

A COMPREHENSIVE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE: TARGET AREAS FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT & A BLUEPRINT OF BEST PRACTICES

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Introduction

Ten target areas or focus points for institutional development and assessment of a comprehensive first-year experience program are cited in this manuscript. These target areas derive from empirical research and scholarly reports published in the higher education literature which identify college practices that are positively associated with the following student *outcomes*: (a) student retention, (b) academic achievement, (c) satisfaction with the college experience, (d) personal development, (e) educational attainment, and/or (e) educational advancement.

Particular attention was paid to published studies that were:

- (a) *comprehensive*—studies that involved multiple, diverse institutions (e.g., large/small, public/private) and sizable, representative samples of students (e.g., national samples);
- (b) *longitudinal*—studies that used long-term, follow-up measures of students across different points in time (e.g. college entry, graduation, post-graduate life);
- (c) *methodologically rigorous*—research designs that *separated college effects from student effects* (e.g., studies using multivariate analyses to statistically separate the unique effects of the college from effects attributable to the particular characteristics of students who happen to attend the college);
- (d) reviews of the research literature involving narrative or statistical *synthesis* (meta-analysis) of a large number of individual studies;
- (e) *national reports* issued by blue-ribbon task forces, higher education associations, and governmental agencies.

Drawing on this base of research and scholarship, the following ten targets are offered as focus points for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first-year experience program:

- #1. Institutional Mission**
- #2. New-Student Orientation**
- #3. Classroom Teaching and Learning**
- #4. Academic Advisement**
- #5. The Curriculum**
- #6. Academic Support Services**
- #7. The Co-Curriculum (Student Support Services)**
- #8. Faculty-Student Contact Outside the Classroom**
- #9. Administrative Leadership, Policies, & Practices**
- #10. Institutional Assessment.**

In the following sections, each of these target areas is accompanied by a short summary of supporting research and a set of evaluative questions that is intended to stimulate institutional awareness of what would comprise a comprehensive, high-quality, first-year student experience. The manuscript includes three appendices: Appendix A identifies ten

key *properties* of effective program *delivery*; Appendix B identifies nine prime *times* for supportive program *intervention* during the first year of college; and Appendix C provides a snapshot *summary* of effective first-year program *characteristics*.

TARGET AREA #1. ***INSTITUTIONAL MISSION***

A number of scholars in American higher education have argued that “*mission blur*” characterizes the institutional purpose of many universities, i.e., institutional missions lacks clarity and consistency. At many higher education institutions, constituents are not sure what their mission is, disagree on what it is, or may say they are one thing in *print* and do something else in *practice*. (For example, viewbooks may claim that the college is devoted to providing high-quality teaching, yet faculty are rewarded more for research productivity than for effective teaching.) Research also indicates that colleges with a *focused mission* that is *clearly and consistently communicated* in its institutional publications and public announcements are colleges that: (a) more effectively promote student involvement in the college experience, (b) have a stronger sense of college “community,” and (c) have higher rates of student retention—i.e., higher graduation rates.

Criticism has also been directed at institutions claiming *multiple missions* that may not be compatible or mutually reinforcing (e.g., teaching and research; undergraduate and graduate education). Over the years, some colleges and universities have displayed “*mission drift*” or “*mission gallop*,” drifting *away* from their original mission as teaching institutions and galloping *toward* an expanded mission that includes more emphasis on research or graduate education. Pursuit of additional missions may suggest that the institution is “spreading itself too thin” and may be trying to be “all things to all people”; consequently, undergraduate education in general, and the education of first-year students in particular, may be compromised by competing institutional interests and priorities.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

- 1.1** Is the stated mission of the college *student-focused*—with an emphasis on teaching and learning, or is it *institution-focused*—with an emphasis on institutional resources, research preeminence, or institutional prestige?
- 1.2** Is the mission *communicated clearly and consistently* to *prospective* first-year students, both in *print* (e.g., college catalogue and viewbook) and in *person* (e.g., admissions representatives)?
- 1.3** Is the mission that is expressed *externally* in college publications designed for prospective first-year students (e.g., catalogue and viewbook) *consistent* with institutional goals communicated *internally* to first-year students who have enrolled at the college?
- 1.4** Does any *representative* of the college *articulate or discuss* the institutional mission with new students after they have been admitted?

