to construct your intervention.	*Hint: Revisit the CARE Venn Diagram to see a list of services and how integration should occur.*
II. Plan	**Assessment methods**
Formative assessment	Name or type of assessment: Overview and purpose: Description: How will you provide prompt feedback? Grading rubric/evaluation criteria (attach): Assessment document name (attach file in pdf):
Summative assessment	Name or type of assessment: Overview and purpose: Description: How will you provide prompt feedback? Grading rubric/evaluation criteria (attach): Assessment document name (attach file in pdf):
III. Develop	Intervention methodology
Overview and purpose of your chosen intervention	
Describe the steps of the intervention, including both your actions and the students' actions.	*Hint: This could be a lesson in class, an individual confer-ence, an online discussion board, etc.* Your actions: Students' actions:
How will you measure the effectiveness of your intervention? Be specific about the tool you will create. Identify whether you will use a control group or pre and post assessment for comparison.	

Figure 1. CARE plan development template.

could enhance their time-management skills by completing a weekly schedule and to-do list for the course or schedule an appointment with the professor to discuss study strategies to improve quiz grades.

While it is still early in the implementation process of CARE strategies across the College, preliminary results in one of the initial and exploratory CARE-infused courses shows a drop in the number of students receiving failing grades. Figure 2 presents a summary of the grade distribution between a non-CARE-infused Intro to Chemistry course (spring 2011) and a CARE-infused class (summer 2011). Poststudy survey results for the summer course revealed that about two thirds (63%) of the students followed the individualized study plan the class created together, and all those who followed the CARE plan found it to be helpful. The majority of students (97%) stated they would also use the study plan in other classes.

> "CARE plans include designing personalized learning plans and assessment strategies, . . . providing referrals to academic support resources, [and] offering continuous check-ins throughout the term"
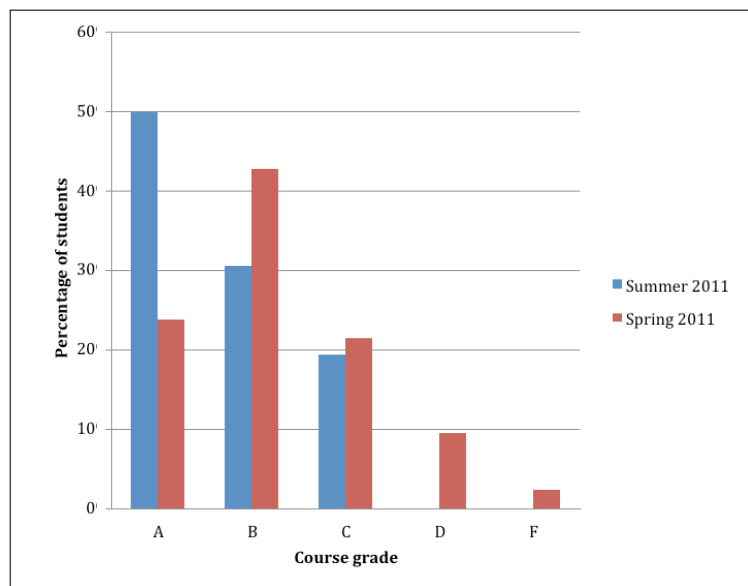
Figure 2. Final grade comparison of Intro to Chemistry (CHE1025c), spring 2011 ($n = 36$) and summer 2011 ($n = 42$).

To date, faculty who have implemented a CARE strategy in their course report the impact on students and learning has been significant. One instructor noted that "creating a CARE culture for students helps me establish better relationships with my students." Other improvements to student success as a result of the CARE strategies include higher student participation rates in class activities and greater use of out-of-class academic support resources. Additionally, faculty indicate "students feel more comfortable asking questions and sharing their personal stories with them. The students also listen better and are willing to work harder when they know a faculty member genuinely cares about their success in a course, and is willing to provide individualized attention to their specific learning needs." Another instructor stated, "I have also found that after implementing my CARE plan, my students take more responsibility for their education when they know I am personally invested in their success and hold them accountable."

The next step for the CARE team is to create a plan for scaling this work collegewide so that more faculty can become involved. Initial ideas include adding the CARE training plan to the tenure process and/or including it as part of the development work instructors are currently participating in.

