

K-State First-Year Experience Task Force Report

Background

In September 2006, a K-State task force composed of faculty, students, administrators and unclassified staff was formed by Provost Nellis. The task force's general charge is to develop a framework and a set of recommendations for improving K-State's first-year experience, based on reviewing, assessing and improving K-State's current practices.

Task Force Members

Larry Rodgers, Task Force Chair and Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Emily Besler, Student
Anthony Carter, Student
Mirta Chavez, Director, Multicultural Programs, Diversity and Dual Career Development
Tara Coleman, Science Librarian, Hale Library
Kevin Cook, Coordinator, Department of Housing and Dining
Lynn Ewanow, Associate Dean, Architecture, Planning and Design
Greg Eiselein, Professor of English
Phil Hughes, Associate Athletic Director
Derek Jackson, Assistant Director, Department of Housing and Dining
Emily Lehning, Assistant Dean, New Student Services
Judy Lynch, Director, Academic Assistance Center
Dixie Schierlman, Associate Dean, K-State Salina
Betty Stevens, Associate Vice Provost, Continuing Education
Be Stoney, Associate Professor of Secondary Education
Cia Verschelden, Director, Assessment Office
Ruth Dyer, Associate Provost, *Ex-Officio*

Task Force Charge

Review current orientation programs offered by various K -State units and colleges.

Gather additional ideas and input from various on-campus and external groups to consider for the structure of a K-State First-Year Experience Program.

Develop set of recommendations for the structure of a K-State First-Year Experience Program. (Consider possible costs. Current additional funding will be on the order of about \$60K/year beginning in Fall 2007 and another \$40K/year beginning in Fall 2009.)

Share recommendations with larger group of representatives from units providing orientation programs. (Expected date of implementation of first phase of new program: Fall 2007.)

Desired characteristics of first-year experience programs identified at August 15 meeting:

1. A sense of community/family to students as soon as they come to campus; might be through all university or college-specific convocations or other events early in school year
2. Faculty engagement
3. Improved linkages among academic and student service units
4. The incorporation of learning communities into the educational experience
5. Improved attention on retention beyond the first-year
6. Programs that involve all student constituencies, including distance education students, student athletes, transfer students, spouses, and other individuals important to students
7. A program that involves students at the individual department and college levels
8. The inculcation of general education skills (information literature, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, moral and ethical reasoning), life-long learning skills, and other qualities of an educated person.

Task Force Process

The task force met bi-weekly for three months. It divided into five subgroups, each of which addressed distinct first-year issues:

1. First-year experience involving non-residential students and on-line orientation programs (Stevens and Schierlman)
2. First-year experience at peer and comparable Institutions (Stoney, Cook, and Hughes)
3. In-class and academic elements of first-year-experience (Eiselein, Verschelden, Ewanow and Carter)
4. Residential life components of first-year experience (Chavez, Jackson, and Coleman). Chavez also addressed the multicultural component of the first year.
5. Orientation programs and elements of first-year experience that occur prior to the beginning of in-class instruction (Lehning, Lynch, and Besler)

In addition, the task force heard from three Presidential-Teaching-Award-Winning Instructors for input involving a first-year classroom experience. The instructors were Andrew Barkley, Professor of Agricultural Economics; Deborah Murray, Instructor of English; and Yasmin Patell, Distinguished Teaching Scholar in Chemistry.

Introduction

A vibrant, academically challenging first-year program that builds classroom skills, addresses issues of campus culture, and instills a strong sense of community through common first-year experiences will yield not only tangible learning benefits, it will also

yield university-wide financial benefits through increased matriculation, retention and degree attainment. Thus successful first-year programs are net financial and academic gains to the university.

Currently, K-State has 5400 first-year undergraduate students, including 300 at Salina. (Although there are also approximately 1700 first-year graduate students, they are not the focus of this report.) Sixty-five to 70% of K-State's first-year students live in the residence halls (3800 of the 4800 residence hall students are in their first-year), 20% (~1000) live in Greek-letter organization housing, and 10% (~540) live off campus in housing that has official university affiliations. With 90% of all first-year students in an organized living environment, K-State already has an excellent common experiential ground on which to rest a first-year program. It can thus capitalize on the community-building opportunities and student-life enrichment that occur in such a setting. Upcraft, Barefoot, and Gardner provide a useful comprehensive description of first-year goals: "First-year students succeed when they make progress toward developing academic and intellectual competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health and wellness, developing civic responsibility, considering the spiritual dimensions of life, and dealing with diversity." Students who develop in these areas are students who will stay at K-State and graduate.

