

*Though many institutions provide an à la carte approach to the first year, Julie Alexander and John Gardner argue that meeting the needs of first-year students requires a cohesive strategic action plan. Here is their practical framework for mapping and developing such a plan.*

By Julie S. Alexander and John N. Gardner

# BEYOND RETENTION

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO THE FIRST COLLEGE YEAR

**C**ONDUCTING an institutional self-study—or even the thought of this process—often causes educators to have an aversive reaction. So why would we encourage campuses to voluntarily undertake such a process? This article lays out a set of arguments about why and how a comprehensive self-study of everything a campus does to, with, and for new students may be in order. While the importance of the first college year has been acknowledged by the majority of U.S. colleges and universities over the past three decades, the outcome has been creation of numerous program-level initiatives that operate on the margins of the first year and may have only limited impact on students. These efforts have been undertaken without a structured model of excellence that goes beyond a single program to a broader vision of a campus's comprehensive approach to the first year.

Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year is a self-study template based on an aspirational

model designed to be a homegrown, grassroots effort to improve what the locals have determined needs to be changed. The model holds that honoring professional knowledge and local judgment has the power to engage members of the campus community in significant dialogue and create meaningful opportunities that can move campus constituencies to accept more personal accountability for change and improvement. From our perspective, the most important outcome of reading this article will be that you seriously consider engaging with your colleagues in an assessment process to study the experience of new students at your institution so as to produce a strategic plan to improve this foundational period of their higher education.

### WHAT DOES EXCELLENCE IN THE FIRST YEAR LOOK LIKE?

**I**N 2003–04, the Policy Center on the First Year of College worked with the Pennsylvania State University's Center for the Study of Higher Education, Campus



Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com).  
DOI: 10.1002/abc.285 © 2009 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

## Nine standards, termed *Foundational Dimensions*<sup>®</sup>, were developed to serve as a means of measuring a campus's delivery of the first year.

Compact, and more than 300 two-year and four-year institutions to develop and vet a set of mutually agreed-upon standards of excellence. These nine standards, termed *Foundational Dimensions*<sup>®</sup>, were developed to serve as a means of measuring a campus's delivery of the first year. The statements are articulated at a high level of generality to enable institutions to design their approach to the first year with institutional context in mind. The dimensions rest on four key assumptions:

- The academic mission of an institution is pre-eminent.
- The first college year is central to the achievement of an institution's mission and lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built.
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the dimensions.
- Collectively, the dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the first college year but also the entire undergraduate experience.

The Foundational Dimension statements are in the public domain, and institutions are encouraged to use them as guides for examining institutional policies, programs, and practices that affect new students' experience. The statements can also catalyze an institution's development of its own standards of first-year excellence.

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### CRITICAL ISSUES IN IMPROVING THE FIRST COLLEGE YEAR

**T**HE MOST COMPELLING REASONS to identify standards of first-year excellence and undertake a comprehensive self-study of the first college year include the following:

**Need to Change from an Assessment-Free to an Assessment-Rich Zone.** Few colleges and universities have systematically studied the period of student experience in which the institution realizes its highest rates of failure and attrition. All institutions have, in the words of Betsy Barefoot, co-director and senior scholar of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, “assessment free zones”—long-standing components of educational practice that are rarely scrutinized to determine their effectiveness. The first year houses many such powerful bastions, such as the core or general education curriculum, the practice of creating first-year courses taught mainly in the lecture mode, and even the pattern of hiring low-cost labor—part-time or adjunct faculty—to teach the overwhelming majority of first-year courses.

**Opportunity to Combat “Retention Fatigue.”** The primary driver of nearly three decades of work on the first year has been retention. It is our contention that the search for ways to retain students isn't sufficiently motivational to get the attention of those we most need in this conversation: the faculty. “Retention fatigue” is a highly contagious condition that spreads quickly when the conversation focuses not on what students learn and can do but on the minimal expectations that a sole focus on retention may represent. What is needed is an approach to first-year reform that is more inclusive and engaging of faculty. Historically, most of the campus-based conversations about retention and the first year have been left to administrators and staff; however, these issues, like crucial battles, are too important to be left to the generals.