Institutions interested in developing early-alert or academic-alert initiatives may want to consider approaches that include their faculty in the design process in a deliberate and significant way. Further, encouraging ongoing assessment and ensuring meaningful connections among students, faculty, and other support staff at the institution may help to establish not just a thriving early-alert system but a culture of CARE. This will create more rewarding and successful experiences for instructors and students, resulting in learning environments that promote high levels of personal connection between students and faculty and lead to increases in persistence and graduation. e

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Extended Orientation Seminar Evolves to Theme-Based Academic Course

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The University of Tampa

During the 2008-2009 academic year, The University of Tampa (UT)'s First-Year Experience (FYE) faculty committee set out to convert its extended orientation first-year seminar to an academic course on various topics. Two factors were critical in this decision. First, the University, regularly regarded as a selective institution of higher education within *U.S. News & World Report*'s ranking of regional universities, continued to have first-to-second-year persistence rates lower than other institutions in its category. Second, end-of-semester student evaluations of the first-year seminar were consistently disappointing.

The extended orientation seminar at UT focused on key transition issues, such as introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and student development. The course was pass/fail, met for one year (two semesters), and was a general education requirement for all first-year students. A three-year (2008-2011) assessment of the seminar using the First-Year Initiative (FYI) survey from Educational Benchmarking revealed that the course did not perform well on faculty connections (Factor 4), peer connections (Factor 5), engaging pedagogy (Factor 14), or out-of-class engagements (Factor 16) (EBI, 2009). Additionally, when reviewing the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013), UT was found to have low performance compared to other regional schools in the following areas:

- courses with service-learning, community-based projects, or linked learning communities; and

- faculty formal interaction with students outside classrooms.

Several recommendations for restructuring the seminar emerged as a result of these findings. They included

- creating stronger faculty-student connections by developing cohort-specific seminar sections, enhancing the peer mentor program, and encouraging and rewarding faculty-student academic interaction outside the classroom;

- revising seminar curriculum to include measurable learning outcomes to motivate faculty to be creative or collaborative; incorporate critical thinking, writing, and research into the curriculum; and create themed learning communities with other first-year courses; and

- converting the seminar from an extended orientation course to an academic seminar on various topics.

In 2011, two new seminars targeting the needs of special distribution groups, such as transfer and veteran students, were approved. Additionally, student placement into seminars was determined by major or specific cohort (i.e., athletes, international students,

honors, undeclared). Each course was assigned a peer mentor with the same major or cohort status as the students in the class. FYE learning outcome assessment for the new model focused on five areas: (a) critical thinking, (b) time management, (c) academic planning, (d) college transition, and (e) major and career explorations. A pilot study of three themed seminars was also approved.

By 2012, a total of six themed courses, including two sections with out-of-class experiences, had been approved by the FYE faculty committee. Themed courses were designed to help first-year students become more sophisticated about developing personal strengths, setting realistic goals, and adapting to changes in society by linking faculty and students with similar academic and future professional interests. For example, a student with an interest in biology might be assigned to an instructor from the biology department or related field (e.g., chemistry). Additionally, faculty members modified learning objectives from the extended orientation model, such as time management, to reflect the theme of the course. For instance, a student in a theater-themed seminar may learn about time management through the lens of production schedules and block rehearsal times.

Based on positive end-of-course evaluations, the faculty senate approved a request for a full conversion from the extended orientation model to an academic seminar on various topics, over a five-year period. The two-semester course, First-Year Seminar I and II, was approved in spring 2015, and a formal application for themed classes, including a rubric for approval of new themes, was also established. Until the new model can be full adopted, UT will run two parallel tracks of first-year seminars (i.e., cohort-based and theme-based). This gradual conversion will allow for comparison data on the two seminar types to be analyzed and offer faculty time for course development.

In fall 2015, the Pearson MyStudentSuccessLab (MSSL) was added to all seminars to measure outcomes related to the college success noted previously. The Conley Readiness Index (CRI, Conley, 2010), part of the MSSL, was used to assess mastery in four areas critical to college success: (a) cognitive strategies, (b) content knowledge, (c) learning skills and techniques, and (d) transition knowledge and skills. FYE faculty can use the results of this tool to identify students' weak areas and set academic goals early in the first semester, specifically in the five FYE learning outcome areas noted above.

The results of the CRI showed an overall positive correlation between the students' self-reported data and their performance on the Critical Thinking module of the Pearson MSSL (Figure 1). Similar correlations for other modules are currently being performed. Additionally, the students' posttest scores increased by 6%, 10%, 15% and 11% on the College Transition, Creating an Academic Plan, Critical Thinking, and Time Management MSSL modules, respectively (Table 1).

