Collaboration + Shared Responsibility + Holistic View of Learning: Our Recipe for a Successful FYE Program

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Over the past three years, Wittenberg University has created an engaging, student-centered, success-orientated, comprehensive first-year experience program. In this session we will outline the recipe we followed for designing and implementing our program. We will share how our administrative model, the relationships we built with campus constituents and our process for designing and implementing programs led to our final product, a truly comprehensive experience that bridges the academic and social lives of our first-year students.

Background

At Wittenberg, the conversation about FYE was brought to the forefront again as part of our strategic plan, Distinctively Wittenberg: A Vision for Excellence, which reinforced the need to intentionally create a student learning environment that will maximize the possibility for student success. In 2007, Wittenberg University created an administrative model for the first-year experience (FYE) that fosters collaboration across campus and bridges the academic and social lives of students. As part of our new strategic plan, a 3-year initiative was started to develop an engaging, student-centered, success-orientated, comprehensive first-year experience program.

Hoping to capitalize on the expertise at the “27th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience”, a team, consisting of the Assistant Provosts for FYE and Academic Services, the Program Coordinator for FYE, the Faculty Development Coordinator and the Director of Multicultural Programs, went to San Francisco with the intent of identifying the core elements of a comprehensive first-year program. Shortly after their return they articulated three characteristics of effective administrative models:

1) shared responsibility and accountability for the design, implementation, and assessment of support and programming,
2) shared perspectives from administrators, faculty, and staff, and
3) a holistic view of student learning.

These characteristics served as guiding principles to create our comprehensive and collaborative first-year program.

Our Recipe for a Successful FYE Program

STEP ONE: Create an Administrative Model that Addresses the Principles of a Learning Organization

According to Peter Senge (1990, 3) learning organizations are:

... organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.
Based on a literature review, Goh (1998) argues that learning organizations have five core strategic building blocks:

1. **Mission and Vision** – Clarity and employee support of the mission, strategy, and espoused values of the organization.

2. **Leadership** – Leadership that is perceived as empowering employees, encouraging an experimenting culture, and showing strong commitment to the organization.

3. **Experimentation** – A strong culture of experimentation that is rewarded and supported at all levels of the organization.

4. **Transfer of Knowledge** – The ability of an organization to transfer knowledge within and from outside the organization to learn from failures.

5. **Teamwork and Cooperation** – An emphasis on teamwork and group problem-solving as the mode of operation and for developing innovative ideas.

Our administrative structure was designed with the responsibility and accountability shared between the Assistant Provosts for FYE and Academic Services. The Assistant Provosts are responsible for managing, coordinating, and evaluating all first-year programs and activities. A Program Coordinator was hired to assist with the planning and implementation of the FYE program.
An FYE Implementation Team (FYE-IT) composed of faculty, staff and students was created to serve in an advisory capacity during the implementation process. The FYE-IT worked with the Assistant Provosts to create a vision statement and develop learning outcomes consistent with Wittenberg's mission. Individuals and offices across campus were invited to submit program proposals to the FYE-IT to receive funding for pilot programs that would address the needs of our first-year students.

**STEP TWO: Make a Space that Facilitates Communication between Constituents and Dialogue about Barriers to Collaboration**

If Larry Shin (2004) is correct that there is —no greater obstacle to shared governance than the ‘us versus them’ world view of faculty and administrators...‖ adopting a commitment to developing learning communities should be a critical imperative on all college campuses. The FYE at Wittenberg is adopting the principles of a learning organization and hoping to set the standard for organizational management by utilizing the many internal resources Wittenberg has at its disposal. Improved communications and intentional dialogues allow constituents to recognize and confront barriers to collaboration.

To increase the likelihood of collaboration and buy-in from all constituents, administrators, faculty and staff attended a two day FYE retreat to learn about our 3-year initiative and to discuss the challenges and opportunities to collaborating across organizational units. Because retreat participants discussed the impact of how having a certain mindset about other organizational units can impact the level of communication and the willingness to collaborate, the campus community began addressing the misconceptions that hold back collaborative efforts. Through these discussions participants continue to recognize and confront their biases and presuppositions and to imagine new possibilities for collaboration.

In addition, for reasons related to institutional efficiency, communication across units is important so that one might begin to limit the duplication of programming. In a collaborative model, energy tends to be refocused toward cross-functional planning and shared responsibility allowing for better use of available talents and skills and the reorientation and linking of resources in new ways. Collaboration also puts us in a position to accommodate future initiatives. Importantly, retreat participants proposed program initiatives to the FYE-IT all emphasizing the importance of collaboration on campus.

**STEP THREE: Create a Shared Vision**

One of the seven —principles of good practice‖ for partnership programs is to reflect and advance the institution's mission (Whitt, Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, McDonald, & Wells, 2008). We developed an FYE mission and vision statement to guide our actions and align ourselves with Wittenberg's mission and strategic plan. Our goals and vision for FYE were developed with input from campus constituents and shared with the whole campus community. Having a clear mission that is supported by the campus community is one of the building blocks of a learning organization (Goh, 1998) and is critical to empowering employees and developing innovative organizations (Senge, 1990).
STEP FOUR: Encourage Creativity & Experimentation

We are committed to creating a learning environment that fosters inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks. To encourage creativity and experimentation, the FYE-IT invited the campus community to submit proposals for pilot programs that were aligned with our vision and goals. Faculty and staff brought forth new ideas and were encouraged to improve on existing processes and programs. Because of the collaborative relationships and shared vision, programs were created that integrate the social, intellectual, and spiritual growth of our students, and reflect the dual citizenship of our students in both the curriculum and the co-curriculum.

STEP FIVE: Develop Programs that Create a More Integrated Educational Experience & Meet the Needs of the Whole Student

Learning Reconsidered (2004) defines learning as—a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development. We believe that learning occurs in many settings and that faculty and staff share the responsibility of student learning. Through collaborative planning by faculty and staff, we can assure that both academic and student life are, in fact, focused on a common center—Wittenberg’s mission, values, and expectations. Collaboration between academic and student affairs can create a more integrated educational experience for students providing them with opportunities to make connections between their academic life, their personal growth and development, and to become connected with Wittenberg.

STEP SIX: Set Benchmarks & Assessment Procedures

A conscious decision was made to incorporate multiple assessment measures, both qualitative and quantitative. Assessment measures start before the first semester with students taking nationally-normed assessments during Pre-Orientation and New Student Days. Currently, Wittenberg uses the NSSE and CIRP surveys. During the fourth week of classes, surveys are completed by students in their WittSeminars to help us identify students who are having a difficult transition. We also assess student and faculty satisfaction with first-year programs through focus groups and surveys that evaluate programs.

We have worked with the Assistant Provost for Institutional Research & Planning to develop a comprehensive assessment of the first-year experience program. The focus of this assessment is on FYE—treatment effects and their impact on academic outcomes. Outcomes for students are measured as quality points accumulated for the academic year, the product of term GPA and term credits earned. To account for differences in ability among students as they enter Wittenberg, a GPA predictor acts a control variable. It is a function of HS GPA, HS quality and gender. A second focus of the analysis is on retention. Many of the same controls are in place. Linear regression analysis can control for the treatment effect, holding—everything else constant. We look at the impact on quality point accumulation of the various FYE treatments above the effect attributed to predicted GPA.
REFERENCES


