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Peer Mentors Support First-Year Students in an Educational Opportunity Program

The work of social activists and politicians, the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program at the City University of New York (CUNY) provides access to higher education to high-potential, low-income students. SEEK started as a pre-baccalaureate program in 1965 and was signed into law by the New York State legislature in 1966 as CUNY's higher education opportunity program. Presently, there are 11 SEEK programs across the University system, each admitting about 200 students per academic year. These students, who are typically first-generation, face many barriers to academic success (e.g., stressful family environments, inadequate academic preparation, self-doubt, lack of financial resources and access to supportive networks). SEEK offers students tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, counseling, and an enhanced financial aid package. The program integrates peer mentors into each component of a first-year experience so that incoming students have a model of academic success and resilience and receive the support they need to succeed in college.

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Mentors participate in role playing exercise during training. Used with permission.

The SEEK first-year experience consists of a summer bridge program, a fall-semester seminar, and a spring workshop series. In the three-week Summer Transitions program, students learn about the culture and expectations of college. The fall New Student Seminar (NSS), a weekly college readiness course, focuses on teaching study skills, explaining college policies and general education requirements, and connecting students to resources. The spring series component comprises four workshops designed to increase students' academic self-awareness and begin the process of major choice and career exploration.

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SEEK Peer Mentoring Program

Our Peer Mentoring Program is an educational initiative offered only to students in the SEEK program. Students who have completed four semesters at our college and have a minimum 3.2 GPA are invited to train as mentors. Fifteen students are selected each academic year. The training includes discussions about the roles and qualities of good mentors and teaches students to facilitate group discussions and implement activities they will later lead (e.g., panel discussion on choosing majors and career exploration). Peer mentors in NSS are required to attend monthly meetings where they discuss their experiences, reflect on their work, share their accomplishments, and talk about the skills they want to develop further.

We encourage peer mentors to participate in all three components of our first-year experience program if their academic schedule allows them to do so but only require them to participate in two. For each of the three components of the first-year experience, a mentor is assigned to a group of incoming students. Entering students are free to choose the day and the time of the class that best fits into their academic schedule. As a result, the same group of students does not complete all components together, nor does a particular mentor follow the same group of students throughout each component of our first-year experience. Rather, we consider and give priority to the peer mentors' own academic schedule and availability when making assignments.



Mentors learn public speaking skills. Used with permission.

We assign one peer mentor to a class of about 20 entering students, and we offer at least 10 classes per component of our first-year experience program. That mentor becomes a cofacilitator of the class, working closely with the instructor to teach important study skills and strategies for navigating challenges in college. During class discussions, mentors share stories about their academic struggles, using their personal experiences as a way to teach specific skills and illustrating the importance of taking a proactive approach to college. During Summer Transitions, mentors lead a campus tour and facilitate a group project focused on team building and learning about resources at the University. In the fall, NSS mentors teach their own lessons on study skills, such as test preparation and note taking, and lead group activities exploring topics such as motivation and procrastination. Mentors in the Spring Workshops Series share the process they went through in choosing a major.

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“SEEK participants [said] they benefited from having the more experienced peers share stories of how they overcame personal and academic challenges in the classroom.”

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Program Assessment

In 2013, the SEEK program was evaluated, using satisfaction surveys administered to first-year students at the end of each component. Including both open-ended questions and items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *strongly agree*), the surveys were designed to assess the impact of the program and capture what students found useful and relevant about the participation of peer mentors in the classroom. Overall, peer mentors received an average rating of 4 or higher for each item, suggesting that first-year students felt the peer mentoring experience was beneficial and positive. More specifically, responses indicated that peer mentors offered sound advice about what to expect in college and shared their strategies for academic success. SEEK participants also stated, in their open-ended responses, they benefited from having the more experienced peers share stories of how they overcame personal and academic challenges in the classroom. Further, students credited their peer mentors with helping them establish a connection to the SEEK program and regarded mentors as role models and an important resource to have in college. In fact, many first-year students reported having a more positive outlook on the overall college experience as a result of having a peer mentor in the classroom. Lastly, SEEK participants highly recommended this experience to future entering students, thus suggesting peer mentors were a critical part of the first-year experience.

