

# RESOURCE

*for College Transitions*

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

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## **Veteran Instructor Offers Advice on Taking Risks in Teaching**

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This summer, I was asked by the first-year seminar director at Purdue University Calumet to write an essay on various aspects of teaching first-year seminars. They were in the process of compiling a “Perspectives” manual for their seminar faculty and wanted to include some viewpoints from educators beyond their campus. Part of the essay focused on the challenges seminar instructors face and my advice to them. What follows is an adaptation of a portion of that essay.

Teaching first-year seminars can be a challenging undertaking for first-time instructors and seasoned professors as well. One challenge I see facing many educators is their fear of teaching something new and their reluctance to relinquish control of the classroom.

Many instructors who have taught in their discipline for many years are very comfortable being “the expert” in their content area, but in their initial attempt to teach a first-year seminar, they find themselves uncomfortable with the new subject area. In first-year seminars where the content is student transition and success, many instructors feel they must have all the answers and know all the keys to student success. Yet complete knowledge in this area is impossible, especially given the fact that success, in many cases, is very student specific.

Another significant issue confronting many instructors is helping students transition from a “high school mentality” to a college mind-set. This can be especially challenging for instructors who normally teach upper-level students. We must remember that the first-year students we teach in the fall term have yet to experience college-level learning,



*Mary Stuart Hunter*

and are essentially “grade 13 students” at the beginning of the term. Our charge is to help them become effective college learners.

How do I teach the first-year seminar? In my 25 years teaching the first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina, I have never taught the seminar in exactly the same way twice. The students and the issues change; therefore, my course must change. I have learned that the more I can engage the students in the course development, the more they learn, the happier they are with the class, and the better the learning outcomes. The old adage about “giving a friend a fish to eat or teaching a friend how to fish” guides me in my teaching. My approach is not for everyone, but it works for me. I have a broad plan for the class but engage the students in determining many of the details.

I begin each term with a discussion of their expectations of the course and with the distribution of a general syllabus which includes expected learning outcomes, course requirements, and attendance and grading policies. I then devote a substantial amount of time to group building (learning names, getting to know one another, and developing a group). At times it seems like we will never “get to the meat of the course.” But experience tells me that if I

don't spend time creating an open, safe, and caring learning environment, their learning later in the semester isn't as significant.

I then engage the class in creating an operational definition of "student success." With my guidance, the students first create a broad definition. With that in place, together we identify their specific needs as a class. What do they need to learn, what do they want to learn, what do they lack, what do they need to experience to become successful students? Surely, I could deliver a course telling them how to be successful students. After all, I've been teaching this course for 25 years. But I find that when they identify and discover their needs as a class, they are far more invested in the process, and the course becomes much more relevant to them. They understand the need for the class and are not as reluctant to actively engage in course content and process.

With a list of topics designed to help them become successful students, we then proceed to learn about the subjects they have identified. For many of the topics, I teach the lessons. For some, I have the students investigate the topic and teach their classmates. And for still others, we invite resource people to class or visit campus facilities and services for a tour and presentation. Thus, the balance of the course is spent addressing their identified needs.

The final phase is one of synthesis and projection. Through culminating academic exercises, the students reflect on what they have learned about themselves as college students and about student success and then project that knowledge into other situations. They are able to personalize the information and describe how what they have learned can be used in future academic endeavors and in life in general. Rather than giving them the fish to eat, I have helped them learn to fish for themselves.

Knowing that teaching a first-year seminar is a unique experience for many educators, I offer the following "ten tips for success in teaching first-year seminars."

- embrace high expectations and demand quality work
- learn student names early and use them
- demonstrate self-disclosure
- give students ownership for some aspects of the course
- involve students in teaching the course
- remember that process is content
- meet at least once with each student individually
- obtain feedback throughout the term
- provide opportunity for synthesis and projection
- know that teaching new-student seminars is a continual work in progress

Although teaching a first-year seminar can be a challenge, it can also provide an opportunity for us as faculty and staff to stretch ourselves, to take some risks, to learn some new things, and to help first-year students transition to a collegiate culture all at the same time. For those of us who have made education our life's work, our personal continuing educational process is what keeps us fresh and alive.

## Addendum

In the October issue of *E-Source*, we ran Jill Steinberg's piece on the peer mentor program at San Jose State University. Jill has asked us to acknowledge the contributions of two people to the success of this program. Marshall Goodman, provost at San Jose State, was instrumental in launching the university's first-year experience programs and remains a primary supporter. Emily Wughalter is the director of the MUSE seminar program and works closely with the Peer Mentor program at San Jose State.

