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On Becoming Accessibility Allies

Of the 22.5 million undergraduate students in the United States, about 11% report having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Collectively, these 2.2 million students represent myriad disabilities, including learning disabilities, mental health issues, mobility limitations, acquired brain injuries, ADHD, and chronic health issues. The challenges associated with these disabilities can hinder students' academic progress; only 34% of young adults with disabilities attending four-year colleges or universities attain bachelor's degrees, compared with 51% of their student peers without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011).

At California State University, East Bay (CSUEB), a regional, public university enrolling 14,000 students, faculty and staff partnered to improve the educational experiences of students with disabilities or learning differences. As part of the Learning, Ability and Neurological Diversity (LAND) Project, faculty studied the perspectives of students with disabilities through interviews, focus groups, and online surveys. Using their findings, the faculty researchers joined staff from Accessibility Services, the Office of Diversity, and the Office of Faculty Development in developing Accessibility Ally training for faculty and staff, as well as a website with tips for faculty on educating students with disabilities.

The LAND Project

The goal of the LAND Project, funded by a campus Diversity and Inclusive Excellence Grant, is to address the needs of a group of students who may be overlooked in conversations about diversity and equality. The two-phase research project investigated the academic and learning experiences of students receiving accommodations from Accessibility Services because of a documented disability or learning difference. In the first phase, 45 students (some with more than one disability or learning difference), recruited through Accessibility Services,

Christina Chin-Newman
Professor, Human Development
and Women's Studies

Deepa Nair
Research Assistant, LAND Project

Sara Smith
Assistant Professor, Human
Development and Women's
Studies

*California State University,
East Bay*

The logo for 'Accessibility Ally' features the word 'Accessibility' in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. Below it, the word 'Ally' is written in a smaller, bold, black sans-serif font. A red triangle points upwards from the right side of the 'Ally' text, partially overlapping the bottom of the 'Accessibility' text.

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department e-mail listservs, or campus fliers, participated either in a semi-structured interview or a focus group and were compensated with a \$25 campus credit. Data from Phase 1 were used to develop an online survey. In the second phase, 109 students recruited solely through Accessibility Services completed the online survey. These participants were entered into a drawing for 10 \$50 prizes.

Stigma and Challenges: Findings from Interviews and Focus Groups

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups covered challenges the students faced, the role of their disabilities in their experiences at the university, and the social support from faculty or staff that facilitated a successful college experience. Findings indicated that students with disabilities experience social stigma because they identify as having a disability, or as using accommodations. Whether dealing with their professors or peers, these students felt misunderstood and even disrespected during everyday campus interactions. For example, some participants encountered professors who didn't know what to do with their accommodations letter or were told by peers that ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) does not exist. One participant even went to great lengths to avoid using the note-taker accommodation for which he qualified to avoid being treated differently by others.

Participants also described how the nature of their disability or learning difference could pose an academic challenge (e.g., needing more time to re-read material) or social challenge (e.g., interacting with faculty or other students who have a negative perception of the participant). Other participants described how health problems or side effects from medication could drastically affect their ability to concentrate or their energy level, thus affecting their academic performance.

Depression and Anxiety: Findings from the Survey

Online survey respondents self-reported their specific disabling conditions (including ADHD, memory disorders, physical pain, dyslexia, depression, anxiety, and dyscalculia, among others) and whether these conditions had been officially diagnosed. The most commonly reported conditions were those within the broader constellations of depressive and anxiety disorders; more than half of participants (56%) reported depression, anxiety, or both. Specific forms of anxiety reported by students included general anxiety, test anxiety, social anxiety, and panic disorder. Notably, regression analyses predicting satisfaction with various aspects of campus experience (interactions with faculty, staff, or students) found that participants who reported depression or anxiety were especially vulnerable to dissatisfaction with their interactions on campus.

It is unknown whether these participants, compared to their peers without depression or anxiety, actually receive less support from professors and are less likely to receive

“Some participants encountered professors who didn't know what to do with their accommodations letter or were told by peers that ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) does not exist.”

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respectful, positive feedback from peers. Perhaps they perceive interactions with others on campus in a less positive light. In any case, a relatively low-cost intervention to improve student outcomes would be for campuses to offer support groups, whether through accessibility services or through student health and counseling services.

Lessons Learned

Student participants developed many creative solutions to manage their academic requirements. These included being proactive by contacting their professors to introduce themselves; taking advantage of accommodations; and having a strong support system of counselors, faculty, friends, and family. The students' dedication is admirable, but it is vital that colleges and universities do their part by investing in training faculty to optimize their teaching of students with disabilities and learning differences.

