

# E-SOURCE for College Transitions

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition

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## Vocational Focus Supports Students during the “Sophomore Slump”

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Colleges and universities do a commendable job encouraging the exploration phase of identity development in the first year of college. During the sophomore year, however, students are expected to conclude this identity exploration, especially as it relates to academic major choices and vocational discernment. Unfortunately, colleges have not been as successful at developing models for encouraging or affirming particular identity commitments or decision making. The result is that sophomores may find themselves in a time of crisis with few resources for support—a transition period identified as the “sophomore slump” by many educators. With funding from a Theological Exploration of Vocation grant from the Lilly Endowment, Davidson College created a year-long sophomore experience (entitled Vocational Vertigo) that both challenges those students who haven’t experienced identity crises and creates spaces where students in the midst of identity crises can seek affirmation of the particular identity commitments they have made. The program encourages students to explore identity and vocational discernment through the lenses of religious and secular traditions. In this article, I describe this program and the questions that have been raised during its first year.

Vocational Vertigo consists of three distinct pieces: a retreat, monthly seminars, and semester workshops. Sophomores attend these programs on a voluntary basis. The distinct components of the yearlong experience offer both a connected, comprehensive program and self-contained individual activities. Because one of our goals is to support a large percentage of the sophomore class through this programming, it is important that we create opportunities appealing to different learning styles and personalities. By offering three unique types of opportunities, we broaden the base of student

involvement. Recognizing that not all students are interested in attending retreats, we offer the monthly seminars in part as an attempt to involve these less outgoing students. The semester workshops offer hands-on, small group opportunities to explore identity and discern vocation creatively and physically.

The retreat sets the stage for the monthly events and ongoing semester workshops by introducing the broad connection between identity and vocation and the specific topics to be covered throughout the year. Participating sophomores are divided into diverse groups (determined by religious affiliation, gender, ethnicity, and campus activities) of five to seven students with a staff or faculty member serving as the leader. In the first major retreat activity, small group members spend a significant amount of time (about 30 minutes per member) sharing their personal stories. In these narratives, participants (including the leader) are asked to reflect on significant relationships, experiences, events, and places that they identify as pivotal or life shaping.

In particular, participants are asked to share spiritual or religious questions, convictions, or tensions that inform their worldviews. While each participant is sharing her narrative, others are asked to take notes and provide feedback or ask clarifying questions to the individual sharing. This activity challenges students to both isolate the stories that reveal aspects of their identities and to recognize the similarities and differences between their own narratives and those of other group members.

After the often emotionally draining process of sharing and hearing personal narratives, sophomores and leaders participate in a series of workshops designed to offer particular lenses through which they are challenged to examine their own identities. In order to provide a context that affirms particular identity commitments, each of these workshops presents a different, spiritual, or secular tradition. Some examples of workshops include “Yoga and Listening to the Wisdom of the Body”; “Abraham Joshua Heschel, Judaism, and Spiritual Discipline”; “Roman Catholicism, Dorothy Day, and Intentional Poverty”; and “Alice Walker, Secular Humanism, and

Creativity." Following these workshops, small groups reconvene to reexamine personal narratives through the newly presented perspectives. Throughout the school year, small groups meet frequently to reconnect and check in with each other about the struggles shared on the retreat.

Each month, sophomores are invited to participate in a seminar that encourages them to think critically about decisions, worldviews, and particular aspects of their identities. Teams of five to six faculty, staff, and students who have an interest and some expertise in the monthly topics are assembled to plan the monthly events. A side benefit of this arrangement is that involving students with faculty and staff breaks down the boundaries students perceive between academic and non-academic experiences.

The monthly topic is related to a category of otherness as described by Beverly Tatum (1997): socioeconomic class, ethnicity and race, occupation, physical and mental ability, gender, and religion. The goals of these sessions are (a) to challenge students in the "unmarked" groups (i.e., upper middle class, white, able-bodied, male, mainline Protestant) to recognize their "situatedness" within these identity categories and (b) to create a safe space in which students can gain self-awareness by reflecting on the ramifications of their particular identities.