## Service Provides Important Outcomes for Undergraduates

*Alicia Phillip*

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*Editor's Note. Alicia Phillip is a graduate student in mass communications at the University of South Carolina and works as an editorial assistant at the National Resource Center. Here, she provides a compelling, personal account about the impact of service participation on her undergraduate experience. Her work as an ESL instructor contributed to her persistence in college, instilled in her a sense of responsibility and a strong work ethic, improved her self-esteem, and exposed her to diverse cultures. While Alicia's story is unique in many ways, the benefits she derived from service participation are common to undergraduates throughout the U.S.*

I acquired one of my most treasured life experiences in my sophomore and junior years at St. Francis College (SFC), Brooklyn Heights, New York. I participated in a Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) program that fundamentally affected my persistence during a difficult period of college.

The ESL program was actually initiated through a larger project called “Gaining A Voice.” In collaboration with SFC, Catholic Charities developed this free initiative to assist immigrants in becoming United States citizens. The program involved preparing them for the citizenship exam and, in most cases, helping them learn enough English to pass the exam and succeed at the interview. Each student who receives a tuition scholarship from SFC must commit to 15 hours of community service every semester, and the ESL program became one community service option.

Classes were held on campus one evening per week. As the program grew, one or two SFC students were given responsibility for tutoring 10 to 15 students in a two-hour session. ESL classes were subdivided into groups depending on the level of English proficiency already attained and often by primary language as well.

Irrefutably, I developed most of my confidence in my ability to complete college through my participation as a tutor in the ESL classes. Though I did not struggle academically, I was plagued with the insecurities many first-generation college students face. I questioned my desire to raise my standard of living, felt like I was trying to disown my humble upbringing, experienced guilt that I had left my family behind to pursue my education in the United States, and overall doubted whether I could survive for four years on my meager earnings. The confidence gained through this program allowed me to recognize my potential and motivated me to achieve it despite my doubts. The administrators provided supervision and learning materials, but we were given the freedom to structure our classes as we thought best. Constantly, we, the student teachers, were affirmed and lauded for our efforts, and this was integral to our desire to keep returning every week. At the end of the semester, we were each awarded a certificate of appreciation, and each of our students got the chance to personally thank us for our work.

Inherent in the student teacher position was the awareness that your students needed you. Students would be forlorn at the end of a session, wishing that there was more time. Then, as they left, there would be obvious anticipation for the next week. I could not, in good conscience, miss one session because I would think about all the students who would be disappointed.

The ESL program also provided a necessary diversion in my otherwise hectic schedule. At that time, I worked two part-time jobs while attending school full-time, and there was no time or extra money for entertainment. Yet, because of the program’s cultural diversity—there were students



*Alicia Phillip*

from Caribbean Spanish- and French-speaking islands, as well as European students—invariably there would be comic relief. In addition, we all learned to appreciate each other’s culture. Often students would be asked to tell the class a bit about their country and home life so that everyone would feel included and important.

Most important, my participation in the ESL program helped me come to terms with, and not be ashamed of, my cultural idiosyncrasies. Until that point, I was constantly aware of how different I was compared to many American and European students in my school classes. My Caribbean accent had become an impediment when conversing with non-Caribbean students because I just was not understood. Self-consciousness gave way to self-esteem problems, and I questioned whether I would ever be able to enter “Corporate America” with my Trinidadian accent. Then, at the inception of ESL, I found myself standing in front of a large number of successful men and women whose first language was not English, who hardly knew any English, and yet had no reservations about their ability to learn English, or become citizens. Finally, I was at ease. I realized, by talking to some students, that in “Corporate America,” diversity is encouraged and applauded, not stifled.

For all these reasons, I have to commend SFC for its ESL program and its other community service endeavors. Not only is the college creating well-educated students with a propensity for hard work, but it also instills in students responsibility, autonomy, and a valuable sense of belonging and increased self-worth—all Franciscan traditions. Other schools would do well to adopt these principles.

For further information on the ESL program, contact Brother Thomas Grady, O.S.F, Director of Campus Ministries, 180 Remsen Street, St. Francis College, Brooklyn Heights, NY 11201. (718) 489-5493. Tgrady@stfrancis-college.edu.

## Editor Seeks Papers Beyond the First-Year Experience

The legacy and reputation of the *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* is founded in the rigorous study of the characteristics, experiences, and assessments of first-year students. The number and diversity of writings within such a narrow context confirm the scholarly interests of many professionals and the recognition of the complexity of issues that contribute to student success during their first-year of college. The *Journal* remains committed to serving as a forum for the dissemination of high-quality research-based or conceptual scholarship related to this phenomenon.