The task force recognizes the strong connection between K-State's ability to attract, retain and graduate excellent students and what kinds of academic programs those students are offered during their first year on campus. Data from a variety of first-year programs nationwide make a compelling case for the way in which various initiatives in these programs lead to statistically significant improvements in student persistence from the first-year through graduation. The task force's recommendations are K-State-specific proposals that the task force believes will have positive effects on improving student learning and therefore will also improve retention and graduation rates.

For example, *Peer Review* (vol 8.3, pages 26-28) provides an excellent summary of first-year retention research that has influenced the task force's decision to make the creation of a first-year classroom experience its highest priority. Data from more than forty studies indicate that the creation of a first-year seminar alone can likely account for a 5-15% improvement in four-year graduation rates at public universities like K-State. Based on the retention data reported in the table below, this improvement alone would elevate K-State from below the national retention average to the mean or above. It would also provide a means for retaining the tuition of a minimum of 400 students to as many as 1200 whom we are currently losing from the first year on.

First-Year Experience Challenges and Opportunities

According to an American Association of American College's and Universities 2002 report *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, "as colleges admit many more students, the professors who teach them report greater numbers are underprepared for college work. The evidence supports these impressions.

Less than one-half of high school graduates complete even a minimally defined college preparatory curriculum in high school, leaving colleges to remedy the education gaps.“

K-State’s current effectiveness in addressing this gap can be measured by its lower-than-average retention rates. These rates, summerized in the following table, suggest that K-State needs to improve its first-year retention by at least 5% to reach the national mean among similar universities.

Six Year Graduation Rates

1999 First-time Freshman Cohorts

Type of Institution	Retention Rates		Graduation Rates	
	1st-yr	2nd-yr	5-yr	6-yr
All Institutions (Doctoral/Research Extensive)	84.0%	76.0%	61.0%	66.0%
Public Institutions (Doctoral/Research Extensive)	84.0%	76.0%	60.0%	66.0%
Private Institutions (Doctoral/Research Extensive)	87.0%	79.0%	64.0%	69.0%
Kansas State University	75.0%	67.0%	49.0%	56.0%

First-year Retention Rates

2004 First-time Freshman Cohorts

Type of Institution	Retention Rates	
	1st-yr	2nd-yr
All Institutions (Doctoral/Research Extensive)	86.0%	N/A
Public Institutions (Doctoral/Research Extensive)	86.0%	N/A
Private Institutions (Doctoral/Research Extensive)	85.0%	N/A
Kansas State University	81.0%	72.0%

Source: Office of Planning and Analysis, KSU, from the 2005-06 CSRDE Retention Report.

The task force weighed the range of factors that account for K-State's lower-than-average retention rates. It noted the following overarching local challenges to creating an effective first-year experience. Addressing these challenges is the first step toward making statistically significant improvement in retention.

1. Currently, there is no single event or set of events, either social or academic that unite first-year students and help integrate them into the K-State community.
2. Currently, there is no centralized first-year office, which leads to inadequate coordination between academic and student-life services on campus focused on first-year issues and programs.
3. There is no common curriculum or even a single class that unifies the academic experience of first-year students. (Other universities have referred to this as a "One Voice" course with a common syllabus.) Although every student must take expository writing and public speaking, an increasing percentage of students arrive having already fulfilled these requirements either in high school dual-credit classes or via transfer.
4. The first-year experience must address a diverse range of students (multicultural students, non-traditional students, traditional freshmen, students in resident halls or off-campus housing, commuters, transfers, students taking courses on-line, etc). The different needs among these groups have to be factored into programs, classes and events.
5. And finally, research based on best practices from other universities strongly indicates that first-year experiences are most effective when they emphasize individualized and small-group experiences, so the cost of sustaining programs is a factor. However, the cost of running individual courses must be considered in the context of larger issues involving matriculation rates, retention and overall student satisfaction.

Recommendations

The committee's initial recommendation is for the university to create a campus-wide administrative structure to coordinate the three diverse elements of the first-year experience. These elements include:

1. First-year academic curricula
2. Orientation to K-State student life
3. Orientation to college life

To have a permanent means of addressing these areas, we recommend a) establishing a "first-year experience office" whose primary responsibility is to provide a centralized means of promoting, organizing, and overseeing first-year courses, issues and events and

b) establishing a committee made up of students, faculty, staff, and administrators to promote communication among all the constituent groups. The initial charge to the administration and the advisory committee is to create and disseminate a document that outlines the core principles and philosophy of K-State's first-year experience.

One of the larger benefits of such an office would be its ability to serve as a bridge between the academic and university-life campus communities. The task force noted on many occasions that these two areas, which tend to operate independently of each other, would greatly benefit from far more collaboration.

