



# First-Year Experience Programs and Lifelong Engagement



# Advancement Forum

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# 1) Executive Overview

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## Key Observations

**Profiled institutions establish comprehensive first-year experience programs to support a student's transition to higher education and teach the institution's traditions and values.** Pre-enrollment and new student orientation sessions, teach students about the school's history and traditions, notable alumni, and the value of lifelong institutional engagement (e.g., networking opportunities). Contacts foster an institutional connection among first-year students through common book programs and activities that encourage students to explore local businesses.

**Alumni participate in recruitment events and host celebratory galas for first-year students.** Contacts note that the inclusion of alumni in prospective and admitted student recruitment events demonstrates the importance of lifelong engagement to incoming students. The Alumni Association at **Institution J** hosts a gala event for all first-year students immediately after the completion of their first semester, which officially welcomes them to the alumni network.

**Staff hire students to serve as orientation leaders during first-year experience program sessions.** Staff interview student applicants in the fall and train selected leaders in the spring. Student leaders earn academic credit for attendance at weekly meetings where they learn about leadership theory and development, diversity, and university history. Student leaders serve as counselors to first-year students and their guests during summer orientations and receive a monetary stipend of at least \$1,000 and summer housing.

**Online survey evaluations for participants after program sessions to collect feedback on how to improve orientation programming.** Staff administer surveys to attendees after orientation via online survey links offered through Survey Monkey, internally-developed survey systems, or external partners such as Hobson's. The surveys include both qualitative and quantitative feedback mechanisms that ask participants to numerically rate their satisfaction with orientation sessions and provide open-ended feedback. Staff compile and aggregate the survey results and meet at the end of the summer to make data-based decisions on programming changes to subsequent orientations.

## 2) First-Year Experience Program and Components

### First-Year Experience Program Components

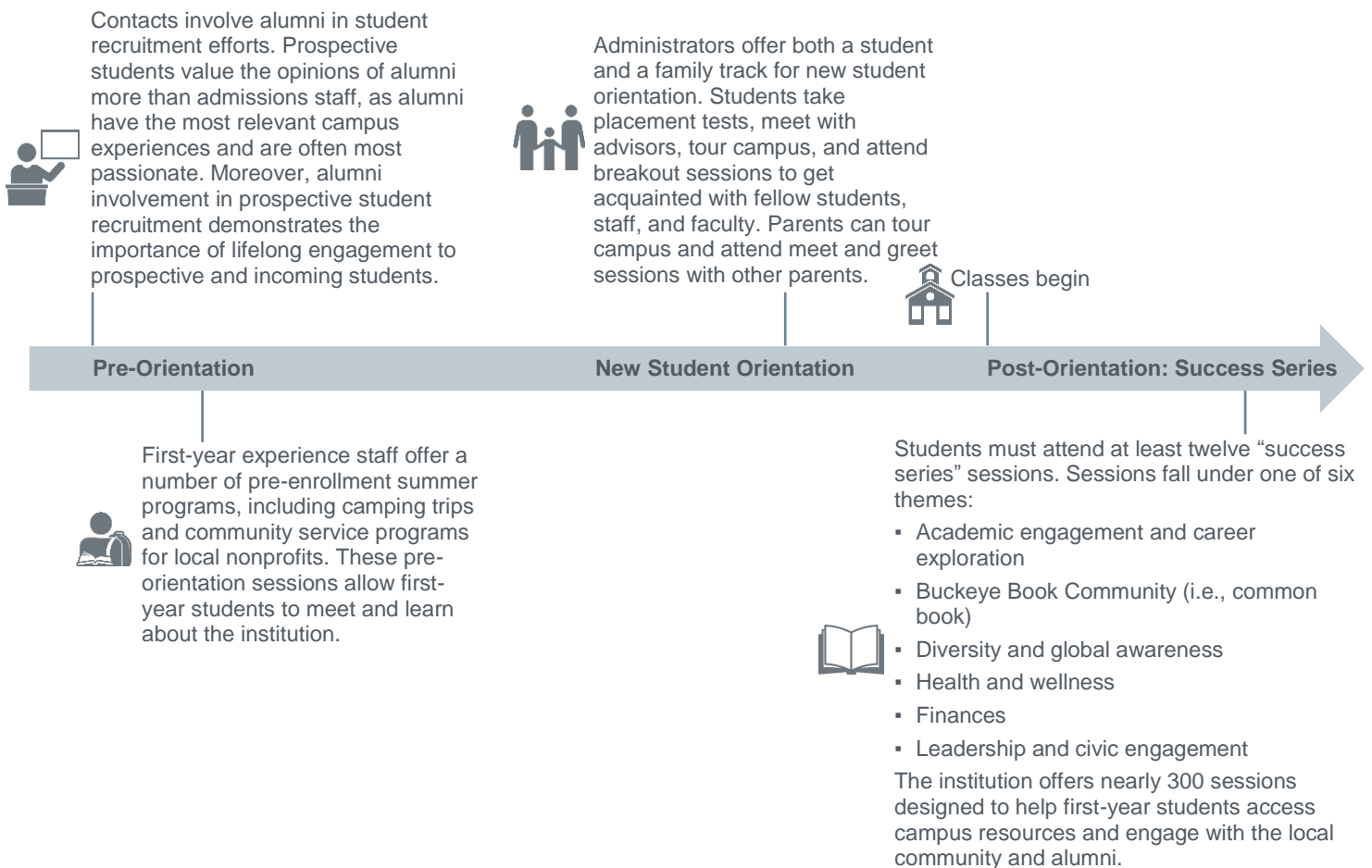
#### ***Profiled Institutions Communicate Campus Traditions and Values through Summer and Pre-Convocation Orientation Sessions***