Our research team concluded, on the basis of our findings and unofficial meetings with faculty and staff, that faculty members commonly lack awareness of their responsibilities when teaching students with disabilities and learning differences. CSUEB is not alone in recognizing this problem (Bauer & Choiniere, 2008).

To address this knowledge gap, CSUEB launched the Accessibility Ally program, a training workshop where participants learn about *ableism* as a social justice issue—similar to racism and sexism—through a panel of students with disabilities. Participants are given many reasons students may be eligible for accommodations. Faculty also are informed that by law, they are not allowed to ask why a student may be receiving accommodations. After completing the Accessibility Ally training, faculty receive an Accessibility Ally sticker to display in their offices, communicating their willingness to discuss and support any accommodation needs. By encouraging more faculty members to become Accessibility Allies, the college aims to improve the campus climate and increase successful educational outcomes for students.

The Accessibility Ally movement may also grow to encompass other campuses. CSUEB faculty and staff have collaborated with their counterparts at San Jose State University, which is conducting research on students with disabilities there and plans to develop its own Accessibility Ally training.

Faculty and staff from both campuses will participate in a roundtable discussion on becoming Accessibility Allies at an upcoming conference. They also plan to develop procedures for some faculty and staff to voluntarily serve as Accessibility Ambassadors to their home departments.

“The students’ dedication is admirable, but it is vital that colleges and universities do their part by investing in training faculty to optimize their teaching of students with disabilities and learning differences.”

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The LAND Project team advocates that the definition of diversity in higher education be expanded to include students with disabilities and learning differences. For these students to thrive on campus, they need heightened awareness of the obstacles they face among faculty, staff, and students; they also need motivated faculty members to change their instructional practices to accommodate learners of all abilities. CSUEB plans to continue developing faculty resources so that pedagogical practices are sensitive to the experiences of neurologically diverse students. ☺

Resources for Faculty

Faculty Accessibility Ally website of California State University, East Bay

<http://www.csueastbay.edu/AccessAlly>

National Center for College Students with Disabilities - Resources for Faculty and Instructors

<http://www.nccsdclearinghouse.org/faculty--instructors.html>

American Council on Education - Accessibility Resources

<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Accessibility-Resources.aspx>

Student Resources

American Association of People with Disabilities - Guide to Higher Education

<http://aapd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Higher-Education-%E2%80%93-Getting-There.pdf>

DREAM: Disability Rights, Education, Advocacy, and Mentoring (hosts "Disabled and Proud" conference)

<http://www.dreamcollegedisability.org/>

Active Minds (advocates for open discussion of mental health issues on college campuses)

<http://www.activeminds.org>

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Christina Chin-Newman

christina.chin-newman@csueastbay.edu

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Bridge to Success: A Summer Bridge Program to Serve a Target Population

Many colleges and universities have used summer bridge programs to effectively assist specific populations in transitioning to college (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). At Kennesaw State University (KSU), a summer bridge was used to accommodate a group of slightly less prepared students who applied for admission to the university after institutional consolidation.

In summer 2015, KSU launched its Bridge to Success (B2S) program after a merger with Southern Polytechnic State University created a pool of about 400 students who did not meet the entrance requirements (i.e., minimum high school GPA and SAT/ACT test scores) of the newly consolidated institution. Rather than being denied admission, students who met the GPA and SAT/ACT entrance requirements for one of the pre-consolidation institutions were offered admission through their required participation in B2S. Of those eligible to participate, 15% chose to enroll in the B2S program.

B2S is a six-week program that carries a program fee, offers limited summer housing (which extends through the following academic year), and requires a 2.0 GPA for students to continue at KSU in the fall. The program includes curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular strategies designed to (a) promote academic preparedness and provide academic support, (b) cultivate a sense of belonging and affinity with the institution, and (c) engage students in experiential education opportunities.

The program's curricular strategies include two credit-bearing academic courses: a first-year seminar and one general education course. Three academic departments that offer general education courses—Math, Music, and Political Science—reserve sections of their courses for B2S students. Supplemental instruction is offered for each general education course in the B2S program, providing students a peer mentor and structured study sessions for their linked courses. Offering three general education courses gives students options while limiting the number of classes that must be supported by supplemental instruction (both a personnel and funding concern).

Since classes in the B2S summer session meet twice a week for three hours and 45 minutes, the first-year seminar course uses experiential education strategies extensively to engage students. The instructors employ brief lectures coupled with activities, exercises that encourage greater self-awareness and deeper learning, peer evaluations to promote student interaction, and Medium (an online publishing tool) for self-reflection and self-expression.

A second B2S component is the use of cocurricular strategies to facilitate academic success. One such strategy is the use of early-alert interventions to identify struggling students and offer support. The program also incorporates lecture-style presentations from key campus partners, such as the dean of students, to introduce the cohort to essential campus resources. Another strategy is the inclusion of activities such as an on-campus low-ropes course to facilitate connections with peers and foster a sense of community.