- 1.5 Do *all members* of the college community (faculty, administrators, students) have a *similar understanding* of what the college mission is, and can they *articulate* that mission?
- 1.6 What specific first-year programs or practices have been designed by the college to put its *professed* mission (rhetoric) into *action* (reality)?
- 1.7 Are the college's first-year policies and practices truly *mission-driven*, i.e., are they *derived* from, and *consistent* with the college's stated purpose?
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TARGET AREA #2.
NEW-STUDENT ORIENTATION

National data continue to reveal that students are most “at risk” for attrition during their *first year* of college. New-student orientation may be the only opportunity for institutions to reserve and devote all its campus resources and attention to one class—entering first-year students. Consequently, new-student orientation programs have the potential for shaping students’ important “*first impression*” of the college and have been found to promote the retention of first-year students by (a) enhancing their social integration into the college community, (b) improving their college coping skills, and (c) increasing their knowledge and utilization of campus-support services.

Furthermore, if a *convocation* or formal *induction ceremony* is included as part of new-student orientation, a powerful “*rite of passage*” can be created in which students perceive the beginning of college as an event of developmental significance, and experience a sense of unity or belonging that comes with entry into a new community.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

- 2.1 Before first-year students begin classes, does the college provide a substantive *orientation* program during which time new students are oriented to *people* (not just buildings), and given the opportunity to *interact* meaningfully with peers, faculty, and support staff?
- 2.2 Are new students exposed to experienced and trained *peer orientation-week leaders* as part of the orientation process?
- 2.3 Is new-student orientation *required or optional*? (If optional, what *percentage* of entering students *participate* in it?)
- 2.4 Does new-student orientation include a component designed for students’ *parents* and *family* members that involves discussion of the role they can play in supporting first-year student adjustment and success ?

2.5 Are college *faculty and academic administrators* involved in the planning and delivery of new-student orientation, ensuring that the program has both an *academic* and *student life* focus?

2.6 Do first-year students experience a *celebratory ritual at college entry*—e.g., a *convocation* or *induction ceremony*—at which time the college formally welcomes new students into its “community”?

2.7 Is orientation *extended* into the critical first term by means of a *freshman-orientation course* or *new-student seminar*? (If so, is the course *required* or *optional*?) (If optional, what *percentage* of full-time and part-time students *enroll* in it?)

TARGET AREA #3. **CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Research strongly suggests that *student involvement* in the learning process enhances both academic achievement and student retention, and surveys of both college administrators and college students indicate that *satisfaction with faculty* and the *quality of teaching* is the number-one reason why students *stay* at a college and go on to complete their degree. At the same time, national commissions and blue-ribbon reports on the status of American higher education have consistently criticized the college classroom-learning experience for its failure to involve students actively and collaboratively in the learning process, and have repeatedly called for greater attention to the quality of college *teaching* and *undergraduate* education.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

3.1 What percentage of *first-year courses* are taught by *full-time* faculty—as opposed to graduate teaching assistants, part-time or adjunct faculty?

3.2 If *graduate teaching assistants* are employed to teach first-year students, are they carefully *trained and evaluated*, and are they *compensated* equitably?

3.3 What percentage of first-term students are enrolled in at least one course with a class size of *15 or less*?

3.4 Do faculty provide first-year students with *feedback* on their academic performance that is *prompt, proactive, and personalized* (e.g., early written feedback on individual tests and assignments)?

3.5 Do instructors’ *actively involve* first-year students with the subject matter, with the instructor, and with other students?

3.6 Do instructors encourage *collaborative learning* among first-year students?

3.7 Do instructors know the *names* of students in most of their classes?

- 3.8 Are instructors of first-year students carefully *evaluated* by a variety of *different sources*—such as students, administrators (e.g., department chair), faculty colleagues (i.e., peer evaluation), and self-evaluation?
- 3.9 Are first-year students *apprised of*, and *prepared for* their role as *evaluators* of college instructors?
- 3.10 What specific *criteria* are used by the college as *indicators* of *effective* first-year instruction?
- 3.11 What is the *average class size* of important, *academic skill-development courses* commonly taken by first-year students—such as writing (composition), oral communication (public speaking), and elementary mathematics?
- 3.12 Does the college “*front load*” its *most experienced* and *most effective* instructors to teach first-year courses?
- 3.13 How much *weight* is given to *teaching effectiveness* (relative to research, publications, and grant procurement) in decisions about faculty *retention, promotion, and tenure*?
- 3.14 How is high-quality teaching *recognized and rewarded*?
- 3.15 If faculty are expected to publish, are *publications* relating to *teaching effectiveness, student learning, and student development* accepted, encouraged, and rewarded?
- 3.16 Does the college conduct a *new-faculty orientation* program that includes *instructional* development and dissemination of current information on the *characteristics and needs* of first-year students?
- 3.17 Is there an ongoing *faculty development* program designed to promote instructional quality and to keep first-year college teaching at a state-of-the-art level?
- 3.18 Is effective teaching assessed rigorously and weighed heavily during the process of *recruiting and selecting* faculty for the college? For example, are students and student development professionals included on faculty-hiring committees? As part of the hiring process, are faculty asked to (a) share course syllabi or instructional materials, (b) provide a teaching demonstration, and/or (c) engage in a simulated interaction with students?
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TARGET AREA #4.
ACADEMIC ADVISEMENT

