

RESOURCE

for College Transitions

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Surviving in the Real World: Higher Education Meets Reality TV

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"I feel normal watching these people," says one girl of a new reality TV concept that took off last September. It isn't *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, or *Canadian Idol*—unlike those shows, this "program" can only be seen at her university and is considered by students to be more constructive and much more real. In fact, it is real.

Real is the name of an innovative new video added to Trinity Western University's First Year Experience program last fall. Each week, first-year students pile into their University 101 class, as the Real video begins, unraveling events in the lives of Trevor, Jordan, and Shayla from the past week.

These three first-year students agree to have their lives as students spontaneously video-taped and shown to their peers throughout their first semester.

Unlike big-budget Hollywood shows, where the goal is to entertain and shock its audience, Real has been carefully crafted to help students deal with the stress and complications that can arise as a result of being a first-year student.

Now in its third year, University 101 is a one-credit class for students attending their first semester at Trinity. Cathy Chapplow, Director of the First Year Experience explains the purpose behind the video.

"The goal of Real is to normalize student transition issues," she says, "and show them that other students are feeling the same things, by showing them the scope of three different student experiences." Every second week, University 101 students see Real at their large group session. The video highlights the topic of the lecture that week and gives students a visual of their unspoken fears, feelings, and challenges. Before the pilot project began last September, potential students were contacted and asked if they'd be willing to take part in an experiment. In addition to being



Jordan Youd of California talks about life as a first-year student at TWU as Tina Francis films.

followed and filmed, these students were asked self-discovery questions such as, "How do I handle stress?" "How do I manage my homework?" and "Who am I?"—all to be shown on screen in front of 700 of their peers.

Three brave students said yes, meeting the pre-set quota of three different TWU groups: a male resident, a female resident, and a commuter. Jordan Youd of California, Shayla Potvin of Ottawa, and Trevor Birak of Surrey each filled the respective positions.

Though fourth-year students Tina Francis, videographer, and Mike Wipf, production coordinator, are two key



Mike Wipf, production coordinator looks on as videographer Tina Francis films another Real shoot.

people to thank for Real's success, in the beginning they were not so sure if the project would sink or swim.

"Tina and I put our all into it," recalls Wipf. "We gave it all we had, but we were still quite skeptical of how the video would go over with the students. So once it was shown to the first-year class, we were relieved to find out how much they loved it. And Tina and I were like, really? They really like it?"

"The good thing is that students watching can relate to any one of the video students' diverse personalities, or at least to similar situations," adds Francis. "And that's the whole purpose of the video. It's not just, 'Oh this is fun times,' or, 'What a cool class,' but it is a time for all first-year students to go on this journey of self-discovery—the video sets that in motion."

Students agreed with Tina's perception. "It was helpful because they had the same fears and worries I was feeling," says first-year nursing student, Erin Fitzpatrick. "I remember when Shayla was talking about how she felt overwhelmed and didn't know if she could do it—well that really hit [home]."

Jered Love, a communications student from Alaska said he "likes that MTV flavor" it has. "We can all relate to the music and to everything. I didn't know Jordan at the time, but to see life from his perspective and the fact that he was totally honest was really cool."

Three new students have been selected for the second year of Real. This time two women and one man, two residents and one commuter, have agreed to let their university experiences be documented and filmed. They are also will-

ing to share openly and honestly with the camera (and their peers).

Thanks to three credible students, a whole first-year cohort is able to engage in university life knowing that their stresses and struggles are normal and that they are not alone. That's exactly the end result that Cathy Chapplow had hoped to achieve. "The power of Real is that it is real," she says. "It normalizes students' feelings. Jordan, Shayla, and Trevor have demonstrated in real life the feelings that are happening outside of the classroom. I couldn't have written a script better than this."

