

# INSIGHTS

## ON EQUITY AND OUTCOMES

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## Exploring the Role of First-Year Experiences in Enhancing Equity & Outcomes

**Marci Rockey and Randi Congleton**

Transition to postsecondary education is a time of hope and opportunity to fulfill goals. College can also cause personal and psychological disruption (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Renn & Reason, 2013), but providing social and academic support can reduce or alleviate the challenges of adjustment. The importance of transition support has been well documented in the literature on four-year college students (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Students who experience validation from faculty and peers, and are integrated academically and socially are more likely to persist to degree completion (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2011; Rendon, 1994). Research has shown that social and academic integration may differ for community college students compared to university students, but in both cases it impacts student persistence (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010).

Weak connections between students and their academic and social environment can hinder commitment and lead to departure (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010). Given their influence on college retention and completion, higher levels of academic and social integration should be a priority. Rather than focus on why students leave, it is important to understand what two-year institutions can or already do to improve transitions and persistence.

Identifying equity gaps and focusing on improvement in pathways and programs of study is one way to improve student outcomes (Pickel & Bragg, 2015; Tinto, 2007). To this end, this brief explores the role of First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, with specific attention to student success courses or first-year seminars, as strategies that institutions can employ to better integrate students academically and socially, thus improving their transition to and achievement in postsecondary education.

*A quality student success course within a FYE program can help to demystify college culture and structures and help students build social networks and critical academic and help-seeking skills.*

### First-Year Experience Defined

The FYE is defined as the programming and interactions that form the student experience from the first point of contact to the end of the first academic year. Modifying the FYE has been identified as one way to address issues related to transition to and through the first year (Renn & Reason, 2013). FYE programs have been recognized as a high-impact practice that can improve student engagement and outcomes, particularly for underserved students (Kuh, 2008). FYE programs have multiple components, including first-year seminars, learning communities, orientation, early alert systems, academic advising and other practices that enhance student engagement and student success (Bers & Younger, 2014).

## HIGHLIGHTS

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS CAN BE A HIGH-IMPACT CHANGE TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ FYE

SEMINARS CAN BE CUSTOMIZED TO SERVE SPECIFIC PATHWAYS AND POPULATIONS

DISAGGREGATED SEMINAR ASSESSMENT CAN REVEAL INEQUITIES AND ADDITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS NEEDS

## Potential FYE Program Components

- ✓ **First-Year seminars** are typically a semester long and offer success strategies that influence academic and social integration (Hunter, 2006).
- ✓ **Learning communities** include common programmatic efforts and shared courses. They have been shown to ease transition and create a supportive environment through peer grouping (Renn & Reason, 2013).
- ✓ **Orientation programs** have four common goals: improve academic success, assist students in adjusting to college life, facilitate peer connections, and as a source of information. They have been shown to increase integration, academic progress, and persistence through to the second year (Renn & Reason, 2013).
- ✓ **Early warning systems** are often implemented by academic advisors or counselors for students who are struggling academically. They provide an opportunity for the review of study habits, and enable students to course correct before it is too late (Beck & Davidson, 2001).

Given the consistent evidence of just how critical success in the first year is to student retention and completion, Mayo (2013) encourages community colleges to require structured FYE programs. Such programs can be vehicles for all four of the mechanisms that Karp (2011) identified as contributors to student success: creating social relationships, clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment, developing college know-how, and making college life feasible. However, despite the strengthening evidence base and advocacy for FYE programs, the *2014 National Survey of Student Success Initiatives at Two-Year Colleges* indicates that mandatory participation in these programs is not the norm. Only 32.5% of the colleges required all students to engage in pre-term orientation services, including advising and registration. The same survey indicates that while first-year seminars are offered at 80.2% of the institutions, only 20.4% require participation by all students (Koch, Griffin, & Barefoot, 2014).

## First-Year Seminars: A Manageable Intervention with Measurable Outcomes

While learning communities are a conduit for the social and academic integration of community college students (Deil-Amen, 2011), they tend to require multiple semesters to produce more than modest, short-term results (Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, & Wathington, 2012). When considering changes to the FYE, the first-year seminar or student success course is an appealing option for colleges looking for a high-impact retention intervention (Cho & Karp, 2012; Karp et al., 2010; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007) without the intensive implementation demands of an early alert system or multi-semester learning communities. A student success course offered as a first-year seminar can be an important component of a FYE program, especially for underserved student populations. A quality student success course can help to demystify college culture and structures and help students build social networks and critical academic and help-seeking skills. It can also be customized to support specific academic or social needs present among particular student populations (based on background, interests, or race/ethnicity) or within a particular academic pathway (e.g. if students in a particular program of study need some additional skill building or career exploration).

