

CONTENTS

▪ 1 ▪

Exploring Noncognitive Factors of Student Success in a First-Year Seminar

Concordia University-Wisconsin uses the Student Strengths Inventory to predict academic success and retention.

▪ 5 ▪

Foundations Program Combines Tradition, General Education, Technology for the 21st Century

University of Vermont classes communicate the importance of public speaking and information technology.

▪ 9 ▪

Major Accomplishment: Creating a Learning Community for Undeclared Students

Engagement agrees with students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania looking for the right academic path.

▪ 12 ▪

Capstone Program Takes Students to New Heights

Enrolling high-achieving scholars is the top goal for learning community at the University of South Carolina.

▪ 16 ▪

Expanding a Peer-Facilitation Program Beyond the Fall Term

T2U at Queens University of Charlotte supports student interaction.

▪ 18 ▪

Research Spotlight: National Evidence of the Assessment of First-Year Seminars: How and How Much?

Student course evaluations lead efforts but more meaningful measures needed.

Exploring Noncognitive Factors of Student Success in a First-Year Seminar

Research indicates noncognitive factors are critical to college students' academic, social, and emotional success (e.g., Ramsey, 2008; Robbins et al., 2004; Sedlacek, 2005; Ting, 2003). In Robbins and colleagues' (2004; ACT, 2004) meta-analysis of the subject, six skills emerged as useful predictors of student success as follows:

- Academic engagement is the extent to which students view themselves as conscientious and hardworking and relates to how much effort they put into studying and assignments.
- Educational commitment is defined as students' dedication to completing college and earning a degree and is related to their ability to persist when college becomes difficult.
- Associated with levels of involvement in student life, campus engagement reflects the connection students feel to the campus community.
- Social comfort refers to students' facility in meeting and interacting with others and involves connecting with social and peer networks.
- Academic self-efficacy represents students' beliefs about their ability to perform well in school.
- Lastly, resiliency refers to management of emotions and stressors related to students' ability to cope with their feelings and the pressures of college life (Pickett, 2011).

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The Student Strengths Inventory (SSI; Gore & Leuwerke, 2009), a 48-item instrument, measures the six most robust noncognitive factors described above and generates individualized profiles on students' strengths and weaknesses or areas for growth relative

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from* **EXPLORING NONCOGNITIVE FACTORS**, p. 1

to the first college semester. The SSI's individualized reports also direct students to specific support services unique to their campus—such as career advising, tutoring, or remedial study skills training—to help them bolster specific strengths or improve particular areas for growth. Faculty or advisor versions of the SSI student profile include an academic success index and a retention index.

To determine how the SSI influences GPA and retention, the inventory was administered to all first-year seminar (FYS) students during the beginning weeks of the fall semester at a Christian university in the upper Midwest. Individual instructors incorporated the results of students' SSIs into their courses in many ways. This article shares a specific example of integrating SSI results and developing an intervention into one section of the FYS.

Student Strengths Inventory and Classroom Intervention

The classroom intervention was scheduled shortly before midterm and completed a few weeks before the end of class. The learning objectives of the 50-minute classroom intervention included understanding the six noncognitive factors; setting short-term semester goals; increasing self-awareness; and preparing for the SSI personal development plan assignment, which required students to identify one area of strength and one area of growth based on their personal SSI profile. First, students were divided into small groups and asked to discuss their successes and challenges to that point in college to help them articulate their strengths and weaknesses. Next, the instructor presented a mini lecture on the background of the SSI, the six noncognitive factors, and the personal development plan assignment criteria. A large-group class discussion followed on defining short-term versus long-term goals and provided examples of well-constructed goals using the SMART model (specific, measurable, accepted, realistic, and timed). After students were introduced to the main didactic concepts and their SSI profiles were distributed and reviewed, the instructor fielded individual questions. Students then identified personal areas of strength and growth and began setting unique goals to work on during the rest of the semester and beyond.

Two weeks before the final exam, students completed their SSI personal development plan assignment. For each identified strength and area of growth, students set one specific, short-term goal on which to work before the semester ended. In their goals, students listed a specific action to take to connect with a support service on campus, as recommended by their SSI profile, and, as part of their personal development plan, provided verification after having used the services. Lastly, they discussed how their plans worked and if they would continue the actions and identified one new short-term goal and action for the next semester.

“For each identified strength and area of growth, students set one specific, short-term goal on which to work before the semester ended.”

Continue to **EXPLORING NONCOGNITIVE FACTORS**, p. 3 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)[<< Continued from EXPLORING NONCOGNITIVE FACTORS, p. 2](#)

For example, a student identified social comfort as an area of strength based on his SSI profile and set a goal to attend a psychology club meeting. His profile recommended he build social connections to support his educational goals and consider pursuing leadership positions. In his development plan assignment, he indicated that he attended the meeting, enjoyed interacting with other psychology majors, and decided to become a member. He included the meeting agenda signed by the club president and set a new goal for next semester: to volunteer to be the club's representative at student government meetings.