National survey research indicates that this is the #1 area of *student dissatisfaction* with the college experience (other than campus parking and cafeteria food). Advising has also been the #1 target area of administrators who are attempting to improve *student*

retention at their college. Moreover, research indicates that college students are very confused about what they should *major* in and what *careers* are associated with different college majors. For example, about 50% of all entering college freshmen are “undecided” about their college major and one-half of the remaining 50% who have allegedly “decided” on a major when they first enter college eventually change their mind. In fact, recent studies suggest that most college students change their mind about their major at least three times before graduation.

Thus, it appears that the vast majority of first-year students need effective, personal academic advising and career counseling because final *decisions about majors and related careers* are typically made *during* the college experience, not before it. For any institution claiming to provide a first-year experience that is “high quality,” it must provide students with personalized advisement needed for linking their present academic experiences with their future life plans.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

- 4.1 Is each first-year student *paired* or *matched* with a *personally-assigned* academic advisor?
- 4.2 When *registering, adding, or dropping* courses, are first-year students required to *confer* with, and obtain a *signature* from an academic advisor?
- 4.3 Do academic advisors only engage in course scheduling, or do they provide comprehensive *developmental academic advising*—i.e., personalized advising that relates students’ present academic experiences to their future life plans, and connects students with key campus-support professionals who can most effectively address their present needs and facilitate realization of their future plans?
- 4.4 Is special academic advising support provided for *undecided* first-year students?
- 4.5 What is the average *student:advisor ratio* for first-year students?
- 4.6 Does the college engage in any practices or procedures that are *intentionally designed* to increase the *frequency* of *student-advisor contact*?
- 4.7 Are *group advising* sessions offered periodically, whereby students with similar academic or career interests (e.g., sociology majors) are advised together in order to promote *peer support and collaboration* with respect to academic and career planning?
- 4.8 Are trained *peer advisors* available to support and facilitate the academic advising process?
- 4.9 How are academic advisors *recruited and selected* to ensure that they have the competence and commitment needed to effectively advise first-year students?
- 4.10 Is a substantive advisor *orientation, training, and development* program provided for academic advisors of first-year students?

4.11 Are advisors *evaluated* and provided with individual *feedback* on the quality of their advising?

4.12 Are advisors individually *recognized and rewarded* for high-quality academic advising?

4.13 Does the college engage in *program evaluation* of its academic advising system?

TARGET AREA #5.
THE CURRICULUM

The undergraduate curriculum has been criticized repeatedly for being *fragmented, disjointed* and *lacking coherence*. In particular, the *general education* component of the college curriculum has been characterized as a dizzying array of “distribution requirements” which are taken “smorgasbord style”—a little of this and a little of that with little sense of connection among general-education courses (*breadth* requirements), or connection between general education courses and specific courses in the student's major (*depth* requirements). At some colleges and universities, general-education requirements may actually be fulfilled by taking a variety of very narrowly-focused, esoteric courses which represent the specialized research interests of the faculty rather than a true “core” curriculum—i.e., courses that every educated college graduate should experience because of their pervasive relevance for all humans and all careers.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

5.1 Does the college curriculum include a *first-year seminar* designed to provide new students with a meaningful beginning course which gives a *preview* or *overview* of, and *introduction* to the *general education* curriculum, along with the *rationale* for its requirements?

5.2 Is a first-year seminar required of *all* new students so they have at least one *common learning experience* during their first year of college?

5.3 Does the design and delivery of the first-year *general education* curriculum reflect a *coherent* plan for learning, whereby first-year courses are purposefully *connected and sequenced* in relation to subsequent courses, thus providing a meaningful *beginning* or *introduction* to the college curriculum?

5.4 Have *faculty* from different academic disciplines *collaborated* to develop a shared view of the general education curriculum that is *focused and thematic*?

5.5 Does the first-year curriculum contain any *interdisciplinary* general-education courses that are designed to *integrate* different academic disciplines, or which are *team-taught* by faculty from different disciplines?

5.6 Does the college offer a true “*core*” curriculum for first-year students—i.e., a set of specific courses that all new students take regardless of their particular academic major or field of interest, thus ensuring a common or shared learning experience for all entering students?

5.7 Are groups of first-year students given the opportunity to *co-register for the same block of courses* during the same academic term so that they can develop “*learning communities*?”