Contacts recommend that students learn the value of lifelong engagement prior to attending an orientation session, and therefore employ alumni in student recruitment events like questions and answer sessions. Profiled institutions also incorporate campus traditions and values into nearly all facets of the first-year experience, including programs such as:

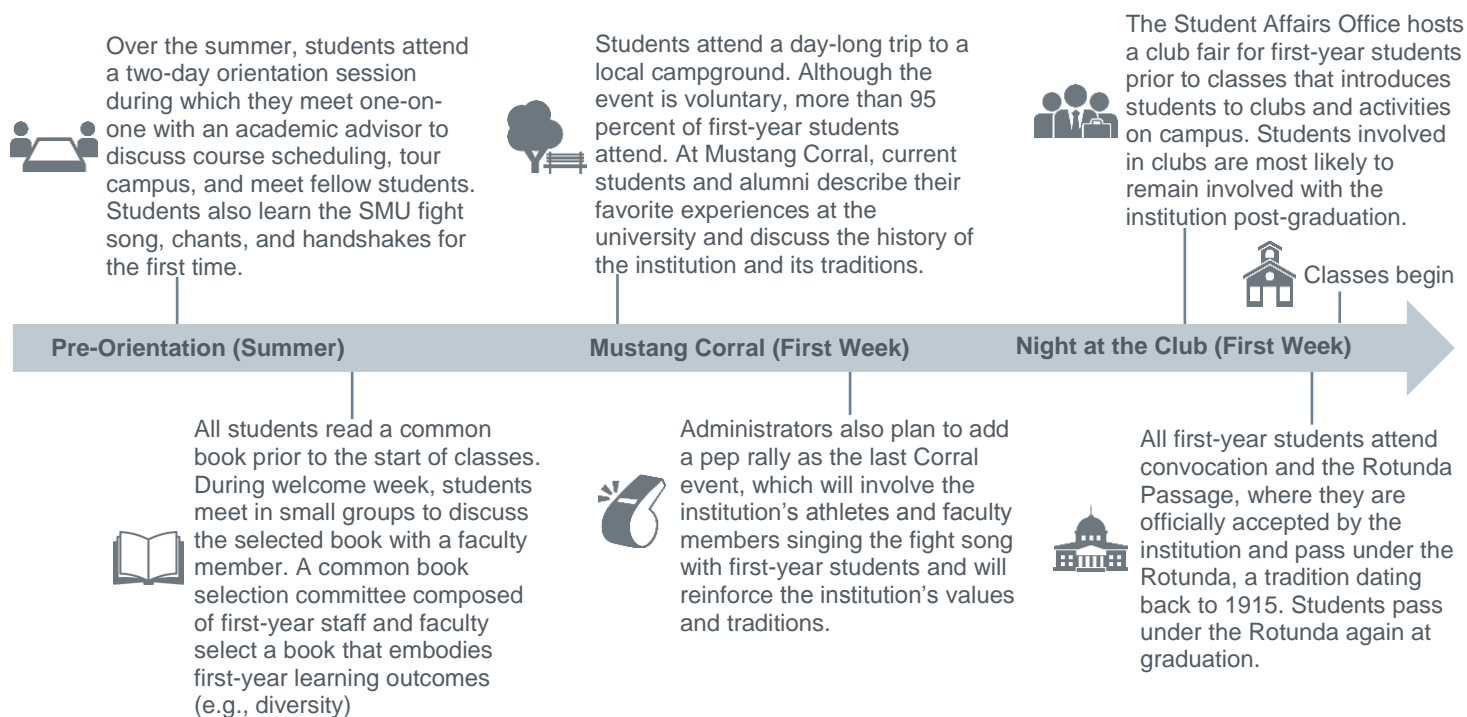
- the reading of a common book,
- pep rallies, and
- speeches by notable alumni.

