



EAB

First-Year Experience Programming

Student Affairs Forum

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Table of Contents

1) Executive Overview	4
Key Observations	4
2) FYE Program Offerings	5
First-Year Student Retention	5
Holistic Programming	6
New-Student Programming	7
Post-Orientation Programming	9
3) Program Development and Management.....	12
Program Development and Evaluation	12
Staffing Structures	14
4) Student and Faculty Engagement.....	17
General Program Engagement.....	17
Engagement of Special Student Populations.....	18
4) Research Methodology	21
Project Challenge	21
Project Sources	21
Research Parameters	22

1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Integrate various first-year experience (FYE) programs to create a holistic experience for students across their first year. Staff at all profiled institutions integrate three to five new-student, academic, and residential programs to achieve a single goal. For example, to generate meaningful discussions between students, staff at Institution D integrate their academic and residential FYE programming—students enrolled in first-year seminar courses on similar topics live nearby one another as well. Intentional integration of mandatory programming aligned with FYE goals encourages student engagement with the first-year experience.

Align FYE programming to institution-specific goals. According to the contact at Institution F, an effective and cohesive first-year experience requires administrators to first define the goals for their programming, and then align their offerings to those goals. At Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C, staff established FYE programming goals related to academic growth or community-building. To assess program effectiveness and alignment to FYE goals, staff at Institution A evaluate their first-year seminar classes based upon FYE goal-linked learning objectives. For example, to foster academic growth, the first-year seminar courses at Institution A must be writing-intensive and interdisciplinary.

Collaborate with various stakeholders across campus to offer quality programming. While most FYE offices exist within the purview of academic affairs or student affairs, other stakeholders across campus (e.g., mental health counselors, residence life staff, librarians) have a direct impact on first-year students' experiences and thus have valuable input to provide on FYE program design. To formally source broad input on FYE programming and inform program design, administrators at Institution A, Institution B, Institution D, and Institution E leverage first-year committees that include relevant stakeholders from various areas of the institution. For example, to evaluate their current orientation programming, faculty, staff, and students sit on the FYE committee at Institution B.

Establish FYE programming that increases opportunities for special student populations to build community. Rather than replacing standard FYE programming with specialized programming for traditionally underserved students (e.g., international students, first-generation students), administrators at Institution B and Institution E offer specialized programming as a supplement. This encourages students to create relationships both with first-year students as a whole and with other students in their specific community. At both Institution B and Institution E, staff offer pre-orientation programs these special student populations. For example, FYE staff at Institution B offer an optional nine-day pre-orientation for first-generation students. During this time, first-generation students familiarize themselves with campus and build a community among their peers.

2) FYE Program Offerings

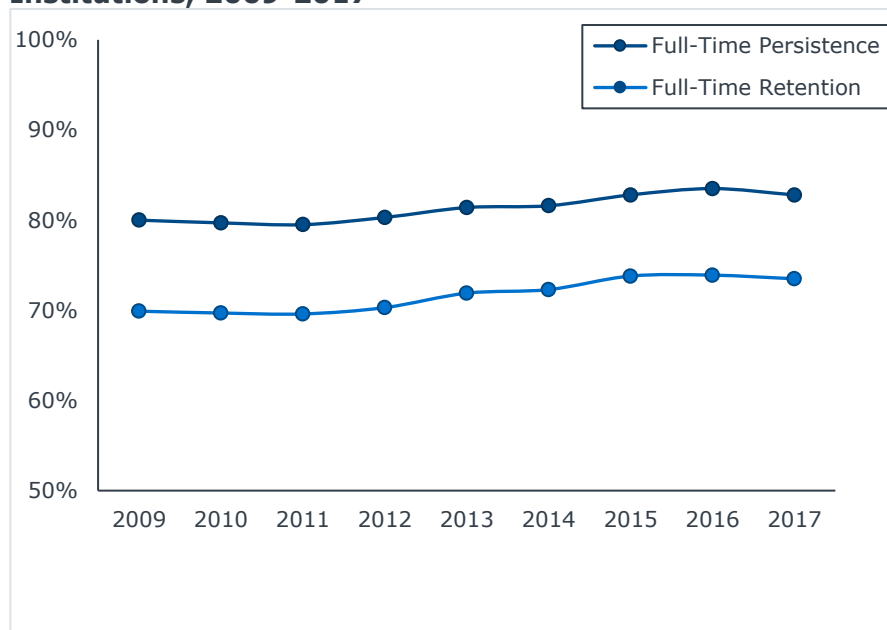
First-Year Student Retention

Persistence rates describe the percentage of first-year students that enroll at any institution for their second year, while retention refers to the percentage of those who specifically re-enroll at the same institution.

First-Year Students' Retention Rates Remain Consistently Lower than Their Persistence Rates

While full-time first-year students' persistence rates have increased between 2009 and 2017, the retention rates of full-time first-year students remain a concern among higher education institutions.¹ Since 2009, retention rates consistently remain 10 percentage points lower than overall persistence.² While high persistence rates indicate a high level of ultimate student success, lower retention rates can negatively impact an institution's reputation and tuition revenue.

