

The Evolution of the First-Year Experience:
Effective Strategies to Support Today's Generation of
College Students

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HEA 595: Project Seminar
July 20, 2022
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Abstract

In 1970, American institutions of higher education were faced with the dissatisfaction of their student populations due to intense social and political clashes transpiring throughout the nation. To gain the students' loyalty, the University of South Carolina introduced a groundbreaking program designed to counteract the discontent felt by students. What would come to be known internationally as the First-Year Experience is now in its 50th year of existence thanks to the vision of Tom Jones and dedication of John Gardner. Institutions must assess and expand their current FYE programs to meet the latest evolving challenges in higher education.

Keywords: First-Year Experience, holistic development, student success, research ideal, college ideal, retention, student development

**The Evolution of the First-Year Experience:
The Importance of Remaining Flexible for Each New Generation of College Students**

Introduction

As it is recognized today, the first-year experience (FYE) for college freshmen began 50 years ago, during a time when our nation's campuses underwent immense civil unrest and turmoil. One college president, Tom Jones, refused to remain satisfied with the state of relations between the administration and his students, so he introduced the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina (*University 101 Programs*, n.d.). This was the very first version of what would later become known as the first-year seminar (FYS). In the ensuing years since the establishment of the FYE concept, universities have grown to appreciate the value of the first-year experience; in fact, some version of it is now found at more than 90 percent of four-year institutions and over 80 percent of two-year institutions (Skipper, 2017, p. 7).

Embodied in its mission statement, the values and priorities of an institution are the driving force behind each unique version of a first-year experience (Wismath & Newberry, 2019). Even with these differing priorities, it is generally agreed that “the first-year experience is not a single program or initiative, but rather an intentional combination of academic and co-curricular efforts within and across postsecondary institutions” (Koch & Gardner, 2006, p. 2) meant to aid students in their transition from high school to college. Institutional characteristics are incredibly wide-ranging in the United States; therefore, the type of first-year experience offered varies greatly throughout, with no expectation of standardization. There is, however, a growing movement advocating that FYEs should be a combination of support programs rather than relying on a singular, signature program to foster development among first-year students (Greenfield et al., 2013).

In this paper, the author will investigate the following research questions:

1. How did the FYE movement come about?
2. What theoretical framework(s) guide/influence/inform the concept of a first-year experience?
3. Why is it important to provide a first-year experience for freshmen students?
4. What constitutes a high quality first-year experience?
5. What are some recommendations/implications for the future of first-year experience?

Literature Review

The Fledgling First-Year Experience

Surprisingly, the FYE movement in its infancy in 1972 did not originally claim student retention or success as its main objectives. Instead, a proactive college president who witnessed the difficulties occurring at universities across the nation during the late 1960s and early 1970s felt the urgency to create a new type of program designed to counteract the discontent felt by students. At this juncture in history, many college administrators were at odds dealing with the level of student protests and demonstrations resulting from the continued U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Increased recreational drug use on campuses and a new trend among young people toward the questioning of authority greatly exacerbated the problem (Horn, 2022).

The culmination of this unrest led to unfortunate, sometimes tragic clashes at over 800 college campuses as student anti-war activists actively protested and rioted during the month of May 1970. There is no better example than the unfortunate events that precipitated the Kent State Shooting on May 4, 1970. An escalation in the hostility between the protestors and both the town and the university leaders led to dire consequences. Ultimately, four students were killed and nine wounded in the confrontation between anti-war protestors and the Ohio National Guard

(History.com Editors, 2021). Although facts concerning that day are still disputed, the bottom line is that the already tenuous relationship between university officials and students had reached a crisis point. Many students across America were dissatisfied and applying a heavy hand to the problem had yet to yield acceptable results.

Throughout this exceptional month of May, the University of South Carolina would not remain immune to the nationwide rioting. Triggered by the events of Kent State on May 4th, South Carolina students became upset when local “police were being heavy handed in the way they arrested students” (Horn, 2020, para. 6) on campus during their protests, so tensions continued to escalate. Tom Jones, the president of the University of South Carolina during this unprecedented time, was barricaded in his office during a student riot held on May 11th (Sexton, 2019). In reaction to this treatment, Jones quickly formed a committee of faculty and students to “study the causes of the riots” (Gardner & Schroeder, 2003, p. 10). As he grew impatient with the committee’s progress toward a solution, Jones formulated his own notion of how to prevent future discord. His response to the incident was quite unlike other college presidents of the time since his approach centered around creating a new breed of student who would not want to riot (Watts, 1999). In order to do this, he planned “to restructure the whole socialization process of bringing students into a major research university” that would “teach students to love the university rather than be angry and trash it” (Gardner & Schroeder, 2003, p. 10).