Although many components of first-year experience programs are common across institutions, the timeline to offer these experiences differs at profiled institutions. At **Institution L**, contacts offer more programming after classes begin through their success series workshops; conversely, the majority of first-year experience programming at **Institution M** occurs prior to the start of classes.

#### **First-Year Experience Overview at *Institution L***



## First-Year Experience Overview at *Institution M*



### **Select a Common Book and Develop Events with Local Businesses to Promote Engagement with the Entire Institution**

Contacts acknowledge that students often feel a specific connection to their academic program or to a co-curricular pursuit, and struggle to foster support for the institution as a whole among students. Contacts recommend regular reminders of campus-wide values and traditions throughout all orientation events, For example:

- At **Institution J**, administrators issue every first-year student a class pin, emblazoned with the institution's logo, motto, and class year. Students wear these pins for convocation and at graduation.
- At both **Institution L** and **Institution M**, first-year students take a class picture on the last day of welcome week. First-year experience staff then email the photo to every student.

These examples, although simple, cost the institution very little and successfully connect first-year students with the institution. However, contacts acknowledge that a single strategy will not promote lifelong engagement among first-year students.

## Considerations for Lifelong Engagement and Community Connections in First-Year Experience Programming

← More Successful ————— Less Successful →



### Repeat Traditions at all First-Year Programming Sessions

Contacts at profiled institutions recommend incorporating campus traditions and history into all first-year events. For example, orientation leaders at **Institution M** always discuss the history of the building and the donors in which an orientation event is held. Students also sing the school fight song at every orientation event and during meals.



### Develop Programs with Local Businesses

At **Institution A**, administrators and local businesses host a “community introduction event.” For three hours on the Monday of orientation, businesses invite students to tour the local shops, and encourage participation with free food and prizes. Administrators also provide each business with a list of forty to fifty first-year student names. If the student enters that store, they receive an institution or business-themed prize (e.g., a Bucknell mug).



### Introduce a Common Book

At **Institution M**, first-year experience staff select a book in collaboration with faculty members that all students must read prior to orientation. Students meet in small groups at orientation to discuss the book. Contacts note that the book unifies first-year students around a common theme; however, they also acknowledge that not all students read the book or participate in discussion.



### Develop an Institution-wide Scavenger Hunt Second Semester to Promote Continued Engagement with the Institution’s History

The Scarlet Scramble is a 24-hour campus and city adventure for teams of five to ten first-year students at **Institution L** in the spring. The event encourages teams to answer institution-related trivia questions and decode clues to earn points and prizes. Participating students build relationships with other students and the local community, learn about new resources on campus, and learn more about the history of the institution. Types of clues include:

- **Local Trivia:** Answer questions related to local business, the history of the institution and famous alumni
- **Photo clues:** Take pictures in front of landmarks both on and off campus
- **Head-to-head:** First two teams to a local location compete in miscellaneous challenges (e.g., an eating competition at a local bakery or pizzeria)

## Alumni Involvement in Recruitment and Orientation

### ***Alumni Participation in Student Recruitment Demonstrates Lifelong Engagement and Fosters Connections Prior to Enrollment***

Contacts at **Institution L** recommend including alumni in both prospective and newly admitted recruitment events, as students who actively engage with alumni both before and throughout their college career are more likely to become active alumni themselves. Contacts typically employ alumni to answer general questions (e.g., admissions information, tuition) and provide prospective students with their personal experiences on campus.

