THE CHRONICLE
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The First-Year Experience

How to support student success

On the cover: John Pleasants, a professor at Iowa State U. and coordinator of its Sky Is the Limit Learning Community, works in a field with first-year students to capture and tag migrating Monarch butterflies as part of a migration-tracking project. Photo by Tom Neppl.

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Students in USC-Columbia's Carolina Experience program participate in an orientation activity in which they throw around a ball of yarn to create a "network" among them.

LOGAN WHITE, USC

The Elements of Success

FROM the time students accept an offer of admission to Mount Holyoke College until they begin their first semester, seven people — two deans, two faculty members, an adviser, and two peer mentors — will guide them along a path designed to give them the smoothest transition possible.

First-generation and low-income students will be invited to preorientation sessions to help them make friends and navigate the intricate, often-unwritten rules some refer to as the "hidden curriculum." Later orientation sessions will be customized for 18-year-olds fresh out of high school, international students adjusting to life in the United States, and students transferring from community colleges.

All freshmen will take small, discussion-based seminars on topics ranging from the economics of happiness to modern Chinese literature in which a professor and peer mentor will help them hone their writing skills. They'll be encouraged to join learning communities for those with common interests in the arts, outdoor adventures, or religious diversity.

As the year continues, students will learn about Mount Holyoke traditions, like the evening milk and cookie breaks that have been referenced in letters home since the 1840s and the Laurel Parade, when seniors dressed in white and linked by 275-yard laurel chains process to the grave of the college's founder.

Such personalized attention to the academic and social needs of incoming students might seem unsurprising at a small, residential liberal-arts college like Mount Holyoke. But the first-year experience, as this

TAKEAWAYS

- The strongest first-year-experience programs support students' academic, social, and emotional well-being.
- A sense of belonging is the biggest predictor of whether a student will return.
- Coordination among various offices is crucial for smooth handoffs.
- Lingering effects of the pandemic have made this programming especially important to retention and student success.

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

Mount Holyoke College students participate in Milk & Cookies night in the library's reading room..

wraparound network of support is called, has become a staple at a growing number of colleges that see the first year as a make-or-break opportunity.

Colleges that used to rely on short orientation sessions are dedicating much, if not all, of the first year to helping students with a transition made more challenging, in part, by the aftereffects of the Covid-19 pandemic. A central goal of these efforts is to make sure students feel connected to the college, comfortable with their peers, and confident that they know where to turn when difficulties arise.

Students who feel they belong on campus and who see a clear trajectory forward are more likely to return the following year and ultimately graduate, researchers have found.

"Without a doubt, first-year initiatives have positively contributed to student persistence, learning, and success," says Jillian Kinzie, associate director of the National Survey of Student Engagement at Indiana University at Bloomington. First-year seminars are among the "high-impact practices" the survey has found contributed to greater student engagement and persistence.

Still, the fact that a quarter of the students who start out in college drop out after the first year "suggests some unfinished business."

In the pages that follow, we'll highlight some of the components that make up successful first-year experiences, including seminars; learning communities; and efforts to connect students with study-abroad programs, community service, and potential careers. We'll

examine the academic, social, and emotional support woven into these programs and the challenges they face.

NECESSARY INTERVENTIONS

A number of factors have converged in recent years to make first-year programs like these not only pluses for recruiting but essential for retention, their advocates say. The prospect of steep and steady declines in enrollment has colleges intensifying efforts to retain the students they already have. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, known as WICHE, projects that the number of high-school graduates will peak at 3.8 or 3.9 million next year, then steadily decline to about 3.4 million by 2041 — a 13-percent drop. The proportion of students who identify as Hispanic or multiracial will continue to increase. Retention rates for students from these demographic groups are significantly below those of white students.

In its December 2024 update, WICHE made recommendations for shoring up enrollments. They included "expanding wraparound supports for students across all areas of need, including financial and academic supports, intensive advising, [and] free or discounted transportation programs."

First-year programs typically cover study skills and other strategies to help students adjust to the rigors of college-level courses. That's become increasingly important given the learning loss many students suffered during the pandemic, a period starting in 2020 when many were just starting high school and struggled to shift to virtual classes.

Even students who had been strong academically before classes switched online may be less confident in their ability to tackle tough classes now, but, like generations of students before them, reluctant to ask for help. Colleges today are making sure students feel comfortable signing up for a summer bridge program, tutoring session, or study group.

"We want to make sure students don't feel ashamed if they don't know something because their eighth-grade algebra class was then on their computer," says Kate Lehman, director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina at Columbia.

Course work isn't the only area that suffered during the years when students were holed up at home. Social skills also atrophied. Many students grew accustomed to communicating virtually and comfortable with the convenience of online classes and activities. Today, an important part of the first-year experience is encouraging students to join clubs, study in groups, and get to know their professors outside the classroom. Students, many of whom complain of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, are also being encouraged to seek out mental-health counseling.

> **"Without a doubt, first-year initiatives have positively contributed to student persistence, learning, and success."**

USC's efforts to help students adjust to college life and feel a sense of connection with their campus trace at least back to 1972, when the institution created a first-year course called University 101. Over the years, the program, and others it inspired around the country, expanded to include career exploration, community-service opportunities, and

5 Things to Know Before You Build a First-Year Experience

Shifting from a first-year orientation to a full-fledged first-year experience requires coordination among departments and a significant commitment of time and resources. The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, at the University of South Carolina, has been advising colleges for decades on how to go about it. Here are some tips from the center's current director, Kate Lehman:

- Colleges can coordinate efforts under an office of first-year experience or spread responsibilities across several departments. They may also appoint someone to a new role as director of the first-year experience.
- Regardless of where the program is housed, buy-in and support are needed from across student affairs and academic affairs.
- Among the offices that need to be aligned on the goals of the program are advising, orientation, recreation, residence life, student activities, student success, and wellness.
- Getting buy-in across so many units and departments requires a clear campuswide vision of what the first-year experience should encompass.
- Each of those offices will have their own priorities, which will need to be balanced among all of the competing demands on staff members' time.

study abroad, along with study skills, time management, and budgeting.

Rather than trying to cram everything students need to know into the first few weeks of college, as orientation programs used to do, first-year experiences stretch the information out over an entire year. The information, from battling homesickness to thinking about majors, is doled out in manageable chunks as students need it so they don't become overwhelmed or just tune it out.

Some colleges, including the University of South Carolina's flagship and Prairie View A&M University, have extended their first-year programs to encompass the second year, as well. (See Page 16.) That expansion is both an indication of the popularity of first-year experiences and a recognition of their limitations.

"We hear from students that there's this incredible enthusiasm and excitement after the first year, and we want to continue that," says Donald Chamberlain, program coordinator for first- and second-year experience at Prairie View. Without extra support, he says, too many students drop out after the first year.

At USC's Columbia campus, the second-year extension is called the Carolina Experience Program. It includes guidance from peer leaders and a month-by-month guide to making the most of the sophomore year, from knowing whether and when to switch majors to participating in "service Saturdays,"

de-stressing around finals, and planning summer internships and part-time jobs.

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

These interventions are making a difference, advocates of first-year programs say. The national persistence rate — the rate at which students continue pursuing a degree — for students who started college in the fall of 2022 inched up to 76.5 percent, from 74.8 percent in 2020, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The national retention rate, which reflects those continuing at the *same* college, was 68.2 percent, up from 66.3 percent in 2020. In both cases, those were the highest rates recorded in the past decade. Retention rates for Hispanic, Black, and Native American students also improved, although they remained significantly lower than the national rate, at 64, 57, and 53 percent, respectively.

First-year programs are also adjusting to heightened expectations that the skills students learn in college will set them up for successful careers. Students want to feel their learning is relevant to life after college, Lehman says, and instructors in first-year courses are increasingly incorporating a stop at the career center into their syllabus.

"We used to think about the college-to-career transition in the junior and senior year," she says. "Colleges are finding that's way too late."

Not everyone can afford, or has the flexibility in their academic schedule, to take on an internship, but jobs out of college can be hard to come by without that experience. Beginning in the freshman year, colleges are offering what some refer to as micro-internships — short, paid experiences that expose students to different careers and spice up their résumé.

But institutions are also stressing that the goal of these work experiences, and college more generally, should be more than to polish a resume or land that first job after graduation. Engineers need to know how to write and nurses need to know how to think on their feet. Industries will contract and expand. Careers will take unexpected turns.

"Developing a professional identity gives folks the tools they need for a lifetime of careers, to be ready when the world pivots, when the economy pivots," Lehman says.

At a time when many are skeptical about the value of a college degree, students may also need to be reminded in that first year why they're putting in the long hours of studying and possibly taking on substantial debt.

"We have to explain what is the purpose of this, what we hope college will do for you, and how it will set you up on a trajectory for success," says Dallin George Young, an assistant professor of counseling and human-development services at the University of Georgia. It's important that handoffs go smoothly as students progress through the first year and into the second, he says.

"When students encounter their first challenge, will they conclude that 'I'm not cut out for this? I'm going to pack it up and get out?' We need to remove real barriers, but college is full of twists and turns and challenges," he says. "When you run into a problem like a hard class, how do you navigate it and who can you talk to?"

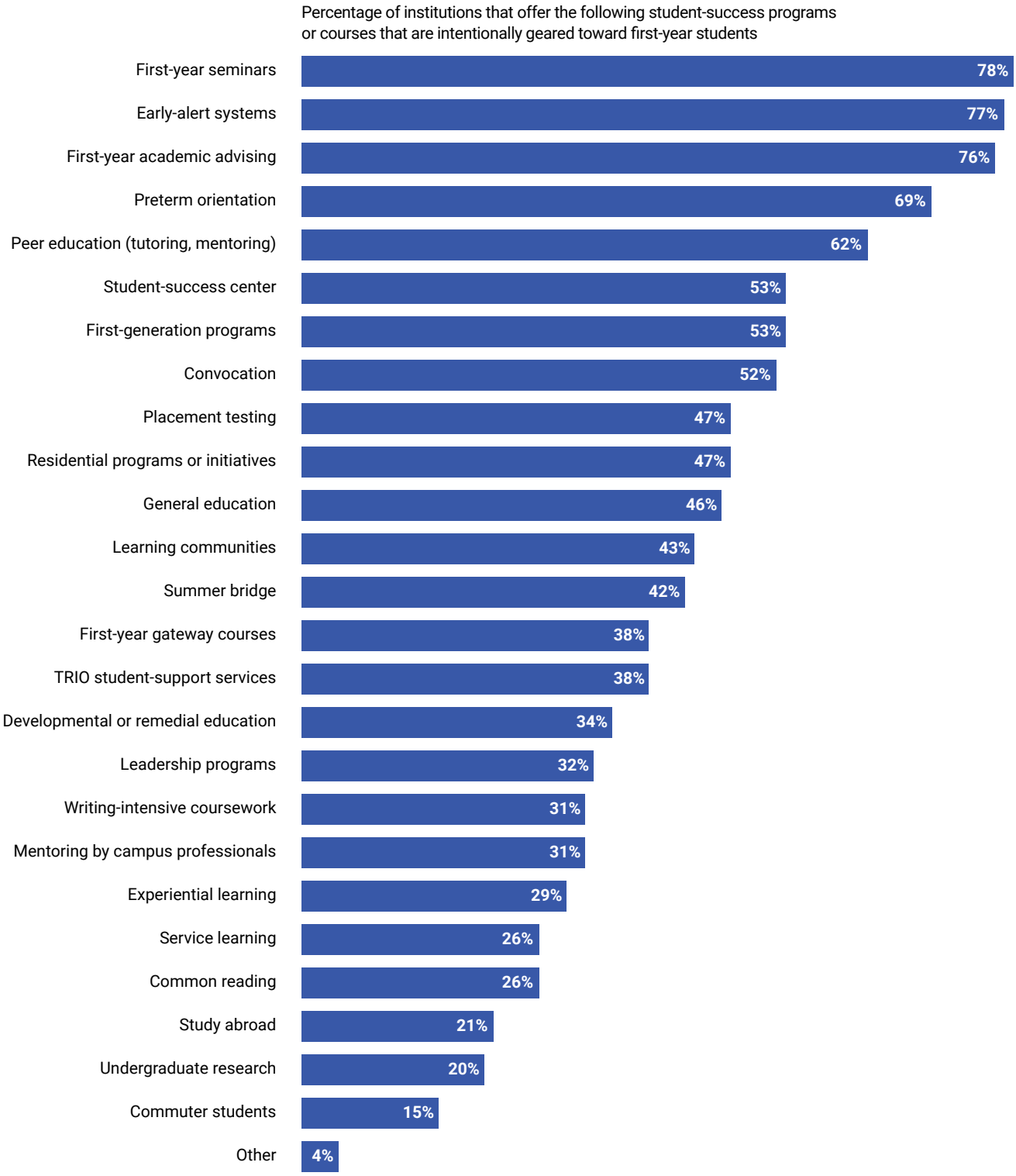
ADULT STUDENTS

Helping students adjust requires recognizing that the first year in college means a lot of different things. Often, it's the transition from high school, but it can also mean a transition from a two-year college, an unsatisfying job, a period of unemployment, or raising children.

"What does the first-year experience look like for a 40-year-old looking for a career change?" Young asks. To someone with a job and a family, "It can't be about handing out hula hoops and bubble gum." For these students, time management and financial planning take on added importance.

Common and Less-Common First-Year Programs

Preliminary results from the 2023 National Survey on the First-Year Experience show that some programs, including first-year seminars, are widespread while others, like summer bridge programs and first-year study abroad, are less common.



Source: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina

Among the seminars first-year students can choose from at the University of Georgia, for instance, is one on personal financial management that helps students learn how to avoid taking on too much debt, save up money for their first house, and budget when starting a family. An accountant and financial planner also answer questions about taxes and retirement planning.

Clubs and activities geared toward specific careers can provide welcome social outlets and leadership opportunities for older students who might feel out of place in, say, a fraternity or intramural-sports team.

All students benefit from exercises during first-year seminars that encourage students to get to know each other. Before a session on time management, an instructor might go around the class asking everyone what their biggest time waster is. To learn more about the college's history and traditions, students could pair up on scavenger hunts and trivia games. In one activity at South Carolina, students take turns sharing their interests, then throwing a ball of yarn to the next student who chimes in. Students hold on to the yarn after throwing the ball, and an instructor might describe the web of yarn that's created as a metaphor for community.

Learning communities are another popular option. At Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi, cohorts of students are grouped by majors in first-year learning communities where they find out how the university works and how to see the connections among their courses. At the core of the learning community is a seminar for 20 to 25 students who are on the same degree path.

A common theme across many first-year experiences is the importance of including peers early and often in supporting students. At the University of Arizona, peer mentoring is a key component of the first-year experience, which offers mentoring options specific to one's culture or major.

While the overall outlook for first-year experiences is positive, Kinzie sees some threats on the horizon. Colleges are tightening their budgets, and often, "first-year experiences are on the chopping block because they're viewed as icing on the cake rather than essential services."

But if students don't feel supported, they're more likely to drop out, costing colleges badly needed tuition revenue, she says.

The huge influx of high-school students taking dual-credit courses has also disrupted efforts to help their transition, Kinzie says. A growing number of students are entering college with dozens of credits under their belts and are not considered first-year students. They may be ineligible for a first-year seminar, especially if it counts for a required course like English 101 that a student took, by dual credit, in high school.