TARGET AREA #6. **ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES**

National surveys indicate that “fear of academic failure” and “help with academic skills” are among the most frequently cited concerns of beginning college students. Additional research suggests that students who earn good grades during their first term are far more likely to continue in college and graduate than are first-term students who do not experience initial academic success. Furthermore, decisions to stay or leave college have been found to correlate more strongly with first-year students’ academic achievement than with their pre-enrollment characteristics.

Additional research demonstrates that (a) students generally *under-utilize* academic support services, particularly those students who are in most need of support, and (b) students who do seek and receive academic assistance experience enhanced *academic performance* and *academic self-efficacy* (i.e., sense of perceived control and expectations for future academic success).

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that first-year students who receive learning assistance from academic support services during the first year of college are more likely to be retained and achieve higher levels of academic performance.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

6.1 Is special *high school-to-college transitional support* provided for *academically at-risk* students *before* they encounter a full load of college courses (e.g., summer bridge or summer transition program)?

6.2 Are the *basic skills* of all incoming students *assessed at college entry* in order to diagnose their academic preparedness and to *place* them in courses or programs that are commensurate with their entering levels of skill development?

6.3 Are support services made *highly visible* to first-year students (e.g., pictures and campus phone numbers of support professionals advertised in campus flyers, posters, newsletters, or the college newspaper)?

6.4 Is *institution-initiated* action taken to deliver support services *intrusively* to first-year students through such practices as: (a) bringing support services to students on their “turf” (e.g., providing workshops in student residences or the student union), (b) integrating support services into the classroom (e.g., student-service professionals as

guest speakers in class; peer tutors invited to class), and (c) requiring, or providing students with strong incentives to take advantage of support services (e.g., as a course assignment or as a condition for registration or graduation)?

6.5 Is there an effective *communication and referral* system in place whereby classroom instructors routinely refer students in need of academic assistance to support service professionals and classroom instructors who, in turn, receive feedback about whether referred students actually act on the referral—and, if so, what type of support they received?

6.6 Is there an *early-warning* or *early-alert* system in place whereby first-term students receive feedback about their progress (grades) at midterm—so corrective action can be taken before final course grades are determined?

6.7 Is *peer tutoring* readily available to first-year students, in which experienced and trained students provide them with academic assistance?

6.8 Is *supplemental instruction (SI)* available for “high-risk courses” (i.e., classes with historically high attrition rates and/or low grades), whereby a student who has completed the course and done exceptionally well—re-attends the class—and helps novice learners during additional (supplemental) class sessions that are regularly scheduled outside of class time?

6.9 Are credited “*stepping-stone*” courses available to prepare first-year students for courses in which there are repeatedly and unusually high rates of failure or withdrawal?

6.10 Are adequate academic-support services available to meet the special needs of students with *learning disabilities* and *physical challenges*?

6.11 Is an academic *mentoring* program available to first-year students whereby they are mentored by more experienced college students, faculty, staff, alumni, or community volunteers—e.g., career professionals or retirees?

6.12 Do academic support professionals provide instructional faculty with *diagnostic feedback* (e.g., via academic-support service newsletters, presentations or workshops for faculty) about the types of academic assistance that first-year students typically *need or seek*, and *common errors* in new students’ approach to learning that are witnessed in academic support settings?

6.13 Are all first-year students introduced to the *library* during their *first term*, either as part of new-student orientation or during a first-term course (e.g., new-student seminar or introductory English course)?

6.14 Does *course-integrated* library instruction take place in the first year, whereby students learn information search, retrieval, and evaluation skills within the *context of specific course content* or *course assignments* (e.g., research paper or group project)?

TARGET AREA #7.
THE CO-CURRICULUM (STUDENT DEVELOPMENT SERVICES)

Research indicates that student involvement in campus activities and student life outside the classroom contributes significantly to their (a) *social integration* into the college community, (b) *satisfaction* with the college experience, (c) *persistence to graduation*, and (d) *leadership* qualities after graduation. Furthermore, alumni often report that their most meaningful and memorable college-learning experiences occurred *outside the classroom*.

Thus, out-of-class student experiences entail much more than “extracurricular activities” and an active “social life.” Quality colleges design their co-curriculum with the clear intention of providing students with powerful *experiential-learning* opportunities and retention-promoting *peer interactions*.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

7.1 Are *numerous* and *varied* co-curricular *opportunities* available on campus that are designed to promote student involvement, especially in the following areas: (a) student participation in *college governance*, (b) *campus employment*—e.g., work-study, (c) *internships*—on and off campus, (d) *volunteerism (service learning)*, and (e) *student clubs or organizations*—including opportunities for students to initiate and create new ones of their own choosing?

7.2 Are *educational objectives* explicitly constructed for co-curricular activities, and are these activities *delivered* with the deliberate intention of promoting *learning and development*?