In another example, a student identified academic discipline as an area for growth based on her SSI profile and set a goal to earn a *B* or better on her next English paper. Her profile recommended she use campus learning resource services, and she chose to visit the writing lab. In her development plan assignment, she discussed that she met her goal of earning at least a *B* on her paper, how the campus writing center helped her meet that goal, and that she would continue to use the lab when writing papers in the future. She included a receipt of her visit to the lab signed by a tutor and set a new goal for next semester: to participate in supplemental instruction services offered for her chemistry class.

Results

In addition to incorporating the SSI into one classroom intervention and assignment, the researchers studied the results of 407 students (245 women and 158 men) who agreed to allow their SSI data to be used to explore predictive capabilities of the inventory. The sample was predominantly White (89%) and included traditional-aged college students. The SSI academic success index was correlated to fall semester GPA ($r = .482, p < .001$), and the retention index was correlated to spring semester registration ($r = .197, p < .001$).

The results indicated that the SSI success index influences both GPA and retention. Specifically, the inventory was a particularly good indicator of academic success as measured by grades. Fall semester GPA was correlated to all the SSI scales, except social comfort. It was negatively correlated to resiliency, indicating possibly that students who felt slightly more anxious about school took their studies more seriously. GPA and academic engagement had the strongest relationships ($r = .339, p < .001$), followed by academic self-efficacy ($r = .262, p < .001$). Asking students about time spent on their studies and belief in their ability to perform appeared to be important in helping them succeed. Registering for spring classes was correlated to academic engagement ($r = .106, p = .032$) and campus engagement ($r = .117, p = .018$), indicating that feeling connected to the campus community was an important factor in returning to school. See Table 1.

“Specifically, the inventory was a particularly good indicator of academic success as measured by grades.”

[Return to Front Page](#)[Continue to EXPLORING NONCOGNITIVE FACTORS, p. 4 >>](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from* **EXPLORING NONCOGNITIVE FACTORS**, p. 4

Table 1
Correlations Among Noncognitive Factors, Academic Success, and Retention

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Fall 2011 GPA	—							
2. Spring 2012 registration	.299**	—						
3. Academic engagement	.339**	.106*	—					
4. Academic self-efficacy	.262**	.028	.436**	—				
5. Educational commitment	.172**	.086	.432**	.525**	—			
6. Resiliency	-.136**	-.045	.153**	.227**	.036	—		
7. Campus engagement	.205**	.117*	.250**	.366**	.338**	.047	—	
8. Social comfort	-.047	.028	.042	.200**	.110*	.313**	.304**	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Future Directions

Initial impressions, based on the data presented above, pointed toward using the SSI as a predictive tool for assessing academic success and retention. The current study indicated the inventory to be slightly better at predicting academic success compared to retention; however, scores on campus engagement appeared to be useful in university retention efforts and suggested students who were more connected to the campus community were more likely to return.

The SSI was useful for instructors in understanding their students' strengths and areas for growth and provided a platform to discuss specific issues in the classroom. Student SSI results were directly linked to specific support services on campus, which made creating relevant assignments easy. Student feedback indicated that setting goals and creating specific improvement plans would have been much more difficult without their individualized SSI feedback.

Future research would benefit from further exploration of the predictive capabilities of the SSI and noncognitive factors of academic success and persistence. Because the SSI allows for customizability, any campus can tailor result reports to reflect university resources and meet the needs of its unique student body. The SSI also may be helpful in understanding the needs of various student populations, such as first-generation students or commuters. 

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[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

Foundations Program Combines Tradition, General Education, and Technology for the 21st Century



For more than 30 years, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) at the University of Vermont (UVM) has offered a first-year class for its entering students. Started as a one-credit fall semester course to help students familiarize themselves with the university and the college, the class has developed into a two-course, yearlong Foundations Program to help first-year students make the transition from high

school to college and also develop specific general education skills that will help them not only at UVM but also after graduation. In addition to presenting the history, mission, culture, and curriculum of the UVM and the CALs, the three-credit fall course, CALS 001, Foundations: Oral Communication, focuses on public speaking and presentations. The three-credit spring course, CALS 002, Foundations: Information Technology, teaches students about current computer hardware and software, operating systems, and the Internet and prepares them for future developments as technology changes.

Seeing the need to teach students skills, knowledge, and values that are significant in the 21st century, college administrators added the courses to the college's general education requirements more than 12 years ago. Their rationale for focusing on public speaking and information technology in the Foundations courses: Have students build on their knowledge of those subjects as they would in any other class at the university, setting a standard that they can continue throughout their years at UVM. The class is highly recommended for first-year students (95% take it), and students are required to take it during their first two years. Since it began, the Foundations Program has engaged students with the university and college and positively affected their retention rates.

