UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Developing an Integrated First-Year Experience
At Institutions with Large Non-traditional Student Populations

Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

**Project Challenge**  *Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:*

- What is the rationale behind the creation of an integrated first-year experience at contact institutions? What goals do administrators have for their first-year experience programs?
- What are the components of first-year experience programs at contact institutions? Which two to three components have the greatest effect on the performance and persistence of entering freshmen?
- Which campus units oversee the components? How do administrators coordinate components of the first-year experience across different offices?
- How do administrators integrate academic and co-curricular or extracurricular components (e.g., undergraduate research, leadership opportunities) to create a comprehensive experience? How do programs support students beyond the first year?
- What percentage of first-year students participate? Which students participate? Are all first-year students required to participate in first-year experience programs?
- Which students (e.g., first-generation, commuters) need the most support in their first year, and how do programs reach them?
- What support exists for students who do not participate in the first-year experience?
- What first-year experience programs exist for transfer students? Can transfer students join the first-year experience group in subsequent semesters?
- How do administrators involve tenured or senior faculty in the academic and social components of the first-year experience? How does this faculty involvement benefit the program? What efforts does the administration make to garner faculty participation?
- What metrics do administrators use to assess first-year experience programs? What measurable effects (e.g., changes in retention rates, academic success rates, and graduation rates) do first-year experiences have on students? How do these effects compare across subgroups of the first-year experience?
- What challenges have administrators faced in the development and implementation of first-year experience programs? How have they addressed these challenges?
- What advice do administrators at contact institutions have for administrators developing a comprehensive first-year experience?

**Project Sources**  *The Council consulted the following sources for this report:*

- Education Advisory Board’s internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries
- National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov/)
Research Parameters

The Council interviewed administrators of first-year experience programs from large, public, comprehensive, primarily non-residential universities.

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<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
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<td>Public</td>
<td>42,500/34,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>24,000/20,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>28,000/22,000</td>
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</table>
II. Executive Overview

Key Observations

First-year experience programs increase student retention through courses, residential programs, interest groups, and involvement incentive programs. Courses promote student interaction with faculty and often provide an introduction to the university. Residential programs and interest groups create small communities within the incoming class for students to build bonds with their peers. Involvement incentive programs increase students’ participation on campus. At every institution, these programs aim to improve students’ first year and increase retention rates.

First-year experience programs rarely support students beyond the first year, nor do they integrate components such as undergraduate research or leadership opportunities. Most programs adopt an academic approach to the first year through courses or scholastic communities (e.g., residential programs, interest groups). One institution offers prizes to incentivize first-year students to attend academic and extracurricular events.

Courses with high levels of faculty engagement and incentive programs that encourage campus involvement best improve the performance and persistence of first-year students. Successful courses provide students with opportunities to interact directly with professors inside and outside the classroom. These opportunities come from small class sizes and co-curricular activities for faculty and students. Involvement on campus helps students feel more at home and become a part of the university community.

Students participate in first-year experiences if they understand the value and goals of the program. Students often must enroll in first-year courses, but other components of a first-year experience are typically optional. Students participate more in programs that offer students a well-defined outcome, such as increased academic success or campus involvement, than programs in which they do not understand the goals.

Faculty members prefer to participate in courses with academic subjects that value their expertise. First-year courses either discuss an academic topic and introduce students to campus, or they present campus resources and provide support during the transition to campus. Faculty members participate more in the former style of course because they can share their field with incoming students.

First-year experience programs rarely target non-traditional or transfer students. Some administrators partner with campus divisions that serve non-traditional students, such as an education opportunity program, to promote the first-year experience but typically they do not focus their outreach on a particular demographic. Transfer students can participate in most aspects of first-year experiences, but programs do not target them specifically.

Increased student grade point averages and positive survey results demonstrate the success of first-year experience programs. Student grade point averages and retention rates offer a quantitative metric to evaluate a program’s progress toward its goals. Surveys and focus groups collect detailed feedback such as students’ perceptions of the program.

One office or administrator typically oversees the components of the first-year experience program. First-year experience programs incorporate components from academic affairs and student affairs. Many institutions have one office to manage the program and communicate with stakeholders across campus.
III. Elements of First-Year Experience Programs

Goals  Programs Aim to Increase Student Retention

First-year experience programs familiarize students with campus resources and help them build relationships with faculty and other students, which creates a positive experience in students’ first year and increases student retention. At University B, the first-year experience supports students’ successful transition to a new environment. The coordinators of the first-year experience at University D engage and interact with students to connect them with campus resources. Administrators at University F recognize that the campus structure can confuse new students and intend for their first-year program to help students navigate the large bureaucracy.

