

# **Recommendations of the First-Year Experience Task Force**

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## **Introduction**

The first semester of college is a potentially bewildering experience for incoming students who may lack the skills, knowledge, and motivation to succeed in higher education. The poor performance of freshmen is a common complaint among professors at this and other institutions. Indeed, national surveys have shown that 50% of university faculty rate students' preparation for college as "fair or poor" (cited in Kopp, 1989). A sizeable proportion of our students might agree with this assessment. The Noel Levitz College Student Inventory, which is administered to all new freshmen, indicates that 36% of our entering students identify specific academic skills as a need (SMSU, 2003). Although some students may never be suited for college study, many could perform better and persist longer with additional support from the institution.

The First-Year Experience Task Force was initiated in February, 2003 for the purpose of developing a program or set of programs that would enhance the educational experience, satisfaction, and performance of incoming students at Southwest Minnesota State University. Under the guidance of Provost Lou, the ultimate objective has been to increase the percentage of students who successfully complete their coursework and graduate from this institution. Currently, our graduation rate in 6 years is 39%, which is lower than the Minnesota public university graduation rate of 43%, and the national public institution graduation rate of 42% (SMSU, 2003). According Vincent Tinto's (1982) developmental model of student retention, the two factors that best predict student success at a university are academic integration (interest in learning and academics) and social integration (involvement in social relations at the university). Any successful first-year experience program should incorporate one or both of these processes.

The First-Year Task Force has spent several months examining theory and research on this issue, as well as sample first-year programs from other institutions. Just as the problem itself is complex and multifaceted, there is no single "magic bullet" that will convert all of our students into successful graduates. A number of ideas and specific recommendations are summarized in the sections that follow.

## **Summer Readings**

Some colleges and universities select a book or other reading material to send to incoming freshmen during the summer, prior to their arrival on campus. The point is to encourage intellectual interest and conversation, and whet the appetites of the new students for learning. The reading becomes the topic of informal and classroom discussions during the first few weeks, and is often connected to the convocation speaker. Gallaudet University, for example, chose James McBride's book, *Color of Water* for their 2003 summer reading. About 60% of those surveyed on that campus reported enjoying the program, which included lunchtime discussions and a visit by the author. The Task Force recommended a summer reading for our Fall, 2003 freshmen. Consequently, a set of poems and essays were mailed to the incoming students, and then discussed by our convocation speaker, Bill Holm. The convocation was well received, but a lack of discussion activities and formal assessment severely limited the usefulness of this trial. Although this type of intervention may start students off on the right foot, there is no research to indicate that it has any significant long term results, or does anything to enhance student satisfaction and retention. Summer readings should be viewed as a partial solution at best, and they must be kept in the context of cost-benefit ratios. Even mailing a \$5 paperback book to 600 incoming freshmen would be an extra expense in these budget sensitive times. Shorter works that can be photocopied and mailed inexpensively may have an advantage over longer works.

## **Bridge Programs**

Summer bridge programs are designed to provide a smooth transition from high school to university life. These are typically offered for university credit and may involve several weeks of on-campus coursework and skill-building programs. Research suggests that bridge programs are effective for their target groups, typically lower income, minority, or other at-risk students (e.g. Garcia, 1991). It may not be practical to implement this type of program for all incoming freshmen, but provided that vulnerable students can be reliably identified and encouraged to participate, this could be a viable option for a "pre" first-year experience. At SMSU, A 7-credit TRIO summer bridge program was implemented last summer for 17 low income students. All of these students were doing well at mid-semester (typically receiving a *B* grade or better in their courses) and three had even joined the honors program. Next summer, if grant funding permits, the program will be expanded to include more students, and also minority students. Like summer readings, bridge programs are best considered a partial solution, though unlike summer readings, there is evidence of their effectiveness.

## **Extended Orientations**

Freshman orientation is the standard method to ease student transition into university life. The week-long orientation program at SMSU provides a valuable experience, but like all of these programs, it may lead to a state of overload, as freshmen try to process new people, places, and procedures for the first time. It is possible that lengthening this orientation would improve its effectiveness. Experts in the areas of

retention and freshman programming have suggested that it is the first semester, and even the first few weeks of the first semester that are critical in forming good student habits and social adjustment (e.g. Gardner, 1986). As an example of this type of intervention, Valdosta State University has a fifteen day “Fall Explosion” which combines a variety of recreational opportunities designed to acquaint students with each other and make them aware of campus activities. In terms of Tinto’s retention model, this type of program is geared more toward social integration than academic integration. Valdosta State’s retention figures for 2000 were 73% for the first year, with a 39% graduation rate. This is comparable to our figures of 68% and 39%, respectively. After implementing their retention program (which includes several other components), the Valdosta freshman retention rate moved up slightly to 75% (Zaccari, 2003), but it is too early to assess the impact on their graduation rate. Extended orientations that include discussion groups related to summer readings and convocations may be more effective, as they could increase academic integration as well as the social element. A fifteen day “Mustang Stampede” that balances social and academic programs may be worth our consideration as another potential remedy.