"When you run into a problem like a hard class, how do you navigate it and who can you talk to?"

At Texas A&M's Corpus Christi campus, students who'd accumulated at least 24 hours of college credit while in high school used to be able to opt out of the two-semester first-year seminar other new students were taking. But after a study found that their grade-point averages and retention rates were lower than those of the students who'd opted in, the seminar requirement became mandatory.

The university learned that students who were placing directly from high school into upper-level courses were stressed not only by the academic demands of those courses but

by the need to immediately begin planning internships and thinking about life after graduation, according to an article in the *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*.

Those who opted in to the first-year seminar program consistently had higher GPAs and retention rates. They reported that it had been easier to make friends, approach professors, and stay on top of upper-level courses usually reserved for juniors and seniors. And while that might have slightly slowed down their fast-track approach to graduation, many welcomed the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities and social events they hadn't been making time for.

First-year seminars can be tailored to those with significant college credits by focusing more on major requirements and career development, the journal article noted.

"Just because you earned 30 credit hours in high school doesn't mean you have any sense of what the transition will require," Kinzie says.

—KATHERINE MANGAN

Can the First-Year Experience Be Ranked?

IN 2019, *U.S. News and World Report* began ranking colleges' first-year experiences using the number of nominations each received from administrators surveyed. For 16 years prior to that, *U.S. News* published alphabetized lists of top-rated programs.

The magazine invites college presidents, provosts, deans of students, and deans of admissions from more than 1,500 institutions to suggest up to 15 colleges each with strong first-year programs.

Like all of its rankings, the list can be helpful for parents and prospective students looking for information about their options. R1 flagships, public regional colleges, and small private institutions are all represented on the 2025 list — meaning each was mentioned at least 10 times.

But, as with some other categories in the *U.S. News* rankings, critics question the relevance of a reputation-based ranking.

Dan Friedman has a unique perspective as assistant vice president for University 101 programs and the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina.

"We actually own the trademark to the term 'first-year experience,'" Friedman says. "So it's sort of ironic that there's this ranking of it."

In any case, the university is ranked second by *U.S. News*'s 2025 list — a win Friedman attributes in part to the National Resource Center. (Elon University is ranked first.)

While the University of South Carolina certainly does draw on its center's research to improve the first-year experience, Friedman says it's unfortunate that the *U.S. News* ranking doesn't directly measure program quality.

"There's going to be some degree of association between reputation and quality," he says. "But there's a lot of stops in between."

In a statement to *The Chronicle*, Robert Morse, *U.S. News*'s chief data strategist, emphasized that reputation was an important factor in choosing a college.

"Employers consider it when deciding on applicants for post-graduation employment," Morse wrote. "Reputation is also a qualitative metric that may capture intangible elements of program strength not fully captured by statistics."

But Nidia Ruedas-Gracia, an assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who studies belonging, says she wishes the ranking included the student perspective. After all, students are in an ideal position to describe how valuable they think the first-year experience is.

Morse wrote that, while important, students' perspectives are hard to obtain "in a way that is verifiable and representative of all applicable institutions."

The University of Miami has a well-respected residential-college program, but it doesn't show up on the *U.S. News* list. Tiffani Idol, director of residence life, says she and her team asked themselves why.

"We think we're doing some really cool stuff," Idol says. "But it doesn't seem like anything that we're really able to manipulate."

Another sticking point for critics is that the ranking, despite its name, accounts only for a sliver of the first-year experience: seminars and other curricular or co-curricular programs.

So it may surprise some administrators who work on the extracurricular side of the first-year experience to see that their work is not even being considered. —KATE HIDALGO BELLOWS

U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT

SPOTLIGHT: PRAIRIE VIEW A&M U.

A Sophomore-Year Experience

THE CHALLENGE: Sophomores were struggling without the supports they had in their first year.

THE STRATEGY: Offer a second-year experience that builds on the first.

THE RESULT: It's too soon to know, but recent gains in freshman retention bode well.

MAYBE it was a typical sophomore slump, but the slide in motivation that was happening at Prairie View A&M University was especially discouraging for a university that had invested so heavily in getting freshmen off on the right foot.

The historically Black institution northwest of Houston was still losing too many students between the first two years. Those who returned were struggling without the mentors and workshops on time management and confidence building that were baked into the first-year experience.

Because of the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, "many of the students we're serving are not academically ready for college, and on top of that, they're lacking social skills," says Donald Chamberlain, program coordinator for the first- and second-year experience.

As his title suggests, Prairie View had determined that one year of interventions wasn't accomplishing enough.

So now it's offering a second-year experience that builds on the first.

"We decided to expand the model because we know that we still lose a high number of students between years one and two," says John P. Gardner, assistant vice president for academic engagement and student success.

But the university didn't want to relax standards in order to retain students, who, starting during the pandemic, had grown accustomed to getting extra time for assignments and more leeway for missed classes. So reintroducing rigor meant that students needed continuing support.

As part of a new student-success model, the university assigns every undergraduate student, starting in their freshman year, with an academic adviser, a career coach, and a financial counselor. Students are divided into one of three pods by major, and if they stay in that major, they stick with the same three people for four years.

"The care team is taking on the onus of preparing students for career choices, reducing debt, and making sure they're on track to graduate" with both the hard and soft skills employers will want, Gardner says.

The university hired 42 new staff members to fill out the program, which now includes 66 employees and 100 peer mentors. A software platform allows students' care teams to share notes and monitor their progress, or raise alerts when a student is struggling.

During the first year, students complete a career assessment to make sure they're in the right major, work on résumés, create academ-

JESS MORALES, PVAMU

Freshmen participating in the Building Challenge and doing the signature dance routine. The Building Challenge is a competition between buildings to see which one has the most school spirit and knowledge. It's a culminating event at Prairie View A&M U.'s Panther Camp, a summer program that prepares students for their first day of classes.

ic plans that will allow them to graduate on time, and develop a budget to pay for college. Year two includes preparing for internships, refining academic plans based on first-year performance, and learning more about money management.

Five or six peer mentors are assigned to each residence hall, where they're encouraged to build relationships with everyone living there. During Panther Camp, which kicks off freshman year, mentors introduce a signature dance routine that will be the class "shuffle" for the next four years.

Three times a year in a residence-hall courtyard, the mentors put on a "rhythms and resources study slam." For two hours, during a focused study time, a D.J. plays light jazz for students who are comfortable with that while they study. That's followed by an hour break when the music is cranked up, some students break out into their class shuffle, and pizza and board games are rolled out. Then, it's back to work.

The first- and second-year program emphasizes school spirit and pride. "We want them to attend sporting events; we want them to rock the house with purple and gold," Chamberlain, the program coordinator, says.

Since the sophomore-year experience is relatively new, it's too early to see results, but Prairie View officials are optimistic, given recent retention gains among freshmen.

Seventy-six percent of the students who started in the fall of 2023 came back this fall, the highest level since at least 2016. —KATHERINE MANGAN

How to Expand Cohort Programs

TAKEAWAYS

- Scaling up cohort programs takes money and staff, but buy-in from campus leaders is critical to gaining traction.
- Administrators need to determine what elements are fundamental to a program's success while allowing for enough flexibility to be responsive to the needs of different populations of students.
- With larger programs, support staff can handle ancillary tasks like administration and marketing, freeing up key personnel to focus on core student services.
- A larger scale can also allow for more research and assessment and for professional development.

A **PILOT PROGRAM** started by the City University of New York to boost graduation rates for low-income community-college students was a success from the start.

Students who took part in the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, had nearly double the three-year graduation rate as their classmates. They were also more likely to stay enrolled, earn more credits, and transfer to a four-year institution, a study found.

It seemed like a no-brainer to expand the program, which was started in 2007 at six community colleges.

Scaling up student-success efforts that began with small cohorts can be more easily said than done, however. Such programs often promise comprehensive support services, which can be harder and more expensive to deliver to larger numbers of students. Participants in ASAP receive free tuition, mandatory tutoring, and intensive academic and career advising. While ultimately the program is cost-effective because so many more students graduate, it requires a large up-front investment: An early assessment found that CUNY spent about $16,300, or 60 percent, more per ASAP student over three years than on the general population.

Still, CUNY moved forward. Today, 40 percent of all first-time full-time freshmen in the CUNY system are part of ASAP, says Christine Brongniart, the program's executive director.

CUNY's experience suggests how other colleges might scale up their student-success programs — and offers lessons about the difficulties in doing so, too.

In addition to money, a key ingredient is people. Umoja, a support program for Black students in the California Community Colleges system, has its roots in individual programs on different campuses. Two decades ago, the heads of the programs began meeting informally to share strategies and best practices.

MARCUS BEASLEY, CUNY

CUNY ASAP students John Adibeli and Francesca Rodriguez-Fernandez collaborate to achieve academic success.

The approach spread to other colleges within the system and, excited by improvements in course-completion and transfer rates, the state Legislature began to appropriate money for expansion, says Eric Mayes, chief executive of the Umoja Community Education Foundation.

In 2018, the foundation was started to administer funds and to provide professional support and technical assistance to campus programs. Between 2015 and 2019, Umoja doubled the number of students it served, and 73 of California's 116 community colleges now offer Umoja programming. "Umoja was grassroots from its inception," Mayes says. "But as you start to scale, volunteers aren't enough."

A common element among student-success programs is what's known as "intrusive advising," a model that emphasizes proactively engaging with students to build relationships, rather than waiting for them to reach out once problems arise. The approach is staff-intensive. At the outset, ASAP advisers worked with 70 or 80 students, while a typical community-college counselor may have a caseload 10 times larger.

When CUNY broadened ASAP, it enrolled new students faster than it could hire advisers, says Julia Raufman, a research associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University. That led to a kind of "fast-food advising," says Raufman, who has studied ASAP's expansion. "Which was the opposite of the ASAP vision."

"Part of the secret sauce" is that "it all doesn't taste exactly the same."

Commitment from institutional or system leaders is critical, Raufman and others say. They can ensure the necessary funding and staffing, of course, but they also signal that student-success programming is a broader priority, helping coordinate efforts. ASAP, for instance, involves not just academic advisers but also admissions officers to identify and recruit students and tutors for classroom support. "There has to be higher buy-in that transcends silos," Raufman says.

Larger programs can sustain more infrastructure than individual efforts. In California, the Umoja foundation organizes student-leadership activities, professional development, and faculty institutes. A centralized ASAP office takes on administrative tasks including research, marketing, budgeting, fund raising, and coordination with the admissions team. The consortial approach frees up campus-based staff to focus more on student support and services.

COMPROMISE IS CRUCIAL

But expanding student-success programs from smaller, cohort-based models also necessitates compromise. Today, each ASAP adviser works with about 150 students, Brongniart says. That's a bigger caseload than at the program's outset but a lower student-to-adviser ratio than across the CUNY system generally.

To make this model work, ASAP emphasizes its "most robust" engagement when students first enroll, to establish rapport and get students on the right path, Brongniart says. The program has also built in a triage approach, assessing students' progress and providing higher levels of support to those with the greatest need.

While some may receive more one-on-one counseling, ASAP has expanded workshops and other programming as additional touchpoints for students, Brongniart says.

A growing program doesn't need to look like a carbon copy of its progenitor. Because Umoja got its start on individual California community-college campuses, programs have never looked identical. "Part of the secret sauce," Mayes says, is that "it all doesn't taste exactly the same."

Instead, Umoja adheres to common principles of providing holistic, culturally relevant, and empowering educational programming both in and out of the classroom. The foundation organizes professional-development training for faculty members to incorporate the approach in their own teaching.

At the same time, there are certain nonnegotiables. Every participating college must provide a dedicated space on campus for Umoja students. This "village space" sends the message to students that they belong at college and keeps them on campus longer to get programming support and to build stronger relationships with advisers, professors, and fellow students, Mayes says.

"It's a delicate balance between fidelity and responsiveness," Mayes says.

Umoja students demonstrate improved academic outcomes — they earn more academic credits and are 82 percent more likely to complete transfer-level math and English than other Black students who didn't participate in the program. But researchers also found psychological benefits such as a greater sense of belonging and increased self-confidence.

Program expansion can give project leaders the opportunity to step back and assess what's working as well as identify obstacles and

barriers, Raufman, the Columbia researcher, says. ASAP was specifically designed for full-time students, but CUNY examined what strategies could be adapted to the system's large number of part-time students, setting up a sister program for that student group.

ASAP has spread throughout CUNY, but its model has also been adopted beyond New York City. It has been replicated some 40 times, and in 2023, CUNY formed a partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association to start a learning community of five states that will receive planning funds and support to create their own versions of ASAP.

Brongniart, the ASAP executive director, says she has taken lessons from all colleges CUNY has worked with. "We continue to learn what's possible in collaboration," she says.

—KARIN FISCHER

The liberal-arts department at Austin Community College holds a community discussion as part of its Great Questions Seminar.

CATALIN ABAGIU, AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Transition in the Classroom: First-Year Seminars

THE TRANSITION to college is broadly seen as significant, and many incoming students are nervous about it. So first-year seminars have a built-in appeal. Even so, Naomi Elvove makes a hard sell for Dominican University of California's introduction-to-college course during new student orientation. Elvove, executive director of the Student Success Center, gets up on stage and tells incoming students that they're at a small college with lots of support — and they should plan to use it. Then, she has one of the course's peer mentors come up to spot her as she does a handstand on stage.

Elvove tells students, "I would go upside down for you," she says. But she also tells them that she gets nervous, and wouldn't put herself in this position without a spotter. Usually another 25 students will sign up for the course after that demonstration, she says.

The handstand is a grabby — and surely unusual — tactic. But Elvove's message, that college can be tough but that students will be supported as they rise to the challenge, is central to the idea of a first-year seminar.

Dominican's, called "Navigating College," is a one credit, pass/fail course that is not tuition-bearing, meaning that students can add it to a full course load without having to pay extra. The course incorporates peer mentors, like the one who spots Elvove's handstand on stage. Although it adds an hour to students' schedules, it's meant to lower their stress. And it seems to be working: The course isn't required, but around three-quarters of new students take it each fall. Elvove has been gratified to find that some students call it "home base."

TAKEAWAYS

- First-year seminars introduce college academics and life to students while reassuring them that they will have resources to thrive.
- Key to the seminars' success is having enough qualified and committed instructors.
- Effective first-year seminars have led to higher sophomore retention rates.
- Research suggests best practices, but not everything is always possible.
- Some seminars introduce study skills by giving students an intellectual push.

First-year seminars are a longstanding and widespread approach to helping students acclimate. Because they're courses, they allow students to learn how to connect with an instructor and a set of classmates by doing it, creating conditions where students can form the kinds of relationships research suggests enrich the college experience: mentorship, and friendships that have an academic or intellectual dimension. On a large campus, especially, the seminars give students a more intimate class size than they're likely to experience in many of their other early courses.

First-year-seminar courses take many forms, but they share the same deceptively simple core goal: making campus feel smaller and more personal.

For all of their promise, running a first-year seminar course comes with challenges. Perhaps the most significant: offering a course in many small sections requires lots of instructors; a course that is meant to help students connect to their college depends on those instructors being well-prepared and committed to this work.

When colleges are able to figure such challenges out, they can present students with a welcoming on-ramp to their college careers, setting them up to succeed, even thrive, during their undergraduate years and beyond.

