eSOURCE FOR COLLEGE TRANSITIONS
A biannual publication from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition
Vol 10
No. 2
April 2013

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Week of Welcome: Building a First-Class Tradition

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In fall 2009, findings from a general first-year student survey at Marshall University indicated that students felt a lack of connection to the institution. Since the early 1990s, the University had offered a required, traditional first-year seminar introducing students to the campus and its many resources. In 2010, however, changes in the general education requirements forced the elimination of this seminar, which was replaced with a three-credit, graded academic course, FYS 100 Introduction to Critical Thinking. In response to the survey findings and the loss of the traditional first-year seminar, the University Retention Committee began planning a program that would help students build a sense of community on their new campus and increase the first-to-second-year retention rate. The Week of Welcome (WOW) was conceived initially as an optional, two-day, informational and social event to follow up an earlier new student orientation program. To encourage more students to attend, and with the approval of the Curriculum Committee, WOW expanded to include an elective, one-hour course—UNI 100 Freshman First Class. The administration strongly encouraged every first-year student to enroll in UNI 100 while attending WOW, and students who did were preregistered for the class along with their general education courses.

Photo courtesy of Marshall University.

WOW launched in fall 2010, and nearly 1,800 first-year students (i.e., approximately 92% of the entering cohort) participated. Of this group, 1,597 students also enrolled in UNI 100 and were required to attend all WOW events. At the opening, students received a T-shirt reflecting the color of the college of their major. Students from each college then sat together during a convocation featuring the University president and other key speakers welcoming students to campus and the beginning of their college experience. WOW participants attended several events during the two-day program, rotating through large-group sessions on topics

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such as diversity, academic policies, and involvement in student organizations, as well as a career development session sponsored by a national web-based employment company. They also met with their respective college deans and participated in a first-year class photo. Student Activities sponsored entertainment and social events in the evenings for participants to mingle, relax, and have fun.

When the WOW event concluded, students enrolled in UNI 100 were required to complete several online learning modules in exchange for course credit. Modules included instructions for online course registration, financial aid and satisfactory progress, technology and libraries, creation of an e-portfolio, student development, and completion of an online first-year student survey sent to entering students. Students had to take quizzes at the end of each module and obtain a 75% passing grade, along with meeting the WOW attendance requirements, to receive course credit. Approximately 79% of the enrolled students earned credit for the course.

Four resource specialists in the Student Resource Center facilitated the UNI 100 course sections. Each monitored 375 to 475 students and was responsible for recording WOW attendance and reviewing the completion of online modules and quizzes. This approach directly connected a large portion of the first-year class to the personnel at the Student Resource Center, where they could receive additional assistance.

WOW and UNI 100 were intended to connect students to the University and each other and to increase first-year retention. While the University considers both programs successful based on attendance, course completion, and student feedback, the goal of increasing retention has not yet been met. From fall 2010 to fall 2011, the Marshall first-year retention rate was consistent with the West Virginia average retention rate for students staying at their starting institutions, yet it was a disappointing 69.8%, a 0.4% decrease from the previous year's rate of 70.2% (Marshall University, 2011; West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission Data Portal, n.d.). Although small, the drop in retention could not be overlooked. Because other factors may have contributed to the decrease (e.g., late admissions, poor academic foundations, financial concerns), Marshall remains committed to the WOW and UNI 100 initiatives and future research to ensure success of the program.

WOW and UNI 100 have evolved since their inception in 2010. Future WOW events will continue to include a first-year convocation and class photo, and the large session format will be used for the diversity and career development sessions; however, all other sessions will be in small groups (i.e., 25-50 students), and a separate session has been added for UNI 100 students to explain the course and learning objectives. In addition, live panel discussions will be presented to the small groups in technology-enhanced classrooms on topics such as FYS 100 Introduction to Critical Thinking, the corner-stone of the general education requirements; personal responsibility and behavior

"WOW and UNI 100 were intended to connect students to the University and each other and to increase first-year retention."