Subsequently, the FYE faculty committee, working with the director of FYE programs, sought to facilitate the creation of themed course in an effort to increase faculty and student buy-in of course material while maintaining the integrity of the FYE learning outcomes. That is, theming a seminar encouraged faculty, through the application process,

> "Themed courses were designed to help first-year students become more sophisticated about developing personal strengths, setting realistic goals, and adapting to changes in society . . . "

to bring their academic passions and expertise into the class while meeting the necessary learning objectives of the course. For example, one forensic themed course taught by a criminology faculty member used a C.S.I. in the Park event that simulated crime scenes and integrated the critical-thinking skills component of the seminar by allowing students to analyze and collect the evidence with everyday materials, such as cotton balls, talcum powder, and make-up brushes.

Faculty interest has been growing, and many now see the theme-based academic seminar as a way to address their disciplinary and/or research interests in the classroom without having to go through the often-laborious course approval process. In the 2015-2016 academic year, 19 themed courses are being offered each semester. In addition, as part of UT's quality enhancement plan, money has been budgeted to support themed first-year seminars (e.g., honoraria for guest speakers, software.) The goal is to have all the seminars converted and fully funded by fall 2020. e

Table 1

Pearson MSSL Fall 2015 Assessment Module Results

Module	*n*	Assignment	Average score %	Below 70%	70-79%	80-89%	90% and above
College Transition	1,257	Pretest	71	33	38	23	6
	1,084	Posttest	77	17	31	34	18
Creating an Academic Plan	1,142	Pretest	67	43	28	22	7
	813	Posttest	77	22	22	34	22
Critical Thinking[a]	1,141	Pretest	58	71	23	4	2
	177	Posttest	73	23	14	36	27
Time Management	1,282	Pretest	76	19	26	37	18
	1,103	Posttest	87	4	9	31	56

[a]The critical-thinking posttest is taken at the end of the second semester of First-Year Seminar II. The posttest in this category represents a pilot of only eight sections that took the posttest at during their first semester of the course.
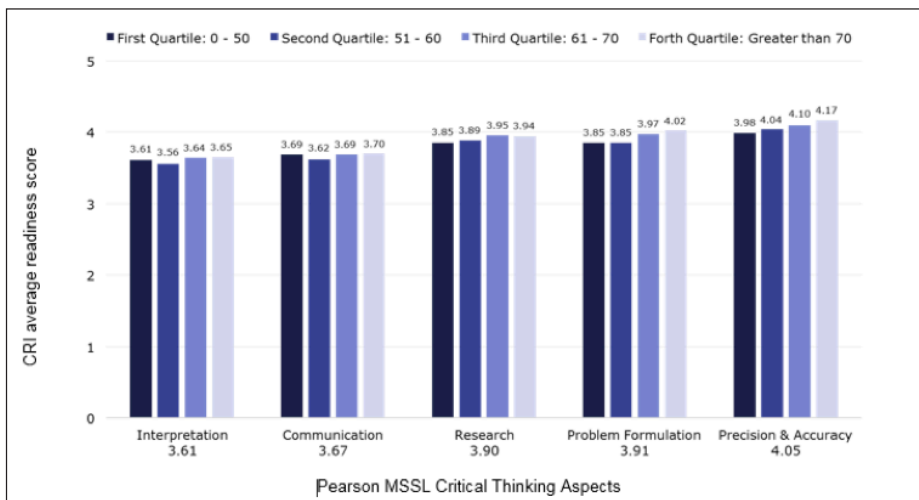

Figure 1. CRI-5 Cognitive strategies: average readiness score by MSSL Critical Thinking Pretest Score Quartiles (*N* = 1,157).

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Digitally Connecting Students to Success: Engaging First-Year Students Through Intrusive E-mail Outreach

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The University of South Carolina (UofSC) currently maintains a first-to-second-year retention rate of 88.1%. While this is an encouraging number, it has been estimated that by retaining another 137 students (a 3% increase) the institution would generate more than $5,000,000 in added tuition and fees over four years. Beyond the financial benefit, the institutional retention rate is a measure of UofSC's ability to deliver on its promise to help students complete a degree.

A number of support services are available at UofSC to assist students both personally and academically. The Student Success Center (SSC) specifically facilitates tutoring and Supplemental Instruction; academic and financial skills consultations; and support for veterans, sophomores, and transfer students. First-year students, though, are often unaware of the myriad services available to them or their own potential need for support. In an effort to better leverage existing resources for student success, beginning fall 2014, the SSC initiated Success Connect (SC), a comprehensive retention initiative designed to personally link students to sources of support for navigating the University.