7.3 Are co-curricular opportunities *visibly* and “*intrusively*” promoted on campus and are students *aggressively recruited* to participate—e.g., “activities periods” designated and reserved at times when no classes are scheduled; personal invitations from peer leaders, academic advisors, faculty, or student development staff; individual mailings or phone contacts?

7.4 Are *incentives* or *recognition* provided for co-curricular involvement, such as (a) free food, prizes, or privileges for participants—e.g., priority parking or priority registration, (b) participation required as course assignments or designated as extra-credit opportunities, (c) awards events or ceremonies recognizing student contributions to the co-curriculum, and/or (d) student involvement experiences documented on an official *co-curricular or student development “transcript”*?

7.5 Are there meaningful *connections* forged between students’ *in-class* and *out-of-class* learning experiences—i.e., Is the planning and delivery of the curriculum and co-curriculum designed and coordinated to produce *mutually reinforcing* or *synergistic* effects on student development?

7.6 Is there a campus-based program in place that provides meaningful *service-learning (volunteer)* experiences for students that is *integrated into the curriculum*? (If yes, what

percentage of the student body has some service-learning experience by the conclusion of their first year of college?)

7.7 Does the college provide varied and meaningful *internship* opportunities or *cooperative education* experiences that are *linked to* the students' intended or declared *academic major*? (If yes, do first-year students have the opportunity to participate in these programs—either to gain real-world experience relating to their intended major, or to explore their interest in different careers?)

7.8 Does the co-curriculum include *peer networking* and *peer support* programs in which more experienced *student paraprofessionals* are *trained* to facilitate new students' social and emotional development during their critical first year of college life (e.g., peer mentors, peer counselors, peer residential advisors)?

7.9 Are *leadership* opportunities available to first-year students—as part of an *intentionally designed* and *cumulatively sequenced* leadership development program?

7.10 Are the *leadership accomplishments* of first-year students formally *recognized or rewarded* by the college?

7.11 Are first-year *residential programs* intentionally designed to create an educational, “*living-learning*” *environment* in which there is meaningful student development programming and where *academic* experiences are *integrated* with residential life? (For example, are any or all of the following available in student residences: computer access, peer tutoring, academic advisement, faculty office hours, seminars, colloquia, classes, test-review sessions?)

7.12 Are *on-campus residential opportunities* maximized for “*at-risk*” *students*, and are these students *strategically assigned* to particular residences, residential floors, or residential advisors in an attempt to enhance their retention, academic achievement, and personal development during their first year of college?

7.13 Are *roommates* assigned *strategically* to campus residences in a deliberate attempt to maximize student learning and development?

7.14 Does the college have in place a carefully constructed set of policies regarding first-year student *membership* in campus *fraternities and sororities*, and first-year student *participation* in fraternity or sorority-sponsored events?

7.15 Does the college display sensitivity to first-year *commuter* students when designing and scheduling co-curricular experiences, such as (a) *scheduling* activities at times that are conducive to commuter participation—e.g., early morning or early evening, (b) *communication* strategies for keeping commuters in the loop—e.g., commuter message boards, newsletters, hot lines, or web pages), (c) campus *place or space* for commuters to socialize and network—e.g., commuter lounge, and (d) special *activities* targeted specifically for commuters (e.g., commuter appreciation day)?

TARGET AREA #8.
FACULTY-STUDENT CONTACT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Postsecondary research has consistently revealed that college students' success is influenced by the quality and quantity of student-faculty interaction *outside* the classroom. Such contact and interaction has been found to correlate positively with (a) student satisfaction with the college experience, (b) student retention, (c) academic achievement, (d) personal and intellectual development, (e) critical thinking, and (f) educational aspirations—such as decisions to pursue advanced (graduate) education. Similar positive correlations between frequency of student-faculty contact and cognitive growth have been reported for first-year *transfer* students.

Despite these well-documented positive outcomes, the *frequency* of faculty-student contact outside the classroom is *decreasing* in higher education because faculty are spending more of their non-teaching time in the pursuit of research and publication, leaving out-of-class contact with undergraduates to student affairs' staff.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