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expectations; and academic policies, including class attendance and academic dishonesty. Volunteers and peer mentors will facilitate group activities and discussions at the conclusion of each presentation. A critical thinking pretest will be administered to the UNI 100 students, and a posttest will be given at the completion of their FYS 100 course.

Photo courtesy of Rick Haye at Marshall University.

Significant changes also have been made to the UNI 100 format. In the pilot, text materials were paired with the online modules. Unfortunately, it was discovered that students could bypass the text and immediately take the quiz—and share quiz answers. To ensure academic honesty and that students engage with the course material as well as provide more direct contact with faculty, staff, and peer mentors, class sections will now meet with a facilitator once a week for seven weeks. Course material will be prerecorded in an online video format to provide a consistent message and delivery. The facilitators will lead class discussions and activities to develop a mentoring relationship beyond the class meetings.

WOW will continue to be a first-year student tradition at Marshall, but one balanced by the needs of the students, the University, and the resources available. Looking beyond the numbers, WOW and UNI 100 have demonstrated that, with this type of programming, institutions can benefit from connecting the students to the campus early on.

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Concept Mapping: Visualizing Plans for Undergraduate Involvement

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Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

A concept map displays a graphical representation of the meaning of and relationships between ideas to promote purposeful learning (Dykeman & Mackenzie, 2009; Novak & Canas, 2007). Beginning with a focus question to define the area of knowledge that will be displayed (Novak & Canas, 2007), students identify concepts related to the question and link those ideas on a map. Concept maps give students the potential to generate ideas, design complex structures, and use higher order thinking skills (Dykeman & Mackenzie, 2009). A concept map activity is one method of helping students organize the information and resources provided in a first-year seminar. During fall 2011, the University of Florida Honors Program used concept maps in its one-credit science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) first-year seminar to help high-achieving students in those majors identify, visualize, and develop their action plans for undergraduate involvement.

Assignment

As part of the Honors Program STEM seminar, the 28 students engaged in a three-part concept map activity and gradually built a detailed visualization of their goals for involvement during their entire undergraduate careers. They participated in panels with student leaders to discuss potential opportunities to include on their concept maps. Then, they designed their concept maps online using free versions of MindMeister (http://www.mindmeister.com/) or Prezi (http://prezi.com/). Both tools offer built-in privacy features, allowing students to share their concept maps with their instructor and classmates without opening the work to the public.

In part one (week six), the instructor asked students to create a concept map starting with themselves at the center and answering the question: What opportunities do you want to consider while at the university? Examples could include, but were not limited to, undergraduate research, internships, leadership, volunteer work, study abroad, summer enrichment programs, scholarship or awards, outside interests, and work. Then, students branched out, responding to additional questions based on their initial answers: What field of research? What country for study abroad? and What leadership positions? Finally, students added contacts and timelines to their maps.

In part two (week 10), students revised their maps, answering more questions: What new opportunities are you considering? Are there opportunities that were missing before?

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and Are there opportunities you are no longer considering? They then included more detailed contact information to their maps, including e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and websites linking their ideas to actual campus resources. For example, students found the telephone number or e-mail address for the study abroad office, named an instructor with whom they wanted to do research, or identified a company to contact for an internship. The STEM students were introduced to some of the campus offices and resources in class; other information they found through weekly homework assignments.

Students reviewed and revised their concept maps from week 10 during the final week (week 16) of class, prioritizing their opportunities and adding their goals for which semesters to participate in them.

After each iteration, students posted the private URL to their map in the course management system's discussion forum for peer review. Placed into virtual groups of four, students reviewed their group members' concept maps and provided feedback as part of that week's online discussion. Figure 1 shows a hypothetical sample of a completed concept map using MindMeister.