In addition to retreats and monthly seminars, a small number of sophomores choose to participate in ongoing workshops related to identity and vocational exploration. During the fall semester, we offered ongoing creative writing workshops designed to challenge participants to develop their unique voices through an introduction to different styles of writing. During the spring semester, we offer a series of outdoor activities—a day hike, a weekend backpacking trip, and a whitewater-rafting trip—coupled with reflection sessions.

One recurring mantra in these programs is that identifying and struggling with questions is more important than finding and clinging to particular answers. In keeping with this underlying theme, I conclude this description by sharing a few questions that have been raised for us in the first year of this program: (a) How do we balance our desire that these programs remain voluntary with our recognition that the students who could benefit most are the ones who choose not to attend? (b) How can voluntary, inconsistently attended programs be evaluated effectively as a unit? (c) How can this program support sophomores without adding yet another layer of events and responsibilities to their already hectic schedules?

We welcome your feedback to these questions or your own questions about Vocational Vertigo, Davidson College's sophomore year experience.

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\new program for first-year students

## Instructors Debate Use of Film in First-Year Seminars

*Hollie Armstrong*

*Editorial Assistant, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*

When UNC Greensboro's student retention coordinator Scott Amundsen was asked to purchase some feature films for use in his first-year seminar course, picking the films was not the problem. Deciding whether to show the movies in or outside of class was of greater concern. Amundsen sent an email to the FYE-List asking for input. The following are snippets of advice offered from listserv participants.

According to David Campagne, coordinator of the University Experience at the University of South Florida, the answer to Amundsen's question really depends on the nature of the campus. For example, when Campagne taught at Georgia Southern, a medium-sized residential campus, the whole class would meet one night a week to watch a movie. This offered a relaxed setting in which the group ate popcorn and even brought along friends. For the most part this approach worked well; however, Campagne noted that varsity athletics or practice schedules, pledge activities, and other class requirements sometimes interfered.

Now at the University of South Florida, a huge metropolitan campus with scattered student residences, Campagne finds that watching films as a group outside of class is impossible. Trying to build the film into the normal class schedule is equally challenging. "There is no time for discussion, no time for a campus presenter to speak to the class about the topic you wish to address through the use of the film, no continuity from one class to the next, and no time to explain and/or reflect on any written work you assign about the film," Campagne said.

Steven Strang, director of the Writing and Communication Center at MIT concurs with Campagne. "Overall, I think it's not a great idea to show movies during class time,

particularly if you have to break the movie up and show it over two periods. That is devoting a lot of class time to what is really a form of homework."

When Strang was teaching a first-year seminar on horror, he showed movies during class time; however, the class ran for 80 minutes. When considering whether to show a movie during class time, the length of the class period is an important determinate. Moreover, St. Thomas University English professor, Russ Hunt, believes you should decide if watching the movie as a group, in the same room, is a more useful and effective tool for relaying the information than other strategies. If, for discussion purposes, you feel movie footage is essential, you can always show clips. This approach is more time consuming for the instructor but is an excellent way to introduce key topics.

"If you can find a clip or two that highlights a main point that you want students to get from the movie, you can accomplish your learning objective, focus the student's attention, and save class time," Chris Cubic, assistant director of orientation and coordinator of First-Year Connections at Northern Illinois University, said. "Using clips also allows you to incorporate movies that you might not want to show in their entirety, for example, American History X. It has a great point but is probably too graphic to be shown in most classrooms. A few clips would suffice to get the message across."

Instructors are not limited to movies. Today, popular television series such as Friends, The X-Files, and Sex in the City are available on DVD. As one instructor noted, using television shows eliminates the time burden since most shows run for less than an hour.

Associate Director of The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, Barbara Tobolowsky offered further suggestions. "If you want to look specifically at how college is depicted in primetime, you can use Felicity, Buffy: The Vampire Slayer, Moesha, The Parkers, and 7th Heaven," Tobolowsky said.

But Campaigne warns that you should never jump right into the movie or anything else you are showing the student without first deciding what you as an instructor want to accomplish, what you want the students to do, and what you want the students to learn from the activity.