- 8.1** How many *office hours* do faculty make available to students per week? (Does the college have a *stated policy* about the minimum number of weekly office hours?)
 - 8.2** Is it common for faculty to give their *home phone number* or *home e-mail address* to students?
 - 8.3** Are college faculty involved in providing *academic advising* to first-year students on a one-to-one basis outside the classroom?
 - 8.4** Does the college have *intentionally planned* programs, structures, or procedures that are *explicitly designed* to promote student-faculty interaction outside the classroom?
 - 8.5** Does the college offer a faculty-student *mentoring* program?
 - 8.6** Are there faculty-student *research teams* or *teaching teams* at the college, and are qualified first-year students eligible to participate?
 - 8.7** How many *faculty-sponsored student clubs and organizations* exist at the college?
 - 8.8** Does the college actively *encourage, recognize, and reward* faculty for out-of-class involvement with students in general, and first-year students in particular?
 - 8.9** What is the *full-time to part-time faculty ratio* at the college? (Note: This question is included because research indicates that part-time faculty spend less time on campus than full-time faculty—due to other work commitments—and, as a result, are usually less available to students for out-of-class interaction.)
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TARGET AREA #9.
ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP, POLICIES, & PRACTICES

Research strongly suggests that student retention and achievement is promoted at colleges where there is administrative commitment to creating a *student-centered* and *learning-driven* environment in which college policies, procedures, and decision-making are driven by their potential for promoting student learning and development—rather than by bureaucratic tradition, administrative convenience, or institutional status-and-prestige seeking motives.

At quality colleges, administrators devote their time and resources to campus initiatives that focus on student development, while adopting administrative procedures that are intentionally designed to promote a “*staying environment*” and a college *community* that is educationally purposeful, caring, and celebratory. A quality first-year college experience, in particular, is characterized by the administrative principle of “*front loading*”—reallocation and redistribution of the institution’s best educational resources to serve the critical needs of first-year students.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

- 9.1** Do high-level administrators *demonstrate visible support* for first-year programs by their *presence* at first-year programming events, by *comments* made during formal addresses, and in *written* statements or documents (e.g., college memos, position statements, strategic plans)?
- 9.2** Do administrators provide the necessary *resources* (human, fiscal, and physical) to support a viable, high-quality college experience for first-year students?
- 9.3** Does the administration *encourage creative thinking* and *support initiatives* designed to improve the quality of college life for first-year students?
- 9.4** Are first-year programs “*built into*” *the institutional budget* and *administrative structure* of the college (e.g., organizational blueprint or flowchart), thus enhancing their prospects for long-term survival?
- 9.5** Do administrators provide *incentives* for faculty and staff to promote their involvement in first-year programs and initiatives (e.g., stipends, mini-grants, release time, travel and professional development funding, administrative or student assistance)?
- 9.6** Does administration support *professional development* of faculty and staff in areas relating to *student retention and student success*?
- 9.7** Does administration *recognize or reward* faculty and staff contributions to first-year students (e.g., meritorious performance awards; letters of commendation; credit toward retention, promotion, or advancement)?

9.8 Is their administrative encouragement and support for college *rituals* designed to build *campus community* and increase *institutional identification* among first-year students?

9.9 Has the college made a commitment to offer *multiple and meaningful work-study* (on-campus employment) opportunities to *economically disadvantaged* students that are designed to (a) help them afford college, (b) promote their retention by connecting them to the institution, and (c) enable them to gain real-life work experience?

9.10 Has the college developed a “*red-flag*” procedure or system for identifying and connecting with students who show signs that they are *intending to leave* the college (e.g., failure to pre-register for next term’s classes; failure to reapply for financial aid; failure to renew residential life agreement)?

9.11 Does the college acknowledge first-year student achievement by means of an end-of-the-year *congratulatory letter* or *ceremony* for students who persisted to *completion of the first year* in good academic standing, with *special recognition* for those students who achieved *academic excellence* or made significant contributions to *student life* during their first year at college?

9.12 Has the college made a commitment to promoting the adjustment and success of first-year *transfer* students by adopting policies and procedures that facilitate their transition, such as:

- a) offering a *transfer-student orientation* program or *transfer-student convocation* to welcome new transfer students and integrate them with native students;
- b) allowing *junior transfers* the opportunity to live *on campus* in student residences with *juniors and seniors*—versus limiting their options to freshman dorms or off-campus housing;
- c) providing transfer students with the opportunity to apply for campus housing and to register for classes *at the same time as native students*—as opposed to automatically placing them last on the list;
- d) *designating* a particular member or group within the college community (e.g., staff member, faculty member, or cross-functional committee) to be in charge of coordinating orientation and transitional support programs for first-year transfer students—as opposed to letting this responsibility “fall through the cracks” of an administrative structure that is not explicitly designed to meet the needs of new students who enter the college after the freshman year?

TARGET AREA #10.
INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT

Historically, college quality in American higher education has been defined simply in terms of institutional “reputation” and student “selectivity.” Consequently, colleges and universities have not engaged in extensive institutional research on the actual impact they have on student *outcomes* (learning and development), or how students change as a result of the college experience. For any college to be deemed “high quality,” it should attempt

to assess institutional *impact* on student outcomes, and use the results of this assessment as *feedback* for *improving* its programs and services—as part of an ongoing institutional process of continuous quality improvement.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following

10.1 Do *recruitment* publications and practices *accurately* portray the characteristics of the college to prospective first-year students and explicitly encourage *campus visits*?