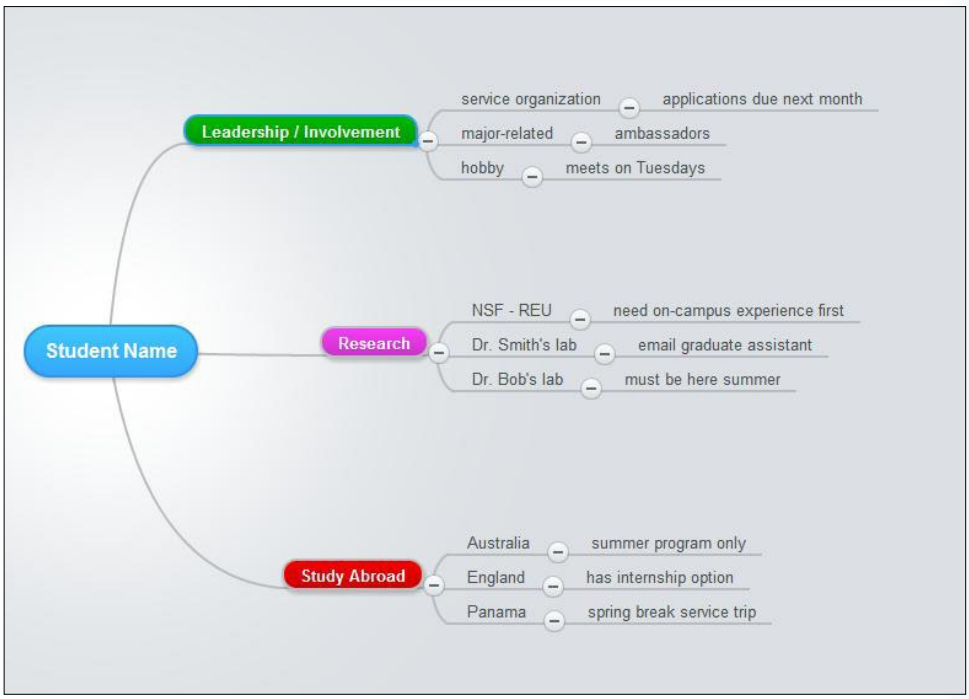

Figure 1: Sample concept map.

Note. NSF-REU is a popular off-campus research program through the National Science Foundation-Research Experiences for Undergraduates.

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Assessment

Students provided open-ended feedback about the concept map assignment as part of their final course reflection papers submitted online. Of the 28 participating students, 22 found the assignment helpful in visualizing their goals, as reflected in the following statements:

> The concept maps were helpful because they forced me to sit down and really think about what I want in a very real and nonabstract way. I couldn't just say I want to have a good time in college while still getting good grades and getting into dental school. I had to work step-by-step into exactly how I was going to make all of this happen. For the first time in my life, I wrote out a detailed plan about how I want to live my life, and I think it has been very rewarding.

> Initially, I hated them and thought they were a waste of time. However, I found it really useful to graphically display my goals. It was also cool to expand and change the concept map as the semester progressed.

> It was great to review my group's concept maps to see what others are interested in studying or participating in. The only thing that was not helpful was when I had to change the concept map every time I learned about something else I wanted to do!

With the concept map as a constant reminder, students felt they had more control over what they needed to accomplish their goals. Yet, students also expressed reservations about the assignment. Four students noted that the concept map was redundant, saying they had written their goals elsewhere. Three students stated they looked at their concept maps only when necessary for the assignment. Two students thought there should have been fewer iterations of the concept map, while several students appreciated seeing the progression of their goals across several iterations. Only one student noted issues with the technology, stating that it took time to master the online tool.

"I found it really useful to graphically display my goals. It was also cool to expand and change the concept map as the semester progressed."