Full-Time First-Year Persistence and Retention Rates at All Institutions, 2009-2017³



First-year students face unique academic and social barriers during their transition to campus, which can hinder their retention.⁴ Many students feel ill-equipped to navigate these academic or social barriers and choose to switch institutions or leave higher education altogether.⁵ By offering students targeted academic support and creating opportunities for relationship-building, higher education institutions can increase retention among first-year students.

A study of student satisfaction and persistence identified seven constructs that factor into student retention: academic advising, social connectedness, involvement and engagement, faculty and staff approachability, business procedures (e.g., experiences with financial aid, residence life, or business offices), learning experiences (i.e., "the collective effort of faculty, staff, and students"), and student support services.⁶ Institutions can introduce many of these constructs to new students through first-year experience (FYE) programming.

¹ NSC Research Center, "Persistence & Retention—2019", National Student Clearinghouse, July 10, 2019. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport35-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ EAB, "Prime First-Year Students for Success with Resilience and Coping Skills," EAB, 2019. <https://eab.com/research/student-affairs/whitepaper/prime-first-year-students-for-success-with-resilience-and-coping-skills/>.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Hanover Research, "Strategies for Improving Student Retention", Hanover Research, September 2014. <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Strategies-for-Improving-Student-Retention.pdf>.

FYE programs at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, and Institution E seek to increase student retention through increased support related to these constructs, both in initial orientation programming and throughout the year.

Academically-focused FYE programming at profiled institutions integrates several constructs including academic advising, faculty and staff approachability, in and out of classroom learning experiences, and student support services. For example, at Institution D, first-year seminars count for more credits than normal courses, allowing first-year students to establish strong relationships with professors. Additionally, FYE staff at Institution D use first-year seminars to determine residential living assignments, encouraging students to engage in learning outside of the classroom.

To establish social connectedness, orientation programming at Institution B, Institution C, and Institution E includes an off-campus orientation trip. Orientation trips introduce students to other first-year students in a small-group format, as well as non-first-year student trip leaders who also continue to support students throughout their first year. Mentorship components in first-year seminars at Institution A and Institution C also connect students to non-first-year students and ensure out-of-classroom engagement in first-year programming.

Holistic Programming

Create a Holistic First-Year Experience through Meaningful Integration of FYE Programming

While individuals often use the term “first-year experience” to refer to a first-year seminar, or other standalone programming, impactful first-year experiences require multiple programs that work together to achieve broad goals.⁷ The integration of several FYE programs ensures that students receive deep and coordinated support across their first year. To create a holistic experience for first-year students, administrators should create a purposeful array of programming that ensures social connectedness in among students and boosts first-year student retention.

Staff at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, and Institution E integrate between three and five new-student (i.e., orientation), academic, and residential programs within their broader FYE. To integrate orientation and academic programming at both Institution B and Institution D, faculty members hold the first sessions of their first-year seminars during orientation. By integrating these programs early on, first-year students can immediately establish valuable relationships with faculty members. Also, this opportunity helps faculty identify warning signs among struggling students as early as possible.

Throughout the year, staff at profiled institutions continue to align various aspects of their FYE programming. For example, both Institution A and Institution C incorporate a mentorship program into their first-year seminar courses. Staff at both institutions pair non-first-year student mentors with a single first-year seminar course, for which they lead programming outside of regular class hours. This allows first-year students to regularly meet with non-first-year students who can offer valuable academic and social support.

Additionally, staff use students’ first-year seminar enrollment at Institution D to dictate residence hall assignments. Staff place students into halls with their seminar classmates. Additionally, they cluster like course groups together to encourage communication and regular collaboration between students with similar interests. By integrating residential and academic programming, staff more easily achieve their

⁷ Dr. Andrew K. Koch and John N. Gardner, “A History of the First-Year Experience in the United State during the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Past Practices, Current Approaches, and Future Directions,” *The Saudi Journal of Higher Education*, 2014.
http://www.wiu.edu/first_year_experience/instructors_and_faculty/students/History%20of%20the%20FYE%20Article_Koch%20and%20Gardner.pdf.

institutional goals of generating meaningful discussions among student peers and creating positive learning experiences.

FYE Program Offerings at Profiled Institutions

	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D	Institution E
Orientation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Orientation Trip		✓	✓		✓
First-Year Seminar	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Read	✓	✓	✓		✓
Mentor Program	✓		✓		
Living-Learning Community				✓	✓

By integrating these various types of programs, FYE staff ensure students receive holistic support throughout their first year and engage with the first-year experience in many ways. Acting together, FYE programs can tackle retention concerns through deep, coordinated academic and social supports.

New-Student Programming

Introduce First-Year Students to Student Services and Campus Life During a Multi-Day Orientation

All profiled institutions offer orientation programming to familiarize first-year students with campus and available student support services. This new-student programming lasts between two days at Institution D to about a week at Institution B.

For example, at Institution D, orientation programming includes sessions on campus safety, campus navigation, academic planning, and diversity and inclusion. Because of the short duration of orientation, it includes little social programming. Conversely, at Institution B, FYE staff use the longer timeframe to offer sessions on available student services (e.g., Counseling Center, Health Services, Title IX office), as well as additional social and community-building programming.