#### **Popular Areas of Involvement for Alumni in Prospective Student Recruitment<sup>1</sup>**



**College Fairs**

At **Institution A**, alumni attend a major recruitment fair that draws nearly 120,000 prospective students. The Alumni Relations Office emails alumni in the area and works with the local alumni chapter to identify volunteers for the three day event. The institution provides alumni with shirts that identify them as connected to the institution. The Alumni Relations Office identifies alumni who represent a range of academic majors, geographic areas, and ages to attend.



**Alumni Chapters**

At **Institution B**, the number of alumni chapters increased from 30 to 95 between 2008 and 2013. Alumni relations staff rely on a chapter's board of directors to educate alumni about the student recruitment process and provide opportunities for participation. Contacts note that working with alumni already dedicated to the institution helps identify the best (e.g., most outgoing, with compelling anecdotes) alumni for student recruitment.



**Handwritten Postcards**

At **Institution C**, contacts ask interested alumni to write handwritten letters to 10 newly admitted students, detailing their positive experience at the institution and convincing admitted students to matriculate. The Alumni Relations Office provides alumni with contact information, a postmarked envelope, and a sample letter to ensure quality. The Admissions Office pays for the postage, and the Alumni Relations Office pays for the printing of sample letters.



#### **Showcase Upperclassmen and Alumni who Participate in First-Year Experience Mentoring Programs**

**Institution L's** First-Year Connections Team pairs a current second-year Ohio State student with a small group of first-year students to mentor and guide them through their first year on campus. Team member responsibilities include:

- Planning and hosting weekly activities from 6:00 - 7:30pm for students, including meetings with faculty and staff members and trips to local businesses
- Mentor group members for at least one hour per week on a variety of academic and non-academic topics
- Participate in Scarlet Scramble and student recruitment events

1) Severin, Alex. "Strategies to Engage Alumni in Student Recruitment." Education Advisory Board. Accessed April 10, 2014. <http://www.eab.com/Research-and-Insights/Advancement-Forum/Custom/2014/2/Strategies-to-Engage-Alumni-in-Student-Recruitment>.



## Ideal Qualifications for Alumni Recruiters<sup>2</sup>

Although most contacts recommend younger alumni for student recruitment events, contacts also acknowledge challenges, as older alumni are often more established in their professions and have greater flexibility to take time off to attend a college fair or recruitment event than younger alumni.



### Recently Graduated

Contacts recommend alumni who graduated two to six years ago as recruiters, as these alumni are typically the most passionate about the institution and have the most relevant experiences and anecdotes for prospective students.



### Post-Graduate Engagement

Alumni who participate in local alumni chapters, donate to the institution, or attend alumni events (e.g., networking events, career fairs) are more likely to participate in student recruitment efforts.



### On-Campus Involvement as Student

Alumni who were most involved during their time on campus (e.g., in athletics, student government, on-campus clubs) often possess the most compelling anecdotes and convince more students to attend the institution than alumni who were not as involved on campus as a student.



### Excellent Communication Skills

Alumni recruiters who can articulate the benefits of the institution and effectively address prospective student and parent questions are most likely to convince students to matriculate.

## Co-Host an Event with the Alumni Association to Celebrate Current Students and Promote Lifelong Engagement

At **Institution J**, the alumni association hosts celebratory events the day after the completion of a student's first semester, when they are officially welcomed to the institution's alumni network. Contacts host a gala event with food and drink during which alumni congratulate all first-years and discuss the advantages of being an alumni. The event also serves as a networking opportunity for current students and alumni. Students also sing the fight song, which reinforces their commitment to the institution.



### Host a Mandatory Orientation Session on History and Tradition

**Institution G's** orientation leaders present for an hour and a half on institution traditions and history, including a discussion of notable alumni and the importance of giving back to the institution. The presentation includes school spirit-building activities and information and videos from the president. A post-orientation survey revealed that students rate the history/traditions session as their favorite at orientation. The session ends with seniors giving first-years their class pins. Students will wear their pin to graduation, where an alumni representative will give them an alumni pin.

2) Ibid.