Recommendations involving each of three areas are as follows:

1. Recommendations for first-year curricula

Top Recommended action item: The committee's highest priority expressed as a recommendation is the creation of a common first-year classroom experience for credit. These courses would be for students during the whole of their *first year at K-State*, both freshman and new (undergraduate) transfer students. Students would take one three credit-hour course each semester, for a total of six general education credit hours. Complementing the proposed revision of the general education program, the courses would be built around a set of first-year seminars taught by K-State faculty that are focused on general education skills and academic development. The curriculum would aim toward strengthening intellectual skills, explaining academic standards of college-level work, and introducing students to the University's undergraduate learning outcomes. These seminars would not be designed as introductions to the disciplines.

Recommended action item: Develop courses that reflects a common course design, learning outcomes and pedagogy.

Recommended action item: Develop an incentive and reward system for faculty and departments who participate in the first-year course and teach in the first-year program.

Recommended action item: In addition to the first-year course, enlarge the number of non-classroom, academically-oriented experiences, which may include mandatory library research instruction and peer mentoring programs to connect first-year students to upper-classmen.

2. Recommendations for Orientation to K-State Student Life.

This part of the first-year experience is addressed for the most part prior to students' first day of class at K-State through a variety of programs and overnight experiences.

Recommended action item: Wildcat Warm-up or a similar experience should remain the centerpiece of K-State's extended orientation. It should be enlarged considerably and should be offered at a range of times/dates throughout the summer

to allow different audiences (including athletes, prospective Greek system members and band members) to attend. Another option is to bring students to campus the week before classes commence and combine the Wildcat Warm-up experience with some of the University 101 features presented below. The program needs to have long-term stable funding to grow to a more inclusive size. The start-up for this program that has come from SGA should continue as long as is feasible.

Recommended action item: The committee recommends creating University 101, a required program for new students designed to help them adjust to the campus environment. The program is a one-hour academic credit course. It is split into two parts. Part one is a one-day orientation prior to the beginning of class. Topics of emphasis can include the Principles of Community, sexual assault prevention, responsible decision-making (alcohol use) and other immediately critical topics. Part two involves meetings during the semester that include student health, campus safety, student services, diversity/global perspectives, study abroad, scholarship availability, and financial management. Distance students should have the accommodations to take this course via off-campus broadcasts.

Recommended action item: Establishing a first-year convocation held in the football stadium that includes a tunnel walk during the weekend before fall classes commence. All first-year students should be strongly encouraged to attend. The event should include the president, relevant administrators, faculty, various coaches, recognized athletes and alums, the band, and the jumbotron.

Recommended action item: The residential element is one of the foundations for successful first-year programs. Several components of residential student life need to be incorporated into K-State's first-year plan.

Faculty: Many first-year programs bring faculty to the living environments to meet with students outside of class time. Currently, K-State has four cluster floors that involve faculty. The committee recommends bringing more faculty in contact with first-year students outside the classroom, including involving faculty in meals, etc, at the residence halls. This may include giving certain faculty an official designation of "first-year faculty" and recognizing them accordingly.

Academic Services: Making academic services available to students in their living environments is crucial to first-year success. Students need classrooms, tutoring, advising, study groups, career development and counseling and resource centers close at hand. Such services are generally available on various scales across campus. They will need to grow as the first-year experience expands.

Residence Life and Academic Life: These two separate parts of campus need to work hand in hand. Many first-year programs have successfully created advisory teams that include faculty, residence life staff, and student leaders to help coordinate the overall 24-hour first-year experience.

Peer to peer connections: Mentoring is a crucial component of first-year programs. The current ratio of resident assistants and multicultural assistants to residents is 1:47. Reducing the ratio would yield obvious positive benefits, especially if the focus continued to emphasize academic success.

Residence Hall advising: Although students' main advising should continue to take place in conjunction with their majors and programs, we recommend establishing peer advising desks in the larger residence halls staffed by upper-level student employees who are trained and supervised by professional college advisors. The walk-in technology help desk in the library might provide a model for a similar advising help desk.

Residence Hall Classrooms: The committee notes that the excellent general-use technology classrooms in the residence halls might be better used to maximize the benefit of those rooms for first-year programs and classes.

Recommended action item: Obviously, not all students live on or near campus. Our commuting and distance students need special accommodations during the first-year. Courses that are part of the first-year experience should be created with off-campus students in mind, which includes a version of courses in K-State Online. Special events held on campus should be recorded for playback from the K-State web presence. DCE should employ the appropriate measures under its administrative umbrella to ensure that off-campus, distance and non-traditional students receive the same kinds of first-year opportunities and benefits accorded on-campus students.