Natasha Lovelace Habers
Interim Chair of the Department of
First-Year and Transition Studies &
Associate Professor of Art

Deborah Mixson-Brookshire
Assistant Dean of University
College & Associate Professor of
Management

Ruth A. Goldfine
Interim Associate Dean of
University College & Professor of
English

Nirmal Trivedi
Director of First-Year Seminars &
Assistant Professor of English

Kennesaw State University

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Finally, B2S offers optional on-campus housing and partners with the school's Residence Life program for extracurricular programming. For example, students are typically treated to a "Meet and Greet" and Movie Night on move-in weekend followed by team-building activities, floor meetings, and a group dinner leading up to the first day of class.

Assessment

To assess the impact of the B2S program, the retention rate and GPA of the B2S students were compared with those of students in the general population who entered KSU during the summer session. Of the 60 students who chose to participate in the B2S program during summer 2015, all met the program requirements and were eligible to continue at KSU in fall 2015, with 98% being retained from summer to fall, compared with an 82% retention rate for first-year students who started during the summer semester and whose high school GPAs and SAT/ACT test scores were similar to B2S participants. The average GPA of the B2S students was 3.08 for their summer 2015 courses, compared with an average of 3.39 for the comparison group.

After their first three semesters at KSU (i.e., summer 2015, fall 2015, and spring 2016), the B2S students had an average cumulative GPA of 2.63, compared with 3.19 for the comparison group for the same three semesters. Also, 93% of the B2S students were retained from fall 2015 to spring 2016 (compared with 75% of the comparison group), and 75% of the B2S students who persisted achieved sophomore status (i.e., 30 or more credit hours) by their second fall semester, compared with 49% in the comparison group and 52% of the general student population. Table 1 provides a comparison of the data for each group of students.

Table 1
Comparison of Retention Rates and GPAs of B2S Students and Comparison Group

	Retention Rate (Summer to Fall)	Retention Rate (Fall to Spring)	Sophomore Status Obtained After Three Semesters	Average GPA After First Semester	Average Cumulative GPA After Three Semesters
B2S Students	98%	93%	75%	3.08	2.63
Comparison Group	82%	75%	49%	3.39	3.19

While B2S students earned lower GPAs than students in the comparison group, they were retained at a higher rate than the comparison group and attained sophomore status more quickly than the comparison group or the general population. These findings suggest that integrating curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities as an integral part of students' experience can help their persistence and progression. Moreover, the findings emphasize the value of a strong relationship between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs units on campus in order to strategically integrate and coordinate curricular initiatives with co/extracurricular activities.

“ These findings suggest that integrating curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities as an integral part of students' experience can help their persistence and progression. Moreover, they affirm the value of a strong relationship between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs units on campus.”

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Implications for the Future

The B2S program successfully met its objective of providing access to KSU for students who otherwise would have been denied admission post-consolidation, and participants had initial success as evidenced by the average 3.08 GPA earned by the group in their summer classes. However, this strong start did not guarantee future success for B2S students. After three semesters at KSU, the average cumulative GPA for program participants had fallen to 2.63. The decline in GPA may be due, in part, to a lack of academic support beyond the six-week summer session. Program managers may need to consider how B2S might be modified to better equip students to succeed academically in the future.

After assessing the program and getting feedback from students and faculty, the following revisions are proposed:

1. Identify and implement strategies to better equip students to succeed academically after they complete the B2S program.
2. Offer classes three times a week rather than twice a week during the summer session, allowing for shorter class meetings and more opportunities for students to work independently (e.g., on homework) and receive feedback from the instructor three times each week, rather than twice.
3. Select courses that will allow students the greatest chance for success. During the short summer term, do not offer challenging classes in which a large percentage of students typically earn grades of D, F, or W.
4. Expand the program by adapting its successful strategies for use with other target populations.
5. Add programming to help family members and, in turn, their students navigate the admissions processes in the summer semester, particularly regarding financial aid and housing.
6. Remove the requirement for students to earn a 2.0 GPA in their first semester at KSU in order to align the program with university policy, which places students on academic probation rather than dismissing them.