As for Amundsen, who initiated the film debate, he sided with popular opinion and will not show films in class. Because Amundsen believes there is not a perfect film for all students, he decided not to restrict the viewing to one particular film; instead, his students are going to form small groups and pick the movies they want to watch. The group will then work together to relate the film to first-year issues.

## Film and Television Titles and Topics

### Films

- Office Space** (1999): Career/job issues
- Good Will Hunting** (1997): Critical thinking
- Dead Poets Society** (1989): Self-esteem, finding your own voice, parental expectations, conformity vs. non-conformity
- Finding Forrester** (2000): Communication with professors
- Forrest Gump** (1994): Adaptability and overcoming obstacles
- Madeline's Best Manners** (2001): Consequences of a rigid schedule and over commitment
- Higher Learning** (1995): Diversity and race issues
- Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone** (2001): Leaving home and dealing with the challenges of a new environment
- Smoke Signals** (1998): Separation, breaking pre-formed stereotypes
- Stand and Deliver** (1988): Everyone can learn and succeed, importance of an inspiring teacher
- Dangerous Minds** (1995): Everyone is capable of success when instructors believe in the student's abilities
- American History X** (1998): Depicts the affects of racism and hatred

### Television Series

- Felicity** (available on DVD/ in syndication on WE): Depicts the college experience from first-year to last
- Buffy: The Vampire Slayer** (available on DVD/ in syndication on F/X): Adjustment from high school to college
- Moesha** (UPN in syndication): Adjustment and dealing with academic demands
- The Parkers** (UPN): A 40-year old mother and her 18-year old daughter go back to school, contrasts the traditional student with the non-traditional student
- 7th Heaven** (The WB): Mother going back to school, son going to medical school, and daughters deciding if they want to further their educations, looks at the family and various educational situations that can result

## What's Happening at the Center? Conferences

The 23rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience will be held in Addison, Texas (Dallas area), February 20-24, 2004. We hope you will make plans now to join colleagues from across the country as we focus on strategies for improving the learning and success of first-year college students. The complete conference announcement and registration form are available online at <http://www.sc.edu/fye/events/2004annual/index.html>

## Research

This month the Center launches its Sixth National Survey of First-Year Seminars. The revised survey continues to focus on capturing data regarding the administration of the seminars, as well as gaining a better understanding of what is happening in the classroom. It will also explore the use of peer leaders, team teaching, and online course elements more extensively than earlier surveys did.

We hope that when the survey pops up in your e-mail, you will take the time to respond to it. For more information about the survey, please contact Barbara Tobolowsky [barat@gwm.sc.edu](mailto:barat@gwm.sc.edu) or Carrie Linder [carriew@gwm.sc.edu](mailto:carriew@gwm.sc.edu).

## Teleconferences

The Center is pleased to announce the topics and panelists for its 2004 Teleconference Series. Registration information will be available on our web site in November. For more information, please contact Barbara Tobolowsky [barbarat@gwm.sc.edu](mailto:barbarat@gwm.sc.edu) or Tracy Skipper [tlskipper@sc.edu](mailto:tlskipper@sc.edu)

### *Promoting the Public Good: Fulfilling Higher Education's Civic Mission*

Thursday, March 4, 2004 1:00 – 3:00 pm EST  
featuring Regina Hughes, Elaine Ikeda, and Edward Zlotkowski

### *Creating Learning Environments*

Thursday, March 25, 2004 1:00 – 3:00 pm EST  
featuring Jim Burns, Jim Groccia, Suzanne Hamid, and Constance Staley

### *Rethinking Retention*

Thursday, April 8, 2004 1:00 – 3:00 pm EST  
featuring John N. Gardner, Kay McClenney, and Patrick Terenzini

## *Campus Activities: Creating Intentional Connections for Student Learning*

Thursday, April 25, 2004 1:00 – 3:00 pm EST  
featuring Jan Arminio, Gregory Blimling, and Walter Kimbrough

## **Calls Personalize Residence Life**

*Mike Taylor, Assistant Hall Director*

*Susan Shumaker, Hall Director*

*The Ohio State University*

At Ohio State students are seen as numbers - phone numbers that is. Resident advisors (RA's) phone each of their residents 10 days before the academic school year begins. This personalized effort sometimes surprises students who expect to be just another face in the crowd of 9,200 undergraduate residence hall students. The RAs follow general conversation points, providing a basic introduction to the hall, information about move in, and an overview of welcome week activities. Perhaps most important, students have an individual opportunity to ask any questions that may have lingered from summer orientation. Parents also are often able to speak with the RA as they prepare to send their student to campus.