## 3) Staff and Resources

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### Coordination across Campus Units

#### ***One Administrator or Office Coordinates First-Year Experiences between Academic Units and Student Affairs Divisions***

The combination of academic and extracurricular components of first-year experience programs requires careful coordination. It is particularly difficult for academic units to partner with non-academic units, as professors have different priorities and concerns than student affairs administrators and the two groups may struggle to develop comprehensive programs that are both relevant and engaging for first-year students.

At **University C**, a First-Year Academic Coordinator and a Director of Resident Education together oversee the first-year experience:

- The First-Year Academic Coordinator manages all academic components, such as faculty affairs and curricula
- The Director of Resident Education oversees the non-academic components, such as housing

The coordinator and director meet every other week and attend meetings with campus officials such as vice provosts to discuss the development of new first-year experience programming and potential program changes.<sup>3</sup>



#### **Locate First-Year Experience Staff under the Office of Enrollment Services to Promote Collaboration with Admissions**

At **Institution L**, seven full-time staffers comprise the Office of First-Year Experience: five directors or assistant directors and two program coordinators. The Office of First-Year Experience reports directly to the Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Services, who also oversees admissions at the institution. First-year office staff accompany admissions officers in recruitment events, and note success related to increased

3) Edmonds, Lauren. "Developing an Integrated First Year Experience." Education Advisory Board. Accessed April 16, 2014. <http://www.eab.com/Research-and-Insights/Academic-Affairs-Forum/Custom/2012/06/Developing-an-Integrated-First-Year-Experience>.

## ***Hire Student Orientation Leaders to Provide Administrative Support***

Institutions hire students to serve as orientation leaders, provide campus tours, and assist the staff in office functions. Student leaders at **Institution L** also attend spring semester recruiting events.



### **Student Involvement in the First-Year Experience**

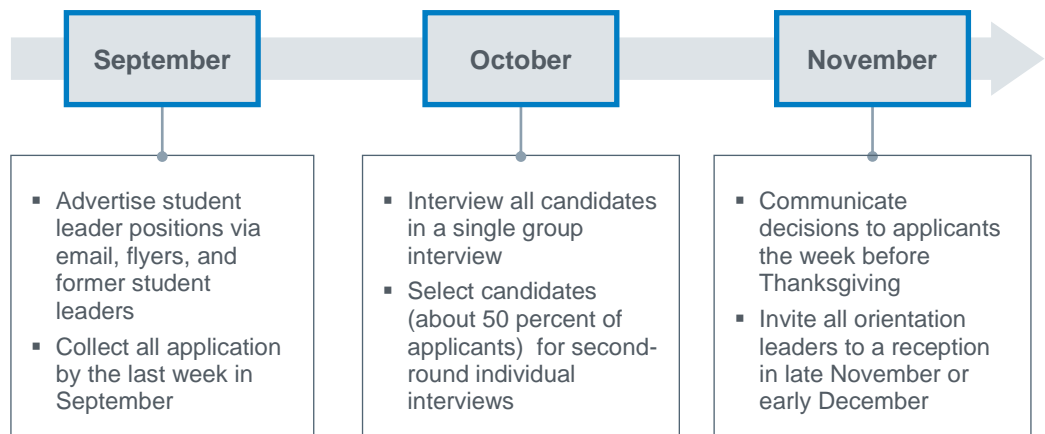
“No matter how much experience or expertise a faculty or staff member may possess, first-year students are far more likely to listen and engage with information presented by other current students and recently graduate alumni. Moreover, current student and alumni involvement in new student orientation and first-year experience programming demonstrates the values of lifelong engagement to first-year students.”

*-Forum Interview*

## ***Professional Staff Interview Prospective Student Leaders in the Fall***

Students submit a biographical interest essay and references to apply for orientation leader positions. The first-year experience staff at **Institution I** charge a \$5 application fee to self-select applicants based on maturity and enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup> Staff at **Institution J** received nearly 300 students applications for less than 80 open positions. Contacts encourage hiring a group of student leaders that reflects the diversity of the campus in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Contacts market the program through email, flyers, and former student leaders.

### **Orientation Leader Hiring Process:**



4) Hurley, James. “Two-Day Orientations.” Education Advisory Board. Accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.eab.com/Research-and-Insights/Student-Affairs-Forum/Custom/2013/05/Developing-Two-Day-Orientations>.