The B2S program at KSU was born of necessity to serve a group of students who fell just short of admission standards following institutional consolidation. Its implementation has highlighted the fact that a summer program can be effective in helping target populations succeed and persist in higher education. Consequently, the B2S program can serve as a model for other institutions facing similar circumstances or seeking to support a variety of target populations. [e](#)

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Natasha Lovelace Habers
nhabers@kennesaw.edu

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Departmental Matriculation Ceremonies for First-Year Majors: The White Coat Ceremony

Historically, matriculation ceremonies symbolize the beginning of a new academic life, and as such have an important role in higher education. An online search confirms that during 2015-2016, at least 60 colleges and universities, public and private, used matriculation ceremonies to welcome, initiate, orient, and emphasize academic honor among incoming undergraduates (M. Murphy, general web research, January 1, 2017). These ceremonies “represent a deliberately designed attempt to provide a rite of passage in which students are supported, welcomed, celebrated, and ultimately assimilated” (Gardner, 1986, p. 266). They may be especially important for first-generation college students and those entering demanding fields of study.

The entering class of first-year majors in Huntingdon (Alabama) College’s chemistry and biochemistry department typically comprises 20 to 30 students, equally distributed between the two majors. About 60% of these incoming majors are first-generation college students. Students perceive these fields as notoriously difficult, with one researcher coining the term *chemophobia* to refer to a student’s fear or anxiety associated with chemistry courses (Eddy, 2003). The college’s general education coursework and chemistry/biochemistry curricula often require General Chemistry I (and laboratory) in students’ first semester. General Chemistry I courses have DFW (drop, fail, withdrawal) rates of 30-35% at large universities, and 20-25% at small colleges such as Huntingdon.

In a response to new-student anxiety in the school’s chemistry and biochemistry department, Huntingdon’s leaders developed a departmental matriculation ceremony called the White Coat Ceremony (WCC), adopting a practice used by graduate schools in the medical sciences. The ceremony has been held annually during the first few weeks of the fall semester since 2008. Huntingdon’s event aims to emphasize the experimental, ethical, and professional nature of the chemistry and biochemistry degrees by welcoming first-year majors as part of a community of learners, setting a clear academic tone early in the semester, and connecting students with faculty and others.



First-year departmental majors celebrate with faculty after a White Coat Ceremony at Huntingdon College.
Photo Credit: Maureen K. Murphy

The ceremony includes an opening by faculty, a prayer and inspirational message led by a religion faculty/minister on campus, a brief faculty presentation on the history and significance of the white coat, and, finally, the presenting of a lab coat to each first-year student. After concluding remarks by faculty, who often recount stories of their first white coats, the students are asked to raise their right hands and recite the matriculation oath (see sidebar, page 9). Immediately after the first WCC

in 2008, faculty noted more professional behavior among chemistry and biochemistry majors. Huntingdon’s first-year majors wore their lab coats around the department more often to

Maureen K. Murphy
Professor & Chair, Department of
Chemistry and Biochemistry

Doba D. Jackson
Associate Professor; Biochemistry
Program Coordinator
Huntingdon College

Jeremy M. Carr
Chemistry Instructor
Central Alabama Community College

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model professional dress and safety practices in the laboratory, as well as for professional shadowing, employment, and advertisement for the college and its science programs. A number of student Facebook posts also showed pictures of students in their embroidered lab coats.

As the department's only initiative for majors from 2008 to 2016, the ceremony also appears to have had an impact on student persistence in the major. First-to-second-year collective chemistry and biochemistry major retention rates at Huntingdon climbed from 75% in 2007 (before a WCC was held) to an average of 91% from 2008 to 2016, while four-year departmental graduation rates averaged 73% from 2012-2016, compared with the college's average 44% graduation rate during this time. The DFW rates from 2008 to 2016 in General Chemistry I ranged from 11-15%, compared with 23% in 2007.

School leaders found that a departmental WCC helped immediately connect first-year students with a major's faculty, philosophy, and other students. The department's first-to-second-year retention rate was 29% higher than the college as a whole from 2008-2016 (Table 1). This is notable considering that departmental losses tend to coincide with student major changes, most often during the first year. Student population and demographics for the major and college remained the same from 2008 to 2016.

Also, from 2008 to 2016, end-of-course supplementary questions on IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction forms (IDEA Center, Kansas State University) for fall General Chemistry I classes surveyed student opinions concerning the WCC. Results from surveys using a 5.0 Likert scale (Table 2) showed that students saw the WCC as a meaningful part of the major ($M = 4.62$) and that they were more comfortable interacting with faculty afterward ($M = 4.69$).