Trinity Western University, located in Langley, B.C., is a not-for-profit Christian liberal arts university enrolling more than 3,500 students this year. With a broad based, liberal arts and sciences curriculum, the University offers undergraduate degrees in 38 major areas of study ranging from business, education, and computer science to biology and nursing, and 12 graduate degrees including counseling psychology, theology, and administrative leadership.

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Building a Culture of Assessment

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Although consensus exists that educational institutions must assess their programs to make sure they are delivering the desired outcomes to students, there remains a gap between the rhetoric of assessment and implementation. The perceived magnitude of the assessment task makes starting a new initiative seemingly overwhelming. Unanswered questions such as, where to begin, what steps to take, and whom to involve often lead to inaction. This essay outlines the initial steps taken by an assessment team at a small campus to build a culture of assessment.

The ideal time to start an assessment initiative is prior to implementation of the program so that goals and objectives can be clearly specified. Unfortunately, our team was not charged to complete its task until a new first-year seminar (FYS) initiative was underway. In fall 2002, the FYS program for Penn State Capital College was completely overhauled. The changes in the program involved reducing the FYS from three credits to one, narrowing the course's objectives, and implementing an extensive cocurricular program. The changes, in effect, created a new FYS program. With the support of the administration, a small assessment team was charged with measuring the success of the changes. Members of the team included faculty committed to FYS and student affairs staff. Empowering all partners involved in the new FYS program required broad representation on the team.

Lopez (1998) suggests that assessment efforts must be well documented. Such documentation includes:

- Listing "explicit objectives for student learning, publicly stated and linked to specific measures of student learning"
- Keeping "minutes of Assessment Committee meetings documenting how assessment information has been collected and interpreted"
- Providing "documentation of how the information derived from that interpretation of the data has been disseminated, to what constituents, and how often (i.e., the feedback loop)"
- Retaining "documentation of changes made as a direct result of information derived from the analysis of the data." (Lopez, 1998, p. 37)

Thus, this article is a result of our efforts to document the assessment of the new FYS program on our campus.

The first major task the assessment team undertook was to develop measurable goals and objectives. This involved several smaller steps including:

- Examining existing written course objectives (available on curriculum documentation and faculty syllabi)
- Grouping these general, vague objectives into several overarching goals
- Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (i.e. knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) to reword the overarching goals so that each objective clearly stated the impact the FYS was supposed to achieve in terms of student learning (Our goals and objectives are available upon request.)

The second major task was to select an appropriate assessment instrument that would yield measurable data on

the extent to which documented course objectives were being achieved. Team members examined several nationally recognized first-year seminar or first-year experience assessment instruments and evaluated their potential to accurately measure the outcomes specified in the goals and objectives of the program. Early in the process the team considered development of a "home grown survey"; however, we eventually decided to use a national survey to acquire "benchmark data." We selected the First Year Initiative (FYI, available from Educational Benchmarking, Inc.) because it tells what students believed they learned, whether or not students believed the material was useful, and how our FYS program compared with similar programs across the country.

The third major task was for the team to disseminate the findings. Several avenues were appropriate for dissemination on our campus. First, team members reported results to all campus faculty at an open "faculty forum" or meeting. The presentation resulted in positive discussion among all faculty, both those who support the FYS and those who do not. Written reports were disseminated to the administration for review. Finally, the team discussed the results at the yearly FYS faculty training session. The faculty attending training discussed the student's perceptions of FYS effectiveness and how to improve areas where perceptions were low.

In summary, the process for building a culture of assessment includes:

- Creating an assessment team with an administrative charge or mandate. This charge is significant because it gives the team institutional legitimacy and recognition for the labor involved
- Selecting program "stakeholders" for assessment team membership
- Engaging team members in the process of constructing specific measurable goals and objectives. The use of Bloom's Taxonomy is strongly recommended.
- Engaging team members in the process of instrumentation—reviewing a wide range of available instruments for adoption or creating a "home grown" instrument
- Engaging team members in the process of dissemination

The team has been enthusiastic about the results achieved in the first year. By documenting our efforts, we have taken steps to establish a culture of assessment on our campus. Our challenge now is to maintain momentum for this and future assessment endeavors.

