

RESOURCE

for College Transitions

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition

June 2004, Vol. 1, No. 6

FYI Benchmarking Assessment

*Dave Butler, FYI Project Manager
Educational Benchmarking*

In an assessment of a first-year seminar or course, the end result should be an improvement in the overall effectiveness of that course for the students enrolled. In Part 1 of a two-part series, we will show that results from the 2003 EBI First-Year Initiative Assessment provide insight into areas that, if improved, should increase the overall effectiveness of first-year seminars or courses.

The EBI First-Year Initiative Assessment was developed by the Policy Center on the First Year of College, in cooperation with Educational Benchmarking (EBI), a private company specializing in the development of higher education assessment tools. There are 70 perception questions on the EBI First-Year Initiative Assessment (we will refer to this study in this article as the FYI Assessment) that use a 7-point Likert scale where “1” represents “no agreement” and “7” represents “significant agreement.” There are also 18 profile questions (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and age) asked of each respondent.

The 70 perception questions comprise 15 factors. Factors (also called “constructs”) are groupings of related questions with a statistical foundation. For example, in the FYI Assessment, the factor “Course Included Engaging Pedagogy” is derived from a series of questions that asks students their perception on items like whether the first-year course included a variety of teaching methods, had meaningful class discussions, and offered challenging assignments. The goal of the annual EBI FYI Assessment is to provide benchmarking information to each institution on the perceptions of their students for the purpose of internal improvement. Assessment is the key to continuous improvement as it is possible to improve learning by increasing course quality and effectiveness. In fact, researchers have found a strong correlation between affective and cognitive learning. Institutions using EBI studies have an advantage as they are better equipped to assess, and therefore, improve cognitive

learning through analysis of students’ perceptions of course effectiveness.

One of these 15 factors, “Overall Course Effectiveness,” is designated as the dependent variable while the remaining 14 factors are designated as independent variables. A multi-variant linear regression establishes the relationship between each of these 14 independent factors and the dependent factor. Those factors that have a strong relationship with “Overall Course Effectiveness” are termed “predictors,” meaning that if these factors are improved then a corresponding improvement in Overall Course Effectiveness should be seen.

In this paper, we identify the top two predictors of “Overall Course Effectiveness” and provide detailed information on the nature of these two predictors.

Aggregate Results (analysis of responses from all participating institutions): In 2003, 51 institutions participating in the EBI FYI Assessment submitted 22,948 responses from students who were enrolled in a first-year course or seminar. This chart illustrates the relationship between performance (factor means) and importance (correlation with Overall Course Effectiveness) for each factor. From this chart we can quickly determine those factors that have high predictive status for Overall Course Effectiveness but are lower performing (Top Priority quadrant); those factors that have high predictive status and are higher performing (Maintain or Improve quadrant); those factors that have low predictive status and are lower performing (Monitor quadrant); and those factors that have low predictive status and are higher performing (Maintain quadrant). Factors that have no predictive status are not plotted.

From these aggregate results, two factors strongly correlate with Overall Course Effectiveness: “Course Included Engaging Pedagogy” (“Engaging Pedagogy” in the plot) and “Usefulness of Course Readings” (“Course Readings” in the plot). Other top predictors are “Course Improved Managing Time and Priorities” and “Satisfaction with College/University.” Unfortunately, all of these high predictors are located in the “Top Priority” quadrant meaning that