Table 1

First-to-Second-Year Retention Rates for College and Department Since Inception of Departmental White Coat Ceremony (WCC), 2008-2016

Entered	Returned	College Retention Rate ^a	Departmental Retention Rate ^b
Fall 2015	Fall 2016	61.5%	92.0%
Fall 2014	Fall 2015	66.0%	92.1%
Fall 2013	Fall 2014	70.5%	94.3%
Fall 2012	Fall 2013	62.0%	92.0%
Fall 2011	Fall 2012	55.0%	91.1%
Fall 2010	Fall 2011	59.6%	90.0%
Fall 2009	Fall 2010	59.5%	89.3%
Fall 2008	Fall 2009	63.0%	88.4%
Mean		62.1%	91.1%

^aData published online by the Office of Institutional Assessment and Compliance (OIAC), Huntingdon College, 2016. http://hawk.huntingdon.edu/oiac/consumerinformation_studentattainment.html

For students entering fall 2007 and returning fall 2008, the college retention rate was 65%, while the departmental retention rate during this time was 75%.

^bData published by Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry, Huntingdon College, Assessment Report, 2016.

Matriculation Oath

I promise:

- To be a loyal and contributing member of the college community;
- To abide by the Honor Code of Conduct to assure a responsible environment for learning and living;
- To strive for excellence in all that I do inside and outside the classroom, laboratory, and research environment;
- To abide by and uphold the ethical standards of science;
- To model professional behavior in all that I do; and
- To lead, serve, and make the world a better place.

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Table 2

Chemistry and Biochemistry Majors' Responses to Supplementary Questions on IDEA Student Rating of Instruction Surveys, 2008-2016^a

Question	M (n)
I considered the White Coat Ceremony an important and meaningful part of joining the major.	4.62 (234)
I felt more comfortable interacting with my major professors inside and outside the classroom after the White Coat Ceremony.	4.69 (231)

^an = number of student responses to supplementary questions on IDEA Student Rating of Instruction. Likert Scale used: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. Fall 2016 results are not available.

Conclusion

One of the school's goals for future WCCs is to invite family members on stage when students get their white coats. This may promote family buy-in to the chemistry or biochemistry major and help family members understand the demands, ethical nature, and professionalism involved. Others have found that employing a variety of creative strategies with families, including matriculation ceremonies, was effective in increasing first-year student efficacy (Hicks & McFrazier, 2014).

Students considered the symbolic nature of the white coat, combined with the formal matriculation ceremony, an important and meaningful introduction to the major and a valuable introduction to the faculty. Other schools may be able to successfully adapt the characteristics of the matriculation ceremony when looking for ways to integrate new students into their majors. 

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Contact

Maureen K. Murphy
maureenm@hawks.huntingdon.edu

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Intervention Strategies for At-Risk Off-Campus Students

Located in Fairfax, Virginia, just outside Washington, DC, George Mason University (Mason) is a four-year, public institution serving more than 35,000 students and is the largest public research institution in the state. Mason's off-campus student population comprises about 70% of the student population.

According to 2013 NSSE data, off-campus students at Mason reported decreased engagement and faculty and staff interactions outside the classroom. The data show that off-campus students lacked a point-of-contact for resources, peer connections, and leadership opportunities, which contributed to a diminished sense of belonging and campus pride. Although the Office of Off-Campus Student Programs and Services (OCSPS) at Mason was created in response to these findings, the NSSE data highlight the ongoing need for the services it offers.

Intervention Strategies

The OCSPS supports first-year, transfer, and continuing students living off campus and those transitioning to off-campus living by offering academic and social engagement opportunities. The office connects with off-campus students and supports their success through the Off-Campus Advisor (OCA) program and intervention strategies.

Patriot Success

In 2016, Mason created Patriot Success, a university-wide initiative to identify, develop, implement, and assess student-level interventions. Its goal is to increase student engagement, retention, and timely degree completion. In order to identify and assess student-level interventions and engagement, all undergraduate students are sent the Beacon survey in the fall. A combination of general and institution-specific questions allow administrators to assess which students are at risk for leaving the institution and where additional support is needed, as well as to evaluate the overall student experience.

Students classified as at risk could be transferring to another institution, leaving the institution altogether, or leaving because of a lack of basic resources such as food or shelter. Additionally, some students may leave because of safety concerns. Of those students who had concerns about food, shelter, and safety, about 54% lived off campus.

Staff members at OCSPS respond to the survey results and connect with at-risk off-campus students to discuss their experience at Mason and why they're considering leaving; they also promote resources to assist them with their decision. The OCSPS team divides the list of students who indicate they want to leave the institution among the student leader team. The office's graduate assistants and associate director provide outreach to students with food, shelter, and safety concerns.

Adrienne D. Thompson
Graduate Assistant for Student
Success and Retention, Off-Campus
Student Programs and Services

Emilie Dubert
Associate Director, Off-Campus
Student Programs and Services
George Mason University

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In 2015, 7% of Mason's approximately 2,900 off-campus students were identified as at-risk (i.e., 201 students). Recognizing that not all the identified at-risk students would respond to outreach efforts, OCSPS set a goal to connect with 15% of off-campus students identified as at-risk during the fall Beacon survey push. The office connected with and received responses from 33.8% of at-risk students through phone calls, e-mails, and in-person appointments. Of the identified off-campus students with food, shelter, and safety concerns, about 10% had actionable concerns and were directed to resources on campus to help with their specific needs.