CHOICES TO MAKE

Modern first-year seminars trace their roots to the student-protest movement of the 1970s. At the University of South Carolina, protests over the Kent State shootings and the Vietnam War were also fueled by a local issue: The university had grown and felt sprawling and impersonal. Students didn't feel like they had a voice.

The protests — which grew to include a building takeover and clashes with the National Guard — led to some soul-searching on the part of South Carolina's administration. Among the university's responses: University 101, a small seminar course meant to connect students to the institution, and to one another, says Dan Friedman, assistant vice president for University 101 Programs & the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Friedman co-edited a book on the course's history and impact.

Courses like this existed before World War II but had fallen by the wayside, Friedman says. South Carolina's University 101 caught on; today, more than 80 percent of students take it. The leading reason students register for it is to make friends. And research shows that the course is effective: Students who take it come back for their sophomore year at significantly higher rates than those who don't, Friedman says. The No. 1 driver of that: their sense of belonging.

The model has spread throughout higher ed, with some 75 percent of institutions offering a course in this vein and the university now recognized as a leader in developing the first-year experience.

First-year-seminar courses take many forms, but they share the same deceptively simple core goal as the first modern version at South Carolina: making campus feel smaller and more personal.

When colleges add or redesign a first-year seminar, they have a series of choices to make about how to frame it.

- Is this course going to be a general introduction to the college experience, or will it have a theme?

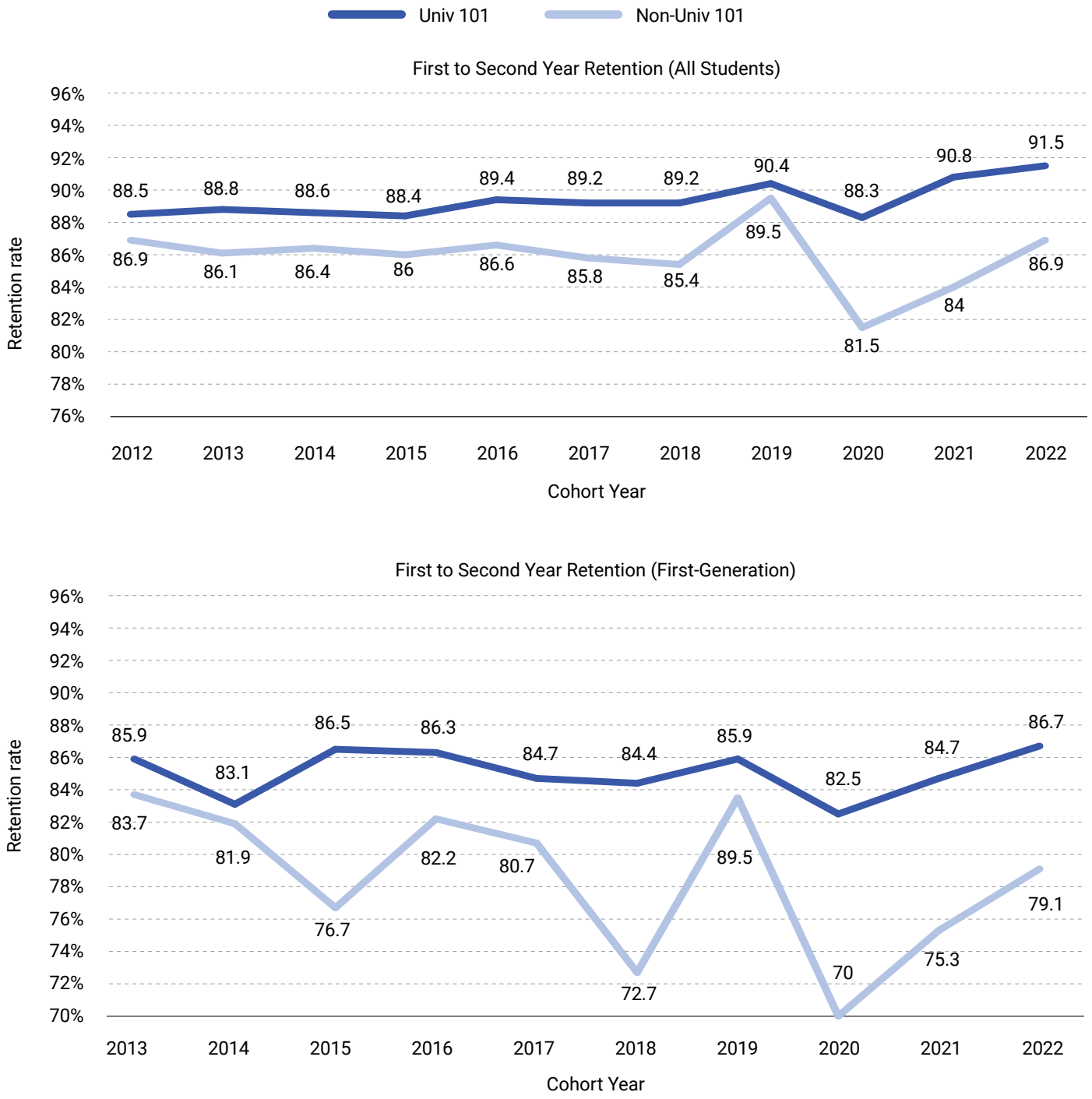
COURTESY OF NAOMI ELVOVE

Naomi Elvove, executive director of the Student Success Center at Dominican University of California, does a handstand on stage to make a point about asking for support.

- If there's a theme, will it be universal, or selected by individual instructors?
- Will the course be worth the standard number of credits, or just one?
- Will students be graded?
- Will the seminar be required? For some or all students?
- Given that, how many students will be in a section — and who's going to teach all of those sections?
- What support will those instructors receive?
- Will students be grouped together, say by major, or is this an occasion to mix them all up?

A Retention Tool

Students who took the University of South Carolina's first-year seminar, University 101, were more likely than others to return for their sophomore year.



Data for 2012-2013 and 2020-2022 cohorts provided by the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment and Analytics and data for 2014-2019 cohorts provided by Student Data Enrollment Analytics

Source: University of South Carolina

On many campuses, those questions will be decided with an eye to institutional politics and priorities and, no question, the bottom line. But there is research on how to make these courses most effective, says Friedman. Some of these choices, he says, are made based on what is "possible" rather than what is "preferable."

For instance, he says, "I think everyone would love to have a three-credit course," because there's more than enough material to cover in one. But given all the other objectives of the gen-ed curriculum, adding even a one-credit first-year seminar can be a tough sell for faculty members.

There is some research suggesting that the courses have stronger outcomes when they're elective rather than required, he says. Some colleges have required them, though, deciding that it's worth annoying a few students who already know the material in order to reach every student who would benefit.

As for who teaches the course, whether to include staff among instructors is often a contentious issue, says Friedman, who consults at other colleges. That can be a matter of policy — say the stipulations in a union contract — or of culture. Friedman, for his part, sees real upsides in including staff members among the instructors for the course, which is what South Carolina does. Among other things, it gives staff a better understanding of both students and professors, and many who teach University 101 find it the most meaningful part of their work.

CHALLENGES ABOUND

Even when a college strives to create a first-year seminar that follows all of the best practices, it doesn't always work. About a decade ago, a group at the University of Wyoming argued for bringing back and beefing up a first-year seminar, in part to combat a dip in retention.

Wyoming had previously had a seminar that could be embedded in a course. But this group "reached high for a lot of the gold standards," says April Heaney, director of the university's Learning Resource Network, known as LeaRN. The goal, she says, was a "genuine seminar," an academic, graded, required, three-credit course where a small group of students would be guided by a faculty member as they discussed ideas, developing their critical and creative thinking. Heaney and her colleagues thought it would appeal to faculty members because they could teach the course on a theme of interest to them.

"We really want instructors and colleges to be more invested in the first-year experience. We want them thinking about the literacies that their students need and the relationships they need."

"In many ways, I really felt like that course was hitting so many of the best practices in first-year seminar," Heaney says. "We were very excited about it, and I think it had a reasonably good start."

But for all of that enthusiasm, the course quickly ran into challenges. It wasn't well funded, so it had a part-time coordinator tasked with running a summer colloquium for participating instructors — but they were not required to go. And it was hard to find enough instructors to run the course. The university designed a quota system so that each college had to staff a certain number of sections based on the number of majors it

had, creating headaches for the deans, Heaney says. The lack of formal training and the trouble finding instructors combined to make a course that was inconsistent across sections.

The course is now paused, meaning that it's still listed and departments can offer it if they want to, but it's not required.

Wyoming will soon roll out a new version of its general-education curriculum, which won't include a first-year seminar, Heaney says. But her own program does run an optional first-year-experience course, and she's still interested in finding a way to scale that up.

"We really want instructors and colleges to be more invested in the first-year experience," she says. "We want them thinking about the literacies that their students need and the relationships they need."

One benefit of a cross-department first-year seminar, Heaney says, is that it gives everyone on campus a common sense of what entering students are like, which can lead instructors to change their teaching and their commitment to student success across the board.

WELCOME 'AT THE TABLE'

All first-year seminars are meant to support students' adjustment to college, but some have additional aims. Take the Great Questions Seminars at Austin Community College. One of the courses students can choose to meet a student-success requirement, Great Questions is designed to give students an early experience studying core texts in a discussion-based course. The sections are taught from a common syllabus, which uses core readings and discussion, not lectures and textbooks.

Great Questions helps students "develop habits and skills that make them be successful in their classes," says Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., an associate professor of government who developed the course. At the same time, studying texts that raise the questions people have wrestled with for generations "helps them think about what they're doing in college in terms that are more meaningful than: 'I need to check this box so I can get a good job.'"

Students in Great Questions, Hadzi-Antich says, are told "you are all here today about to sit at this table that is centuries long, and you are welcome to this intellectual feast, and we're going to be reading these great works, and you are a part of this conversation, and you belong at the table."

At first, there was some internal skepticism that early-career community-college students were prepared for a course where they'd study *The Odyssey* and Euclidean geometry, Hadzi-Antich says. But he was confident they could do the work and believed that getting to do it early on in a supportive environment would get their college careers off on the best foot.

Many students, perhaps especially first-generation students, come to college with the idea that it's significant and that they'll be transformed by it, Hadzi-Antich says. Higher ed doesn't always live up to that ideal. But this course gives students an early taste of what it looks like when it does.

The Launch Seminar at Ohio State Univer-

Students are told "you are welcome to this intellectual feast, and we're going to be reading these great works, and you are a part of this conversation, and you belong at the table."

CATALIN ABAGIU, AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Students, faculty, staff, and community members take part in a Great Questions Community Seminar at Austin Community College.

sity takes on a persistent challenge: getting students to buy into the project of general-education courses. Part of a program called Bookends that also includes a capstone course, the Launch Seminar has three goals: helping students understand and make the most of the gen-ed curriculum; developing academic skills and habits of mind that will help them succeed in and beyond college; and figuring out their personal and professional goals and how their education can help meet them.

"The whole point of this is to give students a meaningful experience," says Melissa Beers, the senior director of GE Bookends. Students, she says, sometimes experience "culture shock" in the Launch Seminar because it's so unlike their other courses.

The challenge here is not in how much they have to read or all the deadlines they have to meet, but in how deeply they can push themselves to reflect. If students take this different sort of academic challenge seriously, it can help them be intentional about choosing among the many options available at the university — and making sure those choices add up to something worthwhile.

Students, in other words, need more than a set of academic skills to succeed in college. They need a sense of purpose, and the sooner they can find one, the better. —BECKIE SUPIANO

SPOTLIGHT: BOWLING GREEN STATE U.

Getting Tutored Is Normal

THE CHALLENGE: Students who need extra help may be reluctant to seek a tutor.

THE STRATEGY: Put tutoring services in a central location and make them inviting.

THE RESULT: Students report that the services have been helpful and have built up their confidence.

STUDENTS come to college with different conceptions of what tutoring is and who it's for. Some attended high schools with robust tutoring support, including in advanced courses, says Travis Brown, director of the Learning Commons at Bowling Green State University. Others come from schools where tutoring was for students struggling to pass their state exams in order to graduate.

Either way, some students sail through high school without needing extra help, get to college, and find that the work there is a lot harder. Faculty and staff see this play out year after year, and campuses offer support. But students might not want to believe that they need it. "It's not easy to admit when you need help," Brown says.

Bowling Green's approach has been to make tutoring centralized and inviting. In 2011 it rolled its tutoring offerings into the Learning Commons, putting them in a big, open study lounge on the first floor of the library. Students can drop in for the math and statistics lab, or walk in to make an appointment for the writing center or to see a tutor for a specific course. They can also study independently or in groups in the space, Brown says, or simply use it as a place to relax between classes.

The physical space is key, but the university does more to get the word out about tutoring. Some professors will bring their whole class to the Learning Commons for a tour, letting them know it's a form of support that strong students take advantage of regularly. The idea, Brown says, is to encourage students to make going to the Commons part of their routine.

"That's what you need to do to be a successful student," he says. "Now it's just normal, right? You know you're going to get up, you're going to study, and you're going to go to the dining hall, and you're going to have fun and go to classes. But you also need to start going to the tutoring."

From his office, Brown has a good view of

Tutoring isn't just about boosting academic performance. It's also part of the student experience.

MICHAEL NEMETH

Students being tutored in the Learning Commons, a big, open study lounge on the first floor of the library.

the activity in the Commons and can see when it's crowded. He also likes to walk through the space to have "soft check-ins with the students in real time when they're using the space." And the Learning Commons also collects qualitative feedback from students who use it. When he hears things like "so-and-so tutor was so helpful," "I'm more confident as a math student," or "I'm happy with my grade," he knows it's working.

Tutoring isn't just about boosting academic performance. It's also part of the student experience. "Students want to feel part of a community," Brown says. "They want to feel connected to their university. And that's beyond social activities, that's beyond going to the football games. They want to feel engaged and that they are valued and that they matter. As professionals that staff all these services, that's our responsibility." —BECKIE SUPIANO

Learning Communities

Building a support system through connected courses

TAKEAWAYS

- Before considering learning communities, ask what needs they would be serving.
- Building effective learning communities requires coordination across campus, including among the registrar, advisers, faculty members, and senior administrators.
- Learning communities can be structured in a variety of ways, including pairing required first-year courses or linking several major-specific courses and adding peer mentoring and co-curricular activities.
- Ongoing assessment is crucial to determining whether learning communities are actively benefiting students and are logistically manageable.

AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY, students interested in joining a learning community can choose from more than 80 options. Interested in geology or atmospheric science? Check out Earth, Wind and Fire. Music? Try Esprit de Corps. There are also learning communities for women in STEM and for undecided majors within the College of Health and Human Services.

What is a learning community? Don't worry if you're unsure. Although they have been around for about 100 years, they are still relatively uncommon. They can also vary significantly in design, scope, and focus. A learning community typically consists of a group of students who are enrolled in two or more courses together. Sometimes the instructors of those courses collaborate on content or design. Some learning communities are thematic; others focus on course sequencing in the major. Some learning communities last a semester; others extend over a year. And learning communities can include co-curricular activities, such as peer mentoring and study groups.

In recent years, advocates have argued that learning communities are exactly what's needed to help higher education meet the post-pandemic challenges students are facing in the transition to college, retention, and academic success. In a 2024 opinion essay, a group of learning-community researchers and practitioners argued that students who participate in such programs can increase their sense of belonging and rebuild their social and study skills. Teaching with a learning community can re-motivate exhausted faculty members by allowing them to collaborate with others on a shared teaching experience. Learning communities can also draw campuses closer together by creating ties among staff members — such as advisers — professors, and students.