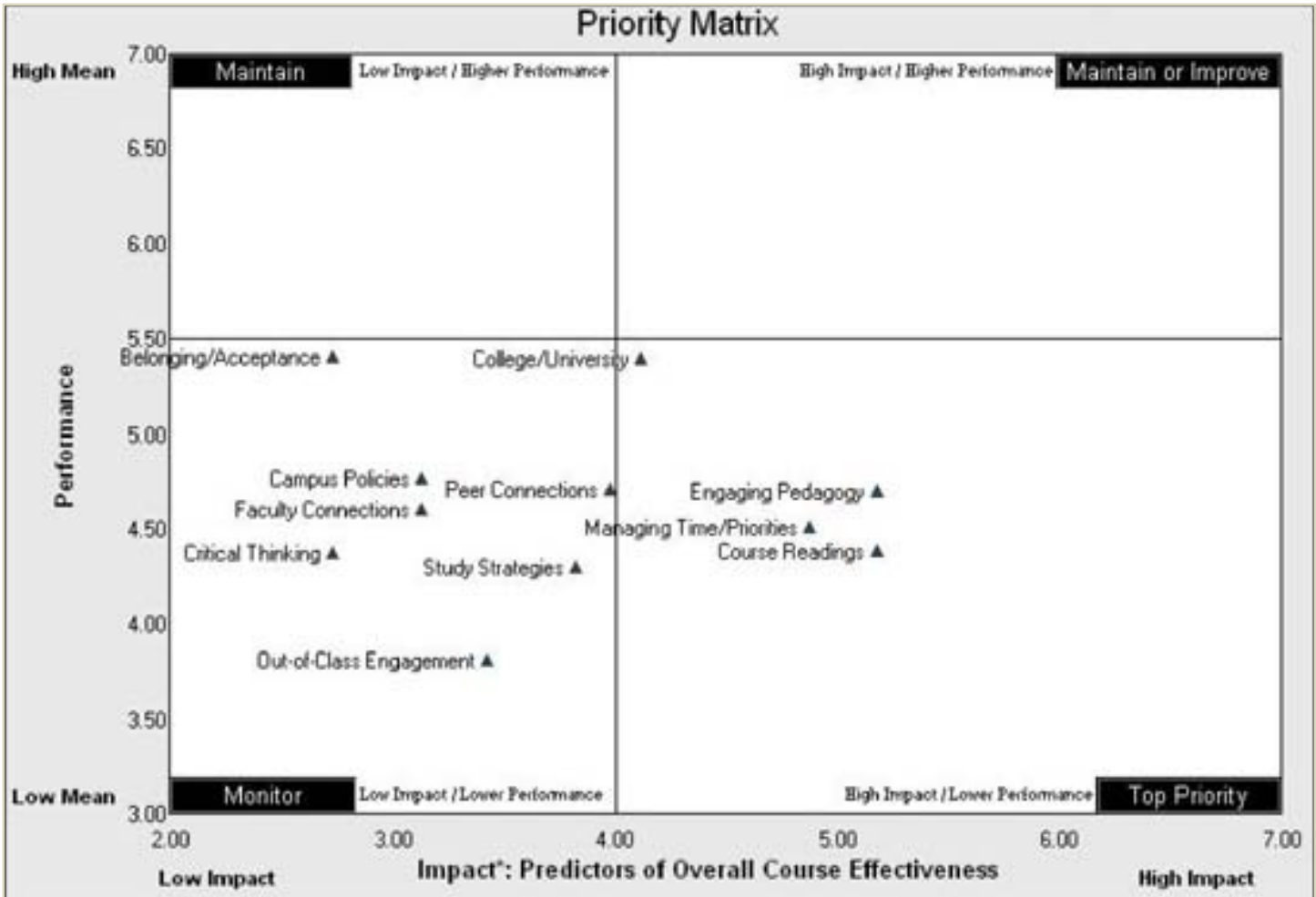


Figure 1. Priority matrix.

they are highly correlated to Overall Course Effectiveness but that, in general, institutions do not perform well in these important areas. Individual institution results may vary from these aggregate results.

Summary: In Part 1 of this series, we presented the results of a multi-variant linear regression and showed that two factors, “Course Included Engaging Pedagogy” and “Usefulness of Course Readings,” were top predictors of Overall Course Effectiveness. Understanding the behavior of these two predictors will be presented in Part 2 of this series.

While knowledge of the top predictors is important, it is not enough information to improve Overall Course

Effectiveness. Each individual institution’s results, while similar to other institutions in some ways, are quite unique. The EBI FYI Assessment reveals where an institution should focus its resources to improve Overall Course Effectiveness, but the study also shows where an institution can reduce resources as well. Resources might be moved from those areas with little impact and reallocated to areas with higher impact. In order to make continual improvements, schools must assess their results, make appropriate changes, and then reassess to determine if their actions brought about the desired results.