Research has shown that enrollment in these types of courses within the first year can improve student outcomes (Cho & Karp, 2012; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, Calcagno, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schnell, Louis, Doetkott, 2003; Stovall, 1999). The extent to which community college student enrollment in student success courses affects outcomes has been explored in two large-scale studies. Results from both studies show a positive correlation between student enrollment in a student success course and their earning college credit and persistence (Cho & Karp, 2012; Zeidenberg et al., 2007). One study found that students referred to the lowest level of developmental math were more likely to earn college-level credits in the first year if they took a student success course, however, this benefit was most pronounced for students who placed into higher levels of remedial coursework (Cho & Karp, 2012). However, Miller, Janz, and Chen (2007) found that participation in a first-year seminar increased retention rates regardless of the level of academic preparation. Given the potential benefits to all students, institutions should give serious consideration to requiring student enrollment in student success courses.

## Implementation and Assessment

Institutions should consider assigning a single leader to oversee FYE initiatives (Mayo, 2013), while also engaging an interdepartmental team and faculty across disciplines to support the design and implementation of FYE programming (Mayo, 2013; Tinto, 2007). These efforts should incorporate interactions with peers and faculty inside and outside of the classroom, encourage student involvement in order to create links between the curriculum and co-curriculum, and address academic expectations, engagement, and prepara-

tion (Mayo, 2013). FYE programs benefit from involving Institutional Research (IR) professionals to develop strategies for measuring program effectiveness (Bers & Younger, 2014). Furthermore, data should be disaggregated to compare outcomes for various student populations. Whereas Cho and Karp (2012) found an overall benefit for students enrolling in a student success course, the benefits to Black students in the programs studied were not evident. As such, community college leaders should commit to collecting program data to identify gaps in student outcomes and advocate for population-specific programming to address equity gaps.

### Key Decision Points for Implementing a First-Year Seminar

- ✓ Is the course mandatory? For all students or only some?
- ✓ Is the course offered for college-level credit?
- ✓ Will this course be free to the student or will they be charged tuition?
- ✓ Is this course being integrated into specific pathways or is it the same course for all students?
- ✓ How are faculty to be involved with designing and implementing the course?
- ✓ How will the course be assessed? What evidence must be collected to verify value to students and the college?
- ✓ Will the course be based on a prepared or a custom curriculum? What values should be reflected in the curriculum? E.g. is it **culturally responsive, setting high expectations and validating students' skills, culture, and belonging in college?**

## Conclusion

The implementation of a required first-year seminar can be a touchstone for transforming the FYE and a space where students can integrate academically and socially, clarify their academic pathway, and build critical success skills. A first-year seminar also offers institutions the opportunity to evaluate outcomes over time and introduce sections customized to the specific academic or social needs of particular populations. While there is no single intervention that can remedy all retention issues, a comprehensive approach to the first year shows promise. Putting multifaceted programs together takes time and commitment by an entire institution. Tinto (2015) reminds institutions that it can take three to five years for student success initiatives to show results, especially if students self-select to participate. Therefore, it is important to stay the course recognizing that even small gains can make a difference in the lives of individual students.

### Additional Resources

**Midwest First-Year Conference**, [www.mfyc.org](http://www.mfyc.org)

**National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition**, [www.sc.edu/fye](http://www.sc.edu/fye)

**National Orientation Directors Association**, <http://www.nodaweb.org>

**Illinois' Principles to Guide Career Pathways and Programs of Study Implementation and Improvement** offer design elements that aid institutions to design pathways that support completion and equitable outcomes through "comprehensive and proactive support services [that] are offered to ensure students' needs are met as they navigate pathways." A quality first-year seminar is a prime example of such a support. Access these principles at [occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/pos/cp-principles-2015.pdf](http://occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/pos/cp-principles-2015.pdf)

The **PTR Process and Practice Assessment** module offers a method for institutions to identify current efforts to support students in the first year, including identifying gaps in student participation. As community colleges continue to balance a high number of underprepared students enrolling and increased demands for accountability, strategies that promote student success in the first-year are important to consider and explore systematically. Access this module at [occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/ptr/Modules/PTR%20Module%203.pdf](http://occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/ptr/Modules/PTR%20Module%203.pdf)

## About the Authors

Marci Rockey is a doctoral student and Randi Congleton is a doctoral candidate in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership specializing in Higher Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Both currently work as graduate research assistants for OCCRL.

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