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Prime-Time Lessons About the First Year of College

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"Television has usurped the place that used to be occupied by parents, the clergy, teachers, and other institutions as socializers of the young..." (Berger, 1996, p. 68).

Since television teaches, this article explores how the prime-time images of higher education influence the college expectations of potential first-year students. In addition, this paper will offer recommendations on how prime-time series can be used in first-year seminars to stimulate discussion regarding transition issues.

Based on data collected in individual interviews with 40 high school sophomores (20 Latinas and 20 African-American young women), television played a role in the formation of their college expectations. The prime-time images of college helped these students develop a sense of what a campus looks like, what classes and some professors are like, and introduced them to academic and social issues they may face when they get to college.

Not surprisingly, not all images are realistic. For instance, prime-time faculty are often portrayed as being distant and unhelpful. As we know, this is not an accurate portrait of today's faculty. Education research confirms that college students regularly comment on the caring attitude of faculty when discussing the elements that led to their successful college experience (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Still, these harsh representations have had their effect on the teens in this study. Many of the students voiced concerns about teachers being cold and unavailable. Although some students saw it as inevitable that professors would have little time to provide assistance because of the large num-



Barbara Tobolowsky

ber of students in college classes (i.e., they tend to see huge lecture classes in the media and expect it), other students were unsure if they would be able to handle the academic challenges because they believed professors would not be there to help them.

In addition to academic worries, television mirrored many students' fears of adjustment. One Latina worried about leaving her friends and family behind when she went to college. She remembered seeing this situation repeated on prime-time, confirming her own beliefs.

Prime-time often depicts difficult roommate situations as well. In fact, several series depicted demon roommates (i.e., figuratively in *Felicity*, episode 1 "Pilot," and literally in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, episode 58 "Living Conditions"). Therefore, it isn't surprising that the teens interviewed were far more likely to want to live at home (Latinas) or in a single room (African Americans) than be placed with a roommate. Did the prime-time portrait contribute to this view? It isn't clear to what extent prime-time is responsible for these views; however, the students' attitudes seem logical in light of the prime-time portrait and are at odds with the formerly traditional view of making lifelong friends with your college roommate.

Recognizing that prime-time may have helped shape some deleterious and unrealistic college expectations, there are ways we can use these images in our classrooms to help students explore their attitudes.

Faculty/student interaction – The best way to change any student's perception of faculty is to be a supportive professor in the classroom. Nevertheless, showing brief clips of professors from *Buffy* (episode 60 "Fear Itself" through episode 69 "The I In Team"), *Felicity* (episode 3 "Hot Objects"), *Moesha* (episode 95 "He Doth Protest Too Much"), or *The Parkers* (all episodes) can spark discussion with the students about their expectations regarding faculty roles.

Adjustment to college – Many first-year students find it difficult leaving their family and friends behind when they go to college. Felicity (episode 1 “Pilot”) directly discusses the difficulties of adjusting to an unfamiliar situation. However, in the series, Boy Meets World (episode 116 “Ain’t College Great”) or Beverly Hills, 90210 (Season 4 – 1993), the characters all stay together from high school to college. Showing a scene from any of these series, allows students the opportunity to discuss their own experience of having to leave friends and family and make new friends on campus. These series provide positive reinforcement as well. Prime-time characters may have some difficulty adjusting to college, too, but they all conquer those fears within an episode (Buffy, episode 57 “The Freshman”) or within a season (Felicity, season 1). Instructors can look to them to show successful adjustment as well as difficulties.

Balance – Some of the series discuss the need for balance between studying and partying. Clips from Sabrina, The Teenage Witch (episode 95 “Every Witch Way But Loose”) and The Parkers (episode 7 “Kimberlane”) directly deal with the characters’ difficulties finding the right balance. Showing these clips invites the students to discuss their own problems finding a workable balance.