For more information about this study or how your institution can become involved, visit our web site: www.webebi.com or contact Dave Butler, FYI Project Manager, at Dave@webebi.com

“Connecting to Students” Helps Them Succeed in the First Year

*Jeff Belsky, Academic Department Chair
Information Technology
Pittsburgh Technical Institute*

A variety of issues directly affect the educational success of new students. These include culture shock, housing, transportation, finances, psychological and emotional health, drug and alcohol use, and learning disabilities. Failure to successfully resolve these issues and the experience of an unwelcoming environment are two of the main reasons students struggle academically or drop out of school completely.

Pittsburgh Technical Institute, a two-year career school located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has implemented two student-focused strategies in their Information Technology Degree Program, designed to increase the successfulness of first-year students by addressing issues of common concern and making them feel welcome on campus.

The Connect II Students and Direct Connect programs have permitted early intervention and greatly assisted with increasing student academic success and relationship building. Both programs evolved from the belief that first-year students need a sounding board, confidant, or simply a friend to go to with issues that might affect their success and educational goals.

Connect II Students program—In this program, each faculty member is responsible for the success of 5 to 25 students. Their responsibility is to meet periodically with their student groups, discuss their academic progress, assist with any needs or concerns (ranging from the academic to the personal), and act as the main contact for that student. During the first week of the students' residence, they are introduced to the faculty member to set up mutually agreed upon meeting schedules. As the student meetings progress, faculty members seek to determine any issues which might negatively affect the students' progress. If the faculty member uncovers issues that he/she cannot handle, they immediately turn the matter over to a Team Leader who aggressively confronts the issues with resolution as a priority. All information obtained in the meetings is put into a database that is accessible to all faculty members, even general education faculty. Faculty members, especially ones who have never had a particular student in class, have access to information that could be potentially useful if they see evidence of academic or personal problems in classrooms or hallways.

Use of the Connect II database is in compliance with FERPA, but as an additional safeguard for student privacy, extremely sensitive information is not included in the database. Rather a reference to the student's personal file is added to the comment section. By doing so, the information can be obtained only by retrieving the actual paper student file.

Direct Connect—A limited number of student representatives, called Peer Leaders, are chosen to befriend an incoming first-year student. Students who are chosen for this role are intensely screened to ensure trustworthiness, academic success, and leadership abilities prior to being permitted to serve on the Direct Connect team. Peer Leaders meet with their first-year student group during orientation and simply become a “friend” and someone to trust. By doing so, first-year students have someone they know by the first day of classes. This is essential to make them feel comfortable and at home. Peer Leaders proceed to meet with their student groups periodically to build a professional relationship, assist with basic academic needs, and encourage participation in school-sponsored activities.

The Connect II Students program has definitely had an impact on student satisfaction and retention. Both programs allow us to be more proactive in solving student issues and help us know, weeks ahead of time, if a potential withdrawal is imminent. Many times we can correct the problems before the withdrawal takes place. The success of the programs is also evident in the number of students seeking assistance from their Connect faculty or student mentor. Students seek them out on a continual basis simply to discuss educational or personal matters that might conflict with their educational goals. The secret to first-year student success is basically early intervention, assertive resolution, and a comfortable environment where students feel welcome, have friends, and participate in activities. By creating such an environment, students undoubtedly feel one thing about their educational experience—a connection!

Contact:
Jeff Belsky
Academic Department Chair, Information Technology
Pittsburgh Technical Institute
Oakdale, PA 15071
(412) 809-5263
E-mail: Belsky@pti.edu

What's Happening at the Center?

Publications

The National Resource Center is pleased to announce the release of the two latest installments in The First-Year Experience monograph series.

Transforming the First Year of College for Students of Color by Laura I. Rendón, Mildred García, and Dawn Person, Editors (see Resources for Diversity Issues in American Colleges and Universities).

Proving and Improving, Volume II: Tools and Techniques for Assessing the First College Year, Randy L. Swing.

Conferences

The Center continues its focus on assessment strategies for the first college year with the **2004 Summer Institute on First-Year Assessment** in Asheville, North Carolina, July 18-20, 2004. Gloria M. Rogers, Vice President of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology will keynote the event. For more information, visit the web site www.sc.edu/fye/events/summer/index.html

The Fall Institute for Deans and Department Chairs will meet in beautiful Charleston, South Carolina, October 17-19, 2005.