The Initiative

SC encompasses an early-warning system; collaboration with campus partners to identify students at-risk of attrition; and the assignment of all first-year students to a success consultant, who assists students in the transition to a four-year university by serving as a trained resource and ambassador for college-level academic expectations. Success consultants share their knowledge of learning strategies, campus resources, and institutional procedures with students who may be unsure of their new academic surroundings. Both professional staff and graduate students act as success consultants while also dedicating their time to one of the programmatic areas in the SSC. As part of the SC e-mail outreach, each success consultant corresponds with 500 to 1,200 students; however, the level of interaction with each student varies. In addition to communicating with students via e-mail, success consultants provide both appointment-based skills consultation and drop-in access.

The Process

Prior to the first week of fall classes, each member of the incoming first-year cohort is assigned to a success consultant in the SSC. Using an e-mail marketing platform, targeted messages are drafted and sent to first-year students from their assigned success consultant. The e-mail marketing platform ensures common, personalized messaging to all new students and provides valuable data about the reach of SC communications, including open rates. Using intrusive advising (Earl, n.d.) as a guiding framework, the SC e-mail outreach is intended to provide relevant academic information to students at intentionally chosen points in the semester when they can both benefit from it and are ready to receive it

(e.g., links to tutoring services or the Writing Center after the first round of tests/papers). Success consultants begin a dialogue with students who reply to these e-mails, answering questions and making appropriate referrals.

The first SC e-mail students receive is intentionally designed to welcome them to the University. In this message, first-year students are introduced to their assigned success consultant and the role he or she will play in their experience at the institution. They are also asked to respond to three questions: (a) Where are you from? (b) What do you hope to gain from your college experience? and (c) How can the success consultant best help you achieve your goals? Finally, the success consultants assure students that they are available to answer questions and serve as a resource when needs arise.

Success consultants use students' responses to these questions to connect them with relevant campus resources within the first two to three weeks of the semester. Campus partners identified for students during this time often include the Career Center, the Study Abroad Office, the Office of Undergraduate Research, and Student Life. As students respond to this outreach throughout the semester, referrals continue to be made to appropriate campus partners, including academic departments and the offices of the Registrar, Bursar, and Financial Aid.

Subsequent SC outreach e-mails introduce students to important dates on the academic calendar (e.g., deadlines for adding or dropping courses and withdrawing prior to receiving a failing grade) and encourage them to take advantage of a variety of campus resources. The University has a decentralized advising model, which can be difficult for students to navigate. To that end, a later e-mail focuses specifically on academic advising at the institution. Course-specific support, including tutoring and Supplemental Instruction, are introduced to students six weeks into the semester, about the time they take their first round of college exams. The final e-mail of the fall term congratulates students who found success in their first semester and promotes reflective thought for those who may benefit from making academic adjustments moving forward.

Results

Prior to the fall 2014 semester, 5,101 first-year students were assigned to a success consultant in the SSC and, subsequently, received e-mail outreach. In total, 4,805 (94%) of these students opened at least one SC e-mail, with a majority opening three or more messages from their success consultant. Of those students who opened at least one SC e-mail, 88.60% were retained to the fall 2015 semester. In the first-year cohort, 296 students did not open any SC e-mails, and only 42.91% of this group were retained to the fall 2015 semester.

Rather than implying that the outreach has a direct link to student retention, these data offer insight for future practice. For example, more than half (59.1%, $n = 100$) of those students who did not open an SC e-mail and were not retained by the University were male, 71.01%

> "The e-mail marketing platform ensures common, personalized messaging to all new students and provides valuable data about the reach of SC communications, including open rates."

(n = 120) identified as White (not Hispanic or Latino), and 74.56% (n = 126) resided off campus during their first semester. Within each of these populations exists the potential for further intentional outreach to better connect students to resources as they transition to the institution.

Conclusion

As institutions across the country endeavor to increase retention and persistence, the University of South Carolina is focused on building relationships with first-year students and promoting high-impact campus services. As part of the SC retention initiative, success consultants successfully engage first-year students through the use of an e-mail marketing platform. By sending relevant information to students who are receptive, inquiring about their goals, and serving as a resource to help them navigate the rigor of higher education, the success consultants are facilitating connections between new students and their academic environments. Further, by examining students who chose not to engage with the program and who were not retained, the SSC can develop and implement more intrusive outreach to targeted populations as they transition to the University. The SC outreach e-mails are a simple part of a complex program that could be adopted by student support professionals at institutions of varying size, type, and mission.

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