However, implicit in the journal's title is a second mandate to focus on all students in transition. To meet this component of our research agenda, we also invite articles that focus on experiences beyond the first college year. These articles can explore research questions or concepts related to transfer students; students moving to graduate study, professional study, or employment, in addition to those curricular and co-curricular issues specific to post-first-year students. The objective of this inquiry is to expand our understanding of students' challenges throughout the entirety of their university careers.

Questions about the *Journal* can be directed to Joshua Gold, Editor at [josgold@sc.edu](mailto:josgold@sc.edu). Submissions guidelines are available on the National Resource Center's web site.

## UCLA Launches Research Into Spirituality

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles is undertaking a new research initiative into the spirituality of students in higher education. The project will track the spiritual growth of students during their college years. It is designed to provide insights into the trends and principles of students' spiritual growth and to engage institutions of higher education in expanding the opportunities for students to grow spiritually while on campus.

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles is undertaking a new research initiative into the spirituality of students in higher education. The project will track the spiritual growth of students during their college years. It is designed to provide insights into the trends and principles of students' spiritual growth and to engage institutions of higher

education in expanding the opportunities for students to grow spiritually while on campus.

Some of the questions guiding the spirituality study include: the number of students actively searching for answers to questions about religious issues, the way students view themselves in terms of spiritual qualities or virtues, the types of religious or spiritual practices students are most attracted to, and the things that get in the way of most students' search for spirituality.

A pilot survey was completed in spring 2003 by approximately 3,700 juniors who had participated as first-year students in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Annual Survey of Entering Freshmen. A revised survey will be administered to entering first-year students in the fall of 2004 and will be given every three years to provide continuing longitudinal data. The results of the 2004 survey will be available in the spring of 2005.

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## Training Orientation Leaders: The Camp War Eagle Counselor Training Process

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*Chris Whaley, Head Camp War Eagle Counselor*

In 1994, William Muse, the 15th President of Auburn University, expressed the need for a more comprehensive first-year orientation program that would emphasize academic success, retention, and school spirit and address social issues facing many college students. That summer, under the guidance of Debbie Shaw, the first Camp War Eagle took place off-campus with approximately 100 students. Based on the success of the pilot program, Muse made the decision to move Camp War Eagle to campus and turn it into first-

year orientation. Camp War Eagle now serves approximately 4,000 students and 5,000 parents each summer.

Camp War Eagle is divided into eight different sessions over the course of the summer. Incoming first-year students are placed into groups of 12 to 15 and are led by 1 of 40 camp counselors who moderate small group discussions called "Tiger Talks" and guide the first-year students through the program. The camp counselors are undergraduate students selected through an application and interview process held in early January. Training for the new leaders begins immediately.

The Camp War Eagle counselor training process consists primarily of weekly meetings that run from February to April, followed by an intensive seven-day training week after the end of the spring semester. The counselors are trained in large part by four Head Camp Counselors, who are selected by the Freshman Year Experience office staff from the previous summer's camp counselors. Weekly meetings primarily address information that will prepare the counselors for the summer and feature guest speakers from various campus services and examinations on campus buildings, campus offices, and school history.

Students also receive training to lead "Tiger Talks," the small group discussions that address campus information and common questions that first-year students have about college. Training for these small group discussions is crucial because this is where first-year students primarily get the information they need to know about attending college. The Head Camp Counselor guides the counselors through the process of leading a good small group discussion, providing the counselors with an outline of each small group session.

Although training meetings are an integral part of the training process, Camp War Eagle also emphasizes the relationship the counselors have with one another. The four Head Camp Counselors plan and promote social events for the counselors and staff throughout the training process such as dinner at local restaurants after training meetings, midnight bowling, and roller skating. These social events are useful in fostering teamwork and cohesiveness among the counselors.

Approximately two weeks after the end of the spring semester, a two-day retreat kicks off training week. The counselors and staff participate in various team building activities, including low ropes and obstacle courses. The atmosphere at the retreat allows counselors to continue to build confidence in one another and focus their attention on the training. At the retreat, the staff and the four Head Camp Counselors give a detailed and comprehensive run-

through of the Camp War Eagle schedule. Once everyone returns to Auburn, the counselors begin a rigorous five-day preparation for the first orientation session. This training primarily focuses on the orientation program schedule, situational training, and some review of previous training. The long days during this week often motivate the counselors for the first orientation session.