High Levels of Faculty Engagement and Campus Involvement Increase Student Retention Best

Direct interaction with faculty contributes significantly to student success and retention. At University C, contact hours with faculty outside of the classroom are the most important aspect of the first-year experience. The first-year course at University B exists primarily for students to build relationships with faculty members.

Orientations  Orientation Reaches Every Incoming Student

University D’s summer orientation acclimates students to campus and presents other components of the first-year experience to students. Students at University B receive an introduction to campus resources and have their first meeting with advisors during summer orientation.

At University D and University B, the same coordinators manage orientation as other components of the first-year experience and consider it the start of the comprehensive first-year program. Mandatory orientation reaches every first-year student at the beginning of their transition to the university.

Welcome Weeks  A Welcome Week Introduces Students to the Campus and First-year Program

Welcome week events typically include a blend of social activities and academic workshops. Students attend many of the optional events because few activities occur during the first week on campus. The welcome weeks at University D and University B familiarize students with campus and explain expectations for the first year.

University D’s welcome week introduces the involvement incentive program, teaches students about campus resources, and helps students find ways to participate in the campus community.

The welcome week at University B includes workshops to help students transition to campus. Students learn how to use Blackboard and the My Degree tools (e.g., a GPA calculator, a dashboard with students’ progress on a major), how to engage in a large lecture hall, and how to develop skills such as time management. All colleges hold an introductory event during the week, often a picnic or team-building activity, to bring students, faculty, and staff together.
**Academic and Transition Courses**

*Courses Promote Student Engagement with Faculty and Other Students*

Small class sizes allow students to build relationships with their professors and classmates. Courses either focus on an academic discipline or provide an introduction to the university. The courses may be optional or required, based on the institution’s capacity to offer the course.

Professors of academic-focused courses use their field as a lens to introduce students to college-level coursework. Students at **University C** enroll in an interdisciplinary, theme-based course on topics such as sustainability or global leadership. To encourage interaction outside of the classroom, professors must host two co-curricular programs per quarter, such as film screenings, and many also host optional social activities, such as lunches.

At **University B**, students can take a course that focuses on an academic discipline and incorporates transition support. Students discuss their adjustment to campus and apply the course theme to their own lives. For example, an economics professor teaches a course on personal financial matters such as how to keep a budget or manage debt and also discusses the value of a University B education. Another course explores the self and community through literature and film and studies portrayals of students in literature and film. The courses have standard learning outcomes and four common assignments, but professor-designed curricula.

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**Hallmarks of a First-Year Seminar at University E**

Administrators at **University E** will require all incoming students to take a first-year seminar beginning in fall 2012. In the past, unrelated, optional first-year seminars existed in multiple colleges. Now, the general education requirements include first-year seminars. Courses have college-specific themes specific, but must meet six hallmarks:

- Introduce and explain on the syllabus and in course content university learning outcomes and the purpose and structure of general learning at the university
- Emphasize global awareness, civic engagement, and ethics (three university learning outcomes) through college-specific content
- Require at least five hours of individual study outside the classroom (e.g., reading, lab work, homework)
- Introduce academic content areas and academic campus resources (e.g., libraries, writing center, academic success center)
- Include at least one credit (one class session per week) of teaching from a full-time academic faculty member; a part-time instructor can teach the remaining credits
- Limit the course to 25 students

Courses directly focused on students’ transition offer an introduction to campus resources and connect students to academic support services. The optional academic success course at University D covers study skills, college requirements, and campus resources.
Residential Programs

*Residential Programs Create Small Communities among First-year Students*

Students in the living-learning communities at University C live on the same floor in a residence hall and enroll in the same first-year inquiry course. Living and studying in small groups helps students develop a niche on campus.

Interest Groups

*Interest Groups Create Small Communities Based on Self-selection*

Students at University A may choose to participate in a first-year interest group based on their career or major interest. First-year interest group members enroll in four to five courses together, typically Writing and Rhetoric 1, the First-Year Experience seminar, a science course with a lab, and a social science course. Writing and Rhetoric 1, the First-Year Experience seminar, and the science lab limit enrollment to students in the interest group. The science and social science lecture courses include students not part of the interest group.