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Related Articles in E-Source

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Discussion

Survey findings suggest that for first-year students, this structured peer support is unlike other relationships in college. With a peer mentor, incoming students feel more comfortable asking questions and disclosing concerns about the transition to college than they would with faculty and staff. Further, mentors facilitate the learning of study skills and strategies for academic success by providing illustrative and real-life examples of how these skills are applied. Mentors also help build a sense of community by participating in events that target first-year students. Their dedication to mentoring and to the SEEK program signals to new students that they are joining a supportive, cohesive program that values community involvement and celebrates academic success.

In sum, peer mentors are a valuable resource for students and an important component of the SEEK initiative. At the program level, the number of SEEK participants returning for their second year has steadily increased (i.e., 84% first-to-second-year return rate in 2012—first year it was recorded—compared to 92% rate in 2013) since CUNY instituted this first-year experience. At the college level, the provost's office has asked the program directors to lead a campus peer-mentoring consortium, and the SEEK training curricula and structure have become a guiding model for the college as it seeks to standardize mentoring practices. The SEEK model and peer mentoring program have proven to be an effective retention and academic success tool that can be easily adapted on other campuses and tailored to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. 

“mentors facilitate the learning of study skills and strategies for academic success by providing illustrative and real-life examples of how these skills are applied.”



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Rebranding an Early-Alert System Through Education and Collaboration

Curry College, a small, regional liberal arts institution, like many small colleges faces the challenge of supporting high-risk populations who require intense support and attention. Many of our students are first-generation college students and have both documented and undocumented learning differences. The average incoming GPA for fall 2014 was 2.8. We also found that many of our first- and second-year students were not developmentally prepared to seek help, nor were they necessarily aware of the appropriate resources to use. Creating a process where faculty can initiate those conversations lifts the burden from the student and provides them a bridge to success. While early-alert systems are not a silver bullet, they inform students that someone notices they are struggling and wants to help. Yet, the success of these systems relies on meaningful use by faculty.

An alert system in some form has been in place at Curry since 2007, but it was underused and lacked strategic student follow-up. It began as a home-grown, online form, which has maintained by the Academic Success Coordinator (ASC), and e-mailed to students and their academic advisors. The success of the alert was completely dependent on student response. When the faculty used the system, it was frequently too late in the semester for meaningful intervention to take place. To improve the program's success, the ASC launched a rebranding effort involving a three-pronged approach: (a) educating faculty about the system, (b) building collaborative networks to underpin successful early intervention, and (c) fostering a data-driven approach to student support.

Rebranding the Alert System: Faculty Education

Because faculty buy-in is critical to the success of the early-alert program, the rebranding process was initiated through proactive, collaborative efforts with department chairpersons, in the hope that they would be able to provide insight into the lack of faculty participation and also serve as messengers. According to chairperson feedback, faculty did not submit alerts because the process was never fully explained, it did not seem worth the effort, or they feared that sending an alert would fracture the faculty/student relationship. With this information, the ASC began visiting department meetings and individual faculty members to explain the importance of the system and a new follow-up process designed to improve student response. She presented data to faculty and discussed the success rates when students had received alerts. Essentially, the ASC reframed the alert as an opportunity for a conversation rather than a rigid warning, which did not focus on students' potential for success. Further, she highlighted the role of the alert system as a form of documentation in the event of a grade dispute.

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“The director of academic advising ... educates faculty advisors about using alerts in a proactive manner and focusing on strategies for success.”

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Building Networks of Collaboration and Support

To broaden the support available to students, the alert form was changed to include academic advisors, the student-athlete welfare coordinator, and faculty from the Program for the Advancement of Learning (PAL), an initiative for students with learning differences. Follow-up with students is coordinated by the ASC but does not reside with her alone. If a student is neither an athlete, nor in the PAL program, the ASC follows up, recommending campus services, such as tutoring, or offering academic coaching. The amount and intensity of follow up depends on a student's academic history, academic standing, and number of alerts they have received in a given semester. With additional campus representatives included on the e-mail distribution, strategic discussions about the nature of support and timing of follow-up contact are now possible.