Off-Campus Advisor Program

In 2011, the OCSPS also established a peer advising program for off-campus students. The Off-Campus Advisors (OCAs) introduce students to on-campus resources and create peer-to-peer connections to discuss transition challenges. The OCA position is a highly competitive leadership opportunity, with only six off-campus students selected to participate. OCAs are trained on campus resources, off-campus advising, programming, and connecting with students; they also assess where students are in their transition to Mason and their collegiate experiences. The OCAs are instrumental in implementing the intervention strategies established by OCSPS. In the 2015-2016 academic year, OCAs connected with 93% of first-year students living off campus through advising and programming efforts.

Future Implications

The current intervention plan at Mason poses three major challenges for OCSPS:

1. OCSPS needs to determine how to identify those students who do not take the Beacon survey who might be at risk of leaving the institution.
2. Connecting with students who take the survey but do not respond to the office's outreach is a challenge. The office makes at least two attempts to reach out to each student.
3. The university only assesses students once a year, thus leaving out students in the spring semester who may be facing decisions about leaving.

The current system for following up with students can be improved. After initial outreach efforts to at-risk students, the OCA team e-mails students to check in on their Mason experience and try to answer other questions. In the upcoming year, OCSPS is creating a post-advisement survey for students to take shortly after their meeting or interaction with a team member. The assessment will include questions about their experience in the meeting, as well as questions to assess whether the meeting made an impact on their overall Mason experience. This survey will help the office assess how the advisement strategies affect students who have connected with a member of the OCSPS team.

“A combination of general and institution-specific questions allow administrators to assess which students are at risk for leaving the institution and where additional support is needed, as well as to evaluate the overall student experience.”

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For institutions interested in adopting the OCA program or intervention strategies used by OCSPS, having the resources to support students is critical. A six-person OCA team made it possible to reach out to all the identified at-risk students, which would have been challenging for the office's two graduate assistants and associate director to accomplish. Having the additional support of the institution and other stakeholders in retention efforts makes taking on the intervention process much more seamless.

Using Beacon or another intervention tool lets the institution know who its students are and may help increase student retention. Through its intervention efforts, OCSPS connected with a third of the off-campus at-risk students at Mason, assisting them in their challenges on campus and providing resources that will help them graduate. Feedback from students has been positive overall, with one at-risk student noting appreciation for the support and guidance from the office and saying he "is able to manage his stress and responsibilities better" after visiting the office. OCSPS will continue to be a resource for Mason students. 

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Contact

Adrienne Thompson
athomp30@gmu.edu

Emilie Dubert
edubert@gmu.edu

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Research Reports on College Transitions No. 7

What Makes the First-Year Seminar High Impact?
Exploring Effective Educational Practices

Tracy L. Skipper, Editor

First-year seminars have been widely hailed as a high-impact educational practice, leading to improved academic performance, increased retention, and achievement of critical 21st Century learning outcomes. What are the common determinators among these highly variable courses that contribute to their educational effectiveness? A new collection of case studies, representing a wide variety of institutional and seminar types seeks to address this question.

ISBN 978-1-942072-01-0. 164 pages. \$25.00



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Creating a Curriculum for the 21st Century and Beyond: From the Academic Side

When the Rollins College faculty reviewed the college's undergraduate general education curriculum in 2007, they discovered widespread dissatisfaction among students and instructors. Students were unclear about why they were required to take the courses, as the school gave no overview of the curriculum and its purpose.

The faculty found that students who took their classes for general education credit often were disinterested and negatively affected the experience for all members of the class. Students often put off requirements they believed would be difficult, which sometimes affected their ability to graduate on time. Also, the curriculum lacked sufficient assessment mechanisms, making it hard to evaluate its effectiveness. The process of revising the curriculum focused on three key pedagogical goals:

1. Creating a developmental curriculum in which classes build upon knowledge and skills learned at lower levels. This also allows the students to move through the curriculum in a cohort group.
2. Embedding specific skills—written communication, integrative learning, information literacy, ethical reasoning, and critical thinking, measurable by AAC&U LEAP VALUE rubrics in each of the curricular stages (LEAP is the Association of American Colleges & Universities' ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative).
3. Developing themed groups of classes to encourage students to integrate knowledge across disciplines.

A New Frontier: Rollins Foundations in the Liberal Arts (rFLA)

The faculty launched its new curriculum in fall 2014, naming it the Rollins Foundations in the Liberal Arts (rFLA) as it provided foundational skills for success in college and beyond. The rFLA has three components—Rollins College Conference (RCC, a first-year seminar course), Competencies, and Neighborhoods—described in greater detail below.