The Camp Counselor training process comes to a close at the end of training week which coincides with the first Camp War Eagle session. The cohesive atmosphere created earlier in the training carries through the summer as counselors hold each other accountable for the training information. The complete camp counselor training process runs approximately 14 weeks, covers all aspects of the campus, and requires a large commitment. The key to training, retention, and high-quality performance is contingent on building a lasting cooperative atmosphere not only between the professional staff and the counselors but among the counselors as well.

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## **Resource Review: Online Clearinghouse Provides Gate- way to Active Learning Resources**

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If you are finding it increasingly difficult to locate just the right strategy to engage your class in learning complex topics, then the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) can help. MERLOT is an online community where faculty, staff, and students can share materials essential to facilitating active learning.

"MERLOT allows you to access objects cataloged in ways that make most sense to your particular academic dis-

cipline,” said Colleen Carmean of Arizona State University. “The peer review, higher education focus, and disciplinary categories are what makes MERLOT different, and more usable in certain situations, than the kinds of quick answers we find when we Google something.”

What began in 1997 as an academic technology initiative by the California State University System has evolved into an organization composed of 22 institutional partners, 1,300 campuses, 350,000 faculty, and 8 million students. MERLOT’s mission is to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning by expanding the quantity and quality of peer-reviewed online learning materials that can be easily incorporated into faculty-designed courses.

MERLOT provides visitors with:

- Links to online teaching and learning materials
- Evaluations of the online resources
- Sample assignments, illustrating classroom use of materials
- Links to people with common interests in a particular discipline or in teaching and learning
- Electronic portfolios for its members containing their contributions to MERLOT
- Professional development programs for faculty, faculty development personnel, academic technology staff, and administrators from participating institutions

MERLOT’s online resources encompass a wide variety of disciplines and can be accessed from their web site at [www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org). Available material includes simulations, tutorials, animations, references, case studies, drill and practice exercises, and other digital collections for use in the classroom environment. Support resources such as peer reviews, member comments, and sample assignments are also available for viewing.

“I know many faculty who find it a needed resource for ‘publishing’ their materials as learning objects because the objects can be peer-reviewed, the correspondence and follow-up is high-quality, and the reviews can be added to their portfolio. This is a strong step in aiding higher education in transforming scholarship through acceptance of materials besides articles in journals,” said Carmean.

## How to Access MERLOT

- Go to the URL [www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org).
- From the file tab options select browse materials.
- A list of subjects will appear: arts, business, education, humanities, mathematics, science and technology, and social sciences.
- Select your subject of interest.
- The list of materials will provide you with a title, author, date entered, rating, and item type.
- Select an item, and a detailed view will provide information about the document you have selected.
- The actual learning material will be located elsewhere on the Internet—MERLOT only stores a description, peer reviews, member comments, or assignments created by instructors.
- Find the material’s actual location and check for any licensing regulations or costs involved.
- Then proceed to either add a link from the material to your course web page or e-mail the URL to students or others who might be interested in using it.
- Bear in mind, you do not need to be a member of MERLOT to use the material. However, only members of MERLOT are able to post material on the web site. All are welcome to join MERLOT at no cost or obligation.

## Institution of Excellence in the First College Year

In the previous issue of *E-Source*, we featured the second of a series of brief institutional profiles, describing key initiatives designed to improve the learning and success of first-year students. This installment of the Policy Center's "Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year" series features three four-year institutions with enrollments between 2,000 and 5,000. A complete narrative is available on the Policy Center's web site. Click on the institution name to access the narrative.

### Drury University Springfield, Missouri

Established 1873, current enrollment of 1,500

**The First-Year Experience program** at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri is a yearlong program that helps first-year students integrate into the intellectual, student, faculty, staff, Springfield, and global communities.

Central to the First-Year Experience is the mission statement of the university, which includes the goal of liberating "persons to participate responsibly in and contribute to life in a global community." Community service projects, convocation speakers, study abroad opportunities, and international student activities create connections to the global community.

**Alpha Seminar** is the nucleus of the first-year program at Drury University. It is a two-semester interdisciplinary course based on the Global Studies curriculum. Students are encouraged to engage the issue of what it means to be an American in an increasingly diverse global community. All students are assigned to an Alpha section, which comprises approximately 18 students and is supervised by a faculty member, commonly referred to as the Alpha mentor, who also serves as the advisor for the first year.