The ASC also reached out to faculty and administrators to increase awareness and use of the alert system. For example, the writing coordinator has instituted a common syllabus statement in the required first-year writing sequence that identifies behaviors that may trigger an alert in those courses. Another initiative involves collaboration with the director of academic advising, who educates faculty advisors about using alerts in a proactive manner and focusing on strategies for success. This initiative demonstrates the positive, developmental value of early alerts, rather than their having a negative impact on the advising relationship. This positive messaging has significantly increased advisors' receptiveness to using the alert system. These types of broad and targeted collaborative efforts have changed the culture of alerts across campus.

Data-Driven Intervention

An essential step in the rebranding effort was moving from an anecdotal model of development to data-driven programming. The ASC collects the number of early alerts sent, number of faculty who used the system (as a means of social-norming), and percentage of students who were successful (i.e., earn a grade of C or better, pass the course with a P, or withdraw from the course without penalty) post-alert at the end of each semester. These are shared with faculty via e-mail to encourage future use of the system.

Assessment data show the growth, from the 2008-2009 academic year when the rebranding efforts began through 2013-2014, in the number of alerts sent (167% increase), faculty using the system (63% increase), and students receiving alerts (85.5% increase). Increased use of alerts and follow-up conversations with students coincided with a corresponding rise in the average GPA at the college and a decrease in the number of students earning Ds and Fs or ending the semester on academic probation. Probation numbers for first-year students dropped from 10% of the first-year class at the end of the fall 2008 semester to 7% of the class at the end of the fall 2013 semester.

“Increased use of alerts and follow-up conversations with students coincided with a corresponding rise in the average GPA at the college and a decrease in the number of students earning Ds and Fs or ending the semester on academic probation.”


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The college's retention rate during this period of rebranding increased to more than 70% for the first time in at least six years. This culture of proactive support aided in the success of students and, therefore, their retention at the institution.

In addition to demonstrating the effects of rebranding on participation, the data are also used to continue development efforts. Success rates have convinced many faculty of the usefulness of the early-alert system. Finally, the data-driven approach to early alerts has professionalized the system and strengthened an argument regarding the importance of the program beyond anecdote and narrative.

Conclusion

At its core, the early-alert system is about facilitating constructive and supportive conversations between faculty and students. When students are given an opportunity to connect with a faculty member, advisor, or academic coach and change their academic behavior, the message sent is that the institution cares about them and their success. This new approach and culture-shift has cost nothing, but it has resulted in an improved campus culture of support and improved retention for first-year students. 

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Abel, M. (2006). Increasing retention rates through academic early intervention programs. *4(1)*, 11-12.

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Award-Winning Programs Focus on Transfer Transition

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition formally recognized three institutions with its inaugural Institutional Excellence for Students in Transition Award in October at the 21st National Conference on Students in Transition. These award-winning programs are exemplars of innovative collaboration across departments and campuses and dedication to providing transitioning students with the best tools for success. The programs featured below all focus on improving the success of transfer students.

Arizona State University – Guided Pathways to Success

Arizona State University (ASU) is a public metropolitan research university that also happens to have the largest enrollment of a public university in the United States. The university enrolls a massive 10,000 transfer students per year. With the high influx of transfer students, ASU sought ways to better support them through their initial transition and ultimate graduation. ASU created a “culture of transfer” by signing partnership agreements with every public community college in the state. In cooperation with the public community colleges and tribal colleges, ASU also introduced new web-accessible curricular pathways, promoted strong academic preparation, and developed new marketing and communication strategies.

The pathways are structured to ensure students succeed, with an associate degree built into most pathways along with an automated reverse transfer credit mechanism to ensure associate degree completion. If students complete the pathway, they can transfer to ASU with guaranteed admission and no more than 60 semester credits remaining for graduation. Moreover, because credits on a path are guaranteed to apply to a student’s major, no credits are lost during transfer. Each pathway has critical tracking requirements that allow students to determine whether they are an appropriate fit for a particular major. The pathways provide a cost-effective and time-efficient plan for transfer students.

Online self-service tools have been instrumental in the transfer process. For example, the Transfer Credit Guide allows advisors and students to see whether an equivalent course exists at ASU, and if not, provides an easy-to-use online process for students to identify additional courses for evaluation. Other tools such as the Maricopa Colleges’ Pathway Tracker Tool and My ASU give students a clear picture on his/her pathway progress and identify need-to-know transfer resources.