Additionally, institutions use orientation programming to introduce students to other first-year experience programming provided to them throughout the rest of the semester or year. During orientation, first-year students at Institution B, Institution D, and Institution A familiarize themselves with their first-year seminar courses. At both Institution B and Institution D, faculty members hold the first sessions of their first-year seminars during orientation.

The first-year seminar faculty at Institution B also act as academic advisors for the first-year students in their class. Following their first course session, faculty provide a group advising session to their students. By interacting in both the instructor and advisor capacities, first-year seminar faculty create a “safe space” both in and out of the classroom for student support.

In addition to focusing on seminar courses, orientation programming at Institution D emphasizes establishing social connectedness through peer relationships. To facilitate relationship-building, first-year students attend orientation events with their hallmates. This allows students to build initial relationships with students with whom they interact outside of formal orientation programming.

Various non-first-year students help lead orientation at Institution D. For example, staff hire around 40 orientation leaders, each assigned to a hall within a living-learning community. In addition to the hall's orientation leaders, community assistants (i.e., students working as resident advisors) attend orientation with their residents. By including community assistants in orientation, FYE staff at Institution D ensure that first-year students can establish close relationships with a leader who will be a main source of support for their entire first year.

Orientation Support Staff at *Institution D*



First-Year Seminar Instructors

Each hall participates in the same first-year seminar course. One first-year seminar instructor teaches the 20-25 first-year students within the designated hall. Students meet their first-year seminar instructor during orientation. Additionally, these instructors work with the hall's corresponding community assistant throughout the year to help address student needs.



Orientation Leaders

Hallmates complete orientation together. One to two orientation leaders introduce these students to campus and student life. Following orientation, these leaders do not serve first-year students in any formal capacity.



Community Assistants

One community assistant lives on each hall of the residence. While they do support orientation programming, community assistants do most of their work working with first-year seminar instructors and first-year students throughout the rest of the year.

Off-Campus Orientation Programming Builds Connections Among First-Year Students and Between Students and the Local Community

Orientation programming at Institution B, Institution C, and Institution E includes a mandatory off-campus orientation trip. FYE staff members use these trips to connect students with both first-year and non-first-year students. These relationships instill a sense of belonging among first-year students at the very beginning of their college careers.

Additionally, these trips serve as an opportunity for students to learn about the surrounding community and culture. At Institution E, FYE staff offer various orientation trips for students with different interests. For example, the art orientation trip consists of on-campus writing workshops, as well as off-campus performances and exhibit trips. Conversely, on the wilderness orientation trip, students spend four days off-campus backpacking. Similar to the wilderness orientation trip, students at Institution B spend four days during orientation on outdoor activity trips.

At Institution B and Institution C, non-first-year students lead these trips. Conversely, at Institution E, a staff member leads trips, with help from a non-first-year student. Student-led or student-supported trips allow first-year students to establish close relationships with non-first-year students, who can then serve as informal mentors throughout the rest of the year. At Institution B, student trip coordinators choose 50 pairs of non-first-year outdoor activity trip leaders, who lead trips for groups of 10 first-year students. Once selected, students participate in training to ensure they can support students' needs, as well as complete trip requirements.

Outdoor Activity Trip Leader Selection and Training at *Institution B*



Selection

First, interested students select another student to co-lead the trip with them. Three program coordinators then interview both students as a pair. The interview consists of a standard list of six questions, linked to characteristics or values of the outdoor activity trip (e.g., building community across groups, embracing positive leadership). Annually, coordinators accept about 50 to 60 percent of outdoor activity trip leader applicants.



Training

Trip leaders participate in multiple trainings during the two weeks before the outdoor activity trip. All trip leaders receive Wilderness First Aid Certifications. Additionally, students receive training in risk management, inclusion and equity, bystander intervention, and basic outdoor skills (e.g., cooking around a campfire, setting up a tent). Administrators partner with other companies to deliver some of the trainings. For example, they partner with the National Outdoor Leadership School for general outdoor leadership training.

Post-Orientation Programming

Interdisciplinary First-Year Seminar Courses Establish Close Relationships Between Faculty and First-Year Students

Faculty members at Institution B, Institution D, Institution A, and Institution C teach mandatory interdisciplinary first-year seminar courses. These courses last between two months at Institution C and students' entire first year at Institution D. Contacts at all four institutions highlight the courses as opportunities to integrate students academically and socially onto campus.

FYE offices at both Institution C and Institution D require students take two separate and consecutive first-year seminar courses. While interdisciplinary at both institutions, different goals for first-year seminar courses at each institution result in different course designs. For example, first-year seminars at Institution D focus on building community around a specific theme. Conversely, the seminars at Institution C and Institution B focus on building academic capacity for liberal arts learning. For example, the first-year seminar at Institution C concentrates on critical thinking and its relationship to a liberal arts education. Staff at Institution C achieve this goal through problem-based discussions and critical inquiry. At Institution B, staff build student academic skills through a writing-intensive first-year seminar course.