CALS 001

As a general education and first-year transition course, CALS 001 has two goals: (a) to help students discover and learn about what the CALs and UVM have to offer, how they fit in, and how they can make the transition and develop their fullest potential at UVM and beyond and (b) to help them develop essential and transferrable oral communication skills. Oral communication is a core competency for the CALs, and emphasizing oral communications and public speaking is a unique element of the course. During their years at UVM, students will

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Continue to FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM, p. 6 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM, p. 5*

have many opportunities to improve their written communication but few specifically to help them practice and polish their speaking skills. The course allows first-year students to study, learn, critique, and improve speaking skills to become better oral communicators, helping them with presentations in other classes.

During the fall semester, the CALS 001 students attend a lecture class and a lab once a week for 12 weeks. In the lecture, 40-65 students learn oral communication skills, such as introducing themselves to a group, making presentations, and using PowerPoint effectively. In the smaller lab with 20 students, they give a group presentation and three individual presentations: informational; persuasive; and one of their choice, which can be informational, persuasive, entertaining, or a combination of the three. The group project is a 12-15 minute critical analysis symposium presentation scheduled for the middle two labs of the semester. Students choose a controversial political or current event; find a minimum of two articles—from journals, newspapers, magazines, books, or the Web—that take opposite viewpoints; and orally critique each article in their presentations. Each group receives a grade based on the depth and coherence of the critical analysis of each article, the quality of the group presentation, the support and interaction among group members, and each member's personal participation as rated by their peers. Students learn critical-thinking skills by analyzing and synthesizing their articles and how to work in teams, a valuable skill when they begin their careers.

For their three individual presentations, students prepare 8-12 minute speeches on subjects they choose. Each presentation is recorded using a flip camera. Then, the video files are transferred to flash drives for students to view on their computers. Students view the presentations and write a 3-5 page paper reflecting on three different aspects:

- the speech I prepared for, including topic chosen, research conducted, credibility of sources, practice time, and feedback;
- the speech I gave, including details on how the speech went, what the video files revealed, and what went right and wrong; and
- improvements for next time, including things that could have been done differently to give the ideal speech and how to improve preparation and delivery of the next speech.

Students also include peer critiques in their reflection papers focusing on

- Dress—Was the appearance of the speaker clean, neat, and conservative in dress?
- Hook—Was the opening effective, and did it and have a powerful impact?
- Construction—Was speech logically constructed and easy for audience to follow?

Continue to FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM, p. 7 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

“Oral communication is a core competency for the CALS, and emphasizing oral communications and public speaking is a unique element of the course.”

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from* FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM, p. 6

- Language—Did the speaker use direct, simple vocabulary with minimal use of filler words?
- General impression—Did the speaker seem prepared and achieve the overall objective?

Using video file recordings, their own reflections, and peer critiques, students are expected to improve as the term progresses, and each successive presentation carries greater weight toward the final grade.

In addition to critiquing their presentations, students write two reflections each week on the CALS 001 Blackboard site. One describes changes happening in the students' lives, what they are learning at UVM, and their personal explorations and expressions. The other addresses assigned readings for the week in *College 101*, the class text, which includes articles about the major issues first-year students experience from a holistic, student-centered perspective.

The first semester course also teaches students' engagement with the campus, faculty members, and their peers. Students receive credit for joining a UVM club or organization and must meet twice during the semester with their academic advisors. At the end of the semester, the students in the lab know each other well and often get together outside of class. CALS 001 lab students commonly stay connected as friends for their entire undergraduate careers at UVM.

CALS 002

The spring class, CALS 002: Information Technology, gives students a solid foundation of information technology skills and knowledge, enabling them to use current and future software and hardware. In the first lab assignment, students introduce themselves using presentation software to transition from the fall semester's focus on public speaking. Students then learn useful technology skills, including managing files on the University's servers, graphing data, using appropriate e-mail etiquette, evaluating credibility of web information, constructing web pages, and improving their writing skills.

Instructors

Highly experienced, PhD senior lecturers teach the weekly lectures of both Foundations classes, and upper-division undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs) lead the labs, giving them the opportunity to mentor younger students and share their knowledge. The TAs also grade and provide feedback on students' oral communication and information technology assignments and respond to all reflection papers. Working together, TAs form close relationships with their first-year students, answer their questions, and help them make important college decisions, such as choosing or changing their major. The



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Continue to FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM, p. 8 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM, p. 7*

labs often become communities of learners, and students will arrange to have the same TAs they had for CALS 001 in the fall for their CALS 002 lab in spring.

