Eastern Connecticut State University: The Birth, Growth and Maturation of a First-Year Program

Enrollment Grew, Especially in the late 1960's, 1970's and 1980's

• 1889 to 1945 - 13 to over 247 students
• 1945 to 1959 - 247 to 576 students
• 1959 to 1983 - 576 to more than 3700
• 1983 to 1990 - 4475 students

Established as Willimantic State Normal School in 1889 with 13 Students

First WSN building opened in 1894 and served as the only classroom and administration building until 1943

A Two-Year Institution

Unfortunately, the building burned down in 1943, almost ending the Institution's short life

Name Changes Reflected Changing Missions

• 1939 - Willimantic State Teacher's College
• 1959 - Willimantic State College
• 1968 - Eastern Connecticut State College
• 1983 - Eastern Connecticut State University

Campus Growth

• Growth was slow until the late 1960's
• From 1970 to 1976 - 9 new buildings
• From 1977 to 1984, no campus growth
• In 1984, a new residence hall

Eastern Today

• Located in Willimantic, CT
• Connecticut's Only State Supported, Liberal Arts Institution
• One of the Four Institutions in the Connecticut State University System
• Total Fall 2007 Enrollment: 5137
• 33 Undergraduate Majors
• Graduate Programs in: Accounting, Education, Organizational Management, Educational Technology

Eastern Today

ECSU Library and Home of the First-Year Program Office

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Established as Willimantic State Normal School in 1889 with 13 Students

First WSN building opened in 1894 and served as the only classroom and administration building until 1943
University Reaches a Turning Point

- In spite of increasing enrollments, the State of Connecticut considered closing the institution between 1977 and 1988
- The University had a poorly defined mission and a mediocre academic reputation
- In 1988, a new President, David Carter was hired
- From 1988 to 2006, enrollment reached 5200
- 15 new buildings transformed the campus
- Mission defined as the States “Public Liberal Arts Institution” in the mid-1990’s; approved by the Board of Trustees in 1998
- Academic reputation enhanced; now an institution of “First Choice”

Early Planning Stages: Fall 1996 to Summer 1998

- Senate approval for First-Year Program Planning Committee
- Public forum
- Senate approves a “Pilot Program”
- Faculty recruited and trained
- The Programs find an administrative home and is called the “Blue Sky Program”
- A faculty member given 1/4 load to run the program; responsible for faculty and student recruitment, course planning

The Fall 1998 Pilot Program

- Six “Learning Communities” each consisting of
  - 25 students (140 students total)
  - 2 full-time faculty
  - An Administrative “Associate”
  - A peer mentor
- Faculty to work with students during the summer; students to keep portfolios
- Three integrated courses
  - Two specially designed, 3-credit, 7-week seminar courses taken during the first and second 7-weeks, team taught by two faculty members
  - One, 1-credit “Resources, Research, and Responsibilities” course (the “3R” course) similar to University 101
- In the Spring 1999 semester, the same group of students to take another “3R” course

The “Conception” of Eastern’s First-Year Program - Sept. 9, 1996

Letter from the University President to the Senate President

- “Students need opportunities to participate in the first-year program...”
- “...the program should be distinguished by very close interaction among students, range of faculty and support staff...”
- “...The program should be designed to facilitate their adjustment and orientation in the University.”

Program Goals and Objectives

- Transition students to college
- Appreciation of diversity
- Create a culture of academic excellence, creativity, and pride in the University
- Accentuate Eastern’s Liberal Arts Mission and emphasize success
- Involve students in academic and co-curricular programs
- Establish Learning Communities
- Develop academic and survival skills
- Increase retention rates

The “Blue Sky Committee” and Student Affairs Wanted these Skills to be Taught in the “3R” Course:

- Writing Skills
- Critical Thinking
- Time Management
- Multicultural Awareness
- Civility Commitment
- Emotional Well-Being
- Physical Well-Being
- Spiritual Well-Being
- Academic Decisions
- Career Possibilities
- Social Decision-Making
- Co-curricular Activities
- Reading for Comprehension
- Effective Note-Taking
- Dealing with New Autonomy
- Cooperating in New Situations
- Making Good Decisions
- Committing to the Eastern Community
- Understand Leadership
- Using Campus Resources
- Develop Life Skills
- Using Computers
- Drug/Alcohol Education
- Campus Safety
- Dealing With Stress
- Student Government and Clubs
Assessment

• Survey was administered to students
• Due to contractual issues, could not evaluate instructors or associates in the program
• Outcomes measurement for programmatic changes only

Program Problems

• Some faculty did not make assignments
• Portfolio development was not practical
• Many faculty did not like required team-teaching
• Faculty felt 7-week course structuring was difficult in terms of organization
• Faculty did not use peer mentors
• Faculty could not cover all “skills” in the “3R” course
• Impossible to achieve some programmatic components/goals, e.g., getting the same “Learning Community” together for the Spring “3R” course was not practical

Fall 1999 to Spring 2001:
The First-Year Program Planning Committee Seeks Approval for Permanent Program

• Curriculum Committee has concerns
  – Program will drain resources from existing programs
  – Sees support as weak
  – “3R” course too difficult to teach
  – Concern that Director may be administrative position
• Senate does not approve program; tells Planning Committee to address concerns and resubmit proposal to Senate
• Senate approves the proposal in Spring 2001
Eastern Has a Permanent First-Year Program Called the Blue Sky Program

The First-Year Program Planning Committee becomes the Blue Sky Program Committee from 2001-2004 continued