Small and more time-intensive first-year seminars allow faculty members to develop impactful relationships with first-year students. Both Institution A and Institution C limit their first-year seminars to 16 students per course. According to contacts at Institution C, this allows for reflective discussions that may be more challenging in larger groups. At Institution D, first-year seminars meet for four and half hours weekly, while standard courses meet for three hours weekly. This helps faculty develop a more in-depth understanding of student needs.

Integrate a Common Read Program with Other First-Year Programming to Introduce Students to Institutional Values

Administrators at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, and Institution E require all first-year students to read the same text, via a common read program. Common read programs engage all first-year students in the same academic experience and introduce them to the values of the institution. Administrators use the common read to influence discussions both during orientation and throughout on-going first-year programming.

For example, as a commitment to fostering conversations on diversity, staff at Institution E created the common reading program. Each year, staff select a book promoting these ideals and send to students to read prior to orientation. They offer additionally programming aligned with the book throughout the year (e.g., speakers, special events) to continue conversations among students.

Similarly, staff at Institution A use common reading texts that require first-year students to think critically about the multicultural world. Rather than asking students to read the text prior to arrival, Institution A includes the text in their first-year seminar class. This allows for faculty to create formal opportunities for discussion and analysis of the shared text.

Integrate a Student Mentorship Program into First-Year Seminars to Build Community

While first-year seminars help students build community with faculty and classmates, they do not necessarily expose students to those outside their class or non-first-year students. By incorporating a mentorship program into existing first-year seminars, FYE staff can increase social connectedness for first-year students. Additionally, mentors provide first-year students with peer-to-peer social and academic support.

For example, first-year seminars at Institution A and Institution C include a mentorship component. Mentors can extend learning from the seminar outside of classroom and provide supplementary support to first-year students. For instance, at Institution A, non-first-year student mentors meet weekly with students in a particular seminar to educate their mentees about services available on campus. Mentors take each first-year seminar group to visit different offices and providers on campus (e.g., counseling center, registrar's office). Administrators require first-year students to attend these weekly meetings as a part of their seminar courses. Requiring student attendance ensures that all students receive the same level of support.

Non-first-year students at Institution C participate in a less formal mentorship program to offer opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue among first-year students. Rather than meeting once per week, mentors work a more flexible 15 hours throughout each three to four-week term. Mentors' work includes attending and leading events with first-year students. This program's flexible structure allows mentors to offer programming and events specific to their mentees' needs. For example, to help their students write a college-level paper, mentors might schedule a writing workshop. Since the events contain less structure than at Institution A, staff at Institution C require student mentors to log their hours worked.

Create Living-Learning Communities Tailored to Meet Social and Academic Goals

A long-time practice, FYE faculty often use living-learning communities to provide social and academic support to first-year students in a residential context. At Institution E and Institution D, these mandatory living communities integrate academic, social, and residential experiences to increase engagement and retention among first-year students.

To deliver impactful living-learning programming to first-year students, administrators at Institution E and Institution D offer opportunities for non-first-year students to engage in residential programming as well. At both institutions, these non-first-year students offer academic and emotional support to first-year students within their residence halls. While community assistants at Institution D connect informally with their first-year students, Junior Advisors at Institution E offer formal weekly meetings to engage with their residents. However, every Sunday, Junior Advisors also hold snack time with their hall to offer an opportunity for informal peer engagement.

At Institution D, living-learning communities build a sense of community through shared academic interests. Staff members place students in residence halls based on the topics of their first-year seminars. Specifically, staff members locate residence halls with thematic coherence in mind to encourage collaborative discussion among individuals outside of the classroom. For example, first-year students in the outdoor recreation first-year seminar traditionally live near those in the *Silent Spring* first-year seminar.

Using non-first-year students and academic interests to help guide residential programming, living-learning communities at both Institution E and Institution D seek to build community and collaboration among first-year students.

3) Program Development and Management

Program Development and Evaluation

Design FYE Programming Around Institution-Specific Goals





FYE programming intends to accomplish one general goal: to improve retention among first-year students. With that goal in mind, FYE staff establish institution-specific FYE goals or align programming with goals already established in their institution's strategic plan to address academic and social barriers to student retention.

In her research, the contact at Institution F finds that, to create a successful and cohesive experience, institutions must first define the goals of their FYE programming, and then adapt existing programming or design new programming to align with those goals.

FYE programming at Institution C, Institution A, and Institution B focuses on a combination of academic growth and community-building. For example, the FYE program goals Institution C focus on preparing students to navigate the academic barriers of postsecondary education. Specifically, contacts at Institution C outline that FYE programming intends to help students understand the value of a liberal arts education and develop the critical thinking skills necessary for success in a liberal arts structure.

Conversely, the goals for FYE programming at Institution B and Institution A balance community-building and academic growth. For example, contacts at Institution B highlight four specific program goals: connecting students to other first-year students, connecting students to the institution and the surrounding community, connecting students to their first-year seminar instructors, and connecting students to the resources they need. These goals act as a basis for all FYE programming, including orientation and first-year seminars.