Applying Learning to Practice

Students in the program directly apply the skills they have learned to other courses at UVM. Although she was skeptical at first about their value, one student wrote that the classes gave her an edge over her peers:

I must let you know that while I was in those classes I thought that I was wasting my time, but have since used those two courses more than any other at UVM and have had a distinct advantage over other students of my same level in internships and classes since then. That is not simply lip service, and I have credited you to many professors who have complimented PowerPoint presentations, graphics, etc. So, thank you, in retrospect those classes probably prepared me the most for tasks that must be accomplished in the real world.

The program's graduates also use the skills they learned in the classes after they leave UVM. Recent graduates and employers agree that the ability to speak in public is an essential skill. Several of the college's graduates have e-mailed faculty that they were hired for their positions based on 20-30 minute presentations they made using the skills they learned in the Foundations Program. One former student working with AmeriCorps, a national community service organization, found his experience, especially the public speaking skills he learned, with the program and as a TA invaluable. He wrote:

I've been finding that the knowledge I gained from being a TA in CALS 001 has been serving me incredibly well! I'm the Outreach Coordinator here, which means I've been going to community meetings and giving presentations on what exactly Rebuilding Together does, and how residents can get involved and apply.

Assessment and Conclusion

The general education skills, oral presentations, and information technology, in addition to the activities and learning experiences offered by seasoned lecturers and guidance from TA mentors, help first-year CALS students at UVM make the transition from high school to college. Their success is in the numbers. In 2010-11, the CALS had one of the highest retention rates (88.5%) of first-year students returning as sophomores to all schools and colleges at UVM. Also, the six-year graduation rate of CALS students in 2011 (81.8%) was higher than any other college or school at UVM. Future plans for the Foundations Program include not only maintaining but also continuing to improve the oral communication and information technology skills of the college's first-year students. The Foundations Program could be adapted for similar first-year courses with planning and direction. These programs also might be designed to include other important general education skills, such as writing and personal development, to help students succeed in their undergraduate programs and in graduate school and their careers into the 21st century. 

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[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

Major Accomplishment: Creating a Learning Community for Undeclared Students

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In 2007, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) initiated a learning community for undeclared first-year students as part of a strategic plan featuring development and success as key goals. The Crimson Connections Learning Community focused specifically on students in the colleges of Fine Arts and Health and Human Services. Incoming students were recruited during the first-year orientation sessions from the entire population of undeclared majors in each college, and the maximum enrollment was limited to 50 students each academic year. Combining linked courses with informal gatherings, the program sought to engage students in and outside the classroom and help them achieve personal and academic goals and identify a major. By building a strong sense of community and relationships between students and faculty, the program also encouraged retention and academic success (Norwood, 2010). This article explores the development of the Crimson Connections Learning Community during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years, considers the impact of the selected curriculum on student success, and discusses the role building community had on student learning and persistence.

Crimson Connections

The Crimson Connections learning community combined linked courses and a cohort concept. Students enrolled in the program completed a college writing course (ENGL 101) required by the Liberal Studies Program and a career exploration course (ADVT 170). In the career class, students focused on time management and study skills and identified personal interests, abilities, and values, matching them with majors described in the undergraduate catalog and potential career fields. Assignments in ENGL 101 supported the work completed in ADVT 170, with students using journaling for self-reflection. Students also worked in small groups to complete writing assignments related to their common interest in a given major, attended the University Majors Fair, and interviewed faculty teaching in a discipline of interest. Faculty feedback has shaped the content of ADVT 170, with assignments and activities focusing sharply on the disciplines in the two colleges. Combining content with application, the linked courses provided opportunities for students in the cohort to work with others who also were exploring majors and future careers. The students' shared experiences initiated dialogues that strengthened their relationships, a key to retention.

Outside the classroom, students participated in the Crimson Common Hour, a one-hour, informational social gathering in a residence hall. Students shared pizza and ice cream sundaes with the deans and department chairs, learned about academic integrity, and prepared for final exams. In addition to socializing, students discussed their career

Continue to MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT, p. 10>>

[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT, p. 9*

interests one-on-one with administrators and faculty, learning first-hand the coursework needed to complete a particular major and the outlook for careers in that discipline. Topics presented in the Crimson Common Hours have been adjusted each year based on student feedback. In particular, students have requested information they needed to navigate campus life, including meeting with an advisor, discussing academic integrity, and preparing for final exams.

Assessment

To determine the effectiveness of the program, the author collected data during the Crimson Common Hours and at an end-of-the-year focus group meeting. At the end of each common hour, students completed a survey that asked if the information they received had been useful and helpful in making choices about their academic careers at IUP. The end-of-the-year survey specifically focused on whether Crimson Connections had helped students become a member of the IUP community, define a career path, and select a major. Program assessment also explored the impact of the Common Hour on student’s retention, as well as the influence of academic success in the Career Exploration course on a students’ selection of a major. Each of these outcomes was considered as a measure of the program’s success.



Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

Results

Participation in the Crimson Connections Learning Community positively affected retention across both cohorts. Retention to the fall semester of the sophomore year was 67% for undeclared students who participated in the community during the 2007-2008 academic year (Table 1). While slightly lower than University-wide retention (74%), the rate was higher than that of previous cohorts of undeclared majors in the participating colleges (64%). The retention rate of students in the 2008-2009 academic year was slightly higher than the previous year at 69%. (Table 1).

*Table 1
Number of Students Participating by*

Academic Year	Number of participants	Number retained to sophomore year	Program retention rate	University retention rate
2007 - 2008	48	32	67%	74%
2008-2009	42	29	69%	73%

Academic success in ADVT 170 correlated positively with students’ choosing a major. Students who received a C or better in the class chose their majors—ranging from computer science to communications media, nutrition, and English—by the end of the fall semester of their sophomore year, with more than half of the 2007-2008 cohort selecting a major before the end of their first year (Table 2). Similarly, academic success in ADVT 170 was

[Return to Front Page](#)

Continue to MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT, p. 11>>

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT, p. 10*

also a factor in students' selecting a major in the 2008-2009 academic year. Of the students returning to the fall semester of the sophomore year, 26 had declared a major (Table 2). According to the literature, selecting a major influences the retention by fostering and building relationships between students and faculty (Tinto, 2003; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Timely selection of a major may have influenced the retention students in Crimson Connections.

*Table 2
Number of Students Selecting Major by*

College	2007-2008	2008-2009
College of Health & Human Services	9	16
College of Humanities & Social Sciences	5	2
College of Fine Arts	3	2
Eberly College of Business & Informational Technology	2	
College of Education & Educational Technology		4
College of Natural Sciences & Mathematics	1	2

Implications

With the success of Crimson Connections, officials at IUP created another learning community. In 2011-2012, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences in collaboration with the Eberly College of Business and Information Technology developed a similar program for undeclared business majors. Modeled after Crimson Connections and also offering linked courses, Eberly Connections began its second year in 2012-2013 with more than 200 students. This community completed studies that linked HIST 196 Explorations in American History, a required liberal studies course, and BTST 105 Introduction to Business, an entry-level course providing an overview of the discipline.

Conclusion

The Crimson Connections Learning Community has helped students successfully choose a major and positively affected their retention and led to the creation of a new learning community. The program began with an understanding of the needs of the students, helping them become members of the IUP community, creating connections among undeclared majors, and allowing participants intentionally to explore career paths leading to the selection of a major. To date, more than 330 students at IUP have participated in a variety of learning communities for undeclared students. While the number of students in the first years of the programs was small, the data collected showed successes that can be expanded to other colleges, majors, and at-risk populations in the university. 

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[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

Capstone Program Takes Students to New Heights

Recruiting a high-quality first-year class whose students are bright and engaged is a primary goal of enrollment managers across the nation. More than seven years ago, administrators at the University of South Carolina noticed that significant numbers of prospective, high-achieving students whose SAT and ACT scores and high school GPAs fell just short of the admissions requirements of its South Carolina Honors College were choosing other institutions. To attract this particular subset of students, the university created the Capstone Scholars Program, a two-year educational enrichment experience with opportunities in and outside the classroom.

Created in fall 2005, the program has since matured into a living-learning community, bringing in more than 500 students annually and consistently boosting the overall quality of the first-year class. In addition to functioning as an enrollment management tool, Capstone Scholars engages students academically and socially, too, through undergraduate research and study abroad opportunities; exclusive grants; preferred housing; special class section; and service-learning projects that connect students to their peers, the university, and the community.

Capstone Scholars

Learning communities empower participants to build connections between their classes and extracurricular activities, leading to well-rounded students (Tinto, 2003). Capstone Scholars is a two-year academic program that provides a smaller learning community for first-year students while maintaining all of the resources available at the University of South Carolina. Students are invited into the program. No separate application is required, and Capstone is open to all majors. Students admitted into the program for fall 2012 presented very competitive high school GPAs along with average standardized test scores of 1324 (SAT critical reading and math sections) and 30 (ACT composite). Students live in two adjacent residence halls and also have access to the Capstone Study Shack in a separate building nearby, which features four study areas, a full kitchen, a balcony, and wireless Internet access.

Capstone Scholars enroll and participate in courses, presentations, and activities created exclusively for them. For example, the program includes sections for Capstone Scholars only of University 101, the University of South Carolina's award-winning first-year seminar, and English 101 and 102. Capstone class sizes are generally smaller, allowing for more peer interaction and discussion of ideas.