Recommended action item: K-State student life administrators maintain that alcohol abuse plays a role in as many as half of all academic dismissals and therefore has an alarming effect on retention. Through the coordination of Dean Bosco's office, the counseling center, under the direction of Fred Newton, proposes to implement a "Healthy PAC-CATs Program" that addresses healthy life style behaviors and good decision-making skills. By focusing on alcohol abuse as an outcome of poor decision-making, such a program shows promise for mitigating alcohol-related poor academic performance. The committee believes that this program, set at a cost of approximately \$30,000, is likely worth considering in the context of the total first-year experience proposal but it also expressed concern about the cost relative to the academic-based programs it very much wants to see implemented.

3. Orientation to College Life.

This part of the first-year experience involves making available to all students selected services and opportunities that are currently available to select groups (like athletes and University Experience students)

Recommended action item: There should be opportunities to participate in a common university-wide reading experience the summer prior to the first year and every effort should be made to bring the author of the selected book to campus during the fall. Although this project should involve the entire first-year community, it might benefit from a connection to the honors program.

Recommended action item: Currently there are many different study skill and tutoring opportunities on campus. However, not all students become aware of these

opportunities. The committee believes they could be better coordinated so that students would be more aware of the full variety of opportunities for academic assistance.

Recommended action item: Residence life and first-year programs go hand-in-hand. An advisory team made up of faculty, residence life staff, students and other relevant parties needs to be formed that coordinates the crucial link between residence halls and academic life. Their work would dovetail with existing campus activities involving tutoring, academic advising, study groups, career advising, resource centers, etc.

Recommended action item: Currently there are seven cluster floors (housing around 60 students each) in the residence halls. These clusters tend to be organized around disciplinary interests among students. The committee recommends enlarging both the scope and scale of Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS). An additional effort should be made, where feasible, to cluster students taking first-year experience classes together in the same residence halls

Budget

Although the task force had extensive budget discussions and makes its recommendations with a keen appreciation for the budget circumstances in which it was asked to operate, it resisted providing line-item, dollar-specific figures. This is due to several factors: a lack of access about the cost of certain initiatives; an appreciation of the way in which certain initiatives (like Wildcat Warm-up) are fee-driven and can thus generate much of the operating income required for their own growth; and especially the important connection between increased retention and revenue. The main point to emphasize about budget is that based on the research consulted by the committee, when first-year programs put academic initiatives at the center, they pay for themselves over the long run.

Final Recommended action item: The task force recommends creating a financial cost model that projects correlations between the cost of first-year experience programs and the additional revenue that will be generated by higher retention. One cannot be considered without the other. We suggest this model as a crucial feature of our proposal because of the many studies we examined which concluded that despite the seeming initial high cost of first-year programs, the benefits were such that a university like K-State cannot afford not to significantly enhance its first-year academic experience. In the end, we will retain more students, enhance teaching and learning, improve community building, and social and cultural awareness and create a permanent connectedness to the institution.

Citations and Further information

Upcraft, M.L., Gardner, J.N., Barefoot, B.O., eds, 2005 “Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student: A Handbook for Improving the First year of College.” San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Link for designing a convocation, from Washington State University:

<http://www.nsp.wsu.edu/Nodac/index.html#>

First-year experience resources with online or nontraditional student emphasis:

<http://sc.edu/fye/events/annual/index.html> (a great place to start)

<http://www.indstate.edu/site/fvp/img/final-report.pdf> (a report from a group like us)

<http://www.csus.edu/acad/ge/freshmanPrograms/freshmanseminar.htm>

<http://www.csus.edu/acad/ge/freshmanPrograms/learningcommunities.htm>

<http://fye.osu.edu/aboutfve.html>

General First-year experience websites

<http://www.wiu.edu/fye/>

<http://oregonstate.edu/fye/>

http://www.kennesaw.edu/university_studies/class/index.shtml

<http://www.bgsu.edu/students/bgexRerience/>

<http://www.uky.edu/AS/Discovery/index.htm>

<http://www.sandiego.edu/sli/FYEOlineResources.RhR>

<http://www.adultstudent.com/studentislinks.htIUI> (focus on nontraditional students)

First-Year Seminars--the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition

www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr

Residence Education—The Association of College and University Housing Officers-International

www.acuho-i.org

Enclosed Appendices

Appendix 1 Wildcat Warm-up Conference Schedule

Appendix 2 Sample University 101 course from University of South Carolina

Appendix 3 Convocation article by Joe Cuseo

Appendix 4 Summary of first-year-experience programs at peer universities

Appendix 5 Current on-campus first-year opportunities, by college, prepared by Emily Lehning