Dustin Roberts

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In the years since the program's implementation, ASU has already seen a return on its investment. Enrollment from Arizona community colleges rose from fewer than 5,000 in the 2006-2007 academic year to 6,117 new transfer students in the 2013-2014 academic year. More than 225 seamless pathways for different majors have been created for the Maricopa to ASU Pathways Program (MAPP) and the number of Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) majors available for other community colleges has also increased. Furthermore, ASU has seen higher enrollment of students with a junior status meaning less time and money is being required to reach graduation. Through extensive collaboration with their community college colleagues, ASU has made the transfer process a manageable step rather than a daunting leap toward graduation.

Governors State University – The Dual Degree Program

Governors State University (GSU) is a public university located in University Park, Illinois, less than 30 miles south of Chicago. It is the only public university serving the large area of south Chicago, an area where bachelor's degree completion is less than half the Illinois state average at 21%. To increase degree attainment, GSU implemented the Dual Degree Program (DDP), a partnership between GSU and 17 community colleges in Chicago. DDP, a research-based initiative, addresses the known barriers to degree completion. Data suggest that students who obtain an associate degree prior to transfer and those who attend the university full-time posttransfer are more likely to graduate than students who fail to do either. To that end, DDP supports college graduation by emphasizing associate degree completion prior to transfer.

Enrolled DDP students are able to take advantage of certain program benefits, including proactive advising, peer mentors, policies that promote completion, and even financial incentives. Advisors help students determine the graduation track allowing for the shortest timeframe and fewest credits needed. These advisors work for GSU but spend most of their time primarily at the community colleges. Students are guaranteed admission to GSU and tuition is frozen upon enrollment. Access to both need- and merit-based scholarships is highlighted to give students a clear picture of available resources. Peer leaders serve as mentors to guide the new students through their degree completion and transition out of community college and into university. These benefits not only serve as rewards for being in the program but also set up the student for future success.

The results have been overwhelmingly positive. Of the DDP's first cohort, 97% had either graduated or remained enrolled, making appropriate progress toward the bachelor's degree. Students have expressed their thankfulness to the program by calling it a "life-line" while also identifying it as a factor in their decision to attend full time, to complete their associate degree prior to transfer, and to believe in their own success. In such a vast and diverse area students come to college with varying challenges that ultimately detract from their academic success. GSU's Dual Degree Program has worked strategically to help students overcome these challenges, and the students are now reaping the benefits.

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Nominate Your Program for the 2015 Institutional Excellence for Students in Transition Award

The award for Institutional Excellence for Students in Transitions will be presented annually to institutions that have designed and implemented outstanding collaborative initiatives enhancing significant transitions during the undergraduate experience. Award recipients will have demonstrated the effectiveness of the initiative in supporting student success, learning, and development at a variety of transition points beyond the first college year and in responding to unique institutional needs. The award package includes two complimentary registrations to the 22nd National Conference on Students in Transition, recognition at the conference, and opportunity to present a poster session on the award-winning initiative. Nominations will be accepted starting mid-May until early August. Please visit http://sc.edu/fye/awards/IE_Award.html for more information and submission instructions.

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University of North Carolina Wilmington – University College Students in Transition Program

The University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) is a public university that enrolls approximately 14,000 undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students each year as part of the University of North Carolina System. In recent years, many of those incoming students have been students in transition—specifically, transfer students and military veterans. Because of the ever-increasing complexity and competitiveness of major admission requirements, these students frequently lacked the skills and courses necessary to succeed in their chosen major. The purpose of the University College (UC) Students in Transition (SiT) Program at UNCW was to provide support to students at critical points of academic major transition while providing a general advising home prior to admission to the major.

To better support these students, UNCW focused on several specific needs: academic preparedness; awareness of requirements, policies, and procedures; personal and social adjustments; financial responsibilities; academic and career planning; and/or the transition to civilian life. They aimed to do all of this while making advising a more user-friendly process for these populations. The Program provides academic advising, courses, and programs geared toward transfer and military student success.