Most of Iowa State's learning communities include courses that serve as an introduction to fields or majors, along with peer mentoring. Many also include co-curricular activities, such as field trips and social

TOM NEPPL

John Pleasants (standing, right), an ecology professor, works with first-year Iowa State U. students to capture and tag migrating Monarch butterflies.

events. The program, which will turn 30 next year, enrolls about 6,500 students, most of whom are in their first year of college. That comes out to about a 93-percent participation rate. "We are really, truly a first-year experience," says Jen Leptien, the university's director of learning communities.

Learning communities are one of 11 high-impact practices that have shown documented benefits for students. Yet, according to the National Survey on Student Engagement, only about 12 percent of first-year students in 2023 participated in a learning community. About half of four-year colleges and about 20 percent of two-year colleges that responded to the 2023 National Survey on the First Year Experience provide learning communities for first-year students. And most of them said that fewer than 20 percent of their first-year students participated.

Amy M. Cooper, former president of the National Learning Community Association,

says she has seen increased interest among members in first-year learning communities that include a first-year seminar course focused on how to succeed in college. The second course may be a required general-education course, such as English or math.

Participants at the association's 2024 annual conference, Cooper says, talked a lot about how students are craving a sense of belonging. The pandemic prevented many from learning the skills they need to foster that feeling, though, such as how to work well in groups or start a conversation with someone from a different background. Learning communities deliberately build the skills that will ultimately help students succeed in life, she says. "It's not like, let's get together and have a pizza party or let's do an icebreaker."

Learning communities deliberately build the skills that will ultimately help students succeed in life.

MAKING LARGE CLASSES FEEL SMALLER

Learning communities typically center around a group of students who take more than one course together, but not always. At Wayne State University, where Cooper is manager of the learning-community program, each of the 21 learning communities offered centers on a single course tied to a student's area of interest or major. Cooper says this allows large introductory classes to feel smaller. Students in a 200-person anthropology course, for example, would be divided into groups of 15 or 20. Each learning community is also assigned a certified and paid peer mentor, who hosts study sessions, hangouts, and field trips.

Georgia State University began experimenting with freshman learning communities about 15 years ago. The response was positive enough that the university moved to an opt-out model; today, 80 percent of first-year students are enrolled in a learning community, said Timothy M. Renick, executive director of Georgia State's National Institute for Student Success. First-year students who participate in learning communities tend to earn better grades, form friendships early on, and know more about campus resources, the university has found.

All freshman learning communities at Georgia State are built around fields of interest, or what the university calls "meta majors." A student may choose to join, say, a learning community for the arts and humanities, business, or education. Because students are exposed through the community to a variety of majors and careers in a certain area, that helps cut down the likelihood that students will choose one major but then switch to something else once they realize that's a better fit. That means that they graduate more quickly and waste fewer credits, Renick says.

As at Wayne State, some of the courses that students in these learning communities enroll in are large. Others consist only of the students in that learning community. But all students take the same four to five courses together in their first semester. Mixing small seminars with larger courses, Renick says, helps learning communities avoid becoming overly insular.

Renick says that the scale of the program brings certain benefits. The university creates three or four scheduling models within each meta major. If you want to take all of your classes before noon because you work later in the day, there is a learning community for

What to Consider When Starting a Learning Community

Experienced faculty members and administrators offer the following guidance to colleges that are considering adding learning communities to their academic programs.

Know why you're doing it. Be clear about what you want to get out of these programs. That will help you determine how to measure its success and structure it. Jen Leptien, director of learning communities at Iowa State University, notes that the variation in a program's learning communities reflects what different departments think first-year students need in order to succeed in their major.

Secure the support of senior administrators. Getting learning communities off the ground requires an up-front investment of time and other resources. Faculty members may need course releases if they are teaching courses in teams. If you want to add peer mentors, they need to be identified, trained, and paid. Senior administrators are critical to providing the necessary support.

Find your champions. The vast majority of faculty members on your campus probably won't need to be involved in learning communities. But you will need a certain level of commitment, support, and awareness for such communities to run effectively. The registrar's office and advisers are integral to planning, awareness, and feedback. Co-curricular supports such as field trips or service work may require the help of people in student affairs. Timothy M. Renick, executive director of Georgia State University's National Institute for Student Success, suggests starting out with a small pilot program first, to test the waters.

Make sure to assess. Learning communities are meant to increase students' sense of belonging, support their transition into college, and improve their academic success. The only way you'll know if those things are happening is if you measure them. Start thinking about ways you can survey students and compare the outcomes among groups of students in learning communities and those who are not.

Be adaptable. Learning communities, like any other academic program, constantly have to adapt to new realities. One is the growing interest among students in online and hybrid courses. Institutions are figuring out ways that students in these environments can stay connected through their learning communities despite not being together physically. Another is the growing use of dual credit in high school. If students come into college already having completed required courses, colleges need to rethink what other kinds of courses they could pair together.

Don't reinvent the wheel. While you need to build the program that fits your campus, there are plenty of resources out there to help guide you through the process. Two places to start: the National Learning Communities Association and the National Resource Center for Learning Communities, housed in the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education.

— BETH MCMURTRIE

you. The sheer number of learning communities also allows for variety among courses. Students looking to fulfill their social-science requirement, for example, could choose among learning communities in their meta major that offer different courses to meet that requirement, such as sociology, psychology, or American government.

DESIGNATED FACULTY MEMBERS

Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi also has a long history with learning communities for first-year students. Its program began in 1994. It has been unusual in two ways: it was mandatory and it stretched over two semesters. The program had to adjust to the times, notes Rita Sperry, director of college readiness and academic support. For one, the growing number of students coming into college with dual credit led to scaling back the program from four courses to two or three, because administrators found that incoming students had credits that allowed them to opt out of some of the courses.

Until recently, designated faculty members taught a first-year seminar as part of a learning community. Those faculty members worked with the instructor of another course in the learning community to ensure that what they were teaching complemented what the instructor was teaching. A writing assignment in the first-year seminar, for example, might build on something the students were learning in the other course. Or the instructor might spend class time doing exam review — and teaching study skills in the process — for the other course. The two instructors would also coordinate to ensure they weren't scheduling major exams or due dates for the same day. In 2024, the university scaled back its learning-community program to consist of just a major-specific, first-year seminar. Sperry says administrators told her that students found it harder to build course schedules around linked courses.

But Sperry says students have benefited from the program and remains an advocate of learning communities. Their campus has been able to show that students who are enrolled in a first-year seminar linked to a content course, such as history or biology, perform better in that course than if they had just taken it outside of a learning community.

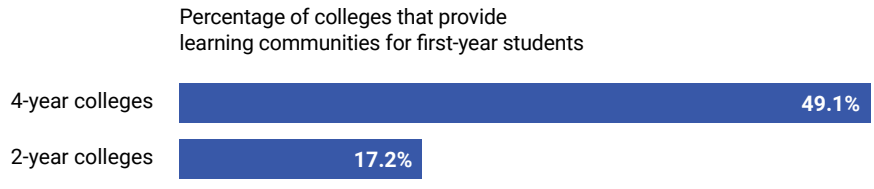
Powerful, But Still Rare

Tight budgets and dual-credit programs are among the challenges of creating a learning community.
52.2% of colleges that provide learning communities said that fewer than 20 percent of their first-year students participated.

11%

of first-year students participated in a learning community in 2023.

Source: National Survey of Student Engagement



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

“A lot of what we’re doing in learning communities is raising the level, raising the bar, of what students are capable of.”

Blended courses, in which two faculty members might collaborate on assignments, aren’t standard to all learning communities, however. When faculty members at Georgia State, for example, tried that, it proved too challenging to maintain. A collaboration might just last one semester if one or both professors moved on. “It’s a nice model conceptually but it didn’t pay off in the long term,” said Renick.

BENEFITS FOR UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

Community colleges also have a long history with learning communities. Chandler-Gilbert Community College, in Arizona, began offering them in 1994, says Chris Schnick, dean of arts and sciences. The college has had to adapt over the years, as it moved from offering learning communities to students taking developmental coursework — which has since been phased out — toward building them around courses that students commonly took at the same time, such as an introductory English course and an introductory psychology course.

Faculty members at Chandler may choose to blend their courses to the point where they are team-taught, or keep them separate, with faculty members meeting outside of class time to create common assignments and share observations.

Learning communities are particularly beneficial for students who may be struggling, said Schnick. An instructor in a reading-intensive course, for example, may see that a student is struggling with reading and alert the instructor in a content-focused course, so they could offer additional support.

Kingsborough Community College at the City University of New York also has a well-developed program, offering different learning communities for incoming freshmen, incoming freshmen for whom English is a second language, and continuing students. First-year students, for example, might be placed together in three courses: an English course, a student-development course that teaches student-success skills, and a general-education course.

“A lot of what we’re doing in learning communities is raising the level, raising the bar, of what students are capable of. It’s polishing their skills, teaching them to work with others,” said Gordon Alley-Young, dean of the faculty. “Especially at a time when it seems like DEI is being dismantled all over the country, learning communities might be that one place where you’re having to work in a group … where you are dealing with folks from all walks of life.” — BETH MCMURTRIE

Looking Ahead: Career Thinking

TAKEAWAYS

- Colleges are increasingly introducing career planning in first-year programs, using various approaches.
- Early discussion about careers can help students choose courses more intentionally and explore more options.

  Such engagement with students can also increase retention.
- Students who are first in their families to go to college may need extra incentives to talk with a career counselor.

THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA'S Career Connections Center had a senior problem.

Students weren't coming in for career advice until they were about to graduate, scrambling to figure out what came next. Some had high grades but didn't get out of the classroom to do internships or gain other first-hand experience. Others had a great experience but had no clue of how to talk about it with employers.

In a national freshman survey, eight in 10 students said improving their chances of getting a better job was very important in their decision to go to college. But intent doesn't always square with reality: An analysis by the Strada Education Foundation found that while most first-year students say they plan to engage in career-planning activities, by the time they are seniors, less than a third have met with career-services staff, done mock interviews, or used career-office resources beyond résumé reviews.

The gaps are even greater for first-generation students and those from underrepresented minority groups.

At Florida, career counselors determined that to tackle their senior problem, they needed to get a head start, in students' first year in college. "Our goal is to plant the seed," says Alison Noonan, senior assistant director of career engagement.

Florida is not alone in stressing early intervention. Colleges are increasingly embracing first-year programs to introduce students to career planning and to familiarize them with the career office and other campus resources.

JULIA SULLIVAN

Students at Binghamton University attending a Fleishman Career Center workshop.

Hartwick College, a liberal-arts college in New York, embeds career development in a required first-year seminar, where students connect with a career coach, write a résumé, and start a portfolio of their work — things they often don't do until later in their college careers. The Stevens Institute of Technology assigns every freshman a career adviser. Binghamton University hires interns as "career influencers" to reach out to their fellow students in person or on social media to make them more aware of the career office and its services and events.

One reason why students shy away from the career center is that they think it is only for older students who are well on their way to figuring out their career path, says Jade Moreno, a career counselor at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, which has a freshman-focus team of career advisers dedicated to working with first-year students.

Many students do come to the university, which emphasizes experiential learning, with internships under their belt and a 10-year plan. But others need to know that the career center is a place to go where they can just ask questions.

"It's OK not to know. It's OK to feel lost," says Moreno, who spent four years as part of the freshman-focus team. "We try to tell them it's OK just to come in and say hi."

Cal Poly's freshman-focus team — which was started a decade ago with funding from a student-success fee — helps to "normalize" career advising for students through outreach at orientation, in introductory courses, and at campus events, says Amie Hammond, the career office's executive director.

Early career engagement lets students be more intentional both inside and outside the classroom, says Noonan, of the University of Florida. It allows them to be more deliberate in the courses they choose and gives them more time to discover and explore their interests.

"It's OK not to know. It's OK to feel lost. We try to tell them it's OK just to come in and say hi."

Noonan says she encourages students to try one new activity each semester that might help move them toward long-term goals.

And the benefits of career exploration in the freshman year don't simply accrue, paying off only when students are near graduation. Researchers with Michigan State University's Collegiate Employment Research Institute found that having students take part in a career-related activity during freshman year — even something low stakes like going to an internship fair or a résumé-writing workshop — can raise retention by 5 or 6 percent.

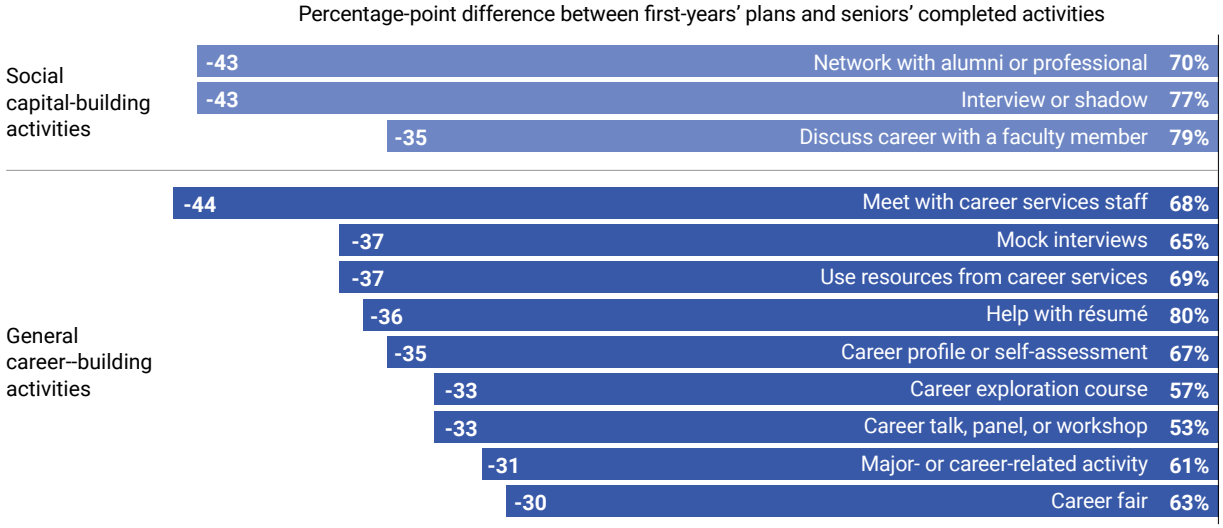
To reach first-year students, strategies must be both broad and deep. The former includes presentations during orientation and in first-year seminars and other courses with large numbers of freshmen. Cal Poly has created a list of career-related topics — like first-year résumé writing and how to get experience without any experience — that professors can pick from; career advisers then deliver short talks of 20 minutes or less.

Both Cal Poly and Florida encourage first-year students to attend career fairs, and station staff members on site to act as guides. That way the experience won't be as intimidating or overwhelming when students are actually looking for an internship or job.

Binghamton, which is part of the State University of New York system, started a fellowship to help faculty members incorporate

Good Intentions

A large gap exists between first-year students' plans for career preparation and what seniors have accomplished.



Notes: Base = 55,277 participants at U.S. institutions, n= 24,921 first-year students and 29,893 seniors.
Survey question: Which of the following have you done or do you plan to do at this institution before you graduate (whether in person or online)?