Conclusion

Developing an action plan can be daunting to first-semester students, especially when they do not know where to start or have many ideas that need focus. The concept map activity helped students in the STEM first-year seminar develop a concrete, first-step action plan in a visual format for identifying their goals. The assignment's strengths included peer review, as students appreciated learning about their peers' interests. The concept maps also provided students a sense of control over their plans, giving them feelings of comfort and relief as they worked to clarify, sort, and solidify their choices among multiple interests. With so many interests from which to choose, students needed a way to organize their ideas, and most students felt the concept maps helped them establish a direction and foundation for further exploration. Students debated whether the assignments should have required two or three

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iterations of the concept map; however, in light of the student comments about the helpfulness of seeing the progression of their goals, the instructor decided to keep three iterations for future assignments. Using MindMeister was easier than Prezi for the instructor when reviewing maps, but students rarely mentioned any difficulties using either tool. MindMeister was designed to create concept maps; Prezi was not. In future semesters, all students will use the same platform. In addition to MindMeister, tools created specifically for concept mapping include Bubbl.us at https://bubbl.us/ and Creately at http://creately.com/. The online format made it easy for students to share with their peers and instructor and gave them the opportunity to revisit and revise their maps long after the course had ended. This assignment can be replicated easily at other institutions in seminars that focus on long-term planning.

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Finding Balance: Creating Hybrid First-Year Seminars

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Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

A recent survey of institutions using online instructional methods revealed that 45.9% offer hybrid or blended undergraduate classes, which deliver course content both online and in person (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). Research suggests that students who take hybrid courses can learn as much as their peers enrolled in traditional face-to-face courses (Mangan, 2012). Although first-year seminars generally are taught through traditional or face-to-face instructional methods, a growing number of courses use hybrid formats, which might offer 30-70% of their content online (Allen et al., 2007). This article explores strategies for instructors to achieve balance in designing and delivering hybrid first-year seminars. These strategies are based on the findings of a pilot study that examined student perceptions of course content and instruction of two hybrid sections of the first-year seminar at Kennesaw State University.

Course Structure and Survey Results

All hybrid first-year seminars at Kennesaw follow a consistent course structure; students meet one day a week, and the remaining content is delivered online. The two sections of the first-year seminar in this study conducted online instruction asynchronously, allowing students to complete course activities and assignments on their own time, with the exception of the weekly class meeting. The sections used a standard learning management system (LMS), which the instructors customized to encourage interaction and engagement (e.g., Class Café discussion board and introductory assignments). Using the LMS, instructors could also give students prompt feedback.

The quantitative surveys from the two sections in this study revealed that the majority of students chose to take a hybrid first-year seminar because it provided flexibility. Similarly, students appreciated the opportunity to work ahead on course content that was available online. Participants also found weekly and monthly plans, often organized in modules by date or topic, to be particularly important.

Although the participants appreciated the flexibility of the hybrid course, they also valued the in-person class meetings, which provided clear, direct communication with instructors. This finding may suggest that students would not have been as satisfied in a first-year seminar offered either completely online or in person. The combination of online and face-to-face methods may have provided participants an ideal experience.

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Strategies for Practice

The following strategies can help instructors create hybrid first-year seminar content and activities that will engage students online and in face-to-face class meetings. When developing content, instructors should be aware of institutional requirements and expectations for structuring hybrid first-year seminars and for delivering course content.

Determining Delivery Format

Hybrid formats provide a unique opportunity to put more course content online, which allows the in-person class meetings to focus on the interactions that students in a first-year seminar often find memorable (Foote, 2009). One approach to developing hybrid first-year seminar content is layering. Glazer (2012) described layering as creating "interdependence between online and face-to-face" (p. 5) course content. Layering can take one of two formats: front-loaded or back-loaded. When content is front-loaded, students learn the information before attending the face-to-face class meeting. In back-loaded courses, instructors introduce a concept or idea during face-to-face class meetings (Chatfield, 2010). While back-loading may be desirable in introductory classes that require students to build on knowledge and skills, the first-year seminars in this pilot employed front-loading methods, allowing the instructors to expand on the basic knowledge students developed on a particular concept. Layering provides a structure for the course design, but determining what is best delivered online and in person should be based on the specific content and design of an individual course. Consulting experienced hybrid instructors, online resources (e.g., SLOAN Consortium, Educause), and institutional support services can help instructors achieve an appropriate balance between content delivered online and in person.