Learning Community Success Hinges on Effective Group Process

Ruth Benander, Associate Professor

Robin Lightner, Assistant Professor

Raymond Walters College

University of Cincinnati

At the University of Cincinnati, we have created learning communities for faculty and students who have enjoyed considerable success. The creation of strong group relationships and the creativity of a close community have contributed to deep learning experiences in these programs. However, we have not experienced unqualified success, and we recently had the opportunity to reflect on the difficulties that can arise.

The principal difficulty stemmed from a conflict between group orientation and individual orientation for group members. Cultures typically value one form of orientation over the other. Some cultures emphasize commitment and attachment to the group and value the individual as a group participant rather than an independent agent. In contrast, other cultures privilege the individual over the

group. Here the individual competes with other members of the group for his or her own goals. In academe, both orientations are required, although the individual orientation is more common. The intersection of these two orientations was a challenge for our learning community and we had to learn to mediate between these two styles in order for it to succeed.

Faculty create the foundation for group cohesion, but they are more likely to be individually oriented, with their course functioning independently in the system of the curriculum. We discovered that it was essential to strengthen our community orientation early in the development of the learning community but immediately had difficulty scheduling meetings. Due to the challenges of academic life, none of our early meetings included all members of the faculty group. This created fragmented communication and prevented our team from forming a strong group orientation. As a result of this initial difficulty, the syllabi were not well coordinated, and, like a small stone dislodging bigger rocks in a landslide, our courses did not coincide effectively despite our best intentions. Thus, the early detail of establishing a group orientation among the faculty appears to be essential to many of the other processes of the learning community.

Although students voiced appreciation for the learning community (LC) concept and developed friendships within the first quarter, a conflict arose later among the students that jeopardized the LC's success. The conflict was grounded in an initial split by students into different groups. This splintering into cliques based on age and ethnicity is not surprising given findings on perceived similarity and interpersonal attraction. However, these undercurrents gained strength outside the classroom so that the instructors were not able to intervene effectively at the early stages of group formation. Late in the quarter, one clique believed that they perceived preferential treatment toward other members of the LC and made comments to that effect. Unpleasant confrontations took place as the students quickly allied themselves with one group or the other.

Steps were taken to recreate the LC as one cohesive group rather than two opposing groups. Mediation with professional counseling from the Office of Student Life was attempted to address the specific conflict that caused the split in the LC, but some students were unwilling to participate. Thus, the group, as it had begun, was not salvageable. The tension was somewhat diffused by allowing other students into the LC in order to create a new group. Faculty also changed the nature of in-class activities to lessen the competition that could have resulted from group work.

In hindsight, preventative measures could have created a group orientation that would have enhanced the experience including:

- (a) A mandatory one-day orientation with team-building exercises and a discussion of expectations
- (b) Group activities structured to enhance group orientation and de-emphasize individual performance
- (c) Social activities created with mandatory attendance, integrated activities, assigned seating, and interactive activities to build relationships beyond the natural tendencies of cliques

The academic environment naturally becomes individually oriented through grades, assignments, and rewards. This is true for both faculty and students. As a result of this natural tendency, it is crucial that the coordinators of a learning community address the issue of group orientation for all participants early in the development, if not at the inception of the planning of a learning community. It is easy to overlook this aspect of planning for a LC when attending to the complexities of integrating academic content and scheduling students. However, arranging meetings and activities that immediately introduce all the participants to the group and establishing procedures that will address the cohesion of the group are equally important and will promote effective communication among members. Without this careful attention to a group orientation from the beginning, participants have a tendency to allow their individual goals to replace those of the group, which may create difficult situations that could compromise the community's function.