Another major concept to address regarding the history of the FYE movement is the continuation of the late 19th century trend toward adopting the research ideal of higher education rather than the long-held college ideal (Watts, 1999). Also known as education for life, the college ideal championed holistic development of undergraduates, paying particular attention to character development. Conversely, the research ideal that originated from the German model of

“the academic enterprise for the pursuit of new knowledge” (Watts, 1999, p. 1) discouraged professors from focusing on the needs of students. This research orientation first infiltrated higher education within graduate schools and then later migrated to the undergraduate level (Watts, 1999). One could imagine a student of the late sixties becoming disenchanted with professors who seemed focused less on student development and more on scholarship in their field. Interestingly enough, President Jones himself was originally brought in as president in 1962 to help turn South Carolina into a competitive research institution (Watts, 1999). The research ideal was ingrained heavily into his formative years as an engineering student at MIT and as faculty at both Purdue and MIT, but as the unrest of the late 1960s began to unfold, Jones started to see the need to weave in more holistic educational aspects into the university curriculum (Watts, 1999).

From Jones’ perspective, the rapid rise in enrollment at South Carolina (from 6700 in 1962 to 23,000 by 1974) (Horn, 2022) coupled with the political angst of the era “brought about a student body that was beginning to feel disconnected with the university itself” (Horn, 2022, para. 26). He labored over a solution alongside faculty and students, testing out two other pilot programs before the University 101 course emerged as the clear winner. What comprised the initial University 101 course to deem it so innovative? Two groundbreaking elements comprised this introductory course: faculty were trained specially to interact with freshman students, and the course was in essence an extended orientation lasting a full semester and worth three credit hours (Gardner, 1980).

Class sizes for University 101 were also capped at 25 to allow for a more intimate setting for “freshman to adjust to the university and develop more positive attitudes towards the university and the learning process” (Gardner, 1980, p. 4). However, the real game changer was

the faculty training program because it offered faculty development in teaching, something not often emphasized by universities at the time. President Jones also realized that faculty could benefit from the adoption of pedagogical methods which “sensitized them to both the problems of students in general and especially those of freshmen” (Gardner, 1980, p. 7). Instead of placing the onus for change on discontented students, Tom Jones championed a method for faculty to evaluate their own attitudes and behaviors in the classroom in order to better understand and accommodate their students. Jones further surmised that the week-long faculty development training would provide faculty with teaching skills that they could bring back to their own academic disciplines and essentially begin a process of permeating the entire university with new, holistic teaching techniques (Fidler, Neururer-Rotholz, & Richardson, 1999).

By 1974, President Jones had placed a General Studies professor, John N. Gardner, at the helm of the University 101 program (Watts, 1999). Although Jones resigned from the presidency that same year, Gardner fully embraced the 101 concept and proved to be a very capable leader to carry on the program. The success of this “holistic, humanistic, and student-centered approach” (Greenfield et al., 2013, p. xxx) rapidly inspired the development of similar programs across the United States and throughout the world. Finally, interest in University 101 was so high that in 1982 Gardner founded the Freshmen Year Experience “as an organization to foster the success of the first-year student” (Watts, 1999, p. 4). He remained the faculty director of the program until the year 2000. Within those 25 years, John Gardner contributed prolifically to the literature concerning FYE and helped train countless higher education professionals in the development and sustainment of their own programs.

As mentioned previously, the first-year experience did not originate due to concerns over student retention or success, but instead it was conceived as a way to ease the tension between

the university and its students. Simply put, the hope was that faculty would learn to be more empathetic toward freshmen in their transition to college and, subsequently, students would develop an affinity for their institution as a result of a more intimate access to faculty. President Tom Jones

arrived at South Carolina as an electrical engineer, but the 1960s changed him into a social engineer. He saw the disaffection of students at a campus that had grown by leaps and bounds during his tenure, and he figured out ways to reconnect with them. (Horn, 2022, para 28)

Thanks to his vision and persistence, a new educational movement was conceived, and to this day, the FYE continues to develop and expand on college campuses all over the world.