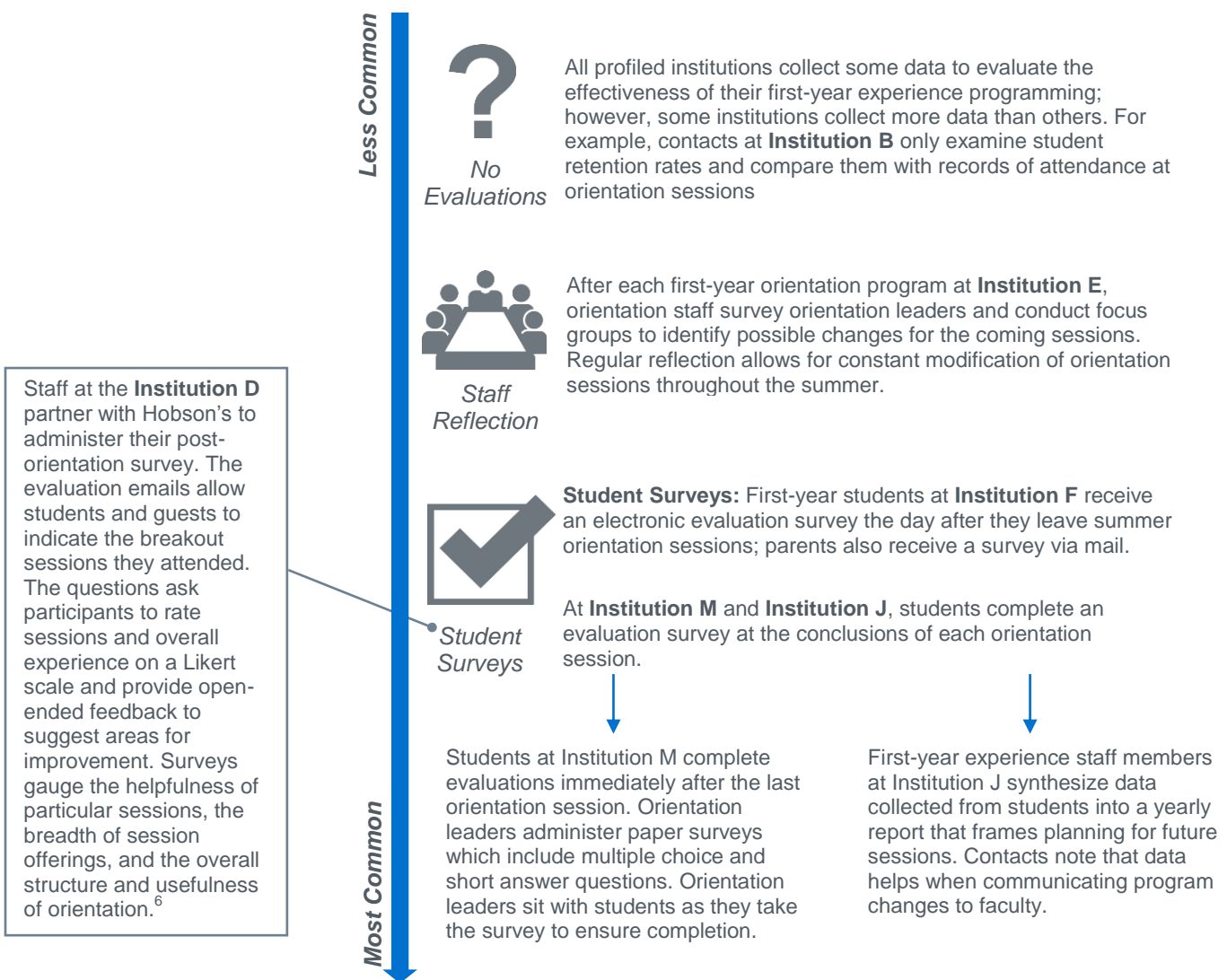
## 4) Outcomes and Assessment

### First Year Program Evaluation

#### **Employ Student and Staff Evaluations to Evaluate Core Learning Outcomes for First-Year Experience Programs**

Profiled institutions administer surveys to students to evaluate the effectiveness of their first-year programming efforts. While staff at many institutions distribute this evaluation via SurveyMonkey or Qualtrics, contacts at **Institution J** administer the evaluations by paper and pencil. First-year experience staff at **Institution H** observe higher response rates and more insightful answers when administering evaluations by hand. Approximately 25 percent of students participating in first-year experience programs respond to online surveys. Offering an incentive to complete the survey, such as a chance to win a free iPad, helps increase response rates.