An additional benefit to this initiative is a more accurate projection of fall quarter occupancy. Students who have changed their mind about attending Ohio State may not have informed the university prior to the RA's phone call. Knowing that a student is not planning to attend Ohio State provides flexibility in placing other students who have been waiting for housing.

The cost of this program is far outweighed by the ability to place students who are on the waiting list for housing and by the positive reviews from parents and students, who report feeling reassured and welcomed by the RA's friendly call. At the end of the school year one resident told his RA, "It feels like just a few days ago you were calling me to talk to me about moving in. Before you called me I was worried about not knowing anyone and coming from out of state, but after we talked I was relieved that I already knew someone who would be there when I arrived." In another call, the RA learned that an incoming student's birthday was on move-in day. The RA decorated the student's door and put up signs to help celebrate. Such personal attention goes a long way in establishing positive impressions of the institution during a critical transition period.

Next fall before your students arrive, we recommend "Calling All Residents." It can make an exciting difference as you welcome students to campus.

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## National Survey Finds Library Instruction Frequent Component of First-Year Seminar

In fall 2001, librarians and researchers Colleen Boff (Bowling Green State University) and Kristin Johnson (California State University, Chico) surveyed 749 institutions that reported offering a first-year seminar to learn about the role library instruction played in these courses. Boff and Johnson suggest that incorporating library instruction into the first-year seminar may be one way to satisfy the increasing need for information literacy (IL)—a knowledge set best acquired through a more comprehensive and integrated approach rather than the more traditional, one-shot approach to library instruction. Yet they wondered how much success the library profession was having in bringing IL instruction into the first-year seminar.

Of the 721 recipients of an e-mail cover letter, 368 responded to a brief web-based survey (52% response rate). A majority of respondents (86%) indicated that a library component was either an optional or required component of the first-year seminar at their institution. Most of those who included a library component (67%) required it, but it represented a fairly small portion of overall course content. Forty-five percent of respondents indicated that just one hour of class time was devoted to library instruction, with about the same percentage (45%) indicating that it made up between 1 to 5% of total course content. Table 1 provides a list of topics covered in the library instruction component in order of frequency. Other responses to this question included citing sources, locating reserve material, and using e-mail or software packages (e.g., spreadsheets, presentation software, word processing).

Survey responses suggest that librarians are primarily responsible for developing the content for the component

### Topics Covered in Library Instruction (n=315)

Topic	First-Year Seminars	
	Number	Percentage
Article databases	257	82
Library catalog	256	81
Web searching	247	78
Library tour	246	78
Research assignment	208	66
Web evaluation	114	36
Scavenger hunt	67	27

Note: Percentages do not equal 100. More than one answer accepted.

(80%) and are most frequently responsible for teaching the component (84%). Overlapping response categories to these questions suggest that librarians collaborate with instructors at some institutions in developing and teaching these components.

While the amount of time devoted to library instruction will not satisfy all IL competencies, such coverage provides a basic introduction upon which other courses can build. Boff and Johnson also avoid offering a one-size-fits-all solution for IL instruction, suggesting that decisions about the specific IL goals for the first-year seminar must be based on institutional needs and characteristics.

A complete copy of their findings is available: Boff, C., & Johnson, K. (2002). The library and first-year experience courses: A nationwide study. *Reference Services Review*, 30(4): 277-287.