These are just a few examples of how clips can help you introduce topics in your first-year seminars that stimulate discussion with the students. Television provides an entertaining and invaluable way to broach subjects central to the first year that students may be initially reticent to discuss. So, don’t be hesitant to do homework and watch some television. Your students will appreciate it.

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Resources

Many of these series can be seen in syndication. Recent prime-time college series include:

Beverly Hills, 90210 – season 4 (1993)

Boy Meets World – season 6 (1998-1999)

*Buffy: The Vampire Slayer - season 4 (1998-1999)

A Different World – season 1 (1987)

Felicity – season 1 (1998-1999)

Fresh Prince of Bel-Air – season 4 (1993)

Moesha – season 5 (1999)

The Parkers – season 1 (1999)

Sabrina: The Teenage Witch – season 5 (2000)

Films on College include:

*Animal House

*Breaking Away

*Good Will Hunting

*Higher Learning

*The Program

*Road Trip

*Slackers

*Van Wilder

**Is available in VHS or DVD*

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Peer Leaders Value Active Role in the Classroom

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Using peer leaders is a growing trend in first-year seminar courses in American higher education. The value of incorporating upperclass students in initiatives for first-year students has been documented in the literature; however, the majority of this literature has focused on measuring outcomes for the students peers serve. Few systematic assessments have examined the impact of such programs on the peer leaders themselves. This article highlights a pilot study conducted with four, white female students serving as peer leaders in the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina (USC) to determine the impact of this experience on their sense of involvement, satisfaction, competence, and adequacy.

Like similar programs, the University 101 (U101) peer leader experience is designed to offer students an opportunity to assume a new, responsible role as a teacher or peer leader in order to enhance their overall development and collegiate experience. While each peer leader presented a strong resume, some impact on self-esteem and confidence were present in their stories. One student explained how meaningful it was to know that someone had nominated her for this important role on campus. Others felt significant pride when students and faculty listened to and acted upon their advice and recommendations.

One participant found that serving as a peer leader motivated her to excel as a college student so that she would have success stories to share with her students. Another found that working through a difficult peer leader experience allowed her to become more conscious of her own intellectual and interpersonal skills. Still others found that they were more comfortable speaking in front of a group and also gained empathy for faculty who had to lecture to an unmotivated and unresponsive audience. Three of the participants stated that they developed leadership and interpersonal skills as a result of the experience, as well as patience and tolerance for working with others. One stated:

I honestly believe that the peer leaders get more out of it than the students do...you are going to learn so much about yourself...how you interact with people...that are not like you. How you deal with power...you learn a lot about students...about professors...it can be a real growing up experience...

Gaining perspectives on faculty roles through the peer leader experience was a central learning outcome for three of the participants. These students believe that the experience led them to be better students, to interact more with their faculty, and gave them a new appreciation for what teachers do. Choosing to speak for her entire cohort of peer leaders, one participant explained:

...unless you do nothing and are totally non-interactive with your class and with your entire peer leader project, it is impossible to walk away from this experience without a newfound respect for and knowledge of the teaching profession.

Throughout the experience, peer leaders alternated between various roles, serving as friend and sympathizer as well as instructor and rule enforcer. At times they were offering students a safe ride home from the library and at other times confronting their underage drinking. One found this dual role particularly challenging and stated:

You are walking this fine line between letting them know that you are their friend...somebody they can call...and also that same person enforcing rules, grading papers, and giving them their mid-term...

Changing perspectives on teaching and faculty roles influenced the career decisions of three students. Two became very interested in the teaching profession, and another eliminated it as an option all together. One student summarized her experience, stating:

I learned about my ability to teach...I found that I had a lot more patience than I thought I did and I didn't know that I had the ability to command respect...I was able to rise to the challenge and take responsibility for another student's work and grade...I can be a teacher...you are looking at someone who never ever thought about teaching who now thinks that I could teach on a college level and really enjoy it!