### **Academic Advising**

In 1997, Southwest State University held *Confluence Day II: All University Retreat on Retention*. President Sweetland’s goal at the time was exactly what our current administration’s goal is now, to boost freshmen retention to 80%. The primary theme of the retreat was that the key to successful retention is high quality advising. There was a great deal of conversation on “developmental advising” in the days that followed, but very little of consequence was actually done. This may have been a missed opportunity, because advising is a major vehicle for providing positive contact with faculty and staff (see Cuseo, 2003), and this contact is a key component of academic integration.

Is academic advising a problem at SMSU? The university already has a dedicated advising center, training programs on advising, and new computerized DARS reports for advisors to use. A survey of 97 freshmen and sophomores conducted during Spring 2003 found that advising was not listed as a major complaint of students, and was not related to their intention to leave the university (Butler, 2003). Indeed, the only significant predictor of attrition in that sample was students’ dissatisfaction with their social life. On the other hand, the Task Force believes that better advising remains a worthy goal. Specific, concrete actions could offer greater benefits on this front than further retreats and guest speakers. One possibility is offering faculty members financial incentives or release time to encourage them to become serious, trained, “professional” advisors. This was recommended six years ago, was apparently not practical then, and is probably still not practical now. Encouraging advisement as an area of PDP development could be a more cost-effective attempt to motivate faculty. Another option is to pair advisees with a professor they have in class during their first semester. This would allow them to become acquainted earlier and hopefully facilitate the advising process. If student ID photos were given with the DARS reports, or in a photo directory, this could also help professors learn their students’ names and bond with them.

It must be recognized that advising is a two-way process, and students need to be both informed and motivated to meet with their advisors. While part of this is certainly their personal responsibility, a greater effort could be made to explain the advising process to students and include better instructions in the academic catalog, course schedules, and other materials. The re-inclusion of a grid or worksheet in the back of the schedule that can be used to facilitate advising sessions is an obvious step. Advising can and should be a time to justify the LAC for our students, which is too often perceived, not as an educational foundation, but as list of obligations to be “gotten out of the way.” The vital importance of advising (and the LAC) should be marketed to students at various points, including an extended orientation period or a freshman seminar, which will be discussed in a later section of this document.

### **Freshman Blocks**

“Blocks,” or learning communities, involve placing cohorts of first semester freshmen together in a common set of classes. The rationale behind blocks is that they allow freshmen to get to know each other better, which should encourage social integration, and thus retention. This is consistent with social psychological research on the effects of proximity and familiarity in interpersonal relations, and there is some evidence of their effectiveness in universities (Cutright, 2003). Blocks or learning communities are now frequently used at major universities as a way of recreating a small college atmosphere. They are also an efficient and convenient way of advising large groups of students during their first registration period. The concept of freshman blocks was initially very appealing to the Task Force. Unfortunately, blocks appear to be problematic at SMSU, which is a smaller institution than most of the universities that have used blocks successfully in the research literature. Some students have reported making friends in their blocked courses, while others report disliking the experience. Blocks were one of the most frequent complaints in a survey conducted in the residence halls during Fall, 2003. And in a particularly negative focus group held last Spring, four students said blocks would *not* be helpful to them, three students said that they *might* be helpful, one student said they would be *not at all* helpful, and one student was *unsure* (Iverson & Beech, 2003). A typical complaint from students is that blocks are too much like high school. This is the exact opposite effect of what we would like to see in an experience designed to introduce students to university education. Learning communities may lead to social integration among peers, but they may also establish a sense of in-group and out-group that is directed against the faculty. One professor has likened blocks to “cliques” of students that are more interested in talking among themselves than to their teachers. It is the recommendation of the Task Force that the current system of freshman blocks be investigated and possibly discontinued.

### **Thematic Blocks**

Could blocks be improved? The Task Force has examined a number of ways that blocks could be made more effective at SMSU. It is possible that smaller blocks, with no more than 2-3 classes would be more successful. Blocks could also be distributed more evenly over the week, with at least one class being MWF. It was suggested that one class

in the block could be writing-intensive, to train students in this important skill right away in their first semester of college. Requiring English 102 (preferably in small classes) as part of the block is another option. Service learning could be incorporated into blocks as a way of motivating students and allowing them to make connections between the “ivory tower” and the community. Balancing blocks so they include a mixture of content and challenge level is always a good idea. The most significant change that could be made in the block system would be to arrange them by themes. Dickinson State University currently uses this model in their learning communities. Some of the themes they have developed are Business, Discovery, Number Crunchers, Info Highway, Culture Connections, Science, Nursing, and Athletics. Thematic blocks seem to be an improvement over the existing system, but there is no solid evidence available that they improve student satisfaction and retention over non-thematic blocks. Dickinson State’s program is relatively new and remains untested. Truly integrated courses also represent a considerable logistical problem in terms of getting multiple groups of instructors together to plan a theme and connect their classes. An attempt to create an integrated science block out of General Chemistry, Cell Biology, and General Psychology for Fall 2003 was unsuccessful, primarily due to an inability to develop a common theme around the existing course content.

