



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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IMPLEMENTING A FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM

In order to increase retention, GPAs, graduation rates, and the overall student experience for students in transition, Wallace State Community College (WSCC) implemented a First-Year Gateway Initiative (FYGI) in spring 2008. The first step in our process was to select committee members from across campus to allow input from all departments and services, define our institution's first-year student, examine best practices, gather data on our gateway courses, and identify priorities for fall semester. The first-year experience is holistic. Every aspect of a student's experience must be evaluated and improved—from coursework to safety.

The idea is not to reform the student but to transform the institution's way of servicing and meeting the needs of the first-year student. We decided to address programs that provided academic support, such as learning communities and structured learning assistance courses, and to initiate more opportunities for interaction between faculty and first-year students. Institutions have the responsibility and obligation to provide social and academic experiences, as most students-in-transition often abandon college from a lack in building relationships and bonding among cohorts and faculty.

Learning Communities

Committee members opted to offer class pairings to pilot our learning communities, as opposed to triads or tetrads, in order to simplify registration. English 101 was paired with Speech 107 (Public Speaking), English 092 with Reading 083 (developmental courses), Math 090 and Orientation 103 (developmental math and required orientation course), and English 101 with ORI 101 (required orientation course).

The purpose of the learning community is to provide an immediate "community" for new students, provide opportunity for interaction among students and faculty, and assist student learning by coordinating and reinforcing course materials. In all of the learning communities, we used a common text. Instructors

collaborated on assignments and discussions to ensure the curriculum was integrated. Classes were offered back-to-back, so instructors could team teach or students could meet with either instructor for an extended period of time.

Essays written in ENG 101 were given as speeches; research materials gathered in speeches were used to write an informative essay. Students wrote about why WSCC was selected for the first-year experience, which was later given as a speech; outlines were covered in ENG 101 and used to prepare speech assignments; journals from English were used for impromptu speech assignments.

At the end of the semester, surveys were administered, and 100% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that it was a positive first experience, one they enjoyed and would like to have again. One hundred percent said that the pairing helped reinforce the material by building on previous information, materials, and techniques. Ninety-four percent stated that the Learning Community assisted them in making friends, and 98% favored the common theme.

Structured Learning Assistance Classes (SLA)

Three SLA classes were offered for fall—History 101 (Western Civ), ENG 101, and Biology 103—and provided academic support, utilizing a student peer-teacher to assist in tutoring. The students selected as peer teachers had taken the courses with the instructor and been successful. They not only reviewed course materials, but assisted in study and organizational skills. Student participants were required to sign a contract, stating they understood that if their average in the course dropped below 70, they would be required to attend hour-long tutoring sessions each week until their average improved. Student surveys indicated that students agreed or strongly agreed that the course format helped them improve academically; 77% of students suggested that other difficult courses be offered as SLA courses.

Faculty/Freshman Lunch

Failure to connect and become involved in college is one of the reasons for high attrition rates among first-year students. Research indicates that social



interaction is one of the important elements in retaining students. In keeping with this idea of connection and involvement, and to promote more interaction outside of the classroom, we initiated a freshman/ faculty lunch the first Tuesday of each month, held in the Student Center. Several instructors gave assignments to encourage participation; a speech requirement was to meet one new faculty member and another freshman at WSCC. Some faculty "invited" a student to lunch each month. One biology instructor challenged students to a game of pool. Students from the music department provided entertainment for the two-hour, come-as-you-please lunch.

Conclusion

First-year programs are crucial to promoting student success and improving retention. At WSCC, we have developed a three-year strategic plan and are focusing on implementing more learning communities with team teaching and SLA classes. Other changes are planned for the Student Center, orientation, registration, and a common-read campuswide. We strive to improve student success by attempting to discover what students truly need. First-year programs can make an enormous difference in helping students fulfill their lifetime educational goals.

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