**Demands for Accountability.** External demands for accountability are being heeded by senior campus leaders but all too commonly have not been translated into meaningful deliberation and action by the rank-and-file members of the academic community who

work directly with new students. Many institutions have discovered that engagement in a voluntary self-study process encourages large numbers of educators in the campus community to come together and honestly, thoroughly, and intellectually grapple with the challenges of the first college year. An extraordinary example of the push for accountability is Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., a leader in liberal education and career development for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Gallaudet began a voluntary self-study of the first year of college in August 2006. Shortly thereafter, in January 2007, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) announced several concerns related to Gallaudet's compliance with reaccreditation standards and issued a mandate for the campus to respond to identified problem areas. For example, standards related to admissions and retention, educational offerings, and assessment of student learning outcomes were among the standards that had to be addressed. Gallaudet's work on the first-year self-study had given everyone on campus practice in using evidence to make recommendations and decisions and thereby supported many aspects of the university's MSCHE report. By the time of the accreditation team's visit in April 2008, Gallaudet University had met all of the MSCHE standards and was commended for addressing high failure rates in developmental mathematics courses, involving faculty in the process of student recruiting, developing an exemplary outcomes-based general studies curriculum, and implementing a model assessment plan, which had all been elements of the first-year self-study. The university's comprehensive implementation plan, resulting from the first-year self-study, has become the centerpiece of strategic planning as it relates to student learning outcomes, assessment, and retention initiatives. This kind of comprehensive campuswide assessment process is the kind of endeavor that demonstrates to regional accreditors a high level of intrinsic commitment to assessment for the purpose of educational decision making and improvement.

**Potential for Better Coordination and Integration.** The movement to reform the first year of college dates back to at least 1982, the year of the first conference that became the series known as *The Freshman Year Experience* (and, more recently, *The First-Year Experience*), organized by the University of South Carolina. This movement has gained tremendous momentum, and most U.S. campuses now have a plethora of programs. These programs, however, are rarely well coordinated or integrated into a coherent, intentional, institution-wide strategy. We make this observation not to detract from the significant contributions of these programs but rather to suggest that their potential impact would be far greater if they were more inte-

grated, less competitive, and less duplicative. The primary manifestation of this point at many institutions is a lack of focused responsibility and leadership for the first year. Responsibility is diffuse, lacking a center and vision. Often, a central question about the first year is "Who is in charge, and of what?"

Investigating an institution's achievement of excellence in the first year requires institutions to go beyond a focus on programs (such as a first-year seminar or learning community) to consider *all* components of the first year and the way those components interact, for better or worse, to affect the learning and retention of beginning college students. While programs are valuable and necessary, they are rarely sufficient to transform the first year.

## TAKING A FRESH APPROACH

**WE WILL USE** the Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year (FoE) self-study model as the framework for presenting the basic components that we believe are necessary to the success of any first-year self-study process. The FoE self-study is a model of task force-based assessment, which we believe is necessary in order to deconstruct and then improve the complex and intertwined structures that collectively make up the first year of college. A diverse mix of faculty members, student affairs professionals, administrators, staff members, and students, all of whom bring with them varied institutional perspectives, is key for any self-study task force that wishes to build support for long-term improvement. Institutions participating in the FoE self-study have created task forces ranging in size from 25 to more than 240 individual members, depending on the institution's size and other current priorities such as reaccreditation efforts.

Since 2003, more than 145 two-year and four-year institutions have undertaken focused self-study, and we have seen these institutions find ways to overcome typical barriers to successfully bring together groups with historically different roles. To bridge the separation between academic affairs and student affairs, it has become commonplace for the chief academic officer and the chief student affairs officer or their senior surrogates to lead the self-study process. For example, at State University of New York, Fredonia, the process was led by Virginia Horvath, vice president for academic affairs, and David Herman, vice president for student affairs. During the campus's spring general campus meeting, President Dennis Hefner remarked, "Academic and Student Affairs held a joint workshop involving nearly 60 faculty, staff, and students working on the Foundations of Excellence project. This self-

# The sometimes startling differences in perspectives provided by faculty, staff, and students from the same institution are often a catalyst for meaningful committee dialogue.

study also has seen nearly 1,000 faculty, staff, and students respond to a FoE survey. Wednesday's day-long retreat identified a number of action steps that will help launch several components of the Fredonia Plan's Student Learning Improvement goals."

Collaborative leadership often filters down through the task force as subcommittee leaders are appointed in the same manner—that is, one leader from student affairs and one leader from academic affairs. This collaboration allows faculty members to gain perspective on the work of student affairs professionals and vice versa. Task force members who may never have worked with one another come together and learn about the complete experience of new students, and sometimes they find gaps in the university's coverage in meeting student needs or redundancies that are consuming campus resources.

Just as we cannot reduce the experience of new students to one measure, we cannot assess each individual component of the first year without taking into account the other puzzle pieces. Admittedly, higher education has made great progress over the past three decades in improving the attention given to new students, yet it remains the case that the dominant mind-set is to consider college students (as opposed to K–12 students) primarily responsible for their own educational outcomes rather than acknowledge our own responsibility as educators. The findings of thirteen institutional case studies compiled in the 2005 Jossey-Bass publication by Betsy Barefoot and others, *Achieving and Sustaining Excellence for the First Year of College*, suggest that the greatest challenge is not identifying effective practices to support student learning but, rather, developing a campus culture that is prepared to adopt effective practices. A structured self-study process that is based on standards of excellence such as the Foundational Dimensions can help task force members avoid the pitfall of failing to adequately define problems and issues before coming up with solutions. Next, we discuss five features of the FoE self-study approach.