RCC. All first-year students enroll in an RCC during the fall semester. This seminar class, featuring a broad range of topics, is designed to foster a learning community early in the college experience. This pre-existing, very successful requirement has helped integrate Rollins students into the college experience for decades. By incorporating it more fully within the rFLA curriculum, the college aims to help students make a more successful transition to their second semester and beyond.

Competencies. Students must demonstrate competency in writing, foreign language, health and wellness, and mathematical thinking by achieving at least a C- (a C in writing) in specific courses at Rollins, in designated transfer courses, or, in the case of foreign language, verifiable second-language abilities.

Claire Strom
Rapetti-Trunzo Chair of History

Tricia Zelaya-Leon
Director of Career Development
Rollins College

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Neighborhoods. This is the most unique component of Rollins' general education. Students choose one of four themed groups of classes within which to finish their rFLA experience. In the theme, or Neighborhood, they take five courses, one from each of the four main areas of study in the college—Expressive Arts, Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences—as well as a capstone practicum course. In these courses, students learn to think, speak, and write in critically and ethically informed ways while also integrating knowledge and ideas from a wide spectrum of perspectives. By grouping courses in themed Neighborhoods, students are encouraged to connect information across classes. Also, each course level teaches specific skills, allowing faculty to build incrementally on students' abilities as they progress through the Neighborhoods.

Direct Goals of rFLA: Developmental and Integrative

The new curriculum is developmental and intentionally structured throughout students' time at Rollins. The students complete their RCC class in the first semester and start in their Neighborhoods the second semester. They must complete the Neighborhood classes in order—introductory, intermediate, and practicum. This allows the courses to be more specifically geared toward the age and year of the students. Thus, the 100-level courses are purposefully designed for second-semester first-year students, who are still relatively new to the college experience and might need help with study skills and learning conceptually; while the 300-level courses are created for juniors and seniors, who are more focused on life after college and strategies for articulating their education effectively.

The faculty crafted the Neighborhoods to ensure that students receive an integrated experience. Faculty members in each Neighborhood meet regularly to establish and maintain common goals, create and review syllabi, and arrange for Neighborhood-wide events. These can include academic affairs such as guest lectures and student/faculty discussion panels, or social events such as escape rooms and movie nights.

One of the big advantages of a new curriculum is the ability to insert effective assessment from the beginning. Each course level assesses different AAC&U LEAP learning outcomes:

- 100-level courses focus on written communication and information literacy.
- 150-level courses focus on critical thinking and integrative learning.
- 200-level courses focus on critical thinking and ethical reasoning.
- 300-level courses assess all five outcomes.

Assessment is done in the summer by faculty who work in groups of three—one group on each LEAP learning outcome being assessed that year. Each group spends a month assessing 100 randomly chosen artifacts. At the end of the month, the assessors meet and discuss the quantitative data generated, as well as qualitative observations.

The new curriculum is more structured, and its courses relate intimately to one another. One consequence of this has been better articulation of the nature of general education and its importance to students. Faculty and staff spend more time talking about the embedded

“One consequence has been better articulation of the nature of general education and its importance to students. Faculty and staff spend more time talking about the embedded skills that students are learning together with the broad-based knowledge.”

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skills that students are learning together with the broad-based knowledge. This process has made general education more understandable to Rollins students, which, in turn, has increased their involvement in it.

What the Future Looks Like for rFLA

Thus far, assessment results demonstrate a positive outlook for the new curriculum. Students say they see the connection between their courses and the theme of their Neighborhood, so it appears the new integrative approach is working. Additionally, they appreciated the opportunity to interact with their fellow neighbors at cocurricular events.

The assessment data collected to date has been positive. In nearly all cases, students have met the program's anticipated benchmarks outline. Next summer, the college will assess artifacts from its first 300-level classes to see whether students show progress. The college addressed scheduling difficulties for students by adopting set class times for all the neighborhood classes during which no other classes may be offered.

Conclusion

Liberal education has evolved in such a way that institutions of higher education must re-imagine their curricular and cocurricular goals and priorities to support the changing needs of students and society. By developing and implementing rFLA, Rollins has responded to this movement by grounding an innovative program in multidisciplinary and learning-centered approaches. 

Contact

Claire Strom
CStrom@Rollins.edu

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The Same, but Different: Supporting Gifted Students in First-Year Seminar

The idea that gifted high school students will succeed on their own during the transition to college is not necessarily true. Research suggests that academically gifted students may face challenges specific to their cognitive ability and educational experiences (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). These may include underdeveloped study habits, social difficulties, and unrealistic expectations from others, all of which can negatively affect gifted students' psychosocial well-being and academic success (Kem & Navan, 2006).