## Peer Mentor Program Integral to the First-Year Experience

*Jill Steinberg, Director  
Peer Mentor Program  
San Jose State University*

San Jose State University (SJSU) is a large commuter campus composed mainly of transfer students. Transitions are especially challenging for the ethnically diverse student body, most of whom are second-language learners, older, and first-generation college students. Many also work at least part-time and require some remedial work. When studies revealed that only 35% of SJSU's entering students were graduating in six years, the administration took action. In an effort to curb social isolation and some of the other issues affecting student attrition, SJSU launched a first-year experience program. The resulting Metropolitan University Scholar's Experience (MUSE) features 15 student seminars for first-year students, workshops, a learning support center, and a peer mentor program. MUSE seminars are taught by

full- and part-time faculty, have a disciplinary focus, and satisfy three general education units across eight general education areas. But MUSE's hallmark and the glue holding all the initiatives together is the Peer Mentor Program.

Research suggests that students often learn best from other students, and a survey of SJSU students revealed that the majority (around 87%) of respondents would request a Peer Mentor for academic or personal help. Most (over 70%) said they would also visit the learning support center, staffed by peer mentors. One student in a summer remedial class wrote "...I wish I had [a peer mentor] ... there are times when everyone needs someone." Thus, student support for this type of program was high.

## The Program

Peer Mentors are an invaluable resource at SJSU. Whether in the MUSE classroom or at the Peer Mentor Center, mentors facilitate discussions on academic coping skills and other concerns ranging from time management to help with class work. Peer Mentors can also address issues students might not feel comfortable talking about with a professor. In addition, they also provide workshops, help with university functions (e.g., New Students Reading Project and Showcase for Learning), and serve on university committees. Peer Mentors are also hired by departments outside the first-year program to mentor their students. For example, a Humanities Honors program designed specifically for "MUSE graduates" hired some Peer Mentors.

The demand for classroom-based mentors at SJSU is greater than the supply, but mentors provide support to instructors in a variety of ways. Typically, this involves introducing themselves and the program, showing the "Peer Mentor Project" video or discussing one of the Peer Mentor's "testimonials."

Instead of waiting for a mentor to come to them, students can seek help at the Peer Mentor Center, open to all SJSU students and housed in a residence hall lounge. The Center has a scholarly and welcoming atmosphere – there are computers with Internet access, writing and reference books, comfortable seating and study space, and even some light refreshments. Faculty members can elect to hold class sessions in the Peer Mentor Center where their students can meet mentors and familiarize themselves with the Center's resources.

## Selection and Training

The recruitment and application process for Peer Mentors is highly selective. During fall 2001, 47 students ap-



plied, and 21 students were selected for paid mentoring positions. These students were academically excellent and diverse in terms of their majors, ethnicity, and experience. In spring 2002, the students completed a three-unit, upper-division peer mentoring class that honed their communication and academic skills. Each Peer Mentor created a research-based project useful for new SJSU students. For example, videos on the hot sports at SJSU and PowerPoint presentations on stress and diversity were produced. Peer Mentors also chose a MUSE Seminar and professor to work with for the fall 2002 term. This allowed enough time for the Peer Mentors and faculty to meet and discuss their roles in the design of the course and syllabus. At the end of the semester, one student wrote in a reflection paper "... at first the course requirements seemed a bit overwhelming but we enjoyed the class and learned so much about ourselves and each other that it never really felt like we worked."

To supplement the initial training, some students enroll in an upper-division, three-unit general education service-learning course while working as Peer Mentors. They receive service-learning credit for their work.

## Assessment

SJSU is currently in the process of assessing the effects of the Peer Mentor Program on new student and peer mentor retention, academic success, time-to-degree, and overall

satisfaction. Several MUSE students have already attributed their first semester success to having a Peer Mentor. Many of the mentors have expressed how participating in the Peer Mentor community and working with first-year students have changed their lives and possible career paths. Peer Mentor Liz Martinez notes that "feeling a sense of community for those who come in search of our services and also for those of us who provide them is the biggest reward I've received from being involved in the program." Peer Mentor Dijorn Moss remarked, "The Peer Mentor Program gives you a glimpse of a world without stereotypes, without labels, without categories. While other programs talk about diversity, the Peer Mentor Program actually embraces it and practices it." Even though the goal was not specifically to help the faculty, many faculty including the Director, have commented that working with the Peer Mentors has been a truly remarkable and inspiring learning experience.