10.2 Are data gathered periodically from first-year students at *college entry* in order to serve as a basis for subsequent *student tracking*, and as a *baseline for comparison* with data collected from students at later points in their college experience—thus providing a *longitudinal* data base for use in *value-added* or *talent-development* assessment?

10.3 Are first-year programs evaluated to assess the degree to which their *actual* operations are consistent with their *stated objectives* and with the *stated mission* of the college?

10.4 Does the college engage in ongoing, systematic, quantitative and qualitative assessment of campus *offices and services* that are used frequently by first-year students?

10.5 Are assessment data gathered on college *personnel* who interact regularly with first-year students, and are these data used to provide personnel with specific and timely *feedback* that is designed to promote *professional development* and *continuous quality improvement*?

10.6 Is assessment information obtained from students actually *used* as *feedback* to promote continuous *program* improvement? (If yes, what changes in first-year programming has the college made in response to assessment-driven feedback?)

10.7 Are *satisfaction* surveys of first-year students conducted to assess their perceptions of the quality of specific college programs and offices, and are *comparisons* made between the perceptions of first-year students who *return* for the sophomore year—versus those who *depart*?

10.8 Is *qualitative* research conducted with first-year students to assess their *needs* and their *feelings* about the quality of the first-year experience (e.g., freshman focus groups)?

10.9 Is assessment routinely conducted to determine what *percentage* of first-year students *withdraw* from the college and at what *time* during the first year these withdrawals take place?

10.10 Are withdrawing students who are *eligible to return* to the college apprised of their *option* to do so and what *procedures* they are to follow for *re-admission*?

10.11 Are *surveys* sent to students who have *withdrawn* from the college in order to assess their reasons for departing?

10.12 Is assessment of student satisfaction and student retention conducted with respect to different *student subpopulations* (e.g., commuters, ethnic and racial minorities) and students enrolled in different *academic programs* (e.g., math, science, humanities)?

10.13 Are *sophomores* surveyed or interviewed to assess their *retrospective* perceptions of how well the college's first-year program facilitated their transition from high school to higher education and prepared them for their second year of college?

Appendix A

TOP-TEN *PROPERTIES/PRINCIPLES* OF EFFECTIVE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM *DELIVERY*

1. **STUDENT-CENTERED**: Effective programs are *oriented* toward, *focused* on, and *driven* by a genuine concern for the *needs and welfare of students* (rather than by institutional habit/convenience, or the needs/desires of faculty and staff).
2. **INTENTIONAL (PURPOSEFUL)**: Effective programs are *deliberately designed* with the conscious intent of implementing *research- and theory-grounded principles* of effective student learning and development, i.e.: (a) *active involvement*—program delivery promotes student “engagement” (depth of involvement) in the college experience, (b) *social integration*—program delivery promotes frequent, high-quality student interaction with other members of the college community (peers, faculty, staff), thus serving to socially “connect” students to the institution—providing them with a sense of community membership, (c) *personal reflection*—program delivery encourages students to reflect on their experiences, *transforming* acquired information into a form that makes sense or has meaning to them, and (d) *personal validation*—programming is delivered in a manner that makes students feel personally *significant*, i.e., recognizes them as *individuals* and conveys the message that they *matter* to the institution.
3. **PROACTIVE**: Effective programs are characterized by *early, preventative* action that addresses students’ needs and adjustment issues in an *anticipatory* fashion, i.e., *before* they eventuate in problems that require reactive intervention.
4. **INTRUSIVE**: Effective programs *initiate* supportive action by *reaching out* to students and bringing or delivering the program *to* students (rather than passively waiting and hoping that students will take advantage of it), thus increasing the likelihood that programming reaches *all (or the vast majority of)* students who would profit from it.
5. **DIVERSIFIED**: Effective programs are *tailored or customized* to meet the *distinctive* needs of different student *subpopulations*.
6. **PERSONALIZED**: Effective programs are delivered in a manner that recognize each student’s *individuality*, and attempt to address *personal needs*.
7. **COMPREHENSIVE (HOLISTIC)**: Effective programs focus on the student as a “*whole person*,” addressing the full range of *academic and non-academic* factors that affect student success.
8. **DURABLE**: Effective programs are *institutionalized* by being “built into” the organizational structure/blueprint and annual budget of the institution, thus ensuring that they have *longevity* and are experienced *perennially* by successive cohorts of students.