The Alpha seminar begins in June, and commences with all first-year students registering for their first semester, meeting their Alpha class, and receiving the summer reading assignment. Subsequently, students are required to attend a four-day orientation that includes Alpha class meetings, a writing assignment, and workshops on writing and time management skills and library resources. In addition, all Alpha classes attend convocations throughout the year, providing another connection to the intellectual community.

Assessment plays an integral part in the improvement of every facet of the First-Year Experience program. Faculty, staff, and students evaluate orientation, and students assess

the effectiveness of Alpha mentors. The First-Year Council, a group of student representatives from each Alpha class, meets weekly throughout the year to supply student input into all activities. Writing, oral communication, and critical thinking skills are evaluated by a group of faculty to ensure that the curriculum results in appropriate learning for all students. From this information, faculty have incorporated new pedagogies into the classroom; orientation activities have been altered to enhance the academic preparation for students; and student life activities have changed to meet a broad variety of needs. Future Alpha sections will incorporate a residential learning community approach, meet the needs of commuter students, better serve the needs of international students, and use an electronic portfolio developed by students.

### Elon University Elon, North Carolina

Established 1889, current enrollment of 4,584

Intentional and multi-faceted, Elon's first-year experience commences in March with an orientation weekend, where first-year students talk with faculty, students, and staff about course offerings for their first year. Early in summer, all students receive a CD — **Destination Elon**, which prepares them for the personal and academic challenges ahead. It offers information about meal plans, residence life, student services, study abroad, and presents the academic catalog, along with an introduction to academic departments and programs. The CD also answers frequently asked questions on subjects ranging from technology to packing.

**The First-Year Core**, consisting of 14 hours of common academic requirements for all first-year students, forms the center of the first-year experience. Based on the theories of William Perry, it challenges the dualistic perspectives com-

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monly expressed by first-year students and strives to produce high-level critical thinking by the junior and senior years.

**The Global Experience**, a course designed to take advantage of Elon's mission to prepare "global citizens and informed leaders motivated by concern for the common good," works with the quantitative, writing, and wellness courses to guarantee that students have the thinking and writing skills to succeed in any academic area of the university.

A dozen learning communities bring together students with common social or academic interests to design activities relating to those interests. The Emerging Leaders Program offers more than 200 first-year students the chance to prepare for future leadership. The Service Learning Program helps students realize their role in the larger society and responsibility to help those in need. Between the orientation session and final exams the following spring, first-year students engage in academic, social, and co-curricular activities designed to prepare them for lifelong success.

Elon's First-Year program is ranked near the top of the nation's colleges and universities, on benchmarks measuring academic challenge in the first year. The 2001 National Survey of Student Engagement reports that 75% of our first-year students contributed often to class discussions, 68% worked with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments, 90% completed community service or volunteer work, and 80% reported that Elon offered "quite a bit" of support to help them succeed academically, all significantly above the national averages.

## United States Military Academy

West Point, New York

Established 1802, current enrollment of 4,000

The entire West Point community focuses on aiding cadets to excel in the "three pillars of cadet life": academic, military, and physical development. In order to help cadets succeed within this environment, the Academy has established systemic interventions to support their maturation

in all developmental domains and inculcate them into the Army profession.

For example, first-year students (plebes) are supported through **Cadet Basic Training (CBT)**, the Core Academic Curriculum, the Center for Enhanced Performance, and the Fourth Class Sponsorship Program.

Cadet Basic Training (CBT) is the plebes' first orientation to the Academy's leadership development system. CBT provides six weeks of training in the basics of soldiering, discipline, and military standards.

In addition, new cadets are introduced to the Academic Program through a series of briefings and assessment/placement measures. In classes of about 18, plebes take a series of core courses designed to provide them with a broad knowledge base in the humanities and sciences. Core course directors meet frequently to coordinate assignments and explore alternative strategies for ensuring cadets' success in first-year academics. Instruction is based on an active learning model that allows or encourages cadets to refine and apply that knowledge in class.

**The Center for Enhanced Performance (CEP)** offers a number of services including the Student Success Course, which approximately 450 plebes take each fall. Taking the Student Success Course increases cadets' academic GPA increases graduation rates, and improves attitudes and behaviors toward learning.

Individualized support is available to plebes through the cadet chain of command and the **Sponsorship Program**. All plebes are assigned a Team Leader, who is a sophomore from their company dedicated to providing guidance and development within the cadet system. The Team Leaders meet their plebes during the week before classes and are responsible for orienting them to company duties, computer systems, location of facilities, and expectations in development according to the three pillars. Plebes are also assigned sponsors from among the staff and faculty. Sponsors invite plebes to their homes and serve as personal and professional mentors.