The Theoretical Underpinnings of the First-Year Experience

In 1965, the Upward Bound program was initiated at the University of South Carolina in an effort to provide opportunity in higher education for economically disadvantaged students. In the ensuing years, Tom Jones was impressed with the academic progress shown by these once underprepared students involved in the program (Spann, 2000). John Gardner shares that Jones even “asked if these pedagogies could be used for mainstream undergraduates and, of course, the answer was yes, they could” (Spann, 2000, para. 11). Thanks to Jones’ observations, the freshman seminar course at USC, University 101, incorporated parts of the curriculum developed for the experimental Upward Bound program (presently known as the TRIO Program) in order that a wider cohort of students could benefit from increasing their potential.

Tom Jones also “had become convinced that behavioral sciences offered a number of possible answers to alleviate many problems in higher education” (Gardner, 1980, p. 5), hence his interest in educational theories from the (then) burgeoning field of humanistic psychology.

James Gardner further acknowledges that the basis of the FYE's theoretical framework derives from the experiential learning model "which owes much to Carl Rogers (1969), Earl Kelly (1951), and Malcolm Knowles (1972)" (1980, p. 8), each a prominent humanistic psychologist. All three also have this in common – a great dissatisfaction with traditional methods of teaching. In their own various ways, these men advocate for students to be treated as unique individuals so their full potential and creativity as human beings can be realized rather than suppressed.

While Carl Rogers is best known for his person-centered psychotherapy approach, later in life he advocates for the adoption of a person-centered approach to education, too. In his book *Freedom to Learn* (1969), Rogers is critical of our reliance on a teacher-centered, authoritarian style of education (Joseph et al., 2020). Instead, he believes that students can flourish when "the responsibility for learning is shared between student and facilitator", and from this partnership, students can develop "autonomy, agency, and self-understanding through the process of learning to learn" (Joseph et al., 2020, p. 557). Carl Rogers goes on to say that in order for the whole person to be educated, they must be stimulated in the aspects of feeling and behavior, not just cognition. Cognition involves rote learning like memorizing the names of all the United States presidents, whereas experiential learning engages and stimulates the students through activities such as field trips and lab work. To Rogers (1967), purely cognitive learning is "meaningless" in comparison to experiential learning, which he classifies as "significant" (p. 42) because it incorporates the student's entire being.

Knowles (1971) espoused that "the heart of education is learning, not teaching, and so our focus [in the early 1970s] started to shift from what the teacher does to what happens to the learners" (p. 33.). Knowles was definitely a man ahead of his time in the sense that he had very little respect for the type of education students are usually offered past the first grade. After that,

from his perspective, education becomes focused on achievement and testing rather than learning (Knowles, 1971). He also believes that since undergraduate students are adults, pedagogy is no longer the best technique or method to employ for enhancing their learning. Instead, the concept of andragogy, or the art and science of helping adults learn, better suits the teaching of youth as they mature – especially by the time they arrive to college. Traditional teaching techniques like “lecture, canned audio-visual presentations, and assigned reading tend to fade in favor of discussion, laboratory simulation, field experience, team project, and other action-learning techniques” (Knowles, 1971, p. 35). As opposed to transmitting knowledge to students through pedagogy, andragogy touts taking on the role of facilitator and resource person as students begin a process of “self-directed inquiry” (Knowles, 1971, p. 36).

Earl C. Kelley provided yet another aspect of learning to incorporate in the organization of the University 101 curriculum. His book, *The Workshop Way of Learning* (1951), outlines how to use group discussion to promote learning and creativity. The workshop method involves small groups discussing issues relevant to the individuals assembled (Kelley, 1954). From Kelley’s perspective, this approach is in great contrast to the traditional practice of lecture or speeches given to an audience on topics that may be of little interest or use to them. Through sharing in discussions and posing questions in a workshop environment, Kelley (1954) attests that each person “has a unique contribution to make to the whole” (p. 1468). This type of learning experience alters “the role of the learner from a passive to an active one, bringing about involvement through doing something” (Kelley, 1954, p. 1468). Just like Knowles and Rogers, Kelley stresses that there should be a facilitator to make the workshop way of learning succeed rather than someone who sees themselves as the “fountain of all information” (Fidler et al., 1999, p. 67).