Contact:

Ruth Benander

Associate Professor

(513) 745-5778

E-mail: ruth.benander@uc.edu

or

Robin Lightner

Assistant Professor

(513)-936-7102

E-mail: robin.lightner@uc.edu

Raymond Walters College

University of Cincinnati

E-learning: It's Not Just for Distance Education Students Any More

Ryan Watkins

Mike Corry

George Washington University

For both instructors and students, the introduction of many technologies has significantly changed the college classroom and experience. From Microsoft PowerPoint presentations to instant messaging software that allows students to communicate immediately with each other, the technology commonly found in today's college classrooms offers instructors and students many new tools with the potential to improve the college experience dramatically. For on-campus students whose instructors are using web sites and Internet tools to supplement course experiences, to on-line students who may never come to campus, the preparation of students for e-learning success is becoming a critical component of first-year experience programs.

Two essential strategies for student success in online courses are: (a) adapting old skills and habits from the traditional classroom for use in the online classroom and (b) developing and applying new e-learning skills and habits to the online classroom (Watkins & Corry, 2004). From building a robust vocabulary of technology-related terminology to adequately preparing for success in asynchronous discussions, building the learning skills for the online classroom takes many of the skills and habits for success from the traditional classroom and applies them in new ways. In addition, some technologies have dramatically changed how students interact with their instructors, peers, and course materials, thus requiring the development of new study skills (see Figure 1).

Transforming first-year courses and materials to include a focus on e-learning skills does not, however, require a great amount of work. By integrating online activities, resources, and materials into current courses, instructors can build online success skills into their courses and provide students with the information, practice, study skills, and experiences necessary for academic success.

Below are six tips for helping students succeed in online coursework:

- Include at least one online activity or assignment in the first-year seminar or similar course.
- Become familiar with the technology terminology (e.g., USB memory, instant messaging, discussion boards, 802.11b technology, Blackboard, WebCT, servers, firewalls, Ethernet).

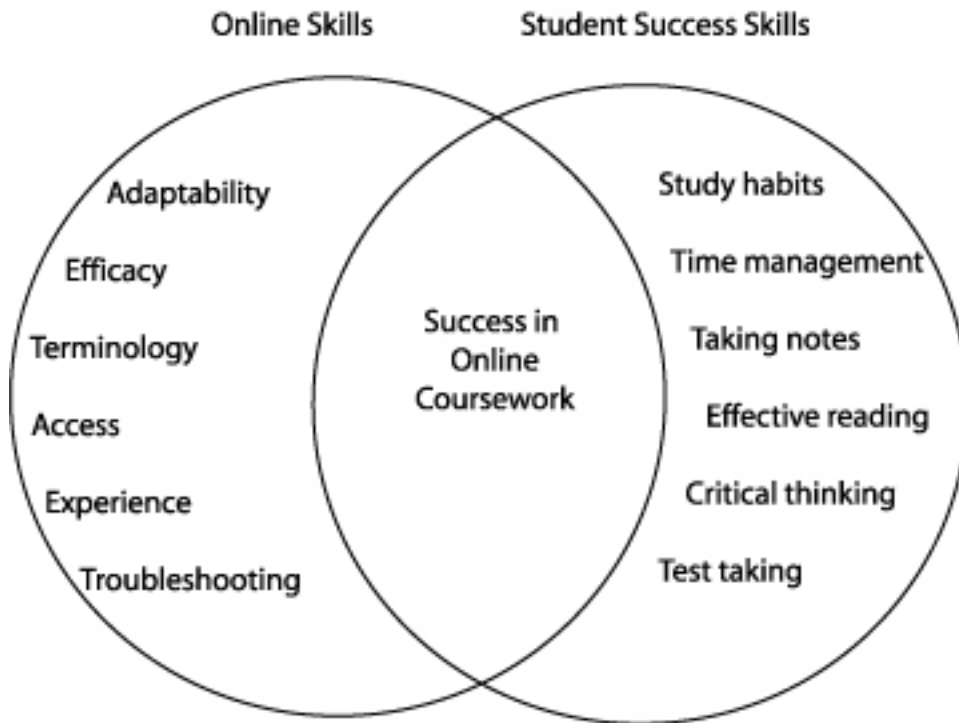


Figure 1. Relating online success with traditional student success skills (from the *E-learning Companion*, Watkins & Corry, 2004).