- Enrollment figures
- New 1/4 load faculty member hired as Program Director in Fall 2004
- “Classes With Same Group” discontinuing
- Increased emphasis on faculty recruitment and training
- “Successful Student Peer Mentors” discontinued
- Fall 2003, a new full-time program director was hired
- University President wants all students enrolled in the Blue Sky Program by Fall 2005
- Committee tightened the goals of the “3R” course, although still difficult to cover everything

Elapse Time from Concept: 5 Years!
Major University Changes Bode Well for the FYP

- Dec 2005, Senate approves a new Liberal Arts Core Curriculum
  - A spring, First-Year Liberal Arts Colloquium now required of all freshmen
- May 2006, a new President, Elsa Nunez
- Sept 2006, Senate modifies FYP
  - Liberal Arts Core courses in fall clusters
  - New required colloquia are under the jurisdiction of the FYP
  - The “3R” course is updated; now academic skills are stressed as well as co-curricular activities
- The President announces FYP to have a full-time director
- June 2007, full-time director is hired

Strategic Plan 2008-2013
Approved Fall 2007

- 1.1 Strategic Initiative: Fully implement and integrate Eastern’s Liberal Arts Core and First-Year Program
  - Benchmarks:
    1.1.1 Implement a plan for allocating faculty resources, including consideration of faculty workload, that ensures appropriate staffing of LAC and FYP courses. (AY 2008-2009)
    1.1.2 Enroll all incoming first-year students in the FYP. (AY 2010-2011)

The First-Year Program Is Embedded!

Eastern’s First-Year Program
Today

The Fall Learning Communities:
Now Recommended, To Be Required of All Freshmen by Fall 2010

Learning Community
- The same 20 to 25 students are enrolled in each course; Fall 2008 scheduled for 500 seats (20 clusters)
- A “Community” consists of two full-time faculty members, the students in the class and a “well-trained” peer mentor
- Two academic courses from the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum combined with a one-credit “3R” academic skills course (FYR 174 Resources, Research, and Responsibilities)
- The three courses are linked by a common theme
- Some clusters are specialized for specific majors

Peer Mentoring: An Academic Program

- Minimum GPA - 3.0; for Fall 2008 the average GPA is above 3.5
- Must sign a contract
- Attend training sessions with faculty
- Enroll in a fall 2-credit Peer Mentoring evening class
- Meet with “3R” course instructor weekly
- Attend “3R” course weekly
- Organize social events outside of class
- Attend all cluster activities (e.g., field trips and other excursions)
- Encourage the students in their cluster to attend campus cultural activities
- Give classroom lectures
  - Mentors receive training in their evening class in such areas as plagiarism, advising and registration as well as other areas
  - Other good topics for short presentations include residence life, coping with exams, etc.

First-Year Program:
Fall 2007 Assessment Data
Collection and Tabulation of Data for Fall 2007

- Assessments were distributed to each class and collected by FYP staff
- Data for approximately 450 students
- Only *combined data was used

More Than 50%:

- Felt the FYP helped them adjust to college life
- Would recommend the program to incoming freshmen
- Felt the FYP helped them feel comfortable with their professors
- Felt the FYP enhanced their ability to:
  - Use campus services
  - Study effectively
  - Use WebCT
  - Work with other students
  - Adjust to the academic demands of college
  - Develop close friendships with other students
  - Get to know faculty

*We generally did OK in:

- Research/library use
- Career development
- Decision making
- Time management
- Critical thinking
- Oral Communication
- Written Communication
- Note-taking

*Higher percentage of students agreed than disagreed, but still room for improvement in some areas

The Spring Semester

Liberal Arts Colloquia:
Required of All Freshmen for the First Time in Spring 2008

Discussion-Oriented Colloquia

- First required by all freshmen in Spring 2008
- 20 or fewer students per class
- 3.0 to 4.0 credits
- 42 sections offered this past spring for the first time
- Offered by faculty from any discipline on a contemporary topic; some examples are
  - “Personal Finances”
  - “Global Warming”
  - “Lessons of the Holocaust”
  - “Diet, Health and Nutrition”
  - “Deconstructing Disney”
- Goals of all colloquia are to develop the skills of good scholarship - critical reading, logical thinking, and effective communication
- Subject matter is secondary; used to develop skills

Retention Data 1999 to 2006

First Year Retention Rate
(Returned the Following Fall Semester)
Challenges Ahead

- Faculty must have additional load credits for teaching in clusters
- Obtain adequate Funding
  - Had to beg, borrow and “steal” funds for this past year
- *Strategic Plan* calls for all freshmen to be enrolled in the fall and spring components of the FYP
  - A Fall Learning Community is now recommended, but not required; Fall 2008 ~ 500 seats; need 1000 seats by Fall 2010
  - Spring Colloquia are now required; had sufficient seats for Spring 2008
- Colloquia have been popular with faculty, but at what cost?
  - 42 new colloquia for Spring 2008 have severely limited faculty hours to teach in a Fall 2008 Learning Communities
  - Recruitment efforts failed to increase number of seats from what was offered in Fall 2007
- May have to offer different types of fall programs
- Hope to link Learning Communities to residential housing
- Need for more staff
  - Administration wants to link freshmen advising to the FYP
  - Wants FYP to monitor freshmen course compliance issues

Summary

- Administrative support (programmatic and financial) were vital
- Sought out input. “Buy in” important.
- Committees important, but sometimes not realistic
  
- Eliminated all redundancy with other institutional offices or programs
- Program Assessment
  - Assessment started from the beginning; identified problem areas and worked towards fixing them
  - Recognized union contract/faculty handbook issues related to renewal, promotion, and tenure process
  - Now return assessment forms and data to faculty
- Program development took many years
- Faculty and Peer Mentors have to be adequately trained and compensated
- Programs cannot grow in numbers of students serviced without growth in staff
- Program now embedded in the curriculum