The program seeks to help students form communities and get to know one another. Few students participate in the program, however, because most do not see the value of small communities and want more exposure to the larger university. Instructors of the different courses rarely collaborate to present students with overarching themes or connect courses to others the interest group takes. This prevents interest groups from becoming learning communities. This fall, the institution will offer fewer interest groups and focus them on the more rigorous majors, particularly the sciences, whose students value an interest group’s support.

Involvement Incentive Programs

*Incentives Promote Student Involvement in Social and Academic Events*

Coordinators of the first-year experience at University D integrate academic and social components in the involvement incentive program. Campus programs partner with the Office of First-Year Experience to offer involvement incentive program points to students who attend campus events. Programs focus on social, academic, or transition issues. For example, residence life administrators host social and educational programming, and English department faculty lead writing workshops.

Use University-specific Textbooks in First-Year Courses

Customized textbooks at University D and University A support university-specific courses and provide students with materials for their transition to campus.

At University A, the textbook discusses university resources and offers stories from past students. Staff from student affairs and academic affairs collaborate to produce the textbook, and the associate vice president for student affairs and director of the academic advising center edit it.

The textbook for University D includes information on orientation, welcome week, and the involvement incentive program. Staff in the Office of First-Year Experience design the textbook and provide instructors with supplemental information. The cost of a customized textbook can be a burden, and staff members hope to increase the value of the textbook without an increase in the cost when they publish the next edition in 2012. They will incorporate supplemental material and improve sections on topics such as study skills.
Students accumulate involvement incentive program points over the semester and spend them in an auction or raffle at the end of the semester. The prizes act as an incentive but cost the Office of First-Year Experience less than $1 per first-year student. The office awards televisions or game systems; the student government association donates a partial tuition scholarship; and local businesses and campus units donate prizes.

Tracking students’ involvement incentive program points requires an extensive database in which staff upload attendance records from every event; to develop a program similar to the involvement incentive program, an office needs to create this complex system first. The information technology department of student affairs at University D developed its database.

**Early Alert Systems**

*Early Alert Systems Provide Students Extra Support to Succeed*

Identification of problem students at University A during the first semester enables staff to connect students to resources to help them succeed. First-year instructors notify the academic advising center if a student does poorly on the first assignment or exam, or if a student does not attend class. About 50 percent of the students whom the academic advising center staff contact respond to the outreach. This coming year, the coordinator of three common introductory math courses and instructors of English composition classes will help identify students who need extra support.

**Summary of Components**

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<th>Required Elements of First-Year Experiences</th>
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<td>Institution</td>
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<td>University E</td>
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<td>University F</td>
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<th>Optional Elements of First-Year Experiences</th>
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<td>Institution</td>
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<td>University E</td>
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<td>University F</td>
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Student Participation

Participation Increases If Students Understand the Value of a Program

Students are more likely to participate in optional programs if they understand what skills or lessons they will learn. For example, a website at University D publicizes benefits of the first-year course, including life skills such as financial planning and improved critical thinking; 25 percent of students there participate in the seminar. Thirty-five percent of first-year students at University B participate in the highly recommended first-year course. The extremely popular living-learning community at University C can serve only half of the number of students who applied for the fall 2012 semester. At University D, 86 percent of first-year students attend at least one involvement incentive program event and most students attend two or more programs each semester.

Coordination among Campus Units

One Administrator or Office Coordinates Experiences between Academic Units and Student Affairs Divisions

The combination of academic and extracurricular components requires a high level of organization. It is particularly difficult for academic units to partner with non-academic units; professors have different priorities and concerns than student affairs administrators and the two groups may struggle to collaborate.

Many institutions have one administrator or office to coordinate the first-year experience. Three professional staff in University D’s Office of First-Year Experience manage the components of the first-year program. The office will add a director in the summer of 2012. Staff members coordinate with campus partners to host involvement incentive program events; they also send email updates each semester with any changes to the program and publicize the program in campus-wide emails. Units seek to partner with the involvement incentive program because of the increase in attendance the partnership brings. University F created the University College to oversee its new first-year course. The first year experience coordinator in the New Student Office at University B organizes the first-year courses. Faculty members develop courses in conjunction with the office’s staff.

At University C, a first-year academic coordinator and a director of resident education work together to oversee the first-year experience. The first-year academic coordinator manages all academic components, such as faculty affairs or curricula. The director of resident education oversees the non-academic components, such as housing and registration. The coordinator and director meet every other week and attend any necessary meetings with campus officials such as vice provosts.