Source: Analysis by the Strada Education Foundation for the 2021 National Survey of Student Engagement's Career and Workforce Preparation Topical Module.

career learning and resources into their curricula. While the grant is open to all professors, the university gives priority to those who teach large, freshman-focused courses, says Kelli Smith, assistant vice president for student success.

Some 80 percent of Binghamton first-years now have "meaningful" career engagement, such as going to a workshop or scheduling an appointment with an adviser. Just three years ago, only 28 percent did, Smith says.

TARGETED PROGRAMMING

But the overall figures can obscure the fact that there might be "pockets" of students the career center is not reaching, like first-generation or international students. Smith and her colleagues regularly analyze the data and then do outreach to offices and student organizations that serve particular student groups. The result is more targeted programming, such as a two-credit career course offered to first-generation, low-income, and other disadvantaged students the summer before they start attending the university.

Career counselors at other colleges also pay extra attention to students who are first in their families to go to college. While career services are broadly underutilized, "the students who come to us are the students whose parents went to college and told them to come to us," says Cal Poly's Moreno.

Cal Poly holds drop-in hours at campus cultural centers where students can get résumé advice, while Florida does "pop-ups" for career counseling in residence halls. Such approaches don't specifically focus on first-year students but work to raise the visibility of the career office and its services on campus.

Other strategies go light on the actual advising and emphasize relatability. The Cal Poly career center, for instance, has held events on the main campus lawn like a "grow your career" giveaway, in which counselors handed out baby succulents to passing students, a reminder that career aspirations need to be nurtured.

Not all efforts have worked out. Binghamton embedded advisers in residence halls but realized that students responded better to their peers, Smith said. The career office now hires student influencers who hold events around campus and post career-related videos and memes on social media.

Likewise, group-advising appointments for younger students was a misfire — they still wanted one-on-one attention.

Career advising for first-year students can look different, though. Upperclassmen often have specific needs, like interview prep or résumé review, while freshmen can benefit from open-ended, more exploratory conversations. During her time on Cal Poly's freshman-focus team, Moreno often heard about homesickness and roommate conflicts mixed in with career concerns.

Some colleges are starting even earlier. When Smith first got to Binghamton, a decade ago, she tagged along anonymously on a campus tour to see how the university talked about careers with prospective students. She has since worked closely with the admissions office to provide more career-outcomes information for families, and the career center is one of the first stops for campus visitors.

At Florida, Noonan does professional development for public-school teachers and counselors to help them introduce career exploration to students long before they get to college.

First-year career programming works best when there is broader institutional buy-in, Smith says. To be successful in reaching these students, career offices need partners and champions among the faculty and in offices like student life, housing, and admissions. Smith and her colleagues spend time getting to know others on campus and their goals to figure out how they can collaborate to better serve students. "This is incredibly complicated work," she said. "To do it, you have to touch all corners of campus." — KARIN FISCHER

First-Year Study Abroad

A high-impact practice

TAKEAWAYS

- First-year study abroad can attract students to your college and help them form bonds that make them want to stay.
- Early exposure to overseas study can spur students to gain other international experience.
- For students in certain majors, it makes more sense to study abroad early, while filling general-education credits.
- First-year programs can also be a way to free up space in overcrowded dorms, and to see if students on the admissions bubble can succeed in college.

VALINCIA HILL picked Marist College from more than two dozen colleges that accepted her.

But when the time came to start her freshman year, Hill, who goes by Val, didn't travel to the liberal-arts campus in New York's Hudson Valley. Instead, she got on a plane to Dublin to spend her first year of college overseas.

Marist has had a first-year-abroad program, in Dublin and Florence, for nearly 20 years. But now more institutions are offering international programs tailored to incoming students, making the introduction to college thousands of miles away from their home campus.

Such programs can attract adventurous students like Hill, who are itching for new places and experiences after spending part of their teenage years cooped up by the Covid-19 pandemic. Marist's first-year abroad program "made me want to say yes" to accepting admission, Hill says.

While they hold appeal for students who are independent and self-assured, these programs can also be beneficial to those for whom the adjustment to college may be rockier, experts say. Among the advantages are establishing relationships with professors and other adult mentors and building close bonds with a small group of fellow students that they can carry with them through their transition.

Studying abroad — at any point in a student's academic career — is recognized as a high-impact practice, one of about a dozen hands-on experiential activities that can deepen classroom learning and improve academic outcomes such as retention and graduation rates.

For institutions, first-year programs can also be a way to see if students on the admissions bubble can succeed in college as well as to free up space in overcrowded dormitories.

CARLO DE JESUS, MARIST U.

Marist University students take in Florence, Italy during a first-year study-abroad program.

While a growing number of institutions — including Middlebury College, Florida State University, and the University of Maryland at College Park — offer programs that allow first-year students to spend a semester or an entire academic year overseas, less than 5 percent of Americans who go abroad do so as freshmen. More than 60 percent of education-abroad students are juniors or seniors, according to the Institute of International Education.

Mitch Gordon, co-founder of Verto Education, which runs first-year-abroad programs, says he has seen growing interest in overseas travel among younger students. They are excited by the idea of taking a gap year to travel and explore between high school and college while their parents are concerned that they stay on track academically.

A first-year-abroad program can satisfy both. "It's a middle ground," Gordon says. "It's a gap year without a gap."

Verto directly admits students who may not have yet settled on a college and works with more than 70 institutions, some of which encourage students who are on the waitlist or whose enrollment has been deferred until January to start their studies overseas.

Marist's program is self-selecting and has become a selling point for the college, Kevin Weinman, the college's president, says. While the majority of Marist students come from

the Northeast and mid-Atlantic, first-year abroad has broadened its admissions reach, attracting a more geographically diverse student body.

Hill says she encourages other students to consider first-year study abroad when she returns to her Las Vegas high school. "You might be questioning it, but just do it," she tells younger students. "It might be a little bit out of your comfort zone, and that's a good thing."

Hill's only prior travel experience was family road trips, but Dublin became a home base for visits to France, Greece, and elsewhere across Europe. She hopes to study abroad again, in Australia and perhaps in South Korea.

"It's sort of a win-win. You're having a transformative global experience and transitioning to being an adult."

Many students who participate and go abroad as freshmen are "repeat customers," Weinman says. Early exposure to overseas study can spur students to gain other international experience — a perennial challenge in American higher education, where just a small percentage of undergraduates study abroad despite the increasingly global nature of work.

At Marist, a higher share of winners of the prestigious Fulbright scholarship are alumni of first-year abroad, says John Peters, vice provost and senior international officer.

For students in more structured majors like engineering, first-year programs can be their one opportunity to go abroad as they can be constrained by degree requirements in their junior and senior years. The curriculum of first-year international programs are typically foundational courses that work for all students. "It's a more interesting way to get your gen-ed credits than some 200-person psychology lecture," Gordon, of Verto Education, says.

And many such programs are cohort-based, meaning that students may have smaller classes and more individualized academic support.

Alexandra Wood, vice president of institutional research and outcomes assessment for the Council on International Educational Exchange, says the programs encourage independence and cross-cultural communication, skills that students need for both college and their careers. "It's sort of a win-win," says Wood, whose nonprofit group runs its own first-year programs and supports ones for individual colleges. "You're having a transformative global experience and transitioning to being an adult."

But students who go abroad may be missing out on other college rites of passage. When they arrive on campus as sophomores or second-semester freshmen, they may not know their way around and could feel left out of already-formed friend groups.

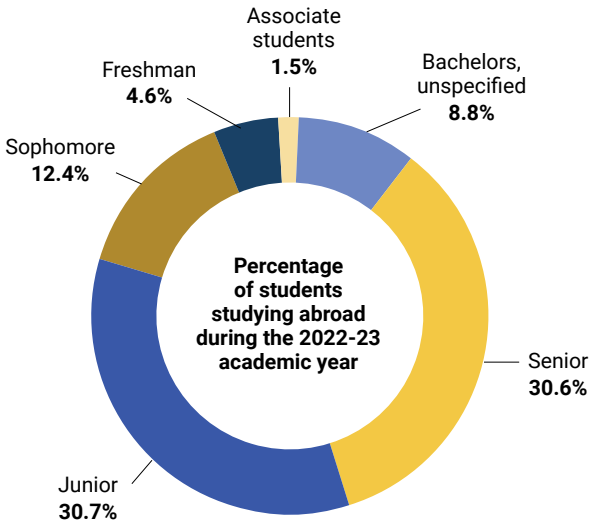
Administrators try to build in college affinity by replicating campus traditions, sending faculty members to teach, and distributing T-shirts and other college swag. Marist holds Zoom sessions throughout the year to acquaint students studying abroad with academic- and student-support services.

Hill says she doesn't feel like she missed out by arriving in New York a year later than many of her classmates. Her year in Ireland has been a great conversation starter, and she has developed strong bonds from the close camaraderie abroad.

Marist professors can often identify stu-

Who Studies Abroad?

Less than 5 percent of Americans who go abroad do so as freshmen. More than 60 percent of study-abroad students are juniors or seniors.



Notes: Percents may not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: Open Doors U.S. Study Abroad Data, 2024.

dents who studied overseas in their first year because they are more confident and more likely to ask questions in class, Peters says.

At the same time, freshmen who go abroad do frequently need more support than students just a couple of years older — after all, they are making two big transitions at once, to college and to another country. Homesickness can be more pronounced when you can't just visit mom and dad over the weekend.

Colleges designing first-year programs need to build in extra assistance, says Kyle Rausch, executive director for study abroad at the University of Illinois at Chicago. For a 10-day program to Costa Rica, UIC sends three staff members, as well as a couple of peer mentors, to work with about 15 first-year, first-generation students.

The program, held just before the start of classes, is a kind of immersive orientation. Students then take a semester-long course together and do a final group project related to sustainability, a theme of the program.

The first-to-second-semester retention rate for participants in the three-year-old program is 90 percent, 10 percentage points higher than for freshmen overall, Rausch says.

Despite this success, Rausch, who tries to minimize costs to students, has not found sustainable funding for the program, which was started with a special-projects grant.

College leaders say that running a first-year-abroad program requires real institutional commitment. "It's not the most efficient way to deliver education," Weinman, the Marist president, says. "But students get so much out of it." — KARIN FISCHER

COMMENTARY

The Secret to First-Year Success? Relationships.

BY PETER FELTEN AND OSCAR R. MIRANDA TAPIA

FROM our synthesis of decades of scholarly literature, the hundreds of interviews with college students we've conducted across the country, and research for the book we've co-authored together, we've found that building a relationship-rich first-year experience requires two complementary efforts. First, we must educate students about human connections. And second, we must cultivate scalable practices in and outside of the classroom.

We should not assume first-year students understand how important relationships are for their education. We need to teach students about why connections matter and help them develop the relational skills they need to act on what they've learned.

For one of our books we interviewed a University of Washington student named Gigi Gaultier. She told us that she went to college expecting to fit in and to be transformed. Both her parents had graduated from UW, and she had always known she would go there, too: "I was thrilled to be at UW," she said, "but sitting in these large classrooms — chemistry had 500 students — I convinced myself that they're all more successful than me. I was comparing myself to others and imagining all of their accomplishments. I was freaking out, to be honest."

Another student, Abraham Segundo, started at San Antonio College hoping to "spark a change" for his extended family by being the first to earn a degree. Like Gigi, Abraham was highly motivated to succeed, but he struggled his first semester and, ashamed, his "pride" stopped him from revealing that to his professors, adviser, or classmates: "Everyone at the college is always willing to help me, but it can be intimidating to go to them."

Students like Gigi and Abraham need to be affirmed that their experiences are normal, that almost everyone feels overwhelmed and intimidated at some point during their first year. College is supposed to be hard.

While higher ed emphasizes the value of academic rigor, we must also teach that successful students don't do college on their own. Instead, the first-year students who thrive connect with faculty, staff, and peers who support them through the struggles of learning and growing.

To achieve this, we should focus our efforts toward three goals. First-year students need to:

1. Understand that connections matter for learning, belonging, and well-being. If students don't know that relationships will help them succeed, they are unlikely to seriously engage with even excellent orientation programs, first-year seminars, and other high-impact experiences. Faculty, staff, and peer educators need to be transparent about why first-year programs are structured the way they are and how the relationships students build in the first year will help them succeed. We know this, but we cannot assume all students do. Indeed, as Anthony Abraham Jack notes, research consistently demonstrates that "students from affluent families experience easier transitions to college life than do their poorer peers" in part because they have a clearer sense of how relationships will help them succeed.

2. Develop strategies to connect mean-

ingfully with staff, faculty, and peers. Simply valuing relationships isn't enough, however. Students need to learn skills like how to form an effective study group or how to work with a Writing Center consultant. Trained peers can be particularly powerful here. Olegaria Gonzales, a first-generation student at Nevada State University, told us that she had benefited so much from peer mentors showing her the ropes in her first year that she decided to serve in that role too: "I saw that as new students, they were as lost as I had been. They didn't want to talk to anyone. They didn't know how to reach out to professors. They didn't know how to speak for themselves." As a peer mentor, she helped first-year students develop these crucial relational skills.

3. Act in ways that enable them to build connections. Once students understand that relationships matter and learn some strategies to connect, they need to act. This step can be especially hard for students who feel like an impostor or who doubt they belong in college. Faculty and staff need to validate first-year students' capacity to act, even when they are struggling. A student named Asma Shauib told us she credits her first-year professors at LaGuardia Community College for convincing her to persist: "The faculty believed in me more than I did in myself." Davidson College student Sam Owusu told us his academic adviser was pivotal for him: "She really pushed me to have some faith in myself."

Many institutions already support at least some of their first-year students like this, often in boutique programs (e.g., bridge, honors, learning communities) for particular groups of students. The real challenge is doing this work at scale — educating every first-year student about relationships. There are simply too many students, and too few faculty and staff members, to rely on small cohorts and one-on-one interactions to reach all first-year students. As Richard Hallett and his colleagues concluded in their six-year study of three public universities: "The problem is that postsecondary education has been focused on creating supplemental programs instead of shifting institutional culture." To get to scale, we need to develop cultures rooted in relationship-rich practices.

The good news is that first-year programs include some of the building blocks for this culture in their new-student orientations and first-year seminars. Too often, though, those operate in isolation, disconnected from the core curriculum, gateway courses for majors, and other central components of a student's first-year experience.

Over the past two decades, the education-reform movement in STEM has demonstrated the efficacy of structured, active learning in first-year courses, even in massive ones like Gigi Gaultier's 500-student chemistry class. Active-learning pedagogies foster relationships by connecting students with peers, teaching assistants, and faculty in educationally purposeful ways.

Students themselves are the most valuable resource in fostering a relational first-year culture. When we educate and empower them, they connect with each other and with us in ways that support individual and collective success. And, like Olegaria Gonzales, many of them will help their peers connect and thrive in their first year.

Peter Felten is executive director of the Center for Engaged Learning, professor of history, and assistant provost for teaching and learning at Elon University. He is a co-author of Connections are Everything: A College Student's Guide to Relationship-Rich Education *(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).*

Oscar R. Miranda Tapia is a research associate for the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University. He is also a co-author of Connections are Everything: A College Student's Guide to Relationship-Rich Education *(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).*

U. of Miami students attend the Eaton Residential College's weekly open house.

MATT MCCABE, U. OF MIAMI

Residential Life After the Pandemic

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, the dormitory is a symbol of the first-year experience. It is there that friendships are forged, term papers are written, and Cup Noodles are microwaved. And despite the randomness of assignments, the dorm is also a point of pride. Long after moving out, the first question many newly acquainted alumni will ask each other is: *Where did you live in your first year?*

Because of the key role they play, dorms have a longer reach than most efforts focused on the first year, at least at four-year colleges. Sixty percent of those institutions have a residential component to their programming, according to preliminary results from a 2023 survey by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Of those, 71 percent indicated that a majority of first-year students lived on campus or were otherwise reached by residential programs.