- Provide students with the necessary information for getting technical support and accessing campus computer labs.
- Offer students opportunities for assessing and improving the technology skills they will likely require in their college courses.
- Supply web links that assist students in accomplishing the college success skills covered in each lesson of the course (e.g., learning styles, time management, diversity, critical thinking, personal health).
- Encourage students to interact and communicate with other students via e-mail and other online technologies (e.g., establish a course listserv).
-

References

Watkins, R., & Corry, M. (2004). *E-learning companion: A student's guide to online success*. New York: Houghton Mifflin

Contact:

Ryan Watkins, PhD

<http://www.ryanwatkins.com>

Michael Corry, PhD

<http://home.gwu.edu/~mccorry>

Educational Technology Leadership

The George Washington University

2129 G Street, NW #103

Washington, DC 20052

202-994-2263

Resources for Diversity Issues in American Colleges and Universities

Tracy Skipper, Editorial Projects Coordinator

Alicia Phillip, Editorial Assistant

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition

Diversity Issues in American Colleges and Universities

Diversity Issues in American Colleges and Universities: Case Studies for Higher Education and Student Affairs Professionals is the collaborative result of many faculty, student affairs practitioners, and higher education researchers working and studying in two- and four-year institutions in the United States. This valuable resource presents common dilemmas, thought-provoking scenarios, and sometimes disturbing realities of the higher education environment. This book of case studies, edited by Lamont Flowers, offers the opportunity to practice responding to the needs of diverse populations on campus and communicating with unique cultural groups.

Diversity Issues in American Colleges and Universities also fills a gap in the student affairs literature in three ways. It comprehensively addresses issues related to diversity in higher education. Second, the case studies are helpful tools for teaching and staff development that will assist students, student affairs staff, and faculty who engage in diversity issues in concrete and practical ways. In addition, this re-

source provides useful suggestions for conducting research about the issues that each case study raises.

A number of the case studies address issues surrounding race and ethnicity and religious differences. Additional cases address lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and students with disabilities.

The ultimate beneficiaries of this timely resource will be the many underrepresented students on U.S. college and university campuses. *Diversity Issues in American Colleges and Universities* was published in 2004 by Charles C. Thomas Publisher, in Springfield, Illinois.

Transforming the First-Year Experience for Students of Color

Multicultural centers, ethnic student organizations, and diversity awareness programs are common on America's college campuses. Yet students of color still experience difficulty accessing and succeeding in American higher education. Laura I. Rendón, Mildred García, and Dawn Person have edited a new monograph suggesting that specialized programs are necessary but not sufficient to ensure the success of first-year students of color. Rather, institutions must transform our approach to the first college year for students of color.

Transforming the First-Year Experience for Students of Color addresses some of the unique challenges and transition issues for African-American, Latino/a, Asian-Pacific American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multiracial college students. Chapters address specific strategies for working with these student populations to ensure their success in the first year of college and beyond. Strategies for creating inclusive classroom environments, opportunities for intergroup and intragroup interactions, and enhancing academic and social integration are also addressed.

In addition, it is a comprehensive resource for faculty and academic and student affairs administrators who are committed to helping students of color succeed. This 38th installment in The First-Year Experience Monograph Series is available from the National Resource Center on The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Please visit our web site for more information.

Contact:

Tracy Skipper

Editorial Projects Coordinator

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition

University of South Carolina

(803) 777-6226

E-mail: tlskipper@sc.edu

Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year

This is the sixth and final installment in the Center's ongoing series of brief institutional profiles, describing key initiatives designed to improve the learning skills and success of first-year students. In this issue we feature two institutions that employ comprehensive strategies for ensuring student success in the first college year.

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
Indianapolis, Indiana
Established 1969

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is Indiana's most comprehensive higher education institution. Despite its record of achievement in academic programs and research, IUPUI has faced challenges serving entering students. For instance, nearly half of the students are part-time and underprepared for college, most live off campus, are first-generation students, and do not have strong financial support.

The decentralized structure of IUPUI, coupled with the challenges facing students, made it imperative that the campus develop a comprehensive and intensive approach to supporting entering students. In 1989, IUPUI formed the Council on Undergraduate Learning and appointed a Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Learning to focus attention on undergraduate education. University College, formed in 1997, has an appointed faculty member from each academic school, provides a common gateway to the academic programs, coordinates existing university resources, and develops new initiatives to promote academic excellence and enhance student persistence.