Additionally, President Tom Jones was greatly inspired by the work of Nevitt Sanford (1967), *Where Colleges Fail* (Cuseo, 2011). Sanford calls for colleges to concern themselves with the whole person – someone much more than just the sum of their intelligence and cognitive abilities (Cuseo, 2011). Similarly, Upcraft and Gardner (1989) make a strong assertion that freshmen succeed when a host of factors are taken into account in their development as a student, not merely their academic capability. In fact, some schools like Indiana University Bloomington have found that focusing on purely academic assistance does little to increase retention without an equivalent emphasis on institutional ethos and student life (Smith, 2003). Kuh et al. (2005) discovered that institutions who have higher than predicted student engagement and graduation rates are ones where “an emphasis on holistic student learning runs broad and deep in institutional policies and practices” (p. 65). Evidence suggests holistic student development secures greater success than academic skill enhancement alone, so it is important that the college ideal and character development should equally coexist with the research ideal in the FYE.

Benefits of the First-Year Experience

With higher education’s latest emphasis on helping historically underserved students succeed in college, the benefits of the FYE to overall student engagement cannot be ignored. An underserved background often means these students arrive as social outsiders, uncomfortable in the “academic and social systems of the college” (Tinto, 1975, p. 103). Habley et al. (2012) and Upcraft et al. (2005) both emphasize the importance of first year courses which assist in integrating students into the predominant aspects of a campus culture. FYE programs contribute to making this assimilation a reality, plus a student also gains increased identification with the university. According to Tinto (1975), this new dedication and commitment to the university precipitates a higher probability of college completion and academic success. As academically

underprepared students participate in high impact practices their freshman year, their grades rise at a significantly higher rate than their better prepared peers – these engagement activities in essence help compensate for their lack of readiness (Kuh, 2008). Even though all students show gains through participation in FYEs, “the salutary effects are even greater for students who begin college at lower achievement levels” (Kuh, 2008, p. 19).

John Gardner (2003) admits that as he has gotten older, he is less inclined to let freshman students make independent decisions to opt out of programs that higher educators know are good for them. From his experience, students required to be involved in activities like peer mentoring or first year seminars benefit greatly and are more successful. While students often recognize they need help in various areas, they are still hesitant to seek it out on their own volition. Gardner (2003) therefore believes a key best practice for the first-year experience is to make it mandatory for students to participate in the distinctive programs that institutions offer in order to reap the full benefits of a first-year experience. Along those same lines, colleges and universities need to prioritize providing ample opportunities for all students to participate in these high-impact activities in order that the playing field can be leveled, and educational disadvantages are overcome during the undergraduate years (Kuh, 2008, p. 22).

With increased retention and success of students comes many advantages for an institution. When higher student numbers are maintained, resources allotted to recruit and replace dropouts can be redirected elsewhere, alumni who can afford to donate to their alma mater are created in greater numbers, and school reputations are boosted (Jamelske, 2008). Students who participate in FYEs also report greater satisfaction with their institution and higher levels of involvement in campus activities (Jamelske, 2008). Moreover, Summerlee and Murray (2010) discovered that those who participated in an FYS were more likely to take part in community

service, study abroad, and campus leadership roles than those students who did not take a FYS.

Basically, FYS participation was shown to embolden students to take advantage of additional high-impact opportunities offered by their college or university (Murray & Wolf, 2016).

Much time in academia is spent contemplating the transformative value derived from the FYE for first-year participants, but equal attention must be given to the benefits afforded to faculty. As noted by Tinto (2004), faculty within higher education unfortunately are not adequately trained to teach their students or help them learn, plus they receive no formal instruction on student development. Allocating resources towards faculty training for FYEs fills this gap that might otherwise be overlooked. Tinto suggests that “one of the key actions institutions can take to enhance retention and graduation is to invest in effective faculty and staff development and reward effective teaching” (Tinto, 2004, p. 9). Gaining exposure to active learning pedagogies and methods other than lecture-based presentations for transferring knowledge to students brings benefits across the institution’s curriculum (Scanlon & Dvorak, 2019). According to Fidler et al. (1999), faculty attending required FYE training preparation not only felt the instruction prepared them to be an FYE instructor, but it also helped them to better teach their departmental classes. Embracing these effective learning strategies among FYE faculty could very well be the catalyst toward propagating student-centered classroom instruction throughout campuses.