#### **Evaluation of First-Year Experience Programming<sup>5</sup>**



5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

Contacts advise against administering surveys that measure general student satisfaction (i.e., questions that ask about the student's overall experience with first-year experience programming). Instead, staff should define orientation session objectives and ideal learning outcomes (e.g., students acquire a better knowledge of campus resources or express substantial personal connection to the institution) and then administer a survey that measures those particular learning objectives.

At **Institution D**, evaluations measure three core learning outcomes for orientation:

- Provide students with the basic academic information, advising, and institutional resources to develop an appropriate first-year schedule
- Introduce university expectations and student responsibilities
- Ensure that students engage with institution-related programming and develop a lifelong engagement with the institution<sup>7</sup>

7) Ibid.

## 5) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How do contacts leverage first-year experience programming to foster and promote the following outcomes? What components of first-year experience programming in particular do they believe most contribute to these outcomes?
  - A sense of institutional affinity, loyalty, and belonging?
  - A knowledge of campus traditions, history, and values?
  - An appreciation for alumni loyalty, engagement, and philanthropy?
- How do contacts promote a connection to the institution as a whole as opposed to a particular connection (e.g., single academic program, co-curricular pursuit, residence hall) through first-year experience programs?
- How or to what extent do program directors intentionally revisit and evoke themes from earlier first-year experience events (e.g., orientation) throughout the students' first year?
- How or to what extent do staff in advancement, alumni relations, or other relevant functions collaborate with student affairs staff to create a comprehensive first-year experience that executes on these desired outcomes?
- How or to what extent do contacts evaluate the effectiveness of first-year programming in regards to its execution of the earlier outcomes?
- What assessment or feedback strategies have administrators relied upon to understand the success of first-year programs?
- How have contacts used this information to further refine the program?
- What challenges have administrators faced in establishing a sense of belonging to the institution community in first-year experience programs and how have they addressed them?
- What lessons learned do contacts offer for administrators seeking to develop a comprehensive first-year experience that promotes these outcomes?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
  - Edmonds, Lauren. "Developing an Integrated First Year Experience." Education Advisory Board. Accessed April 16, 2014. <http://www.eab.com/Research-and-Insights/Academic-Affairs-Forum/Custom/2012/06/Developing-an-Integrated-First-Year-Experience>.
  - Hurley, James. "Two-Day Orientations." Education Advisory Board. Accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.eab.com/Research-and-Insights/Student-Affairs-Forum/Custom/2013/05/Developing-Two-Day-Orientations>.
  - Severin, Alex. "Strategies to Engage Alumni in Student Recruitment." Education Advisory Board. Accessed April 10, 2014. <http://www.eab.com/Research-and-Insights/Advancement-Forum/Custom/2014/2/Strategies-to-Engage-Alumni-in-Student-Recruitment>.
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

The Forum interviewed directors of first-year experience programs.

**A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
<b>Institution J</b>	Northeast	3,500 / 3,600	Baccalaureate Colleges – Arts & Sciences
<b>Institution K</b>	South	14,500 / 21,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>Institution L</b>	Midwest	43,000 / 56,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>Institution M</b>	South	6,000 / 11,000	Research Universities (high research activity)
<b>Institution A*</b>	Canada	7,300 / 8,000	Not Applicable
<b>Institution B*</b>	South	20,000 / 26,000	Research Universities (high research activity)
<b>Institution C*</b>	Pacific West	19,500 / 22,000	Master’s Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
<b>Institution D*</b>	Midwest	20,500 / 24,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>Institution E*</b>	Northeast	7,700 / 12,000	Research Universities (high research activity)
<b>Institution F*</b>	Northeast	16,500 / 28,000	Research Universities (high research activity)
<b>Institution G**</b>	Northeast	5,500 / 10,000	Doctoral/Research Universities
<b>Institution H*</b>	South	20,000 / 25,000	Research Universities (high research activity)
<b>Institution I*</b>	South	16,000 / 20,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)

\*Profiled through secondary research

\*\*Asked to remain anonymous

Source: National Center for Education Statistics