Transfer students who lack certain prerequisites are assigned to the UC SiT program and are advised by SiT-specific advisors. After having met with a Career Center counselor who assists the student with career exploration, the SiT advisors counsel the student regarding major and academic research and planning. They will stay with these advisors until they have successfully transitioned into their major.

Courses provided by the program have sought to further ease students' transition. UNI 201: Transfer Seminar is a three-hour general education course that specifically tackles issues that affect transfer students and the skills that will ultimately help them succeed. Effective fall 2014, the course fulfills six of the Writing Intensive and Information Literacy general education requirements. This prevents students from needing to complete additional, nonrelated coursework to meet these competencies.

Transfer and military students continue to flourish, declaring appropriate majors and gaining entrance into majors of their choosing, evaluating and revising career and academic plans, and forming strong relationships with faculty and staff. Each semester, more and more students are using the program and its resources. This is evidenced by higher enrollment in the UNI 201 course, higher attendance at workshops and more students going through the advising process. UNCW's University College Students in Transition Program has truly created a home for its transfer and military students. 

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- Lagnese, R., Riggs, E., & Pranger, Q. (2014). Successful transitions: Creating an integrated approach to transfer matriculation. *11*(2), 11-13.
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Strengthening Social Support for Transfer Students

Entering community college students have high academic goals, with 81% in one study reporting that their educational goal was a bachelor's degree or higher. However, five years later, only 21% had successfully transferred to a four-year university, and only about 6% had earned a bachelor's degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). Undoubtedly, transfer students face many challenges on the way to attaining a bachelor's degree. Yet, the transition from community college to a four-year institution can go more smoothly when they receive social support from others. As Xueli (2009) observed, college students who have social support and feel a sense of belonging are more likely to obtain a four-year degree. While family members and friends are commonly recognized as providing the majority of social support, faculty members, counselors, other staff, and fellow students can also become active agents of social support to help transfer students succeed. This article highlights strategies for increasing support for students transitioning from a community college to a four-year college or university.

Social Support From Faculty Members

Faculty members at four-year institutions can provide critical assistance both prior to and after transfer (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). At a minimum, faculty members can connect students with campus resources, advise them about which classes to take, and discuss future career possibilities with them. Because faculty members are in an instructional role, they can also assist struggling students with specific aspects of mastering their major discipline, and mentor students with a strong interest in their major discipline. All students benefit enormously from faculty encouragement and advice, yet transfer students have less time to get to know major faculty than native students.

Four-year institutions can employ the following strategies to increase faculty support for transfer students:

1. **Provide incentives for faculty members to participate in mentorship programs for transfer students.** Mentorship programs that pair individual or groups of transfer students with an identified faculty member can grant new students a strong connection to someone at the four-year institution and provide another avenue of support for these students. Faculty involved in these programs can be supported with stipends or grants to support research projects involving transfer students.
2. **Administer awards to recognize outstanding faculty advisors of transfer students.** Transfer students can be asked to nominate faculty members for Transfer Student Advising Awards. Faculty who receive these awards can be recognized at commencement ceremonies and other public events. Awards might also include special professional development funding (e.g., travel grants or research supplies/equipment).

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3. **Support faculty members in efforts to start a chapter of Tau Sigma, the national honor society for transfer students.** While it may not be realistic for faculty to have numerous one-on-one meetings with new transfer students, creating a chapter of Tau Sigma would provide a structured, less labor-intensive way for faculty to interact with transfer students and support their academic achievements.

Support From Campus Staff

As many of the struggles transfer students face concern the logistics of moving between institutions, both sending and receiving institutions can help them by creating special service centers and dedicated advisors. The very existence of a transfer center serves as recognition that transfer students are important and that they face a unique set of challenges. Transfer student centers can serve students in the following ways:

1. **Give workshops focusing on the processes of successful transfer.** Monthly workshops at both two-year transfer centers might describe how to apply to a four-year college or university, navigate transcript review and transfer of credit, while those at four-year centers might focus on overcoming the stigma that community college transfers are academically underprepared. Such workshops could include guest speakers who have successfully transferred from the community college to four-year institutions. For students who have already successfully transferred to a four-year institution, presentations on campus engagement (e.g., joining intercollegiate or intramural athletic teams, taking on leadership roles in campus organizations, becoming involved in research opportunities) can help them become more aware of and immersed in cocurricular experiences. Other workshops for transfers might explore managing time with junior and senior-level coursework and preparing for and applying to graduate school.
2. **Serve as a “one-stop shop” where students can go when they need information and services from the four-year institution.** One of the biggest challenges of transfer is navigating the bureaucratic maze of not one but two institutions. Having a central location where students can go to prepare for transfer or to transition into the four-year institution eases the burden of students having to track down information from decentralized offices and departments and provides them with familiar faces they can turn to for questions and support.
3. **Host a website and publish a weekly e-newsletter for transfer students.** Aside from transfer centers, websites and e-newsletters are also effective ways to relay just-in-time information to transfer students (e.g., course registration procedures, financial aid deadlines). These can detail where to find resources and highlight transfer student success stories. Reading these stories can make struggling students feel like they are not alone in their journey, and that success is entirely possible.

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Social Support Strategies

- Provide incentives for faculty to serve as mentors
- Recognize outstanding faculty transfer advisors
- Create transfer centers to offer one stop for information, ongoing development, and support
- Create cohort-based learning experiences
- Use peers to serve as mentors and guides
- Make cocurricular experiences (e.g., student organizations, residence life) accessible to transfers

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Social Support From Other Students

The importance of feeling that one belongs to a community and is connected to fellow students cannot be underestimated. Discovering that others share your interests can be a potentially rewarding aspect of a college education. From a practical standpoint, communicating with other students is an important way to learn how a new campus works. Peer support for transfer students can be nurtured in the following ways:

1. **Implementing cohort-based learning.** Scheduling classes with the same group of peers can be used in some degree completion programs to foster familiarity among students and promote new friendships.
2. **Employing peer mentors.** Assigning cohorts of transfer students a peer mentor upon admission to the four-year institution can provide them with an initial go-to individual to help ease the transition to their new college or university before other friendships are established. Four-year peer mentors might even work with community college students prior to transfer.
3. **Providing on-campus housing that suits the needs of transfer students.** Living on campus facilitates friendships for many students. Transfer students would also benefit from this opportunity, especially if they can live in close proximity to other transfer students. Reserving sections of residence halls for transfer students (perhaps with a older transfers serving as resident assistants) may help foster friendships among these new students. Also, given that many transfer students may be parents, family student housing (apartments) should be made available when possible.

Because it is assumed that transfer students have already succeeded in community college, they are often overlooked when it comes to services and programs provided by four-year institutions. By understanding the ways in which colleges, faculty, and staff can work together on behalf of transfer students, new measures can be taken to support these students during a critical time in their academic lives. Because students who begin their educational journey in a community college can easily lose sight of their initial academic goal of a bachelor's degree, commitment to supporting them both before and after transfer is critical in helping them stay enrolled and make progress toward their degrees. 

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Good for the Gander: Why Common Reading Programs Are Good for Faculty

Students often worry about proving themselves in college. They anticipate meeting new peers and challenging teachers and learning differently than they have before. A widespread practice to help new students in their transition to college is a common reading initiative, often coupled with orientation programs. These programs typically involve campus leaders choosing a book to create a shared intellectual experience for incoming students, with faculty members conducting seminars and incorporating the text in their syllabi. These practices are supported by a strong professional infrastructure, such as the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, annual conferences, professional development workshops, special book catalogs from major publishing houses, and peer-reviewed research on the benefits of this practice. Common reading programs serve new students, yet they also present a unique opportunity for faculty to reflect on the singular experience of starting college.

Open habits of mind are essential for college students. Common reading programs invite faculty to appreciate anew the very first days of college, when intellectual awakenings and life-shaping decisions were still in their own futures. Dictates of discipline and department were largely unknown and less important than curiosity and risk taking. A common reading lets faculty step away from the trappings of disciplinary authority, temporarily relegating well-worn professional loyalties and affiliations to the margins. Faculty can join across fields of expertise to focus on a single book. Inevitably, this puts most instructors in the position of not being experts on a topic. But in the best of circumstances, all students are in precisely that position during the first week of college and continually throughout their education.