Among two-year colleges with a residential component to their first-year experience, 75 percent said that less than one-fifth of their first-year students lived on campus or were otherwise reached by residential programs. (Final results of the survey are scheduled to be published in late 2025.)

Colleges are no longer facing the acute challenge to residence life presented by the Covid-19 pandemic at its height — when programming was curtailed and even hanging out in someone else's dorm room could result in a code-of-conduct violation if a student didn't follow all the right protocols.

But the struggles have continued. First-year students who were in

TAKEAWAYS

- The Covid-19 pandemic left many students with underdeveloped communication skills. They need help with both making connections and resolving conflicts.
- Social anxiety is rampant, but colleges can lower the barriers for student connection.
- Two ways to make events easier to attend: Make them available campuswide, and schedule them outside of busy class times.
- Holding events at regular times also helps build traditions.

SCRIPPS COLLEGE

Residential life at Scripps College.

middle or high school during the pandemic have arrived on campus with underdeveloped communication skills and more severe mental-health problems. Student-affairs personnel say freshmen need more assistance managing roommate relationships and meeting neighbors.

Some colleges are tackling those issues head-on to help make the first-year-living experience a positive memory.

DeMethra LaSha (Sha) Bradley, vice president for student affairs and dean of students at Scripps College, says she has found, over the last several years, that students lack the skills to talk to each other when they come into conflict. Often, they will ask for external parties to sort out their roommate issues — lack of cleanliness, noise, lights, etc. — instead of talking directly with each other.

One of the ways the college works to build students' ability to resolve conflicts is by demonstrating how to have tough discussions. A student-life administrator might role-play a conversation and offer tips, ask students to describe what they are afraid of, and explain why administrators can't immediately go fix the problem. (In some cases, of course, it is necessary for a facilitator to be present, such as if the roommates are in a screaming match.)

"Sometimes it's a minor thing; sometimes it's not," Bradley says. "But if we don't start some place, especially at the beginning of the academic year, then if a minor thing can't get resolved because we're stepping in to fix it versus providing the tools by which the roommates can address it themselves, minor becomes bigger, becomes bigger, becomes bigger."

Desiree Nownes, senior director of student formation and student life at Creighton University, says administrators can help students feel more empowered to have conversations about things that make them feel uncomfortable or anxious — a skill students will carry beyond college.

"The life skills that we're teaching them … are things that they can take with them when they leave the four, six, eight years that they're with us," Nownes says.

While administrators at many colleges report that students are participating less in clubs and campus events since the pandemic, the University of Miami's Office of Housing and Residential Life is in an enviable position: Leaders say they've noticed increased participation from first-year students in residential activities, such as dorm socials and study halls. Though they didn't collect data before the pandemic, when officials spoke to *The Chronicle* in October 2024, nearly 93 percent of freshmen had attended some sort of residential program.

Matt McCabe, associate director of residential education, and Tiffani Idol, director of residence life, say they think people having to be apart for so long fueled a hunger for peer connection. But the high participation rate is also a result of a programming model that leans into this desire.

One of the key elements is holding the same event on a regular basis. Miami's residential colleges, for example, each host a weekly open house.

"When you start to build these traditions and students develop the expectation that these things are happening, you become less reliant on one-off marketing," McCabe says. "We're not planning a singular event and picking a new date and [worrying] about students learning about it."

Another strategy may seem intuitive but is easier said than done: not repeating unsuccessful programs. Idol and McCabe say they've found that passive, drop-in activities are successful, allowing students to mingle with peers while perhaps also learning something new.

"We don't do a whole lot of, 'You have to come at the beginning of this event. You have to sit down. You have to focus for the entire event. And you can't leave until it's over,'" Idol says.

A few notable exceptions to this practice are intimate dinners with faculty members and excursions into the local community for sporting events and performances. These require RSVPs and use waitlists. Maybe that's part of the appeal.

—KATE HIDALGO BELLOWS

Success Begins at 'Home'

60%

of four-year colleges have a residential component to their first-year programming .Of those,

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Source: National Survey on the First-Year Experience

Thinking Outside the Club

How to get students out of their shells

THE PANDEMIC dealt a death blow to many student groups. Clubs couldn't meet or meaningfully wrap in new members, and upperclassmen couldn't pass institutional knowledge to their younger peers.

The effects are still being felt. More recent cohorts of students missed the normal rites of passage for high-school students, like playing on a sports team or performing in an ensemble. So when they arrived on campus as freshmen, they didn't know how or why to get involved. And they lacked confidence.

Across the country, many students struggle with social anxiety, says Jeremy Moore, dean of students at Naropa University. They feel overwhelmed trying to read social cues. Technology impedes their interactions with peers.

"It's that time-honored challenge of, I want to be friends with people. How do I build that?" Moore says.

The Chronicle wrote a series a few years ago about how colleges and their students were reviving campus life post-pandemic. It included a feature on the University of Virginia's College at Wise, which lost half of its clubs in two years and hired a "vibrant-campus-community coordinator" to help students resuscitate old clubs and start new ones.

Although clubs are one way first-year students find community on campus, they're not the only one. One-off events can be great ways to encourage freshmen to meet others, get outside, and take a break from schoolwork, without committing to the stress of board elections and funding squabbles. And accessible spaces outside of the dorm can provide students with a home away from home.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Desiree Nownes, senior director of student formation and student life, at Creighton University, said the misperception that everyone is involved in everything can lead students to feel pressured to bite off more than they can chew.

"Our goal is really to help students just feel comfortable going to games, going to events — bringing them outside of the halls and doing things," Nownes says.

Nownes says Creighton does this by planning campuswide events that aren't tied to any one student group, such as its 40-year-old "Christmas at Creighton" celebration, and scheduling activities outside of busy class times.

"Our programmers who are here late at night until 11, 12 sometimes, are just dedicated to making sure that they're doing it on stuff people are going to come to," Nownes says.

Each November, departments across campus collaborate on Creighton's "weeks of well-be-

ing." The slate of activities is directed at freshmen through the university's Ratio Studiorum Program, the academic-advising structure for first- and second-year students.

In the fall of 2024, the "weeks of well-being" included workshops on intuitive eating and tough conversations, a virtual careers fair, and a screening of the documentary *Tough Guise 2*.

"We invite everybody from around the university to have little classes, little events, that students can go to and learn more about themselves as a whole person," Nownes says.

CONNECTION FOR COMMUTERS

Nonresidential first-year students may not have as many options as those in dorms to participate in extracurriculars, since traveling to and from campus eats up their free time and many of them work.

But there are a few things colleges can do to help commuter students feel more bonded to their institution and classmates, while letting them determine how much time they want to invest.

The first is establishing a dedicated commuter lounge. There, commuters can kick back in between classes, heat up or refrigerate food, store belongings, and meet other students in their boat.

"These little things that happen at the institution have made commuter students feel as though they do matter," says John Armstrong, associate dean of students at the University of Connecticut.

"These little things that happen at the institution have made commuter students feel as though they do matter."

The second is providing a virtual option for on-campus events. When the fear of missing out is overwhelming, this cost-effective act can help commuters — as well as remote, parenting, or immunocompromised students — feel more included.

"Maybe [that's] watching a comedian, watching a speaker," Armstrong says. "The pandemic has helped us know that we can do these things pretty effectively."

—KATE HIDALGO BELLOWS

SPOTLIGHT: CATHOLIC U. OF AMERICA

Everything but the Bed

THE CHALLENGE: Commuter students face barriers to forming social relationships on campus.

THE STRATEGY: Assign them a residential adviser and invite them to visit the dorm regularly.

THE RESULT: In 2024-25, about one-third of first-year commuter students participated in the program. Administrators will ask how to improve the program and may extend it past freshman year.

SOMETIMES Franklin Arevalo, a junior and freshman resident assistant at the Catholic University of America, is asked by his residents which dorm he was in during his first year. He replies that, actually, he commuted from home.

The university has an on-campus housing requirement for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, but grants exceptions for students who live within 20 miles of the campus with a parent or legal guardian. Arevalo lived with family in Hyattsville, Md., just outside of Washington, D.C., during his first two years of college.

Now, as an RA, Arevalo mentors not only a floor of residential students but also three or four students who commute as he did. That's because Catholic recently restarted a commuter-in-residence program that connects commuting freshmen with an RA, provides them daytime access to dorm facilities, and includes them in hall programs and events.

Commuter students lead a very different lifestyle from those who are residential, says Heidi Zeich, Catholic's associate dean of students and director of residence life. They may have responsibilities like taking care of siblings and completing household chores, or have jobs far from campus. All of that amounts to a distinct schedule from residential undergraduates. Commuters have many fewer opportunities to bump into other students and form relationships.

Catholic's program does something experts say is vital for helping commuters feel at home: It creates a physical touch point for these students.

"What [commuters] are sometimes missing is the ease of connecting with the social experience on campus," Zeich says. "And that was what we were trying to give them easier access to."

NUTS AND BOLTS

After the pandemic, Catholic University administrators were looking for ways to better engage commuter students in campus life. They knew that students who lived on campus persisted at higher rates and they wanted to "even the playing field" for commuters.

About a sixth of the current freshman class commutes. Over the summer, the university reached out to incoming freshmen who had not applied to live in campus housing to invite them to participate in the program. Just over 40 students, or about a third of the incoming commut-

REAGAN BUDASI

Catholic U. of America students attend the CUA Autumn Fest residential program.

er class, indicated interest and were assigned to an RA.

There is no cost to participate, and students can choose their level of involvement. RAs are responsible for checking in with their commuters and including them in residential communications.

During visitation hours — between 10 a.m. and midnight on school nights and between 10 a.m. and 2 a.m. on weekend nights — commuters can enter their designated dorm and use its lounges, bathrooms, and study spaces.

Natalie Gallo is a freshman who lives in Washington and commutes half an hour to Catholic. After signing up for the commuter-in-residence program and getting assigned to a floor, Gallo joined its group chat, where she could find out about events. She has decorated mason jars and made slime at the floor programs she has attended.

"Those were fun ways to get to know the people that were on the floor and experience some dorm life," Gallo says, adding that she hopes to connect with other commuter students assigned to her floor.

Besides having less access to campus, commuters may have more limited time than residential students to socialize and make friends.

"They're always thinking about, 'What do I have to do next?'" says John Armstrong, associate dean of students at the University of Connecticut. "'When do I have to catch my bus?' 'When do I have to get to my car?' Because many of these students may have commitments beyond the university, beyond their academics."

As a freshman, Arevalo worked roughly 30 hours a week managing a Chipotle and sometimes arrived home after midnight. He received a scholarship his sophomore year that allowed him to quit, and then joined several clubs.

Now, as an RA, Arevalo wishes his commuters-in-residence were more active. But he acknowledges that living and work situations affect how much time commuters have to "blow some steam off at the residence hall."

Zeich, the director of residence life, says administrators will ask for feedback from participating commuters about how to improve the program. It's possible the university may expand it past freshman year.

"We are going to want to do some intentional assessment and evaluation to see how far there is interest and desire and, honestly, an impact," before deciding whether to build on the program, she says.

Zeich also hopes to see more commuters interested in becoming RAs. Remuneration includes room and board — expenses that, after all, lead some students to choose the commuter lifestyle.

"We certainly don't require our RA candidates to have lived on campus in the past," Zeich says. "It's inspiring to our commuters to see that this is a real option." —KATE HIDALGO BELLOWS

Civic Engagement's Many Forms

TAKEAWAYS

- Civic engagement can take many forms, including service, philanthropy, and voter registration. Before starting a first-year program, consider what forms of engagement you want to foster.
- One area that campuses are beefing up: first-year programs that teach how to talk to someone who might think differently from you.
- Some colleges are helping first-year students figure out what form of civic engagement most resonates with them.
- National organizations such as Campus Compact and the Constructive Dialogue Institute have resources for campuses looking to beef up civic-engagement programming.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT has long been considered a key part of a well-rounded undergraduate education. After all, one of the central goals of college is to produce graduates who go on to become good citizens.

But what does it mean to be civically engaged? Volunteering at a soup kitchen? Organizing a campus fundraiser for cancer research? Participating in a voter-registration drive? Having a civil discussion with a classmate on a topic of public interest?

For colleges looking to develop first-year programming that focuses on building civic capacities, figuring out what forms you want to support will help determine the kind of programming needed to get there. Here are a few paths that colleges have taken.

Giving back to the community: Coppin State University runs a first-year-experience program that includes three components: civic engagement, leadership, and career services. Loretta Mask Campbell, director of student experience, says the university's goal is to ensure that new students quickly connect with all three early in their college career.

In the case of civic engagement, Coppin State focuses on supporting the local community. "We felt it was important for them to understand you go to college to earn a degree," said Campbell. "But when you come from work, what are you doing to help the community you are in?"

Students are introduced to the idea of giving back from the start. Orientation programming includes immediate ways for freshmen to get involved, including service opportunities during their first weekend on campus. That message is reinforced in a freshman seminar, in which representatives of different community organizations come in to speak. In 2024 the university started a pilot program that will require students to complete around 15 to 20 service hours a year. The plan is to scale that up to include all students. Campbell's office keeps an ever-growing database of organizations with which she can pair students.

BANGALY DIATKE, JMU

James Madison U. students hold a discussion as part of the Better Conversations Together program.

Campbell's advice for others interested in embedding community service into the first-year experience: Begin with assessment. Run focus groups of students as well as faculty and staff members who teach first-year courses. How would they see this working? Where are their interests? Loop in the essential people on campus, starting with your new-student orientation committee, to ensure that students are exposed as soon as possible to these options. Finally, make sure your programming aligns with your mission. As an urban campus, for example, Coppin State has established relationships with many local groups like the Red Cross and Salvation Army. And its nursing program is well known in the medical community.

Talking across differences: James Madison University's Center for Civic Engagement supports a range of programming, including voter education and co-curricular work. This year, it added a new project: teaching first-year students how to hold a better conversation.

The idea was born out of discussions with students during the pandemic who spoke of being deeply fearful of losing relationships if

COPPIN STATE U.

Coppin State U. students participate in CSU Clean, part of a freshman day of service.

they said the wrong thing, says Kara Dillard, interim executive director of the center. For some students, that meant avoiding potentially controversial topics altogether. Dillard and others also heard from students who felt like they didn't have a voice on campus, such as those with more conservative views.

That got them wondering. "Can we design a space where our first-year students who are concerned about saying the wrong thing feel like they can share themselves and talk with each other and listen to each other's views and values?" Dillard asked. "And can students who think of themselves as not having a space on campus … feel like those views are heard and respected and contended with? Even if the group doesn't agree with them, can they still feel like they were listened to?"

The result is Better Conversations Together. Incoming students are asked to complete two 30-minute modules of a program called Perspectives, created by the Constructive Dialogue Institute. The lessons cover how people process information and form values and beliefs. Once on campus, students are put into groups of eight to 10 to participate in guided conversations under the supervision of a trained undergraduate facilitator.