Students also engage with one another, the University, and the community outside the classroom. Capstone Conversations is a series of discussions led by distinguished faculty

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Continue to CAPSTONE PROGRAM, p. 13 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)[<< Continued from CAPSTONE PROGRAM, p. 12](#)

and community members. More informal conversations characterize News and Views, where small groups of students discuss current events using the *USA Today* newspapers delivered each morning to the Capstone residence halls. At a Columbia-area middle school,



scholars work with younger students, and through Capstone Ambassadors, upper-division scholars mentor first-year students based on major. Scholars also can engage in service-learning each semester, (e.g., visiting veterans or helping at a local food bank) and attend a variety of social events, including Hot Cookie Friday at which students, staff, and faculty share treats while building community.

Educational Enrichment Opportunities

Academic inquiry and experiences beyond the classroom drive the Capstone Scholars Program with the motto “Dream Big! Impact the Community. Leave a Legacy,” supporting undergraduate research and study abroad, which are central to the Capstone experience. The program’s strong partnership with the study abroad and undergraduate research offices reinforces these pursuits and gives Capstone Scholars exclusive opportunities for hands-on research and travel abroad. Students can apply for a \$1,000 Magellan Apprentice Research grant, available only for Capstone Scholars, which funds undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative work. The Capstone-exclusive Maymester study-abroad programs, scheduled between spring and summer terms, offer competitive \$2,000 grants to help students partially fund their travel experiences. Students have responded positively to both programs, with an average of five to six research grants awarded each semester and between 30 and 40 study abroad grants given each academic year. Currently, staff from Capstone Scholars and the University of South Carolina career center are working with established employers to match funds to secure exclusive internships for students. Capstone Scholars also offers students a weekly newsletter, credit for attending University events, and leadership programs.

The program also offers students opportunities to step outside their comfort zones to achieve a goal. Through the Personal Challenge program, Scholars can choose to overcome a fear, learn a new skill, or engage in discourse with someone with different values to develop confidence and self-esteem. The challenge might relate to academic or individual aspiration. The program has helped students define career choice and achieve personal goals:

Second semester, I changed my major from marine science to social work, and I wanted to explore all aspects of the new major and classes. I took a social work introductory class and also participated in the Homelessness Census of Richland County.

[Continue to CAPSTONE PROGRAM, p. 14 >>](#)[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from CAPSTONE PROGRAM, p. 13*

This census helped open my eyes to some of the jobs available for social work majors. I now have met a few social workers and have talked to them about their jobs so that I have an idea of what my future can consist of.

My personal challenge for this spring was to improve my leadership strengths by getting more involved and taking on more responsibilities. This year I was elected as membership vice president of my sorority and have grown in my abilities and my confidence in being a leader.

My personal challenge this semester was to learn how to play the guitar. I got a guitar for Christmas, and I hoped to be able to play at least a couple different songs by May of this year. I have completed my personal challenge and can now play six or seven different songs on guitar! I hope to continue learning and improving.

Begun four years ago, the program will be the subject of an upcoming book and topic at several national presentations at First-Year Experience conferences.

Going a Step Beyond

The Capstone Scholars staff members mentor the students throughout the program's two years to help them realize their potential, create possibilities, and discover the tools and resources they need to maximize the benefits at the University of South Carolina. Staff members give students as much face time as possible, allowing them to build trust, develop authentic relationships, and direct students to key involvement areas. As Astin (1984) noted, "Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement, or indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic" (p. 525). Staff engage and motivate students by

- having an open door policy through the day;
- eating breakfast and lunch with the students each week;
- sending weekly e-mail updates and maintaining social media interactions;
- teaching Capstone sections of University 101 (which Capstone Scholars are required to take during the fall semester of their first year);
- providing informal advising and mentoring;
- supporting students in 5K races, cultural events, or developing their own service projects; and
- participating in events alongside the students.

Such activities create trust and allow staff members to encourage students to pursue specific areas of interests.

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Continue to CAPSTONE PROGRAM, p. 15 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)[<< Continued from CAPSTONE PROGRAM, p. 14](#)

Program Assessment

Capstone Scholars has proven to be a successful enrollment management tool. For the past five years, the program's cohorts have averaged 532 with an average SAT score of 1313. The fall 2012 cohort, the program's largest, comprised 610 students. The program also appears to positively affect student satisfaction and retention and graduation rates. Most students in the latest cohort (93.5%) said they would recommend Capstone Scholars to another incoming first-year student, and 88% reported satisfaction with the three full-time staff members' visibility, helpfulness, and accessibility. Concerning academic and community activities, 84% of the scholars expressed they were more likely to engage in undergraduate research, study abroad, and service-learning based on their Capstone experiences. The program also successfully fosters faculty-student interaction:



76% of Capstone Scholars said they were more likely to interact with faculty and staff in and outside the classroom. Although the program is relatively new, its impact on persistence to the second year and degree completion is positive. The inaugural cohort, which entered in fall 2005, had a six-year graduation rate of 76.8% compared to the University's overall six-year rate of 70.3%. The first-to-

second-year retention rates for the fall 2010 and fall 2011 cohorts were 93.7% and 94.4%, respectively. These numbers are highly significant when compared to the University's overall rate of 85.9% for the fall 2010 cohort.