Examples of Alignment Between FYE Goals and Orientation Programming at *Institution B*

 Connecting to First-Year Students	Students meet peers through regular orientation programming, dinners with their residential advisors, and participation in nighttime social activities.
 Connecting to Institution B and the Local Community	Students attend an outdoor activity trip. On these trips, they explore the history or outdoor offerings of the state.
 Connecting to First-Year Seminar Instructors	On the first full day of orientation, students meet their first-year seminar instructor and attend their first class session.
 Connecting to Student Resources	Students attend a student affairs-led session explaining the support provided by health services, the counseling center, and advising.

Evaluate Effectiveness of Program Offerings to Ensure Alignment with FYE Goals

After establishing specific FYE goals, administrators should evaluate the effectiveness of current FYE programming based upon alignment with these goals. Administrators at both Institution D and Institution A use formal evaluations to assess their FYE programs' alignment with defined goals. For example, contacts at Institution D use program-specific surveys (e.g., post-orientation surveys, first-year seminar surveys) to evaluate the effectiveness of FYE programming.

Similarly, FYE staff at Institution A use qualitative measures to assess FYE programming. Based on the Association of American Colleges & Universities' VALUE rubrics, staff at Institution A created their own learning objective-based rubrics to assess the effectiveness of their FYE programming. Clear and concise goals and rubrics ensure that instructors understand what students should accomplish in these seminars.

Association of American Colleges & Universities' VALUE Rubrics

The Association of American College & Universities created Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics to assess 16 learning outcomes students should achieve prior to graduation. The 16 learning outcomes relate to intellectual and practical skills, personal or social responsibility, or integrative and applied learning. Administrators at Institution A use scripting from the Written Communication, Critical Thinking, and Integrative Learning VALUE rubrics for their first-year seminar rubrics.

Institutions House FYE Staff in Units that Align with Program Goals



At all profiled institutions, FYE teams work within a department well-aligned with FYE program goals—either student affairs or academic affairs. For example, more community-focused FYE programs, like those at Institution E and Institution B, reside in student affairs units. Conversely, to align programming with broader academic goals, Institution A, Institution C, and Institution D house their FYE team within academic affairs units.

Regardless of department, Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, and Institution E maintain small FYE teams, with each consisting of less than five staff members. At Institution E and Institution D, a Dean or Associate Dean of First-Year Students leads the Office of First-Year Students. At Institution D, the Associate Dean of First-Year Students role rotates between faculty members who have experience teaching first-year seminars.

Due to their small team size and the various first-year needs they must support, FYE teams often work with individuals and offices housed in other departments. For example, while Institution C’s FYE team works within academic affairs, team members also collaborate regularly with staff in the New Student Orientation (NSO) office. During orientation, the FYE team supports academic presentations, while the NSO team supports the student life portions. During the year, the two sides meet to design and plan orientation programming.

Both academic affairs and student affairs teams collaborate on first-year programming at Institution D. To bridge this organizational divide, the teams leverage multiple collaborative processes. For example, both teams hold weekly meetings, where relevant faculty and staff discuss academic and social issues that first-year students face. When either group surfaces a major concern, the groups create a unified task force to identify potential solutions together. While time-intensive, contacts at Institution D report that this process allows for consistent and meaningful communication to occur among stakeholders.

Interdepartmental Communication on First-Year Programming at *Institution D*

 <p>First-Year Students’ Experiences Meeting</p>	<p>The entire residence life staff and the Dean of Students attends this meeting to discuss student experiences, including residential life, clubs, and organizations.</p>	<p>In addition to these staff members, a number of faculty and staff members attend both meetings. This group includes the first-year dean, members of the judicial board, and health and counseling staff.</p>
 <p>First-Year Students’ Academics Meeting</p>	<p>Academic advising and accessibility services staff meet to discuss first-year students’ academic needs.</p>	

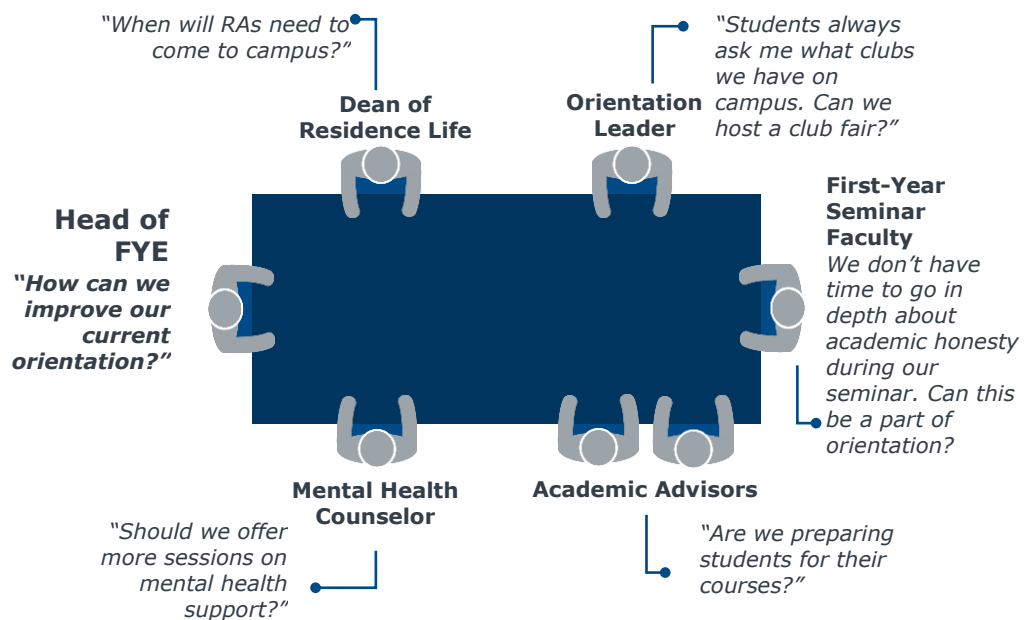
Convene Stakeholders Across Campus via Committees to Optimize Program Offerings