### **Freshman Seminars**

Freshman seminars are typically 2 credit classes held in the first semester, often as part of a freshman block. There are two common variations. One is a “College 101” type of course that emphasizes study skills. The other is an “Introduction to the Liberal Arts” type of course that emphasizes great books and ideas. The latter is more popular among many of the faculty at SMSU. It may be possible to create a hybrid seminar by blending these two models, though the problem here involves preserving the seminar as a cohesive, unified experience. There is a consensus in the Task Force that any freshman seminar class should include a library component. There is also a consensus that the seminar class should be kept small, capped at no more than 15-20 students. The small, discussion-oriented atmosphere is believed to be the essential component in what makes this an enriching first-year experience for incoming college students. It is a small group atmosphere that can lead to both the social and the academic integration that is emphasized in Tinto’s model of retention. The suggestion of pairing advisees with their freshman seminar professors is another promising idea.

Freshman seminar was a key element in the original Freshman College plan outlined at Southwest State University by Mike Kopp and the Freshman Council in 1989. Their formulation proposed a set of common readings and was partly influenced by the freshman seminar at the University of Minnesota at Morris, titled *Inquiry: Values in a Changing World*. This early formulation did not survive and it has taken us 14 years to return to the matter. At Morris, they have now replaced their old *Inquiry* course with an entirely new freshman seminar program. Their new program, which is generally considered superior to the old one by both faculty and students, falls under the broad category of human diversity. Whereas the first incarnation emphasized a common set of readings and a common freshman experience, this new model allows maximum freedom

for instructors and students to select their topics. Sample seminar topics at Morris include Stereotypes in Film, Children's Well-Being, Explaining the Inexplicable, American Comic Strip, Greek Myth and Literature, Eugenics Movement in the U.S., and Why We Eat What We Eat. The seminar begins with an intensive convocation experience and includes an academic "jamboree" just before Thanksgiving. Although these are colorful additions, everyone we spoke with considered the small classroom experience with an enthusiastic professor to be critical. At Morris, the seminar is capped at 15 students (See Schwaller, 2002, etc).

The first-year retention rate at Morris is 83% and their five-year graduation rate is 62%. These rates may have benefited from their first-year seminar, or they may be the result of innumerable other aspects of student life at UMM. Yet the high approval ratings of the program by students and faculty, combined with what we know about student retention, suggest that the Morris program is a model of success. The evidence that first-year seminars lead to beneficial outcomes is greater than the evidence for other types of interventions, including blocks (Cutright, 2003). A national survey of 1013 institutions with first-year seminars revealed that 57% of the institutions report student satisfaction with the program, 33% report increased persistence to the sophomore year, 25% report increased use of campus services, 19% report increased grade point average, 19% report increased participation in campus activities, and 15% report increased persistence in graduation (NRC, 2000). When interpreting these data, it is important to realize that the percentages reflect the number of institutions measuring the particular outcome through formal program evaluation methods. Not all institutions measured all variables, and only a minority possessed information on graduation rates. Nevertheless, the results are certainly favorable on the whole.

Could we develop a freshman seminar course at Southwest? Given budgetary restrictions on new hires, the challenge would consist of recruiting an already overworked faculty from their regular teaching duties. If we were to adopt a system like the one at Morris, it would require 20 instructors each teaching a pair of two credit seminars, plus at least \$37,000 in clerical support, supplies, and stipends (Fuhr, 2003). Given that approximately 20% of our faculty are already teaching overloads this semester, and Morris strongly discourages teaching the seminar as an overload, the possibility of duplicating the Morris experience seems unlikely. On the other hand, costs would be reduced by raising the number of students from 15 to 20 and eliminating certain aspects of the program, such as guest speakers and the jamboree. Furthermore, if the seminar were only held for the first half of the semester, that would reduce the burden of credit hours by half. An alternative idea is to take an existing set of courses, cap their enrollment at 20, and designate them as "first-year intense." Finally, it should be recognized that many administrative and MSUAASF employees are willing and qualified to act as instructors in these courses, easing the load of our regular faculty. Innovative solutions are possible and well worth considering.

## Conclusions

First-year experience programs are gaining acceptance all over the nation. A variety of interventions have been attempted, but the data are ambiguous as to which programs are most effective, and how such variables as school size affect their success. To complicate matters further, it is likely that Hawthorne effects are at work in the program evaluation research. This is the finding that any change at all can create temporary positive effects in an uncontrolled study, simply because of the novelty of the situation. Nevertheless, the First-Year Experience Task Force believes that there is enough evidence available to suggest the implementation of a freshman seminar class. The essential ingredients of an effective seminar appear to be small class sizes, flexibility in course design, and a core set of components, such as library skills. Our existing Learning Resources course on college study skills can serve as a model, but the seminar must not be perceived as remedial or deficiency-based if it is going to gain the acceptance and enthusiasm of the university community. Packing too much skill development into the course is another potential mistake, as we were repeatedly told by the faculty at Morris that "less is more." Other interventions (such as summer readings) can be used to supplement the seminar, and the Task Force is currently planning a more extended summer reading and convocation experience for next Fall. It is important to view the initiation of a first year experience on our campus as an ongoing process of program development combined with assessment research. A freshman seminar class is not only an excellent place to begin, it is long overdue.

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