Conclusion

While assessment has shown Capstone Scholars are engaged and satisfied, the staff struggles to maintain momentum for sophomores living off campus. New efforts focus on forming leadership roles for these students through the Carolina Ambassadors program, for example. Preliminary results are positive but too early to report. [e](#)

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[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

Expanding A Peer-Facilitation Program Beyond the Fall Term

The transition to the university is an important, developmental life experience that for some first-year students can be overwhelming and, at times, difficult (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). To help, universities and colleges now offer first-year experiences in addition to orientation programs. One particular program, Transition to University (T2U), uses peer support groups to help students successfully transition from high school to the university during the fall semester (Pratt et al., 2000; Pancer, Pratt, & Alisat, 2006; Harper & Allegretti, 2009). In the program, originally developed at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada (Pancer et al., 2006), new students met weekly in groups with upper-class students to discuss issues relevant to the transition to university life for the first nine weeks of school. First-year students who participated in the T2U in peer groups have reported positive adjustment to university compared to students who did not (Pancer et al., 2006). Also, first-year students in the program were retained at a higher rate (Harper & Allegretti, 2009).



Recognizing the importance of peer support on successful transitions, Queens University of Charlotte, a comprehensive, private university located in Charlotte, North Carolina, initiated a pilot study of T2U in August 2006. The peer-support program has continued each fall, and in spring 2011, four support groups chose to meet weekly until the end of the academic year. No data currently is available on retention

comparing a one-semester transition program to an expanded experience held throughout the entire first year. Given that social connectedness is one of the primary factors for first-year students' overall adjustment (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Laufgraben, 2005; Pancer et al., 2006), it is expected that extending an interactive social experience that provides peer group support and feedback from the fall semester through the entire first year would help facilitate first-year students' adjustment and connection to the University. This article describes the development of the spring-term experience and examines whether first-year students who participated in the T2U for both semesters of their first year reported higher retention rates compared to students who did not participate or participated only during the fall semester.

Peer Facilitation

In fall 2010, the entire class of approximately 350 first-year students at Queens University of Charlotte was invited to participate in T2U support groups. They were informed of the opportunity by e-mail and letter and from their orientation program leaders. Students were told their participation would be voluntary and they would not receive academic credit. Forty-five students (9 males and 36 females) participated in the fall of their first year. Ten groups met weekly for approximately one hour for the first nine weeks of the fall semester to discuss issues related to the transition from high school to the university. These group meetings were

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[Return to Front Page](#)

Continue to PEER-FACILITATION, p. 18 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from PEER-FACILITATION, p. 17*

co-led by junior- and senior-class undergraduate student facilitators, who were selected through an application and interview process and participated in a training workshop and three-credit hour academic course on group dynamics. Group facilitators led first-year students through discussions focused on topics relevant to their first university semester, such as balancing work and social life and examining relationships (e.g., roommate conflict). T2U participants and their facilitators completed evaluations developed specifically for this program following each weekly group session. These self-report evaluations assessed the students' enjoyment, comfort, and satisfaction and the overall satisfaction and worth of the session.

In spring 2011, four groups (2 males and 20 females) elected to continue their weekly support groups for the rest of the academic year. Following the model for the fall semester, undergraduate student facilitators generated possible topics related to common experiences that typically occur in the spring of the first year. Of the list generated, the group facilitators chose eight specific topics for the first trial of the spring program of T2U, including (a) procrastination, (b) spring break plans, (c) relationships, and (d) future plans for the summer and fall of sophomore year. Because of the familiarity of the experience and established group cohesion from the previous term, the spring T2U participants generated their own topics for group discussions. They, in collaboration with their facilitators, chose topics specifically related to their personal lives, such as (a) changes in relationships with parents (e.g., divorce), (b) bullying, and (c) sexual identity. The continuing T2U students and their cofacilitators met once a week for approximately 1.5 hours to discuss the scheduled topic. The spring sessions followed a similar outline to the fall sessions, including a (a) check-in, (b) general discussion about the topic, (c) activities and strategies related to the topic, and (d) evaluation and wrap up.