In addition to regular interdepartmental communication, administrators at Institution A, Institution B, Institution D, and Institution E convene relevant stakeholders through formal FYE committees. Committees offer a structured and collaborative environment to holistically align first-year programming with student needs.

These committees vary in size, but generally include participants from academic affairs, student affairs, and residence life teams. At Institution B, Institution A, and Institution D, administrators convene FYE committees to evaluate programming holistically, incorporating several key perspectives. For example, to help evaluate their current orientation offerings, faculty, staff, and students sit on the FYE committee at Institution B. Student members include the head orientation week leader, an outdoor activity trip coordinator, and two first-year students, who provide the valuable perspective of recent orientation program participants.

Conversely, staff members at Institution E use two separate FYE committees to evaluate different aspects of programming. One committee focuses on orientation and residence life for first-year students, while the other focuses solely on the orientation trip. By developing specialized committees, administrators can ensure more focused conversations among committee members.

Common FYE Committee Members at Profiled Institutions



Include Non-First-Year Students in FYE Programming to Increase Programming Capacity and Integrate New Students into the Campus Community




Despite serving the entire first-year class, FYE offices usually contain few employees. To help increase the number of leaders available to support FYE programming, staff members at all profiled institutions offer leadership opportunities to non-first-year students. These student leaders also offer valuable peer support to first-year students.

Staff at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, and Institution E enlist non-first-year students to serve in peer leader roles in social, academic, or residential FYE programming. Student leaders at Institution B, Institution E, Institution D, and Institution C engage with new students during orientation to establish social relationships as soon as students arrive on campus. At Institution B, orientation trip leaders engage with a small group of first-year students on a four-day overnight trip.

During this time, trip leaders can establish strong connections with first-year students that often last throughout the year.

To maintain these types of peer connections throughout students' first year, staff at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, and Institution E offer ongoing peer support to first-year students, either through residential advisors or mentorship programs. Residential student leaders at Institution B, Institution E, and Institution D live within residence halls to offer students both academic and social support. Similarly, mentor programs at Institution A and Institution C emphasize academic support of first-year students. By offering peer support throughout the year, staff members ensure students cultivate social connectedness with the institution, thus improving retention as well.⁸

FYE-Related Student Leadership Roles at Profiled Institutions

 Orientation Trip Leaders	 Mentor Programs	 Junior Advisors
<p>Outdoor activity trip leaders at Institution B pair together to take a group of 10 students on an off-campus overnight trip. During the trip, student leaders introduce new students to the culture of Institution B, as well as the geography of the surrounding area. After the trip, student leaders provide informal social support to first-year students throughout the rest of the year.</p>	<p>Student mentors at Institution C work with first-year mentees in a specific first-year seminar course. These student leaders engage first-year students in meaningful reflective conversations on their place academically and socially on campus.</p>	<p>Junior Advisors (JAs) at Institution E have no disciplinary power, but rather offer social support to students in their residence hall. JAs meet weekly with the students on their hall as a group to discuss personal concerns and campus events. Weekly meetings offer frequent opportunities for JAs to gauge student wellness.</p>

Student Leaders Participate in Role-Preparation Courses

Peer leadership roles offer benefits to both mentors and mentees. Student mentors gain valuable leadership skills and mentees gain a relatable support system. To gain the skills necessary to succeed in these leadership roles, peer leaders at Institution D and Institution C must take a course that prepares them for these roles.

At Institution D, residential student leaders (i.e., community assistants) must take a partial-credit course that prepares them for their role. At Institution C, student mentors participate in a mandatory full-credit course during their first term as a mentor. Administrators at Institution C require all mentors to take the course, even if they have previously served in the role. Since the course focuses more on class discussion than on pre-defined content, contacts note that mentors do not find the course repetitive.

⁸ Hanover Research, "Strategies for Improving Student Retention," Hanover Research, September 2014. <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Strategies-for-Improving-Student-Retention.pdf>.

4) Student and Faculty Engagement

General Program Engagement

Inform Students About FYE Programming Through Curated Web Content

Although FYE programming at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, and Institution E is mandatory for first-year students (so administrators do not need to persuade students to participate), FYE staff still prioritize communicating information about this programming to students. Specifically, administrators at Institution A and Institution B rely on their program websites to publish information on programming. Carefully curated websites ensure students understand all aspects of the institution’s FYE programming, including program goals.

For example, the “First-Year Experience” landing page at Institution A specifically lists various FYE programs, such as New Student Orientation Program and their first-year seminar courses. Specifically, staff members created the website to offer a comprehensive overview of the first-year experience at Institution A.