To find topics, JMU uses guidebooks from the National Issues Forums Institute. Students might be asked to discuss whether colleges should remain test-optional, for example, which leads to a deeper discussion on how colleges decide whom to admit. That gives students a chance to talk about their own experiences. Should extracurriculars count?

What about the students who had to work or who didn't have many after-school options? Other lively discussions have included whether felons should be allowed to vote and whether social-media platforms should censor social-media posts.

The State University of New York at Binghamton is doing something similar with students in a first-year-experience course, using a combination of online modules from the Constructive Dialogue Institute and in-person workshops, with an emphasis on showing curiosity about different points of view. Alison Handy Twang, director of the university's Center for Civic Engagement, says students have responded positively in follow-up surveys.

Rather than listening in order to craft a response, as students are taught to do in classrooms, or trying to "win" the conversation, she says, students appreciated the idea of listening as a way to learn about another person's perspective. Asking questions to get at the "why" really stood out to a lot of students, Twang says. "They found it kind of freeing that they don't have to be worried about convincing another person of their point of view," she says. "That created more space for them to be comfortable engaging in the conversation."

Finding your path. When students come into college, their understanding of civic engagement often means service. That's no surprise. After all, volunteering and fund-raising are common activities within high schools, clubs, sports, and families. So how can colleges help students think about civic engagement more broadly? Juniata College found a solution through Pathways of Public Service and Civic Engagement. Run by Campus Compact, Pathways is both a survey and a framework. As a survey, it asks a series of questions designed to help a student explore social issues that they find important and ways to address them. The six pathways in the framework are community-engaged learning and research, community organizing and activism, direct service, philanthropy, policy and governance, social entrepreneurship, and corporate social responsibility.

Under each pathway, students select examples of activities that interest them, what issues they think are most pressing, what experiences they've had in each pathway, what kind of impact they think different activities have on social problems, and so on.

The idea is to expand students' understanding of civic engagement and reflect on what they find most appealing and most meaningful, says Sarah Worley, director of community-engaged teaching and learning at Juniata, and a professor of communications. Students take the survey as part of a required first-year seminar on student success.

"They get their own personal results back, and it's a little bit like a strength-finder kind of approach. They can see, which pathway did they gravitate to in terms of experience? Which one do they have more interest in but maybe less experience? Which one of these do they actually believe has the most potential for impact?" Worley says. "Then the instructors can facilitate discussion and reflection among the group." Instructors also try to "problematize" discussion of different forms

"They found it kind of freeing that they don't have to be worried about convincing another person of their point of view."

JUNIATA COLLEGE

First-year students at Juniata College work with members of the Standing Stone Garden Club to clean and replant garden beds at a local assisted living community.

of engagement. Are there situations in which, for example, a charity or direct service does more harm than good?

Students are also encouraged to take that information with them when they meet with their academic advisers. Maybe they want to do an engaged learning experience, or direct service, or community research. As an added bonus, Worley says, the framework has created a common language on campus. All students are required, through the general-education program, to complete a community-engaged learning experience, and that is now aligned with the pathways terminology. For a student interested in direct service, that could mean organizing a food drive. Someone interested in policy and governance might get involved in a voter-education campaign. That

also reminds students throughout their time in college about the variety of ways they can be civically engaged.

Worley, who is co-chair of the pathways working group at Campus Compact, says colleges interested in this approach have a variety of options. "There's no right or wrong way to use the pathways framework." Some colleges use the framework itself but not the survey. Those who want to get fully involved can join the Campus Compact working group, which allows them to create a survey tailored to their campus and attend quarterly meetings to share ideas and resources. But there is also a free version of the survey on the Campus Compact website. — BETH MCMURTRIE

The Whole Student

Supporting well-being

TAKEAWAYS

- First-year programming can dispel myths about how much partying happens at college and offer alternatives to substance use.
- Incorporating sexual-consent training into campus life can make students more receptive to it.
- Mental-health support is useful before a crisis, and it can prevent one.
- Knowing what basic needs students are struggling to meet can help inform where to provide resources.

THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE presents a slew of health risks, as students experiment with substances and sex, adjust to an increased workload, and try to meet their basic needs in a new environment.

Programming can help fill in the gaps. Below, officials at four colleges offer a peek at the strategies and initiatives they rely on to create a healthy campus year after year.

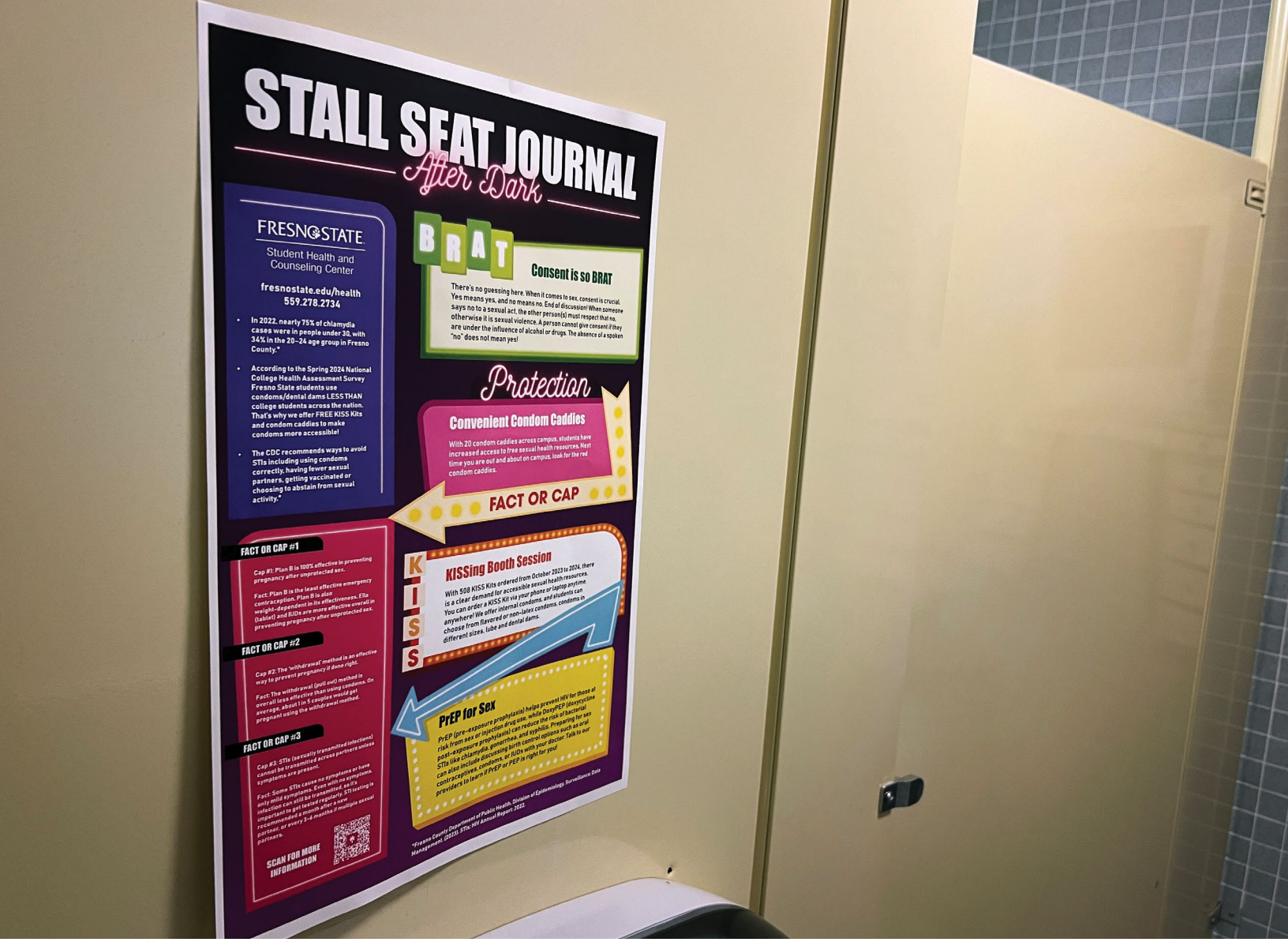
SUBSTANCE USE: OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DIVERSE EXPERIENCES

Many colleges embrace a bifurcated approach to first-year substance-use programming, understanding that students experimenting with drugs and alcohol for the first time and those recovering from addiction have different needs.

With respect to the former group, colleges often seek to correct misperceptions about how much of a party college really is: Research has shown that students often overestimate how much alcohol their peers are consuming, which can lead them to drink more. Blotting these assumptions out early can help put students on a healthier track.

At California State University at Fresno, a prevention and recovery specialist leads a demonstration that asks freshmen how much they think a typical college student drinks and then engages them in a conversation.

Hearing from peers directly can also help. Janell Morillo, Fresno



CALIFORNIA STATE U. AT FRESNO

Fresno State uses "stall-seat journals" in bathrooms across campus as part of an effort to educate students on leading healthy lifestyles.

State's associate vice president for student health, counseling, and wellness, says the institution depends heavily on its volunteer "PAWS" — Peer Ambassadors of Wellness — to educate students on leading healthy lifestyles. They give class presentations, have tables at events, and place "stall-seat journals" in bathrooms across campus, including in dorms.

Students who have already struggled with substance abuse can find community through Fresno State's Bulldogs for Recovery program, which offers one in-person and one hybrid meeting per week.

Similar programs are blossoming on other college campuses. As of August 2024, the Association of Recovery in Higher Education, the membership organization for collegiate-recovery programs, had 183 member institutions.

When so much of the first-year experience revolves around parties and alcohol, recovery communities can offer a respite from drinking culture. They usually include social events and regular meetings led by professionals.

Nationally, drinking is on the decline among Generation Z. Late-night on-campus programming and substance-free dorms can

help enrich the social lives of the large swath of first-year students who abstain but are not in recovery.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE: EDUCATION WHERE STUDENTS ARE

At the University of New Hampshire, sexual-violence prevention education starts before students arrive on campus, when they complete a custom module that explains consent. Then, an hour-long program called Wildcats Get Consent educates students on consent as a policy, practice, process, and pleasure. Classes, including first-year seminars, can request the workshop, as can clubs and Greek-life chapters.

Rachel Stewart, the director of the university's Sharpp Center for Interpersonal Violence Awareness, Prevention, and Advocacy, says that introduction sets the basis for later programming by the health and wellness office.

Meeting students where they are is a key tenet of Stewart's approach. In that vein, the SHARPP Center partners with residential life for programs in dorm lobbies. Those include an ice-cream-sundae bar where facilitators model asking for consent as they help students assemble their desserts and a "hot and ready" consent program that features pizza, where students negotiate what toppings they feel comfortable ordering as a group.

"As students are walking through the building, they can experience our program," Stewart says. "We don't have to rely on them dedicating 90 minutes, walking across campus to a specific location. They can experience it where they're at as they're going to the gym or coming back from dinner."

Stewart says that while the Sharpp Center tries to frontload prevention programming to capture the "red zone" — the period of time between the start of the academic year and Thanksgiving when newly independent students are especially likely to take risks — it's important to provide information in doses. That's especially helpful for engaging students in bystander intervention.

"They're able to better understand their own roles as bystanders and how to protect each other once they understand the campus context," Stewart says. "But they don't have that two weeks in. … What's also really important is doing a lot of programming with the upper class students, reminding them that the red zone does exist and that they should be looking out for the younger students."

MENTAL HEALTH: EARLY INTERVENTION

According to data collected by the Healthy Minds Network in its 2023-24 survey, 34 percent of undergraduate and graduate students screened positive for anxiety, and 38 percent screened positive for depression. Those rates are down since 2022, but up compared with rates from before the pandemic.

Many of today's students, experts say, arrive on campus having already received a diagnosis of mental illness in high school. Their conditions are more acute, and as perceived stigma has faded, they feel less nervous about seeking on-campus counseling services.

As the influx has strained limited counseling-center resources, colleges have embraced skill-building programs and wellness events to target lower-level situations.

At Scripps College, in California, the Sallie Tiernan Field House provides a hub for nonclinical health and wellness initiatives, explained DeMethra LaSha (Sha) Bradley, vice president for student affairs and dean of students.

"We all have mental health," Bradley says. "The way in which we decide to try to infuse that in our community and then get our students to be a part of it is in an effort to say, before something more acute occurs, 'Are you sleeping?' 'Are you eating?' 'Are you having a good time?'"

U. OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

Facilitators model asking for consent as they help students assemble desserts at the U. of New Hampshire's Ice Cream Sundae Consent Bar.

One of the Field House's programs is "Flick and Float." Students vote on a movie to watch at the outdoor pool.

"They don't have to be in the pool," Bradley says. "But many of them do [get in] because it's heated."

Scripps employs other "upstream" efforts to target high-stress time periods, like midterms and finals. Petting zoos and "candy shops" give students a break from studying, Bradley says. Academic coaches help students build time-management skills.

"We're not waiting for someone to be in crisis," Bradley says.

At Western Washington University, administrators partner with faculty members to increase awareness of counseling and wellness center services. Sislena Ledbetter, associate vice president for counseling, health, and wellbeing, said surveys have found that roughly 20 percent of students don't know about the services available to them, even though they're covered during orientation.

"We're keenly aware that students are sitting in front of faculty 14 to 18 hours a week," Ledbetter says. "And so it's incumbent upon us to make sure that faculty are prepared and they understand how to support students."

That can include mental-health first-aid training, which equips trainees to spot signs of distress and crisis. Although the program was originally only available to faculty, staff members, and student employees, Western

Washington has now opened it to all community members.

These resources are in addition, of course, to group and one-on-one counseling.

> "It's incumbent upon us to make sure that faculty are prepared and they understand how to support students."

"We often see and support students who are the most vulnerable," Ledbetter says. "What we like to think about from the prevention lens is: Get them before they are in need of our services that have to do with high levels of acuity."

BASIC NEEDS: KNOW STUDENTS' STRUGGLES

First-year students don't shed their varied life experiences when they arrive on campus. Some may have experienced food insecurity or homelessness. They may not have a safe place to go during breaks. Some may be parents, trying to balance school work with caretaking. Knowing what students are struggling with can help inform where to dedicate resources.

At Western Washington, the Western Success Scholars Program, or WSSP, assists cohorts of students who have experienced homelessness or foster care in their transition to — and persistence through — college. Participants receive coaching from staff members and peer mentors and partake in workshops and social events. Emergency funds are also available.

The program is not just about shoring up students' basic life skills, says Sara Wilson, executive director of student-success initiatives. It's also about providing access to cultural enrichment students might not otherwise be able to afford.

"For example, this group goes out on a whale watch at the beginning of the school year," Wilson says. "That is not an experience any of those students have ever had or even might have the financial means to attend."

Not all of the Success Scholars find the program their first year, Wilson said. But a few years ago, WSSP worked with the admissions office to allow students to self-identify on their applications whether they had experienced homelessness or foster care. That allows the program to inform students of the resources that are available to them before they've even matriculated.

On average, 90 percent of WSSP participants return the year after they join, Wilson said.

"They're not just hovering at making it," she said. "They're very high-performing when they get these support systems to help them through." —KATE HIDALGO BELLOWS

Keeping Families in the Loop

PARENTS' ANXIETIES about how their first-year student will fare in college are timeless: *Will my child make friends? Will she do her homework? How can I make sure that they stay safe?*

But how families interact with their child and with the college has changed. The rise of location-tracking technology and social media has given some parents constant access to their students. The coronavirus pandemic put student-affairs staffers on the hook to answer a flood of questions from families about how colleges were keeping students safe and tending to mental-health concerns.