Clearly Communicating Course Expectations

Because hybrid courses provide many students their first online learning experience, first-year seminar instructors may need to take additional time to ensure students feel comfortable with the course-related assignments and activities on the web. Instructors can help their students succeed in a hybrid course when they

- offer a detailed syllabus explaining the course instruction methods and be specific about what will be required of students online and in person;
- talk with students about why they chose to take the course in a hybrid format, examine their course expectations, and take time to dispel any myths about hybrid courses; and
- discuss appropriate online communication or netiquette and differentiate between the communication that will occur in the classroom and online.

Assigning a discussion board or brief introductory assignment early in the semester can help students become familiar with the online environment for the course. Instructors also can create an online navigation tool that describes the elements of the LMS and

> "Hybrid formats provide a unique opportunity to put more course content online, which allows the in-person class meetings to focus on the interactions that students in a first-year seminar often find memorable."

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what students can find in each of those areas. These tools are common in online courses but also can be useful in hybrid classes because instructors have limited time in face-to-face meetings.

Developing an Online Community

Glazer (2012) suggested successful hybrid courses include activities and assignments that promote interaction and collaboration. Using both synchronous and asynchronous methods may help students achieve greater levels of learning in hybrid courses compared to completely online or face-to-face courses (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). Creating opportunities for reflection in both learning environments, online and face-to-face, can help students develop a deeper and more personal connection to the course content. This deeper learning gives students the confidence to participate in discussions online (via discussion boards, blogs, or wikis) or in the traditional classroom environment. Instructors can facilitate discussions further by using technologies to record introductory videos and post pictures online, allowing students to get to know each other early in the semester. In many hybrid first-year seminars, including this pilot study, students engage actively in online discussions (Glazer, 2012). Assigning activities online that have students summarize concepts or ideas learned in class and posting discussion questions about them also allow students to interact with their peers and with the course content. The learning and engagement that occur online then can be extended in face-to-face class meetings.

Summary

When designed with student engagement and learning in mind, hybrid first-year seminars provide students and instructors with unique teaching and learning opportunities. These strategies can help instructors develop purposeful content to deliver online and in person in their hybrid first-year seminars.

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Resource Spotlight: Website Pays Dividends in Sound Fiscal Literacy

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Harrison, K. (2007). Financial literacy initiatives on today's campuses: Strategies for student success. *5*(2), 1.

Niederjohn, M. S. (2008). First-year experience course improves students' financial literacy. *6*(1), 9.

Finances can present a significant barrier to college access and completion. Poor financial decisions or inadequate resources often result in many students starting college and incurring debt but never completing a degree, thus, limiting their ability to pay off that debt. A sound introduction to finances early in a student's college career can help alleviate this undesirable outcome.

A free, online resource that helps entering and prospective college students and their families make wise decisions about college finances is available at www.MyCollegeMoneyPlan.org. Designed as an online course, available in English and Spanish, this tool helps students

- choose a college they can afford;
- decide how much to borrow for college and from what resources; and
- learn how to manage money in college and beyond, including repaying student debt.

The program is self-paced and currently divided into two parts. Part 1 covers the cost of college and highlights ways to compare potential colleges; tips to pay for an education, with and without borrowing; information on how to complete financial aid forms; and strategies to repay loans. Part 2 explores basic financial planning, including understanding spending plans, bank accounts, credit, debt, credit reports, credit scores, and identity theft. A third part, focused on finances after college, is in development and scheduled for release in 2013.

The course uses text, photos, graphs, charts, videos, worksheets, and other interactive features. In addition, hyperlinks are embedded in the material to provide sources for more detailed information. Users sign in by creating an account or using their pre-existing Facebook credentials. Once logged in, they can stop and return later to retrieve saved worksheets. As students proceed through the course, they earn points and can post their progress to Facebook or Twitter with a single click.

Instructors of high school classes or first-year seminars and other college courses or programs can use all or part of the MyCollegeMoneyPlan program without a fee. Lesson plans and other teaching aids are available under the Resource tab, and instructors can e-mail to request an electronic copy of the quiz bank.