Since FYE programming often starts immediately when students get to campus, clear and concise web-based information can prove especially helpful as it answers student questions prior to arrival on campus. This ensures a streamlined transition into FYE programming as soon as students arrive. For example, to help incoming students choose an orientation trip, staff members at Institution B publish comprehensive details on the various trip options online. Detailed information on these trips ensures students select experiences aligned with their capabilities and interests.

Sample Website Display for an Outdoor Activity Backpacking Trip at Institution B

Each trip description lists an activity level. Activity levels are defined on the outdoor activity trip landing page.

The webpage lists contact information for student questions.



The top menu can open information about the trip’s student leaders. Information includes the leaders’ hobbies, majors, and interests.

Similarly, staff at Institution A and Institution D use their program webpages to help students choose their first-year seminar courses prior to arriving to campus. At Institution D, staff use first-year seminar enrollments to determine student housing

assignments—placing students in residential communities based upon similar academic interests. Since first-year seminar preferences will impact both students' academic and residential experiences, it is important for students to have access to comprehensive information on seminars as early as possible so that they can make informed decisions that benefit themselves both academically and residentially.

Offer Faculty Special Incentives to Encourage Faculty Participation in FYE Programming

To ensure faculty buy-in for FYE programming, administrators should tailor opportunities to faculty members' needs. The contact at Institution F finds faculty respond favorably to opportunities that require low commitment and provide value professionally or monetarily.

Specifically, administrators can offer faculty opportunities that require minimal training or that include faculty-tailored compensation structures. For example, rather than offering faculty a general stipend for teaching a first-year seminar, the contact at Institution F suggests that administrators rebrand funds as a "teacher-owned grant" or "pedagogy grant." This makes the opportunity appear more prestigious on a CV.

Similarly, Institution D and Institution A established faculty-aligned compensation structures. For example, after teaching a first-year seminar for six consecutive semesters, faculty at Institution D earn a sabbatical leave. Because first-year seminar faculty at Institution A take on an additional advising role, they receive additional monetary compensation for their work.

Engagement of Special Student Populations

Offer Population-Specific Programming as a Supplement to, Rather than a Replacement for, General FYE Programming

Non-white, first-generation, and low-income students struggle more to persist through higher education compared with high-income white students whose parents hold bachelor's degrees.⁹ The contact at Institution F finds that institutions often focus on population-specific programming in place of general programming to increase retention among students. But by separating out different special populations, students can feel "othered" from the general student population. Additionally, this contact suggests that replacing general programming with special student population programming limits all students' ability to interact with students from different backgrounds. Rather than only offering population-specific programming, institutions should create spaces within the general first-year experience where all students can learn about backgrounds different from their own.

Inclusive programming, which encourages all students to critically think on diversity, can improve retention through creating a positive learning environment. For example, the contact at Institution F often sees FYE staff use programming (e.g., common read programs, first-year seminar discussions) to create safe spaces for inclusive interactions. In addition to creating a positive leaning environment, inclusive programming encourages hidden student populations, or those not usually seen (e.g., low-income students, first-generation students), to feel more comfortable with self-

⁹ NSC Research Center, "Persistence & Retention—2019," National Student Clearinghouse, July 10, 2019. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport35-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>; EAB, "90% of low-income, first-generation college students don't graduate on time," EAB Daily Briefing, April 29, 2019. <https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/student-success/90-of-low-income-first-generation-college-students-dont-graduate-on-time/>; College for America, "Addressing the College Completion Gap Among Low-Income Students," College for America, June 7, 2017. <https://collegeforamerica.org/college-completion-low-income-students/>.

identifying. Once self-identified as part of a hidden student population, administrators and staff at the institution can ensure they receive the necessary supports.

In addition to inclusive FYE programming, institutions should still offer optional population-specific programming. This allows special population students an opportunity to build a close community among peers, who likely experience similar difficulties in transitioning to college.

For instance, first-generation students at Institution B can attend an optional nine-day first-year orientation and on-campus “retreat” before general student orientation. During this time, students live together on campus to establish a community and attend workshops to help them acclimate to college life. By ensuring that these opportunities do not compete with general programming, FYE staff do not force students to choose between different FYE offerings.