The provost and general education committee oversee the first-year experience course at University E and each college has a coordinator for the first-year seminar. The First-Year Advisory Committee at University A meets annually to discuss course evaluations, propose improvements or changes, and make any updates to the course textbook. The committee includes eight to ten people from various departments that work with first-year students.
A Map of Components Helps Coordinators Understand Students’ Experience

Administrators of University C’s first-year experience mapped a student’s progress through the first year to determine stakeholders and shared this exercise with all units involved (e.g., registration, records, financial aid, student affairs, residence life, etc.) A map of a student’s first-year experience answers:

- What do students do during their first-year?
- What departments do students go to for each component?
- What support do students need to manage their first-year?

A Sample Map of Students’ Experience and the Stakeholders

This map illustrates the complexity of the first year. Students work with four separate campus units to organize financial aid, orientation, courses, and housing. Staff in these units should understand the demands on a student from other stakeholders and seek to collaborate and simplify the student experience. This collaboration becomes more important in integrated first-year experiences; in a living-learning community, for example, course overrides in academic affairs affect housing availability in residence life.

Opportunities Exist to Further Integrate First-year Programs across Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, and to Bridge Students beyond the First Year

First-year programs rarely integrate fully across campus, nor do they integrate students’ first through final years.

At University C, a broader university studies curriculum encompasses the first-year inquiry course. The first-year course precedes three sophomore inquiry courses, upper division cluster courses, and a senior capstone. Each level builds on the previous series of courses to further develop a topic, such as global environmental change. The comprehensive program aims to increase student retention and student learning and satisfaction.
The University Studies Curriculum at *University C*

### Freshman Course
- Interdisciplinary theme (e.g., Race and Social Justice)
- One year-long course
- Introduces the university’s general education goals and campus opportunities

### Sophomore Courses
- Interdisciplinary topic (e.g., Family Studies)
- Three one-term courses, each on a different topic
- Introduces concepts, methods, and questions upper division courses will address

### Upper Division Courses
- Disciplinary subject related to sophomore course topic (e.g., Working with Diverse Families)
- Three one-term courses from a list of cluster-approved courses
- Provides an in-depth study of the themes of a sophomore course

### Senior Course
- Community-based learning focus
- One one-term, six-credit course
- Creates cooperative learning communities with experiential learning

Administrators at *University B* have begun to consider strategies to reach students beyond the first year. They want to interact more with students during the summer after freshman year and during sophomore year to celebrate the completion of the first year and welcome students to the second year.

## IV. Implementation of First-Year Experience Programs

### Target Audiences

*Programs Rarely Target Particular Demographics*

Staff in *University C*’s New Student Office reach non-traditional students through partnerships with the institution’s bridge program, education opportunity program, and student support services. At *University E*, the first-year course is for all students, but instructors can receive additional training on the educational needs of first-generation students.

Services unrelated to the first-year experience also support non-traditional students. Specialized math courses and a mentorship program serve first-generation students at *University A.*
Transfer Students Are Eligible but Not Encouraged to Participate

Transfer students may enroll in the first-year courses at **University D** and **University B**, but programs do not intentionally advertise to transfer students. At University D, transfer students can attend the welcome week and involvement incentive program events, but they do not receive incentives for attendance. At all institutions with required first-year courses, students with fewer than thirty credits when they transfer enroll in the course.

**Faculty Prefer Programs That Value Their Expertise**

Staff at **University A** identified faculty partners to develop the first-year experience. Student affairs staff knew which faculty contributed to student programs, and academic advisors knew which faculty members worked successfully with first-year students. Faculty support enabled integration of the course into academic requirements.

The focus of a course influences faculty involvement after its development. Courses on academic topics rely on faculty experience and make faculty engagement meaningful. Courses on university resources and adjustment to campus better appeal to staff members.

Staff at **University B** shifted their first-year course from a transitional to academic focus to create more opportunities for students to work with faculty. Faculty now teach 60 percent of first-year courses and professional staff instructors teach only 40 percent of courses.

The first-year course at University A attracts more staff members because of its focus on the student transition. Faculty comprise fewer than six of the 100 instructors; academic advisors, residence life staff members, or other administrators teach most sections. When staff instructors teach most first-year courses, coordinators can strongly influence course design and require poorly evaluated instructors to receive additional training or resign from the course.