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## Institutions Excel in Providing First-Year Programs

In the previous issue of *E-Source*, we featured the first of a series of brief institutional profiles, describing key initiatives designed to improve the learning and success of first-year students. The second installment of the Policy Center's "Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year" series features two four-year institutions with enrollments under 2,000. A complete narrative is available on the Policy Center's web site. Click on the institution name to access the narrative.

**Eckerd College**  
Saint Petersburg, Florida  
Established in 1958, current enrollment of 1,582

Autumn Term. The first-year curriculum begins with Autumn Term, a three-week special topics course taught in August. The course meets daily for three hours and includes workshops in library orientation, effective writing strategies, studying for exams, and giving oral presentations. The purpose of Autumn Term is to engage students in the ex-

citement of the intellectual enterprise, introduce them to college work expectations, and orient them to college.

**Western Heritage in a Global Context.** Western Heritage in a Global Context (WHGC) rounds out the first-year curriculum with a year-long, two-semester course required of all first-year students. The course is organized around thematic conversations among the great ideas and enduring texts of both western and non-western traditions. The objectives of the course include introducing students to a sampling of the many influential ideas and thinkers of the western tradition in conversation with those of non-western traditions; developing students' understanding and appreciation of major historical, intellectual, spiritual, and artistic transitions in western and non-western traditions; and improving students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize complex ideas.

**Mentoring.** The key to successful implementation of the college's general education program is effective mentoring. First-year mentors help students plan a four-year curriculum, including possible study abroad, as well as involvement in campus activities. They also encourage reflective learning and goal setting. Although first-year students choose a new faculty mentor in the spring when they declare a major, the pattern has been set in the first year for continuing close collaboration between each individual student and his or her mentor.

Eckerd's emphasis on general education has been commended by external evaluators for helping the institution achieve its academic mission and for providing students with the broad knowledge base required for educated citizenship.

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Kalamazoo College  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
Established in 1833, current enrollment of 1,384

The intentional weaving together of experiential learning and mentorship within a rigorous academic framework is the hallmark of the First-Year Experience (FYE) at Kalamazoo College. The program focuses on the stated outcomes of a "K" education: intercultural understanding, social responsibility, leadership, lifelong learning, and career readiness. It encourages students to take active roles in their educations; achieve greater academic success; realize the benefits of liberal learning; develop a sense of social responsibility, hope, and efficacy; and assume membership in a diverse world community.

**Common Writing and Reading Experience.** The first-year experience begins before orientation when students are asked to write a "Foundations Essay," linking Kalamazoo's desired outcomes to their high school experiences. Students participate in a common reading experience focusing on intercultural and identity issues. Students take part in discussion groups during orientation and have the opportunity to meet and talk with the author.

**First-Year Seminar.** First-year seminars are the centerpiece of Kalamazoo's FYE program. Required of enter-

ing first-year students, these courses are explorations of an idea, topic, or event. First-year forums (required seminar labs) teach the history and traditions of the College and focus on intercultural understanding, career readiness, character development, and civic responsibility. Seminars are assigned peer leaders who share their knowledge and experiences to help new students achieve greater academic and personal success. Academic advising also takes place within the seminar context. Advisors, assisted by peer leaders, help students set goals, select courses, understand the curriculum and degree requirements, frame questions about career interests, and identify college resources.

Self-appraisal is a built-in resource for the program. Teaching philosophy and innovative techniques are incorporated and updated yearly in a first-year seminar teaching manual, along with grading rubrics, syllabi, and assignments. Writing skills are evaluated in class papers and assignments, as well as in the portfolio. Information literacy is addressed in library instruction sessions and informally assessed in student surveys.

For more information on the Institutions of Excellence, look for the forthcoming book from Jossey-Bass, *Meeting Challenges and Building Success: Creating Campus Climates for First-Year Student Success*.