While satisfied with the overall experience, all four participants expressed some concerns. They wished they had been allowed to play a more significant role in developing course lesson plans, leading class discussions, and planning activities. One described her role in class as the "game queen," and another felt that her role was to "sit there and smile." They found that they lacked the training to evaluate student work. Three also felt they lacked the necessary skills to pick a compatible teaching partner and found that choosing the right professor was critical to their experience. In giving advice to future peer leaders, one participant commented:

I think it is great advice to work with people you know already or have had a class with...and if you don't know how the person that you are paired with runs their class, find out and make sure...it is compatible with yours!

Their responses highlight the fact that the full value of the peer leader experience can only be felt when the peer leaders are given the opportunity and the freedom to fully participate in the class through meaningful activities with their students, both in and out of class. When this is not accomplished, the value of the peer leader experience appears to be greatly diminished. Through the Peer Leaders Program, we reach out to our very best students, recruiting and training them as partners in higher education. Therefore every effort should be made to maximize the developmental impact of the experience and to create compatible and meaningful partnerships between peer leaders and their U101 faculty instructors.

Although this study offers some insight into the peer leader experience, it is limited by a small sample size, gender, race, and represents a perspective on a single university's program. Further research should attempt to more fully assess the perceptions of how peer leaders believe they benefited from this experience.

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What's Happening at the Center?

Conferences

The National Resource Center invites you to join us in Maui, Hawaii for the 17th International Conference on The First-Year Experience, June 14 – 17, 2004. Featured speakers for the conference are Graham Henderson, Vice Chancellor of the University of Teeside, United Kingdom and Laura Rendón, Veffie Milstead Jones Endowed Chair at California State University—Long Beach, United States. Proposals for conference sessions are being accepted through Friday, February 27th. Click [here](#) for proposal guidelines. For complete conference information or to register, click [here](#).

The Center continues its focus on assessment strategies for the first college year with the 2004 Summer Institute on First-Year Assessment in Asheville, North Carolina, July 18-20, 2004. Gloria M. Rogers, Vice President of Institutional

Research, Planning, and Assessment at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology will keynote the event.

Teleconferences

In March, the National Resource Center will broadcast two interactive teleconferences focusing on strategies for improving the educational experiences of undergraduates.

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

This panel of national experts discusses the importance of civic engagement in today's society, shares examples of successful programs, and provides guidance in creating campus and community partnerships.

Creating Learning Environments for Today's Students

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

Expert panelists examine proven strategies for engaging students in learning. They also discuss building broad-based institutional support for innovative teaching and designing assessment for student learning outcomes.

To register for these or other teleconferences in the series, click [here](#).

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CAS Issues Revised Standards for Professional Practice in Student Affairs

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

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education has published *The Book of Professional Standards for Higher Education for 2003*. This version contains revised guidelines and information for specific functional areas in higher education in addition to the CAS general standards. The 26 previously published functional area standards have undergone revisions, and each have a set of general standards incorporated in them.

In addition, three standards have undergone major revision, including the Master's Level Student Affairs Administration Preparation program; the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Programs area; and the Disability Services functional area. One functional area, Conference and Events Programs, is included for the first time in this edition.

The CAS Board of Directors, which now includes representatives from 32 professional associations, created these new standards and guidelines to address important issues in education. The guidelines are designed to guide and shape professional practice and development.

The new edition emphasizes student learning and development outcomes and the importance of assessment in all areas. It also focuses on other education functions imperative to institutional effectiveness. This new version reflects CAS's vision to guide professional practice throughout the entire higher education realm.

The book can be ordered through the CAS website, www.cas.edu, for \$45 for domestic orders. Reduced prices are available for orders of 10 or more.

Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year

This is the fourth installment in the Center's ongoing series of brief institutional profiles, describing key initiatives designed to improve the learning and success of first-year student. In this issue we feature two institutions that recognize the importance of learning community structures to excellence in the first college year. A complete narrative is available

on the Policy Center's web site. Click on the institution name to access the narrative.