9. **COLLABORATIVE**: Effective programs involve cooperative *alliances or partnerships* between different organizational units of the college—which work in a *complementary, interdependent* fashion to increase the programs’ capacity to generate multiplicative or synergistic effects on student success.

10. **EMPIRICAL (EVIDENTIARY)**: Effective programs are supported and driven by *assessment data* (both quantitative and qualitative), which are used *summatively*—to “prove” program impact or value and *formatively*—to continually “improve” program quality.

Appendix B

NINE PRIME TIMES FOR FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM INTERVENTION

PROACTIVE

- 
1. *Summer Transition/Summer Bridge Programs*
 2. *New-Student Orientation & Convocation*
 3. *Extended-Orientation Course (New-Student Seminar)(Student-Success Course)*
 4. *Early-Alert/Early-Warning System (e.g., absenteeism reports during first 4 wks.)*
 5. *Midterm-Grade Reports (e.g., at 7-8 weeks into the semester)*
 6. *“Red Flag” Procedures (e.g., failure to pre-register or renew financial aid)*
 7. *Exit Interviews/Surveys (administered during the process of withdrawal)*
 8. *Already-Withdrawn/Departed-Student Surveys (conducted after withdrawal)*
 9. *Re-Recruitment of Withdrawn Students: Converting “Dropouts” to “Stop-Outs”*

REACTIVE

Appendix C

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMS: A SNAPSHOT SUMMARY

1. INTENTIONALITY & COMPREHENSIVENESS

- ***Commuter Student Awareness/Programming**
- ***Continuity** Throughout First Year:
 - Summer
 - Fall
 - Winter
 - Spring
 - Summer
- ***Curricular Coherence** (Integration/Core)
- ***Customized** (Campus-Specific) Materials
- ***Faculty-Student** Contact
- ***Goals/Objectives** of Program Explicitly Stated
- ***Holistic** Focus (including social, emotional, ethical, vocational)
- ***Intensiveness** of First-Year Seminar (i.e., # of contact hours; instructor/student ratio)
- ***Intrusiveness** (Institution-Initiated Support)
- ***Mission-Driven/Linked**
- ***Peer (Student-Student)** Interaction (e.g., via learning communities)
- ***Peer Leaders** Involved
- ***Re-Entry Student** Awareness/Programming
- ***Student-Student** Interaction
- ***Process** Emphasis (Pedagogy/Nature of Program Delivery)
- ***Residential Life** Component

***Transfer Student** Awareness/Support

***Underrepresented Student** Awareness/Support

2.
ASSESSMENT

***Comparative (Norm-Referenced vs. Other Institutions)** Assessment

***Classroom-Based/Course-Embedded** Assessment

***Co-Curricular** Assessment

***Data Responsive/Data-Driven** Decisions

***Entry** Assessment

***Exit (Outcomes)** Assessment

***External (Independent/3rd Party)** Assessment

***Historically Referenced** Assessment (evidence of institutional improvement/progress)

***Internal** Assessment by:

- Students
- Faculty
- Staff
- Peer-Leaders
- Alumni (Retrospective Assessment)

***Outcomes Defined**

***Qualitative & Quantitative** Assessment

***Student Needs/Expectations** Assessment

***Student Progress** Assessment (e.g., early alert)

***Student Satisfaction** with Offices & Services

***Student Self-Assessment**

* **Subpopulation** Analysis

3.
ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

- *Administrator Involvement in Program **Planning** and/or **Delivery**
 - ***Awards/Rewards** Provided
 - ***Committee** Established to Coordinate/Direct/Evaluate Program
 - *Faculty/Staff **Orientation, Training, & Development** Provided
 - ***Fiscal Resources/Budget Line** Established
 - ***Incentives** Provided
 - ***Position** Established to Coordinate/Direct Program
-

4.
CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION

- *Coordination across **Faculty, Student Life, & Academic Support Services**
 - *Partnering among **Faculty Across Disciplinary Lines**
 - *Partnering between **Faculty & Student Service** Professionals
 - *Partnering across Department/Divisions/Units for Program **Assessment**
 - *Partnering Department/Divisions/Units for Program **Delivery**
 - *Partnering Department/Divisions/Units for Program **Planning**
 - *Partnering Department/Divisions/Units for **Resource Sharing**
 - ***Structural Interdependence** between Academic & Student Life:
 - Organizational positioning (administrative report lines)
 - Geographical positioning (campus office locations)
-

5.
BROAD IMPACT ON TOTAL STUDENT BODY

- * Attention to Both **Highly Successful & Struggling** 1st-Year Students
- * **Incentives** for Student Participation (e.g., to increase percentage of student body involved in co-curricular programming)
- * **Required** Program Participation (e.g., first-year seminar offered as a core requirement)