Several collaborative campus initiatives support the transition to college. These include:

Orientation. All students, including transfer students, participate in the orientation programs.

First-Year Advising. Entering students receive individual appointments during orientation and meet weekly with the advisor through the first semester in the learning communities.

Learning Communities (LCs). LCs consist of a first-year seminar linked to a discipline-based course, which is taught by an instructional team composed of a faculty member, an advisor, a student mentor, and a librarian, and often use service-learning and other engaging pedagogies.

The Summer Academy. A two-week bridge immediately preceding the start of fall classes provides students

with a jumpstart in math, writing, oral communication, and helps with high school-to-college transition issues.

In addition, IUPUI, through **University College's** work with all the degree-granting schools, has developed strong academic support programs for entering students, including **Supplemental Instruction** (seven courses); **Structured Learning Assistance**, an evolution of Supplemental Instruction with particular impact in mathematics and science courses; **Critical Inquiry**, a credit-bearing course that challenges students to develop collegiate-level abilities while supporting their success in a linked first-year course; and the **Mathematics Assistance Center**, a program of "high tech/high touch" support for all Mathematics students that provides free tutoring, mentoring, and online tutorials and is open 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

The effectiveness of first-year programs at IUPUI is illustrated in assessment results. The retention rate for first-year, first-time students increased by more than three percentage points between Fall 1999 and Fall 2000 cohorts (58.2% to 61.5%). Moreover, the fall-to-spring retention rate for the current year shows an additional 2% improvement (82% to 84%).

University of South Carolina, Columbia
Columbia, South Carolina
Established 1801

The University of South Carolina (USC) has created an institutional culture that fosters cross-campus partnerships to create and administer curricular and co-curricular programs that enhance the transition experience for each entering class of students. A number of programs serve as a basis for reaching the vast majority of first-year students and are complemented by numerous other traditional and innovative programs, some of which are targeted to specific populations. All of these programs have contributed to significant enhancement of the first-year and undergraduate culture in recent years.

The English Department, for more than 25 years, has made a concerted effort to ensure that its composition program offers first-year students meaningful and effective instruction. All new GTAs are required to take a two-course, six-hour in-service training sequence during their first year of instruction in which teaching strategies are introduced, instruction is observed, and their paper marking is evaluated. In addition to program-based assessments, students in first-year English courses complete written evaluations of each instructor for each course, and one student in each section is invited to participate in a focus group on the course, course materials, etc. This focus group approach has proven to be the primary vehicle for gathering student perceptions about the course.

University Housing offers creative services and programs while providing quality facilities for first-year students at USC. **Freshman Living and Learning Centers** in residence halls have front-loaded support services with a staffing ratio of one Resident Advisor for every 20 students (national norms are 1:40), an **Academic Center for Excellence** offering tutoring services and computer labs, in-house classrooms, and full-time professional staff responsible for the overall first-year center community. Residents performing poorly academically after the first semester meet with the live-in staff to address academic concerns and to better connect with academic resources. Students who excel academically are recognized at an annual First Academic Excellence Reception.

The University 101 first-year seminar serves approximately 80% of the first-year class each year. A national model, University 101 has been replicated at countless institutions in this country and abroad. Course content and process are designed to introduce students to the culture of higher education; expose students to the USC's traditions, services, facilities, and resources; provide a support group of peers with a faculty/staff mentor; and introduce students to significant academic content that will contribute to their likelihood of success. The course continually evolves to meet the changing needs and characteristics of first-year students, the institution, and society.

The First-Year Scholars Program provides opportunities and activities that build community and institutional commitment among the recipients of prestigious undergraduate scholarships. For instance, the program encompasses a residential college for first-year students, a minority peer mentor program, and an emerging leaders program.

Publications Staff

Tracy L. Skipper
Editorial Projects Coordinator

Michelle Mouton
Alicia Phillip
Editorial Assistants

Mey Wu
Web Master

Barbara Tobolowsky
Associate Director

Mary Stuart Hunter
Director