Fall 2014 was the third year with a common read at The Evergreen State College. Nearly everyone who teaches undergraduates participates. In its first year, the College assigned *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School*, a memoir of the civil rights movement by Carlota Walls LaNier (2010), who was one of the Little Rock Nine. While faculty in political economy and in cultural studies were confident about leading seminars on the history of racial discrimination in the United States, some of their colleagues in biology, computer science, business, and visual arts doubted their ability to do so. To bridge the gap, a group of faculty and staff well-versed in LaNier's topics created a guide to help their colleagues plan orientation sessions on the book. They also led introductory seminars for faculty to address concerns about how to conduct discussions about race and justice. The common reading enabled colleagues from different fields to collaborate and help each other renew their awareness of what it is like to encounter new and important knowledge.

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“The common reading enabled colleagues from different fields to collaborate and help each other renew their awareness of what it is like to encounter new and important knowledge.”

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The second year's text was *Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life From the StoryCorps Project*, a collection of transcripts compiled by StoryCorps founder David Isay (2008). The book illustrates threads of everyday life that unite us as citizens: home and family, work and dedication, history and struggle. This time, faculty who taught oral history produced a guide including a brief workshop to help students experience the simple acts of listening, being heard, and documenting the encounter with intention. Faculty who had never taught oral history learned its ethical power by doing it and observing students respond to its methods.

In fall 2014, the common read was Lyanda Lynn Haupt's (2011) *Crow Planet: Essential Wisdom From the Urban Wilderness*. To help colleagues unfamiliar with natural history, a faculty team including an ornithologist and two humanities professors created workshops that took students outdoors to closely observe the natural world. This interdisciplinary group supported colleagues across campus as they learned how to tune in to the skills and pleasures of appreciating nature and consider how human actions influence the fragile ecosystems we work to sustain.

Few routines typical of our profession present opportunities like these to recall the foundational moments of waking up to new knowledge, which for many of us inaugurated a lifetime commitment to higher education and advocacy for the life of the mind. Professional demands, such as planning courses on well-known material, research in a discrete field, governance, teaching at multiple institutions, and juggling several professional identities (e.g., advisor, instructor, committee member), require faculty to be well-read and scholarly, not vulnerable and unschooled. When can faculty pause to revisit what it was like to be a student before committing to a field of knowledge? Common reading programs can inspire faculty to return to that moment, rich with possibility for more than two million students who start college annually.

Because common texts are about topics of general interest, virtually all faculty have garden-variety familiarity with any book's theme. But because every book is field-specific, most faculty will not have knowledge grounded in years of study. Making the adjustment between life as we live it and knowledge that issues from the luxury of detachment offered by higher education is, as W.E.B. DuBois (1903/2008) wrote more than a hundred years ago, "the adjustment which forms the secret of civilization" (p. 61). Through common reading programs, citizens committed to the common good stretch toward the unfamiliar to understand worlds broader than their own. Hopefully, they learn to crave that kind of stretching, just as athletes itch for their daily workouts. They enjoy the experience of facing and grappling with what they do not understand and of using the power of their minds to change who they are and what they are capable of.

Finally, the common reading enables students to witness faculty walking the walk of genuine inquiry by modeling the core virtues of learning. Faculty participation teaches those virtues by continually renewing the culture of inquiry, which is, after all, the hallmark of higher education. 

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Enhancing First-Year Convocation: A Data-Driven Approach

Colleges and universities across the country strive to assist students in the transition to higher education, seeking opportunities to make them feel welcome and to integrate them into college life. First-year convocation, which is generally viewed as a student's official welcome into the university's community of scholars, is one such opportunity. It allows administrators and faculty to engage with students in a formal academic gathering and sets the tone for their college experience. Furthermore, convocation presents the occasion to educate students on the traditions of their institution, motivating and inspiring them to be successful academically and promoting affinity with the university and its culture. Research has shown that students are more likely to succeed when they feel personally significant, and institutions can instill this feeling through convocation ceremonies designed to welcome and celebrate first-year students (Cuseo, 2007).