Gifted first-year students may have experienced a mismatch between their academic aptitude and their educational environment in high school, achieving academic success without significant effort as a result. Consequently, these students may not have cultivated the non-cognitive skills they need to persist in college. They may equate intelligence with ease of success (Mendaglio, 2013). They may encounter academic difficulty for the first time in their first semester of college, an experience Mendaglio described as "hitting the wall." As gifted students are challenged for the first time, they may realize they do not have the academic skills, such as test preparation, note taking, or even active listening, that their more average peers may have developed in high school (Balduf, 2009).

Extended orientation seminars often are structured to help students develop more effective study habits. However, gifted students may not feel a need for this kind of curriculum until they hit the wall.

The Clark University Success Center at Southwest Baptist University (SBU) developed a modified assignment for extended orientation seminars designed to address the unique needs of gifted students in transition. SBU identifies first-year students with standardized test scores in the top 10% in the nation (28 ACT/1240 SAT) for special programming in its first-year experience program. As space allows, those students are placed in either a high ACT/SAT seminar or an honors seminars, if they are in the university's honors program. The assignment described here was developed in those modified sections of seminar but could be used in any extended orientation course to engage gifted students.

While SBU's gifted first-year students were not necessarily underperforming with respect to GPA or retention, they often showed a pervasive disinterest in a traditional seminar curriculum. In their assessments, they consistently reported seeing no need for the course. Based on their high school academic experiences, they did not see a need to learn study skills.

However, in advising it was clear that they consistently faced challenges in transition that were specific to their exceptionality and their general lack of challenge in high school. After the modified assignment was used in seminar, gifted students' engagement in the course increased noticeably. Their assessments of the course consistently referenced the way in which the course was tailored to their needs as gifted learners.

Jodi Meadows, Ph.D.
Director, Dutille Honors Program;
Assistant Professor of University
Studies

Southwest Baptist University

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Supporting Gifted Students in Seminar

Students in all sections of SBU's seminar complete a library assignment in which they choose an aspect of academic transition to research. The topics include goal setting, note taking, time management, textbook reading, concentration, and study environment. In honors and high-ACT sections, the assignment is modified to include gifted-specific issues, such as hitting the wall and underdeveloped study habits.

In the assignment, students find a scholarly source that addresses their topic of choice, write a short summary, and prepare a three- to five-minute presentation on that topic. This assignment addresses several seminar objectives: information literacy, research into common transition issues, self-knowledge as a gifted student, presentation skills, and community development.

Researching and discussing issues related to giftedness facilitated self-exploration among students who had never explored the phenomenon of academic exceptionalism or its effect on their academic lives (Kem & Nevan, 2006). As students explored aspects of being exceptional learners through research, they felt part of a community. In addition, they developed language to describe the joys of their talent as well as strategies to manage the more disruptive aspects of their exceptionalism.

When all the seminar presentations are complete, each student chose three of the presentation topics to reflect on in a short essay. In the essays, the students described why the topic was pertinent to them and how they have implemented the knowledge gained into their academic habits. The gifted-specific topics allowed students to explore their exceptionalism, and in doing so, opened them to their need to learn about the academic practices that will serve them in college.

As an example, in response to presentations regarding perfectionism, study environment, and test anxiety, one honors program student stated,

Up until this point in my life, I had no idea that the struggles I faced as a high-achieving student were not only common, but manageable. I thought that perfectionism, anxiety, and studying were things that made me a sort of societal outcast among people my age. I now see that, while these things can still be negative if they are not regulated properly, they are what has gotten me this far. Watching my fellow classmates present topics that we have all experienced throughout our nerd lives was uplifting.

As the seminar students learned more about their particular experiences as gifted students, they began to view the more mundane aspects of seminar research such as note taking and creating study guides as gifted-specific issues, as well. The class discussions provided the benefit of like-peer mentoring within the context of academic inquiry.

“Extended orientation seminars often are structured to help students develop more effective study habits. However, gifted students may not feel a need for this kind of curriculum until they ‘hit the wall.’”

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First-year faculty and staff are in a unique position to serve the academic needs of gifted students in transition. Although this assignment was developed in homogeneous classroom settings, it could easily be adapted to more heterogeneous groupings. Gifted students in heterogeneous classes could benefit from such an assignment. In addition, the self-awareness the students gain may provide content and language for more one-on-one conversation with faculty or staff in the future. 



E-Source for College Transitions (ISSN 1545-5742) is published biannually by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. The National Resource Center has as its mission to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education.

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Contact

Jodi Meadows
jmeadows@sbuniv.edu

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