Conclusion

T2U participants who participated in both the fall and spring programs returned for their second year at a rate of 90.9% compared to 80% for students who met in the fall only. In addition, both first-year students and their group facilitators reported a high degree of comfort and enjoyment overall with both the fall and the spring semester experiences. For example, one first-year participant stated, "it's nice to have somewhere to go to talk about the week, and I like to know others are going through the same things." A group facilitator commented that "meeting over the course of the whole year helped our group connection to grow and our discussions to go deeper, with my T2U 'babies' talking more in depth about their personal experiences." Of note, one potential confound of the retention results to consider when interpreting the findings is the voluntary choice of the first-year students to continue meeting in the spring, as it is possible these students, in general, were more socially engaged and may have returned for the sophomore year without participating in the spring sessions. With the success of the fall and spring T2U support groups, Queens University at Charlotte is considering expanding the program to include transfer students and extending it for first-year students into their sophomore year. A pilot sample of a sophomore program is currently in development, and results will be available in the future. 

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[Return to Front Page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)

Research Spotlight: National Evidence of the Assessment of First-Year Seminars: How and How Much?

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The term first-year seminar is a catchall phrase that describes a diversity of complex initiatives with common characteristics and objectives. Described generally, first-year seminars are courses designed to develop academic or social skills of first-year students.

Since 1988, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has conducted the National Survey of First-Year Seminars (NSFYS) every three years to gain a better understanding of the proliferation, complexity, and similarities of this fixture in the first-year curriculum. Over the past 25 years, the NSFYS has provided much useful information about the first-year seminar. Previous administrations of the Survey have led to the development of a typology for seminars, provided a common vocabulary for discussing features of the course, and created a body of literature useful for establishing national benchmarks for the implementation of various seminar characteristics. The Survey also provides important information about the number of institutions that have assessed their programs and the methods they used to determine their success or need for improvement.

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2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

The 2012-2013 NSFYS, the ninth triennial administration of the Survey, included questions asking representatives from degree-granting institutions across the United States to provide information about general institutional characteristics, types of first-year seminars offered, descriptions of the seminars, student characteristics, instructor characteristics, high-impact practices connected to the courses, and administration of the seminars. The Survey also included a section on institutional assessment of the seminars.

Overall, 896 institutions responded to the Survey, with 804 reporting that they offered one or more first-year seminars. This proportion, 89.7%, suggests that the seminar has gained wide acceptance as an important intervention for students in the first college year.

Assessment in the First-Year Seminar: A National Overview

The NSFYS sought information about the assessment of the first-year seminar, specifically asking whether institutions had conducted a formal assessment of their first-year seminar and what type of assessment they used. Approximately 6 in 10 (59.4%) respondents reported that their course had been formally assessed or evaluated between 2009 and the time of the Survey's administration in late 2012 or early 2013. The remaining institutional representatives answered that they had not conducted a formal assessment (32.4%) or that they did not know (8.1%).

When asked what type of assessment was conducted, a large proportion of institutions reported using student course evaluations or institutional data analysis (e.g., GPA, retention rates, graduation rates) to assess the first-year seminar. The four methods most frequently

[Return to Front Page](#)

Continue to RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT, p. 19 >>

[Return to Front Page](#)

<< *Continued from* RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT, p. 18

identified by respondents were primarily quantitative: (a) student course evaluations (86.9%), (b) analyses of institutional data (71.2%), (c) survey instruments (53.4%), and (d) direct assessment of student learning outcomes (52.9%). Accordingly, four of the five methods reported least often by institutions were qualitative: (a) focus groups with instructors (35.4%), (b) focus groups with students (30.6%), (c) interviews with instructors (20.1%), and (d) interviews with students (12.4%). Additionally, one third of campuses reported conducting a program review as the method of evaluating their seminars.

Discussion of the Results

These results point to a focus on quantitative methods to assess the first-year seminar. In particular, institutions turned to student course evaluations and available institutional data. These sources of evidence are low-hanging fruit; they are easy to gather and can be part of a well-rounded data gathering enterprise. However, they are less flexible and precise than other methods, such as specifically tailored student surveys or direct assessment of student learning. While these data sources and methods do not require extra time or resources, something especially important in austere times, institutions must strive do better and find ways to gather meaningful measures of student outcomes in the first-year seminar. Additionally, qualitative methods are important to describe the impact of the course on student outcomes in a deeper way, providing an important picture of the lived experiences of the students enrolled in these courses.

Only 60% of institutions had conducted a formal assessment of the first-year seminar in the three years before responding to the NSFYS. Correspondingly, a large proportion of institutions had not formally evaluated the effectiveness of the course. Assessment of any intervention such as the first-year seminar is an important piece of the student success puzzle. When discussing first-year seminars and other high-impact educational practices, Kuh (2010) wrote, "Only when they are implemented well and continually evaluated ... will we realize their considerable potential" (p. xiii).

More information on the assessment of first-year seminars will be presented by Dallin George Young, Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, in a concurrent session at the 2013 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, Indiana, 3:15-4:15 p.m., Tuesday, October 29, 2013, at the Marriott Indianapolis Downtown. Additionally, the results of the research for the NSFYS will be published in a report to be released in early spring 2014. [e](#)

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[Return to Front Page](#)