*Aerial photo on the KSU campus green following the convocation ceremony.
(Used with permission of the authors)*

At Kennesaw State University (KSU), first-year convocation has been a tradition for more than 10 years. It signifies the beginning of a student's life as a member of the KSU community of scholars and functions as a bookend to commencement, with both ceremonies presided over by the University's top administrators. Convocation has evolved over time to meet the needs of the ever-changing student population, with the most recent expansion bringing together units from across campus to include activities that engage students and their families. For example, KSU now offers both pre- and post-ceremony events, such as an open house, aerial photo, on-campus dining options, and evening entertainment.

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In order to make data-driven decisions regarding enhancements to first-year convocation, a sample of attendees were invited to participate in an online survey, which gathered demographic information and feedback on logistical issues, marketing efforts, level of participation, appropriateness of the keynote speaker, and perceived impact of the event. The invitation was sent to approximately 2,000 first-year students, their parents and families, and KSU faculty and staff. More than 300 individuals responded to the survey.

More than half of the respondents indicated they participated in the convocation ceremony, the aerial photo, the open house activities, the on-campus dining options, and the evening entertainment. A significant finding for future marketing efforts was that the majority of respondents learned about convocation through an e-mail campaign and at orientation. Attendees also indicated a clear preference for the ceremony to be held on the Friday during the first week of classes and for the featured speaker to be a current KSU student or recent graduate. These findings were reported back to the arrangement committee who factored them into scheduling and preparing for the subsequent year's convocation.

In addition to data gathered regarding the logistics of the event, the survey also afforded a glimpse into respondents' perceptions of convocation. Of particular interest were the reasons respondents cited for attending convocation and their perceived purpose of the ceremony. The primary reason for attending was to *hear the speaker*, closely followed by a desire to *hear from the university's top administrators*. The next most common reasons for attending were to *meet people*, *to spend time with friends*, and *asked by parents to attend*.

Regarding the perceived purpose of the event, respondents indicated that they believed first-year convocation was intended to foster institutional affinity. Following closely behind were

- *inform students of the expectations of higher education,*
- *educate students about academic traditions,*
- *instill in students a sense of pride in their University,*
- *create a sense of belonging or community, and*
- *motivate and inspire students.*

Based on KSU's experience over the past 10 years and the assessment data gathered from the 2013 survey, the following strategies are offered for developing or enhancing first-year convocation:

- Form a collaborative campuswide committee to achieve buy-in and assistance with the planning, cost, and logistical details related to convocation.

“First-year convocation ... signifies the beginning of a student's life as a member of the KSU community of scholars and functions as a bookend to commencement.”

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- Involve key individuals from the offices of auxiliary services and event planning when selecting a date, time, and location for the ceremony. At large institutions in particular, the timing of the event may have significant implications regarding student availability, traffic flow, parking, and other concerns.
- Gather information about events that may potentially conflict with convocation. Connect with individuals from Residence Life and Student Affairs early in the planning process to navigate these potential conflicts.
- Invite students and their families to convocation through multiple avenues and using a variety of media. KSU survey results suggest announcements at orientation and e-mail were the most successful methods for reaching the intended audience. create a sense of belonging or community, and
- Educate students and their family members about convocation—what it is and its significance.
- Develop a marketing plan that includes a “save the date” announcement, a formal invitation to new students and their families, and a reminder within a week of the event.
- Enlist the assistance of faculty and staff across campus in promoting the event and encouraging their participation at the ceremony itself.
- Provide take-aways for first-year students who attend convocation. Lapel pins inscribed with the KSU mountain logo and words from the KSU Alma Mater were designed specifically for this ceremony and were only available to students in attendance. First-year students are officially inducted as members of Kennesaw State University when they place this lapel pin on their clothing and recite the matriculation pledge as part of the convocation ceremony.

KSU's data-driven decisions regarding enhancements to convocation have led the University to rethink aspects of this annual event. Specifically, based on feedback from the survey, the 2014 Convocation was again held on a Friday evening and the speaker selected was a recent graduate of our institution, as was the preference of a majority of survey respondents. Student attendance at the 2014 ceremony was significantly increased over the preceding year, and preliminary feedback suggests that the speaker was very well received by the audience. In better tailoring first-year convocation to the preferences indicated by our target audience, KSU hopes that more students will attend convocation and gain a sense of personal significance and belongingness that will ease their transition to our institution.

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