Additionally, teaching a first-year seminar course allows faculty to get to know freshmen students in a more meaningful way. There is also the possibility of forming relationships that can last throughout an undergraduate’s career versus only getting to know a student in the last couple of years. A “flattening of the hierarchical relationship” (Murray & Wolf, 2016, p. 8) likely occurs as students and faculty interact in a significant manner through smaller FYS courses.

Instructors gain new respect for first-year students and a better grasp of just how powerful and influential their role is in the overall experience of first-year students (Murray & Wolf, 2016). Much to their surprise, faculty find teaching FYS courses fulfilling and intellectually stimulating, proving beneficial for faculty as well as students (Smith, 2003).

Some institutions with successful faculty development programs design FYE training to function similarly to the first-year seminar classes that faculty will be facilitating. For instance, at the University of South Carolina, faculty training classes are limited to 20 faculty in order to mimic similar student numbers in University 101 courses since this is considered an optimal number for encouraging active learning and discussion (Friedman et al., 2019). By participating in similar activities as their students will encounter, faculty also get to experience “a new, unfamiliar environment much like their first-year students” (Scanlon & Dvorak, 2019, para. 2). Further, they develop empathy for their students’ circumstances and gain a better understanding of the needs of novice learners (Smith, 2003). Through this interactive classroom experience of their own, faculty end up “extend[ing] their networks beyond the department and across the campus” (Murray & Wolf, 2016, abstract), while forming “collegial bonds across disciplines” (Murray & Wolf, 2016, p. 8). It is fascinating to note that “professional development efforts at the postsecondary level are related to...greater faculty satisfaction, engagement, and sense of belonging” (Gyurko et al., 2016, p. 7) – some of the same outcomes we hope to observe in our students participating in a FYE.

Components of a High Quality First-Year Experience

Although there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for implementing a FYE, a “willingness to continually scan the horizon for best practices that can be adapted with care to particular institutional contexts and cultures” (Barefoot et al., 2005, p. 380) greatly aids in keeping

programs both relevant and at a high standard of excellence. While a “cookie-cutter design” (Wismath & Newberry, 2019, p. 36) is not optimal in the creation of FYEs, there are a number of best practices and effective ways to organize the first year that should be carefully considered for inclusion. According to George Kuh (2008), the best possible way to increase student engagement and success is for every student to be provided the opportunity to “participate in at least two high-impact activities during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field” (p. 21). The programs topping his list for incoming students include first-year seminars and learning communities.

Institutions that hold themselves significantly responsible for the success of their first-year students are more likely to attain educational excellence in their version of the first-year experience (Barefoot et al., 2005). These schools differ from the majority of their peers who tend to place the lion’s share of the responsibility for achievement on students themselves. In line with Gardner’s call for mandatory first-year interventions (2003), Barefoot et al. (2005) show that high-performing FYE programs are among those that are not optional and incorporate all or a majority of their students. Another effective component of a first-rate FYE program is a missional commitment to serving the diverse students who comprise the changing population of today’s society instead of “bemoaning the absence of a formerly homogeneous student body” (Barefoot et al., 2005, p. 387). Yes, an increasing percentage of students are arriving underprepared to college, so colleges must adapt and commit to coming alongside students where they are at. Standards do not need to be lowered for success; instead, all involved with first year students should commit to investing in developmental education and thoughtful support in order to inspire their students to achieve beyond expectations.