The MyCollegeMoneyPlan website was developed through a U.S. Department of Education College Access Challenge Grant. In addition to the website, the grant supports an annual Teaching Financial Literacy for College Success conference and provides for workshops at high schools and colleges. Financial literacy should be a component of any student success program. More information about the program and access to the online lessons can be found at http://mycollegemoneyplan.org/.

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Book Review: Helping Students Reach Their Potential While Raising Retention

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While out-of-classroom engagement approaches to improve graduation rates and retain students have captured national attention, in-classroom strategies largely have fallen by the wayside. A new book, however, attempts to put the spotlight back on classroom strategies as the foundation for student retention. In *Appreciative College Instruction: Becoming a Force for Positive Change in Student Success Courses* (2011), Jennifer Bloom, Bryant Hutson, Ye He, and Claire Robinson offer realistic, practical examples of in-classroom engagement to help students understand themselves better and reach their full potential.

The book begins with an introduction to Appreciative College Instruction (ACI), which concentrates and builds on the experiences and talents students bring to the classroom. This approach allows students to plan, realize, and execute their dreams in a supportive, challenging classroom culture, while meeting specific learning outcomes. At the center of ACI is the Appreciative Mindset, which encourages instructors to look for opportunities for excellence, both in their teaching and their students' learning. The concepts presented give instructors excellent strategies to create positive environments for student success. The theoretical roots of ACI include positive psychology (Maslow, 1954; Seligman, 2002), the six phases of Appreciative Advising (Bloom, Hudson, & He, 2008), and the organizational development theory of appreciative inquiry, developed in 1979 by David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University.

The authors report some early statistics on the benefits of ACI, but the results are highly contextualized, depending on the group studied. For example, this approach, used with students on academic probation at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, significantly impacted their retention and academic standing. The authors also cite qualitative benefits to students and instructors, including allowing instructors to be facilitators instead of subject-matter experts and providing students with high expectations in a positive, safe environment. The statistics are promising, and the qualitative benefits point toward the success of this approach in similar environments.

The second chapter introduces the six phases of ACI, adapted from the theoretical roots cited. The authors briefly define the phases—Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle—and chart learning outcomes for students and instructors. These phases are the same as the Appreciative Advising model but are adapted to use in the classroom. The next six chapters detail each phase individually and give many examples—including in-class activities, homework assignments, assessments, projects, and learning outcomes—of how to implement each step in the classroom. The authors also describe materials required, time constraints, and worksheets and provide learning outcomes. The instructions are clear and the assignments easily duplicated. Most activities favor smaller classes, but a few adaptations work for larger ones. While some readers may find the

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model overview in chapter 2 helpful, embedding the description within the chapters on the phases would have been more effective and efficient.

The final chapters discuss two concepts the authors believe essential to the success of ACI, active learning and discussion facilitation. An adaptation of Dale's cone of learning (1969), which states that active and participatory learning methods result in higher levels of learning than passive learning methods, illustrates the need for active learning in all courses. This visual validates instructors who use multiple means of content delivery and reminds them to strive for better delivery methods. The authors describe active-learning classroom projects, such as one-minute papers and think-pair-share activities, which are clear and easily implemented in any student success course. Because facilitating discussions can be difficult for even the most senior instructor, the authors offer enlightening, helpful sample questions and pointers for patterns of discourse, pacing, and evaluations of classroom and online give-and-take. Examples include higher order thinking questions, scanning the class for nonverbal cues, and encouraging discussion participation in the course assessments.

The book's epilogue reminds readers that the task, helping students reach their full potential for learning, is daunting, but the ACI model can make any student success course engaging, positive, and rewarding for student and instructor. The approach, when implemented comprehensively, takes time, effort, and continual tweaking by the instructor but, in the end, can bring students to a much higher level of understanding about themselves, their environment, and their futures.

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eSOURCE

E-Source for College Transitions (ISSN 1545-5742) is published biannually by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. The National Resource Center has as its mission to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education.

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