Ensure Non-First-Year Student Leaders Reflect the Diversity of the Student Body

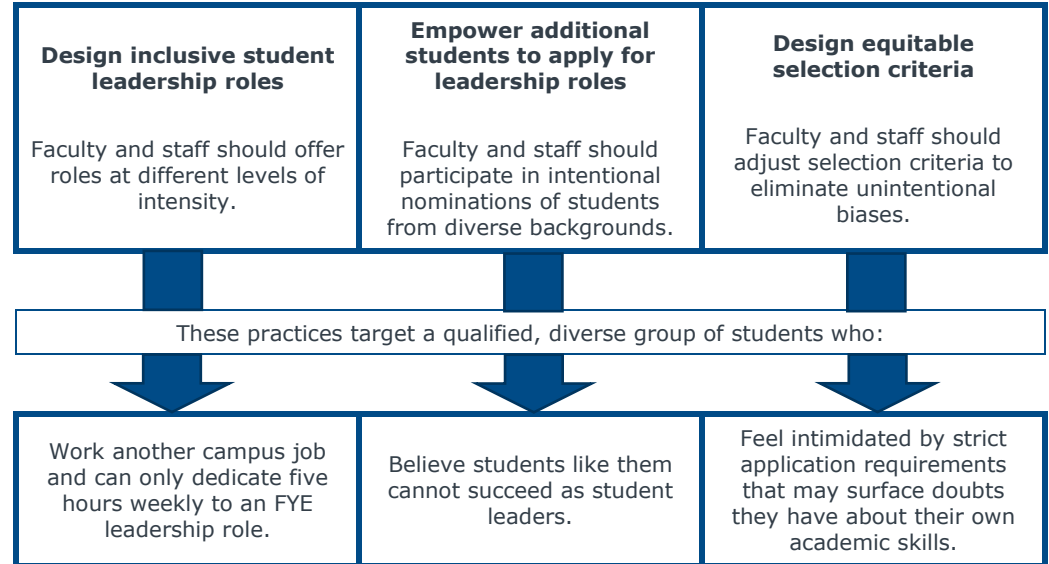
Since student leader positions provide students with opportunities for skill-building and monetary compensation, contacts at Institution B and Institution C find these positions easy to fill. However, the contact at Institution F identifies that often, non-first-year students who self-select for these positions fail to represent the diversity of the general student population. With few student leaders reflecting diverse racial, economic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, administrators fail to expose underrepresented first-year students to peers who share similar experiences in higher education.

According to the contact at Institution F, student leadership programs often disadvantage traditionally underserved students in three main ways. First, student leadership programs often require intensive time commitments. Students who need to work or care for family members may not have time available for these leadership positions. Second, since positions often lack diverse participants, students from underserved populations may not self-identify as successful candidates for these roles. Lastly, staff members usually require student leaders to demonstrate strong academic ability, often through application essays and minimum GPA requirements. These application and selection processes discourage students who may have struggled academically initially, but who have since improved their performance, or students who doubt their academic abilities.

Due to these challenges, first-year students from traditionally underserved populations may not receive the most impactful possible guidance and support. For example, a first-year first-generation student who struggles adjusting to campus life could receive invaluable insight from a non-first-year student who experienced similar struggles.

To increase diversity among non-first-year student leaders, administrators should design more inclusive student leader roles and selection processes. For example, the contact at Institution F recommends relying on faculty recommendations instead of student self-nominations to select student leaders. Faculty nominations signal to traditionally underrepresented students that they can succeed as student leaders, even though these students may not tend to feel empowered to apply on their own due to the lack of support that these students typically receive within the academic system. Other recommendations include varying student leadership roles and designing equitable selection criteria.

Targeted Interventions to Increase Diversity of Non-First-Year Students in FYE Leadership Roles



4) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at the partner institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What process do administrators use to develop new first-year experience programming?
- Which staff members oversee first-year experience programming?
- Which staff members deliver first-year experience programming to students?
- How do administrators publicize first-year experience programming to staff members and to students?
- How do administrators measure the effectiveness of their selected first-year experience programming?
- What type of innovative beginning-of-year orientation programming do administrators offer to first-year students?
- What type of ongoing orientation programming do administrators offer to students throughout their first-year?
- What type of unique residential experiences do administrators offer to first-year students?
- What type of unique social experiences do administrators offer to first-year students?
- What type of unique academic experiences do administrators offer to first-year students?
- How do administrators maximize general student and staff member engagement with first-year experience programming?
- How do administrators navigate staff member and student pushback against established first-year experience programming?
- How do administrators maximize engagement with first-year experience programming among special student populations?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

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- College for America, "Addressing the College Completion Gap Among Low-Income Students," College for America, June 7, 2017. <https://collegeforamerica.org/college-completion-low-income-students/>
- Dr. Andrew K. Koch and John N. Gardner, "A History of the First-Year Experience in the United State during the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Past Practices, Current Approaches, and Future Direction," The Saudi Journal of Higher Education, 2014. http://www.wiu.edu/first_year_experience/instructors_and_faculty/students/History%20of%20the%20FYE%20Article_Koch%20and%20Gardner.pdf
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- Hanover Research, "Strategies for Improving Student Retention," Hanover Research, September 2014.

Research Parameters

<https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Strategies-for-Improving-Student-Retention.pdf>

- EAB, “Prime First-Year Students for Success with Resilience and Coping Skills,” EAB, 2019. <https://eab.com/research/student-affairs/whitepaper/prime-first-year-students-for-success-with-resilience-and-coping-skills/>
- NSC Research Center, “Persistence & Retention—2019,” National Student Clearinghouse, July 10, 2019. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport35-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>

The Forum interviewed administrators who manage first-year experience programming at liberal arts institutions in the United States, as well as the contact at Institution F.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Undergraduate Enrollment
Institution A	Midwest	1,500
Institution B	Northeast	2,000
Institution C	West	2,000
Institution D	Northeast	2,500
Institution E	Northeast	2,000
Institution F	South	25,500