Many of the institutions with outstanding FYE programs owe their success to leaders who show up on all levels. This can be anyone from the far-sighted college president down to a motivated academic advisor – someone willing to make an investment in the students’ first year (Barefoot et al., 2005). Innovative thinking is also rewarded, and risk takers are not penalized for their attempts to improve their schools by trying out new ideas. Of course, assessment is also a critical piece in maintaining a high-quality FYE. If an institution decides to stop transforming because they think they have reached excellence, they would be making a mistake since student populations change continuously (Barefoot et al., 2005). Looking outward to survey the best practices at comparable schools and sharing great ideas with others helps schools keep up with the latest trends, too. As brought up previously, faculty should be committed to taking the lion’s share of the responsibility for the success of a FYE. The dedication from a consequential amount of faculty demonstrates that the FYE is not taking a backseat to other institutional efforts (Barefoot et al., 2005). Staff and administrators can be heavily involved, but they cannot be the only drivers of the efforts to create and sustain a FYE program if it is to be successful.

Another widespread and often mandatory component of FYE programs is academic advising. Potentially, institutions can develop this relationship into something much more than meeting to discuss class choices once a semester – now advisors seek to encourage “conversations about issues students are facing in real time” (Kuh, 2008, p. 14). For example, the University of South Carolina has created a University Advising Center meant to allow for more holistic advising and relationship building rather than continuing to rely on transactional advising (Keup & Young, 2022). Forming significant connections with advisees and learning more about their personal lives appears to have an important correlation to their academic success (Kardash, 2020). Holistic advising allows academic advisors to consider all factors affecting a student’s

success, plus also gain their trust. As student demographics are changing, advisors must also be more alert to the need for intervention and referral (Kardash, 2020). Since academics are just one aspect of a student's life to consider, high quality FYEs are beginning to incorporate holistic advising into their program.

Implications for the Future of the First-Year Experience

One very important point to take into account when planning FYE curriculum is that currently 85% of students at American institutions are considered commuters (Jacoby, 2020). In light of this, the first-year classroom becomes increasingly important since it turns out to be one of the few spaces left in higher education which can influence all students' development (Gardner & Schroeder, 2003). In the past, this avenue of approach for reform within the FYE movement has not been as heavily emphasized partly because not all faculty members are on board with modifying their teaching methods to be conducive to the needs of freshmen (Koch & Gardner, 2017). Instead, administrators may have found it easiest to change and influence the parts of the FYE they had more control over, without needing to gain the cooperation of faculty.

Gateway courses, or those freshman introductory classes that all must pass through to get to their particular majors, are the next area of challenge for faculty to improve upon in the first year (Gardner & Schroeder, 2003). Koch and Gardner (2017) believe the importance afforded the transformation of gateway courses is ultimately a reflection of an institution's sincerity in "serving society and advancing social justice" (p. 136). In their estimation,

if there is to be any hope that the STEM and business-related workforce will actually "look like" the new minority-majority demographic in the United States, then the very students who make up this demographic have to succeed in gateway courses they currently fail in large proportions. (Koch & Gardner, 2017, p. 144)

In order to achieve this feat, capturing a significant amount of faculty buy-in and ownership for first-year initiatives (Barefoot et al., 2005) will be essential to student success going forward.

Barefoot et al. (2005) champion taking an approach in which “faculty have had a major role at the point of conception and initial implementation” of the institution’s FYE (p. 388).

Along the same lines, notice must be taken of the differing needs presented by Generation Z students as compared to earlier generations. Collectively, they are perceived as requiring more attention and nurture than students in the past, plus they place a high priority on being shown care by their professors (Miller & Mills, 2019). According to Gen Z students, traits of a caring professor involve relatability and approachability, but effective instruction is extremely important to them, too. Through a series of interviews and a focus group, Miller and Mills (2019) were able to establish that “effective teaching is at the core of caring and should be a priority for student success work on college campuses” (p. 86). They further claim that complementary support structures such as tutoring or early alert systems are not sufficient to overcome the effects of shortcomings in faculty engagement with students during class. In fact, their study demonstrates that a student’s academic motivation is markedly increased by the assurance of a professor caring whether or not they learn (Miller & Mills, 2019).