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi
Corpus Christi, Texas
Established in 1947

The First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYL-CP) is designed to help students make the transition from high school to the University by involving them in learning communities where they can adjust to college life, academically and socially.

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi requires full-time, first-year students to enroll in learning communities called "triads" or "tetrads" in each of their first two semesters. A triad is a cluster of three courses which includes a:

- Large Core Curriculum lecture course (150-250 students)
- Core Curriculum English Composition course (25 students or less)
- First-Year Seminar (25 students or less)

Tetrads, like triads, include the three kinds of courses listed above and also include a second large Core Curriculum lecture course. Each First-Year Seminar section is paired with an English Composition section in which the same 25 (or fewer) students are enrolled, and that cohort of students also attends the same triad or tetrad lecture course(s).

The courses within a given triad or tetrad are "linked," not only in the sense that students enroll in all of them concurrently but also in the sense that emphasis is placed upon making connections among the courses. Teachers of the courses collaborate extensively to design activities and assignments that help students integrate their learning across disciplinary boundaries.

In first-year seminar sections, the instructors help students increase their understanding of the material from their lecture course(s), think critically about that material, and relate it to ideas and issues drawn from other courses and disciplines. Seminar instructors also help students learn how to learn and, more generally, how to succeed in their first year at the University.

Implementation of this comprehensive learning communities program requires the efforts and cooperation of faculty, administrators, and staff members from many areas of the University. Administrators from enrollment management, the core curriculum program, and advising work together to schedule the tetrads and triads and ensure that students are placed in appropriate learning communities. Faculty from various disciplines teach the Core lecture courses. In the first-

year seminar, staff members from student affairs, counseling, and career placement give presentations; librarians help students develop research skills; and the employee relations staff conducts diversity training sessions.

The FYLCP's comprehensive scope distinguishes it from other learning community programs. Students involved in the program reported gains in academic skills and experienced levels of engagement and satisfaction higher than national means on several factors. Participation has also had a positive impact on retention and course withdrawal rates.

Lehman College of the City University of New York
Bronx, New York
Established in 1931

A non-residential senior college of the City University of New York. (CUNY), Lehman College serves an ethnically and culturally diverse student body. Committed to its mission of access and excellence, the College, some 10 years ago, found itself confronting a student persistence rate of 50% into the third semester. Lehman's Coordinated Freshman Program (CFP) grew out of an urgency to address declining retention rates and a less than meaningful educational experience in the first year. The CFP consists of the Freshman Year Initiative and the Summer and Intersession Immersion programs. The goal of these academic and support activities is to assure student passage from basic skills to sophomore year readiness and to integrate the range of interconnected, but seemingly disparate, academic and social experiences in the lives of students.

The Freshman Year Initiative (FYI), is built on a learning community cohort structure aimed at comprehensive intervention in the overall academic experience of first-year students. Its logistical heart is block programming, based on curricular integration of linked courses — culminating in an interdisciplinary approach to first-year studies. The academic experience that evolves is thematic and coherent. The program initiates faculty dialogue and development and builds awareness of the critical importance of integrating first-year students into the college community. The learning communities that emerge are based on curriculum restructuring efforts and help to foster greater intellectual connections between students, between students and faculty, and among disciplines.

The first-year seminar, embedded in the student program within the block structure and taught by student affairs personnel and counselors, addresses the transition from high school to college. Students find a forum here for problem-solving, examine the goals of a liberal arts education, and map out a long range academic plan.

Prior to enrollment in the Freshman Year Initiative, the entering fall cohort participates in the Summer Immersion program. This component of the CFP constitutes a critical programmatic goal — that entering students pass all three CUNY assessment tests in order to be eligible for admission at the senior colleges. A modified version of the FYI model of blocked courses allows customized placement and homogeneous tracks of skills development in writing, reading, and mathematics. The program significantly improved student readiness to assume the academic challenges of college.