**Determine Course Needs for Faculty Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incorporation of the course into required curriculum</th>
<th>Involve faculty in course development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater faculty involvement to promote interaction with students</td>
<td>Focus course on academic subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater staff involvement to give administrative unit more influence</td>
<td>Focus course on campus resources and student adjustment to campus</td>
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First-year Courses Contribute to the Promotion and Tenure Process

Professors at University C and University E can include instruction of first-year courses in applications for tenure or promotions. This eliminates the choice between career advancement and first-year experience participation that faculty at other institutions must make. Faculty members also receive course waivers for teaching first-year courses. At University E, instruction of first-year courses counts towards a faculty member’s teaching load.

Stipends and Additional Training Incentivize Faculty Engagement

Faculty members at University C receive a $2,500 stipend for instruction of a first-year course. At University A, all first-year course instructors receive $1,200. Stipends at University E vary by college; faculty in the college of liberal arts receive $1,000 to develop the syllabus for the course.

Faculty receive training to teach first-year courses at University B. At University A, new instructors attend a full-day training, and all instructors attend a half-day training annually. Library services at University E hosts occasional workshops for first-year instructors to share successful teaching practices with their colleagues.

Case in Brief: Developing a First-Year Course At University F

Administrators at University F used a planned general curriculum review as an opportunity to develop a required first-year course.

In 2010, the provost formed a first-year academic experience task force. The 28-member task force included faculty members and academic administrators from each college and from units such as freshman advising. Members of the task force met with the provost and the vice president for student affairs in the summer of 2011 to present their conclusions and identify next steps.

The first-year academic experience steering committee and subcommittees formed in 2011 to execute next steps. Ten representatives from academic affairs and two representatives from student affairs comprise the steering committee. Each member chairs a subcommittee. Steering committee members tasked subcommittees with topics such as faculty concerns, special student populations, and committee scheduling. The size of the subcommittee depends on the complexity of the task and ranges from two to ten people. The subcommittees reported back to the steering committee during the 2011-2012 academic year.

The steering committee members are resubmitting their proposal for the first-year academic experience to the core curriculum committee. The first-year course should commence in the fall of 2014.
V. Evaluation of First-Year Experience Programs

**Metrics**  *Surveys Ascertain Student Development*

A pre- and post-survey quantify first-year courses’ effect on students at University C. Students also take a qualitative survey that asks what they think of the first-year housing program. Coordinators of the first-year experience at University E plan to implement online pre- and post-tests once their course becomes required in fall 2012.

Staff at University D administer a survey at least once per semester to measure opinions on the involvement incentive program. Participants take one version of the survey, and students who have not attended an involvement incentive program event take a second version.

**First-year Courses Need Course Evaluations Specific to Their Goals**

University A’s coordinators employ a three-tiered evaluation system: a standard university Likert-scale evaluation, a Likert-scale evaluation of the course outcomes and objectives, and a free response on the course. The free response portion provides greater detail on students’ reaction to the course. The course-specific evaluation asks:

- Did the class help you with your transition?
- Did you gain information on the university?
- Did you get to know other students?
- Were the course objectives and requirements defined?
- Did you use the textbook?
- Was the textbook helpful?
- Did you like the common reading book?
- Would you recommend the course to other students?

**Focus Groups Elicit Detailed Feedback**

Researchers at University A received a grant from the Lumina Foundation to conduct focus groups with students in the first-year courses and first-year interest groups. Based on this student feedback, they reduced the number of first-year interest groups and enhanced the focus on students in the sciences.

Small group discussions at University D elicit students’ feedback on the involvement incentive program. The discussions included frequent participants, occasional participants, and non-participants in involvement incentive program events.

**Students’ Grade Point Averages and the Retention Rate Indicate Outcomes**

Administrators monitor grade point averages and retention rates to measure a first-year experience program’s progress on the goal of student retention.
Outcomes

Non-traditional Students Receive Greater Benefits from Participation

First-year experience programs do not target non-traditional students (e.g., first generation, minority, non-residential), but those students typically reap the greatest benefits. Participants in University B’s first-year courses have slightly higher GPAs than non-participants, and the effect is greater on students who entered with lower SAT or ACT scores and minority or first generation students. First-year courses in the academic success center of University E serve high populations of at-risk students, conditional admissions, and undeclared majors, yet achieve retention rates similar to those of the general population. At University C, the retention of residential students was far below the retention of non-residential students. The retention rate of residential students increased 13 percentage points three years after the introduction of living-learning communities.

Involvement incentive program participants at University D exhibit a higher grade point average in their first-year than non-participants. Participants also report that the involvement incentive program helped them connect with their peers and meet people on campus.