"It used to be [that] families would drop their kids off at college and say, 'See you at Thanksgiving,'" says Anne DeLuca, director of the Office of Student and Family Support at Creighton University. "Things have shifted so much because now students have cellphones in their pockets where they can communicate quickly and in a very detailed way. They can Snapchat whatever problem is in front of them."

Administrators say they've grown to embrace parents as partners in supporting first-year students' transition to college life. They see value, for example, in making connections with the families of first-generation students and helping them feel comfortable with their students being away from home. They have improved accessibility to allow all parents to participate in programs, tapped seasoned parent volunteers to support newbies, and varied their outreach methods.

Jennifer Green, executive director of alumni and parent relations at Harvey Mudd College, says that while it is important to start engaging with parents early, administrators with parent-facing roles should provide information in doses keyed to the time of the year. That may mean sharing details about the curriculum and student life in the summer and discussing summer internships and research opportunities in the spring.

"I made this mistake when I first started doing this job," Green said. "I thought that more information was better. So I would throw as much information as I could at [parents] right when they got here. And more is not better. More is overwhelming."

Here is a closer look at how colleges are engaging parents from summer orientation to the end of the first academic year.

BEFORE STUDENTS ARRIVE ON CAMPUS

According to preliminary results from the 2023 National Survey on the First-Year Experience, 74 percent of institutions said they hold sessions for family members during orientation.

Such programming was significantly more common at four-year colleges than two-year colleges, says Kate Lehman, director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, which conducted the survey. Two-year colleges tend to have more adult students and those enrolled part time.

74%

of institutions hold sessions for family members during orientation.

Source: Preliminary, unpublished results from the 2023 National Survey on the First-Year Experience

Green, at Harvey Mudd, said the institution used to do an in-person-only parent orientation during move-in day that discussed student resources and included social gatherings. The coronavirus pandemic forced it online.

Organizers soon realized that virtual sessions had a major perk: They could be recorded so that parents could watch them later. After the pandemic, Harvey Mudd split parent orientation into virtual sessions over the summer and gatherings in person when parents arrive on campus. Parent volunteers also host regional welcome receptions for incoming students and their families over the summer.

"We have a stronger base for incoming classes than we did prior to Covid," Green said. "The pandemic was horrible. But one of the silver linings was that we learned some of these things, and we got some of these tools that became mainstream."

At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, parent orientation includes answering lots of specific questions, like "what are the room dimensions?" as well as general-programming ones about what students will experience in their transition to college. A student panel offers parents the opportunity to ask questions they might not if their child were in the room.

Wisconsin administrators say they take steps to make their programs accessible to everyone.

While parents must pay a program fee to attend orientation, low-income families can qualify for financial assistance as well as free housing and parking. The university sometimes prearranges certain sessions to have Spanish or Mandarin interpretation.

"There are other ones that we will do our best to accommodate on an as-requested basis," says Carren Martin, director of the Office of Student Transition and Family Engagement. "We've done Hmong, we've done Portuguese, we've done Korean, too."

MAKING FAMILY WEEKEND ACCESSIBLE

Colleges have long geared "family weekends" — during which relatives can explore campus, attend performances and sporting events, and grab a bite with their students — toward the parents of first-year students.

The programs can be a great way to bond parents with the institution, but the costs — travel, lodging, parking, food, and more — can be staggering. Green says Harvey Mudd used to receive complaints about its family weekend being financially inaccessible and time-intensive. Harvey Mudd moved the information sessions online during Covid and has kept them that way ever since.

Wisconsin offers fee support for its family weekend in the fall, although it doesn't cover housing or transportation. But a little less than a decade ago, the university made a change that Martin says corresponded with greater family-weekend attendance and accessibility: It moved the gathering off of a home football weekend.

"Tickets to football games were limited," Martin says. "But once we were able to [offer the] program on campus on a weekend where there was not a football game, venues opened up, activities opened up. We weren't counter-programming on athletics, and more and more families got interested and engaged." (She acknowledged that enrollment on the main campus has also increased).

According to the parent-events coordinator, Annie Doman, almost 8,600 people registered for Wisconsin's family weekend in the fall of 2024. It included movie screenings, salsa lessons, and a "Badger Family Fest" with food, photo ops, and music on the lakefront Memorial Union Terrace.

KEEPING LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

At Western Washington University, the new student-services and family-outreach team publishes a monthly "family connections" newsletter that riffs on different timely topics.

"If it's November and it's time to register for classes, we want you to know that so you can encourage your student to look up and see when it's their time to register for classes,"

U. OF WISCONSIN AT MADISON

The U. of Wisconsin at Madison marching band performs at Badger Family Fest during Family Weekend.

explained Sara Wilson, executive director of student-success initiatives.

The team also publishes a "first-generation family toolkit," which compiles campus resources relatives can refer students to and defines terms used at Western and in higher ed. About a quarter of first-year students at Western are first-generation students.

One of the main responsibilities of family-focused offices like Western's is to hear and respond to individual parents' concerns. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act limits what information colleges can share with parents about particular students, but staff members can discuss in broad strokes what students may be going through in a particular time of the year and suggest strategies for encouraging one's student to share how they're doing.

Each September, Creighton rallies volunteers from across campus to call the parents of first-year students and collect information on how they are doing. DeLuca said staff members then upload notes on the students to a centralized database, which also obtains information from instructors and resident advisers.

"No longer is it the student and family versus the university," DeLuca said. "Rather, it's student, family, university versus the problem. And that's the shift that we want to start really early on." —KATE HIDALGO BELLOWS

COMMENTARY

Creating Champions of First-Year Programs

BY KELLI K. SMITH

STUDENT-AFFAIRS STAFF are essential in creating a supportive and thriving environment for students, especially during their transition to college. Yet fostering a truly comprehensive network of support requires more than just their efforts. In my first year at Binghamton University over a decade ago, I was charged with reimagining our career services. I had a small but mighty team who believed in building a culture of career support for all students. Our team was dedicated, but some of our colleagues in other departments were resistant to collaborating or to what they perceived was the "careerization" of the university.

"The more connected students feel to the broader campus community, the more likely they are to persist in their studies."

My mantra became "focus on the champions," and our now globally recognized "Career Champions" program was born. (It is now widely replicated.) By seeking out and developing relationships with allies from outside of our departments and student-affairs division — whether faculty members, administrators, alumni, student-organization leaders, or even members of the local community — we scaled the work needed to support our nearly 19,000 students.

With retention increasingly important amid the well-publicized "enrollment cliff," finding more "champions" for our first-year students is vital for the bottom line. But there is also the more altruistic and moral imperative of simply supporting the students our institutions work so hard to recruit. Just as some might argue that admissions or career support is everyone's business, so too is the overall success of our first-year students.

For first-year students, transitioning to college can be a monumental challenge. Champions from all corners of campus offer more diverse forms of support — academic, emotional, social, and financial — ensuring that students have access to all the resources they need. Having multiple supports across campus for students in their first year means that students are more likely to be identified early if they are struggling. For example, faculty members may notice a drop in academic performance, while resident advisers, success coaches, student-job supervisors, or career advisers may be more attuned to emotional distress. Champions across different areas of the institution can work together to refer students to the right resources at the right time. The more connected students feel to the broader campus community, the more likely they are to persist in their studies.

Student-affairs administrators are typically very skilled at both being in tune with student

needs and understanding the larger campus system, and so are well-positioned to create a more cohesive network of student support. This can be crucial for first-years, especially those from backgrounds that do not come with significant social capital and support.

HOW TO IDENTIFY FIRST-YEAR CHAMPIONS

1. Know your campus culture. If you have worked at different colleges, you know that every campus has its own "way." This is true even within similar institutional types. What are some signature strengths of your campus culture and structures you can capitalize on? For example, we have a very residential campus and have faculty members in roles tied to supporting our residential communities. Partnering with these faculty members has been a great assist for our first-year efforts.

2. Collaborate with campus leaders. Higher-level administrators, such as deans and provosts, are often key allies in shaping the direction of student-support initiatives. Identify those who also have outsized power and influence, and work with them to gain support. Frame discussions around student success, retention, and the institution's broader mission. Not only does this approach provide student affairs with insight into institutional priorities, but it can be a key way to gain champions from other divisions for large-scale initiatives. This can be especially important for any with a curricular component since faculty at many institutions will see that responsibility as solely their purview, so upper-level academic affairs and other faculty champions are often a must.

3. Use data. Having data for your "why" is crucial, as are regular reviews of that data. Do you have a pilot for which you need more champions, and can show the pilot had a positive impact on student retention, graduation rates, or eventual career-outcomes success? Can you slice it in a way to examine a program's impact on Pell-eligible or first-generation students? We demonstrated a positive correlation with career outcomes for students who used our career center — and even more of one for our Pell-eligible, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students — paving the way for us to advocate for early-student-engagement support and greater partnerships across campus. Keep in mind when using data to influence first-year champions that it is crucial, especially when you're working with academic partners, for the data to be credible.

PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES TO TRY

Finding first-year champions outside of student affairs requires intentionality, strategic thinking, and a proactive approach. Whether as a standalone or integrated project, here are some key strategies student-affairs staff can implement in collaboration with champions outside the division:

1. First-year-experience courses: The American Association of Colleges & Universities designated FYE courses as a high-impact practice based on the education researcher George D. Kuh's groundbreaking work. In our case, FYE courses are uniquely team-taught by interested faculty and student-affairs staff members and are intentionally kept small.

2. First-year mentorship programs: Mentorship can help first-year students feel more connected to the campus community, and curated mentorship programs are yet another way to capitalize upon new-student champions. For example, the UCLA "Bruin Bound" program connects first-year students with peer mentors who help them navigate campus life, from registering for classes to

attending social events. Mentor programs could be peer-led but do not need to be. A new-student transition department could also run a program with interested faculty and staff and provide guidance on mentorship (to both mentors and mentees) along with a small budget for the mentors to, for example, take the student out for coffee or lunch once or twice a year. Your alumni could be part of the mentorship equation.

3. Common-read or common-experience programs: During the pandemic, we looked for ways to ensure our new students were still able to connect with each other and with staff and faculty. This offered me the opportunity to create a new common-read program with a faculty member, and it is now institutionalized. Such programs do not need to take the form of a book and can simply be "common experiences" such as watching a film or reading an article.

4. First-year-success symposium or institute: Often there are faculty and staff in other divisions interested in supporting students in their first year, but they may not be aware of the many resources available. A symposium of sessions designed with this in mind can uncover additional partnerships. Outside keynote speakers with credibility in academic circles can help spur interest.

5. First-year fellows programs: The student-affairs office could create a "fellows" program, whether focused on faculty or more broadly, in which individuals interested in first-year-student success are asked to apply for a stipend-funded program.

6. Cross-divisional working groups focused on first-year success: If your unit is seeking other first-year advocates, consider recruiting those you might already know are champions to be part of a working group and secure support from a campus leader to formally charge the group. Make it easy for the administrator to throw their support behind you: Have a clear plan for what you want to accomplish, tie it to your institution's strategic plan, and ensure you have a broad swath of representation — library, health services, faculty, career services, financial aid, divisions/departments, etc.

7. Acknowledgment programs: Perhaps one of the most effective ways we have identified "champions" has been by celebrating people who have had a positive impact. A "First-Year Champions" program is one way to do this. Such programs can take several forms, but when they involve student nominators, they uncover colleagues you had no idea affected your students' success. Having a respected, high-level administrator speak at the program can also signal the importance of the success of first-year students and how it is not just the responsibility of one division or unit. An added benefit: Those nominated can be called on for other types of engagement.

Finding champions outside of student affairs is essential to creating a robust support ecosystem for first-year students. By cultivating strategic partnerships with faculty, administrators, community leaders, and others, student-affairs professionals can build a holistic foundation of care, collaboration, and empowerment so that first-year students are more likely to thrive in their new environment.

Kelli K. Smith is the assistant vice president for student success at Binghamton University.

A Final Word

FRESHMAN ORIENTATION — a program that emerged in American higher education about 100 years ago — typically lasts just a week. These days, however, it's increasingly clear that one week is not enough. First-year students need more sustained support for the transition to college. They may be overwhelmed by the new environment and lost without the structure of high school. They may be older adults trying to balance academic work with family and job responsibilities. They may struggle — especially since the Covid-19 pandemic — to do college-level coursework and make social connections.

Fortunately, many colleges have figured out ways to offer more support. Whether it's to help students meet academic, social, or wellness challenges, experts in the first-year experience point to common themes in what works:

Programming should be easy for students to access. For example, first-year courses can be linked to peer mentoring and co-curricular activities. Social events can be scheduled outside of busy class times. Tutoring services can be placed in inviting, central locations.

Colleges need to dispel myths. Whether reassuring students in first-year seminars that everyone struggles and it's OK to ask for help, or making clear that not all college students are heavy drinkers, administrators and faculty members can build students' confidence and sense of their own agency.

Students have different needs. It's crucial to determine which elements are essential for all students, and when to be flexible. That requires understanding your students. For example, are they the first in their families to attend college? Are their basic needs being met?

Enabling students to flourish is, of course, key to advancing your college. Research shows that smartly designed first-year experiences lead to better retention and more student success. We hope the information and strategies in this report will empower your institution to get students off to the strongest possible start.

Further Reading and Resources

READING

"A Third of Your Freshmen Disappear. How Can You Keep Them?" by Kelly Field, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 3, 2018.

Connecting in College: How Friendships Matter for Academic and Social Success, by Janice M. McCabe (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Connections Are Everything: A College Student's Guide to Relationship-Rich Education, by Peter Felten, Leo M. Lambert, Isis Artze-Vega, and Oscar R. Miranda Tapia (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).

Factors Affecting First-Year Students' College Choices: Insights From the 2023 CIRP Freshman Survey, by Austin Freeman, Nguyen Nguyen, and Kara Seidel (American Council on Education, University of California at Los Angeles, Higher Education Research Institute, and Lumina Foundation, 2024).

"Freshmen Are 'Souls That Want to Be Awakened,'" by Kelly Field, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 3, 2018.

"KEY Careers: Increasing Retention and Graduation Rates With Career Interventions," by Karley Clayton et al., *Journal of Career Development*, Vol. 46, Issue 4. August 2019.

Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College, by Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

"Reviving Campus Life: Student Clubs Collapsed Under the Weight of Covid. Here's How a College Is Trying to Rebuild Them," by Erin Gretzinger and Maggie Hicks, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 13, 2023.

"Scaling Success: Lessons From the ASAP Expansion at Bronx Community College," by Maria Cormier et al., *CCRC Research Brief*, June 2019.

RESOURCES

Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success (American Association of Colleges & Universities). Holds virtual workshops annually and publishes information about high-impact practices.

The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. This clearinghouse for scholarship, policy, and best practices holds an annual conference and publishes the *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*.

NODA: the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education. Holds conferences, supports professional development and research, and publishes the *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention*.

"The Student-Success Journey: Improving the First-Year Experience," a *Chronicle of Higher Education* webinar (June 12, 2024) available to watch on demand.

Umoja Community Education Foundation. Offers conferences, scholarships, and professional training to promote student success at community colleges through culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.

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