Some faculty may balk at the idea of changing their teaching approaches and essentially feel they are unnecessarily yielding to the demands of the newest students, but they need to understand the significance of their instructional role to the student success agenda. Professors should welcome training and development that helps them not to be a barrier to the success of their students. They must also be compelled to recognize that

the generational diversity in higher education presents unique challenges to engagement and retention of students, as many of the common attitudes and tendencies of the

undergraduates are not congruent with those expected by the faculty teaching their courses. (Miller & Mills, 2019, p. 76)

Colleges and universities would do well to invest in programs similar to the preparation provided to those who teach University 101 at the University of South Carolina. Unlike K-12 teachers, faculty at colleges and universities may arrive to their institutions without having covered pedagogy or instructional methods in their PhD curriculum. Providing faculty with training in adaptive teaching and active learning strategies could go a long way toward improving student learning and engagement in Gateway and FYE courses. And contrary to popular belief, Generation Z students do not require an enormous investment of time or coddling by professors outside of class – as long as a professor conveys that they care while in the classroom (Miller & Mills, 2019).

With the overall mental health of U.S. college students steadily declining year after year (Colarossi, 2022), colleges are actively seeking solutions to this campus crisis. Hiring more counselors or outsourcing counseling sessions may not be the only responses to the predicament. First-year seminars or extended orientations are prime occasions to insert training on the subject of mental health issues and prevention strategies (Wyatt et al., 2017). The transition to establishing new relationships, new living arrangements, and acquiring new study skills can cause an immense amount of stress, which in turn may exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions or possibly be the cause of them. Exposing first-year students early to mental health awareness can aid them in recognizing and coping with challenges if or when the time arises.

Contributing as a peer mentor on campus helps students to focus outwardly on the needs of others instead of continually fixating inwardly on their own tribulations. We often consider the immense benefits to the mentored students such as increased connection and integration to

the university (Yomtov et al., 2017), but mentors themselves experience lower levels of anxiety (Gill & Roulet, 2019) and increased self-esteem from helping others (Cronin, 2022). Adding a peer mentoring element to a FYE can produce profound reciprocal effects on all students involved. Similarly, FYE programs with service-learning elements also help orient students toward goals of compassion and lending a hand to others. This type of involvement actually makes them less likely to experience anxiety or depression (Crocker et al., 2010); therefore, “creating a campus environment that encourages support and compassion could change the cultural status quo to improve overall mental health” (Wyatt et al., 2017, p. 183). With the rates of mental health issues skyrocketing for college students, institutions should carefully weigh the benefits of incorporating preventative and coping strategies for mental health, peer mentoring, and/or community service components into their FYE programs.

Conclusion

The first-year experience movement has undoubtedly carved out a prominent position in higher education and succeeded in making “the academy a more friendly place” (Watts, 1999, p. 6) since its inception. With the continued prominence of research, higher education may never revert back entirely to the college ideal, but a happy medium may yet be achieved. “Until faculty change their attitudes, values, and particularly their behavior in the classroom” (Gardner, 1980, p. 10), an unacceptable number of students will continue to have difficulty adjusting and persisting through their first year and beyond. Over 40 years ago, Gardner emphasized that higher education institutions need to figure out how to retain the learners it has “so budgets can be preserved” (Gardner, 1980, p. 10). Even though he brings up these practical considerations, Gardner believes that the first-year experience should be about much more than the mere retention of a student because that measurement reflects “simply a lack of student failure”

(Purdie, 2007, p. 36). It is also thought that student retention as an aspiration is not particularly inspiring enough to faculty to secure their interest in contributing to the foundational first year (Barefoot et al., 2005). Instead, the goals of an FYE program should be centered around student learning and success – two goals that faculty can heavily influence.

The eventual byproducts of the original University 101 course at the University of South Carolina were wholly unexpected, but these outcomes were what first caught the attention of other higher education professionals. As enrollment at universities flatlined in the late 1970s after the baby boom generation and the demographics of college-going students changed, students became “a more precious commodity” (Gardner, 1980, p. 10), and needed to be treated as such. Once again, higher education finds itself at a similar juncture where lowered overall birth rates, changes in demographics, and COVID-19 have combined to cause fewer students to seek a college degree. Higher education institutions cannot help but think from both pragmatic and idealistic standpoints when prioritizing programs that provide maximum outcomes. Ideals and standards must be upheld, while at the same time new populations of students are welcomed and integrated into the academy (Gardner, 1980). Of course, institutions desire to see the success and persistence of their students, but the students’ success also leads to the very real outcomes of financial stability and increased reputation of the university (Chu, 2016). That is why it is readily apparent that an investment in a quality first-year experience can benefit an institution while at the same time provide all students a solid foundation on which to build a meaningful undergraduate experience.

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