**Review of All Facets of the First Year.** Few individuals on any campus know all there is to know

about first-year students and the initiatives that support them. The first step in analysis of the first year is to gather information about the new students whom the campus serves, policies and practices that involve first-year students, courses that enroll large numbers of new students, and any existing first-year assessments. Institutions that undertake the FoE self-study use a template called the *current practices inventory* (CPI), which often results in the first comprehensive review of the entire first year ever undertaken by that campus. This information serves as evidence to support recommendations for improvement in defined areas. In carrying out the inventory of courses included in the CPI, administrators and faculty alike have been shocked to find rates of first-year students who earn course grades of D or F, withdrawal, or incomplete to be as high as 79 percent. Findings like this have resulted in task force recommendations that placement, advising, and registration policies for first-year students be reviewed. Sometimes, task force members realize that there is no system in place to help faculty identify students who are in their first term or first year and no mechanism for early warning or early intervention to help students in trouble. On the other hand, the CPI can identify an institution's strengths—components of the first year that are effectively designed and delivered. Providing task force members with this level of detail about the first year gives them the data they need to identify areas that need improvement and to celebrate what is working well.

**Focus on the Institution.** Environmental variables, or what the institution does to intentionally structure the first year and enhance the learning experience of new students, are a key piece in the first-year puzzle. While we may not be able to control student behaviors, we can control institutional policies and practices. To that end, staff from the Policy Center on the First Year of College, working with survey developers at Educational Benchmarking, Inc., developed two surveys, the Foundations of Excellence Faculty/Staff Survey and the Foundations of Excellence First-Year Student Survey. Unlike other instruments that address student characteristics and engagement, these surveys

## FOUNDATIONAL DIMENSIONS®

(Four-Year Institution Version)

Foundational Dimensions statements constitute a model that provides institutions with a means to evaluate and improve the first year of college. As an evaluation tool, these standards enable institutions both to confirm their strengths and to recognize the need for improvement. As an aspirational model, the Dimensions provide general guidelines for an intentional design of the first year. The Dimensions rest on four assumptions:

- The academic mission of an institution is pre-eminent;
- The first college year is central to the achievement of an institution's mission and lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built;
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the Dimensions;
- Collectively, the Dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the first college year, but also the entire undergraduate experience.

**Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices.** The philosophy/rationale is explicit, clear and easily understood, consistent with the institutional mission, widely disseminated, and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies. It is also the basis for first-year organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, department/unit philosophies, and resource allocation. (*Philosophy*)

**Foundations Institutions create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.** These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements. (*Organization*)

**Foundations Institutions deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution's philosophy and mission.** Whether in or out of the classroom, learning also promotes increased competence in critical thinking, ethical development, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge. (*Learning*)

**Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty.** These institutions are characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institutions' reward systems. (*Faculty*)

**Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.** Beginning with recruitment and admissions and continuing through

focus specifically on the institution's delivery of the first college year. They are designed so that groups of questions can be linked to each of the nine Foundational Dimensions. The task force members can disaggregate the data on a number of population demographics. The sometimes startling differences in perspectives provided by faculty, staff, and students from the same institution are often a catalyst for meaningful committee dialogue. Committee members are encouraged to interpret and discuss survey results in the context of campus history and culture while considering each other's viewpoints. For example, both surveys include questions about academic advising. A committee might choose to take a closer look at responses to the question that asks advisors "to what degree do you discuss students' future enrollment plans (i.e., stay, drop-out, transfer)?" At one four-year institution, 83 percent of faculty/staff advisors responded "to a high or very high degree,"

while only 44 percent of new students felt that their future enrollment plans had been discussed "to a high or very high degree." Survey results like these are just one source of evidence that a committee might use as it explores how to improve first-year student advising policies and practices. Survey analysis tools give task force members, some of whom have little prior experience with analyzing data, the ability to identify areas of the first year that require attention. Although coming to consensus about what it all means may be difficult, the conversations tend to create a campuswide constituency with a keen interest in and understanding of the first year of college.

**Integration of Recommendations with Existing Data and Institutional Priorities.** Committees use the FoE survey data, current practices inventory, and other sources of evidence such as strategic planning documents, unit mission statements, budgets, accredita-

the first year, institutions communicate clear curricular and co-curricular expectations and provide appropriate support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students' responsibilities to themselves and the institution. They create and maintain curricular alignments with secondary schools and linkages with secondary school personnel, families, and other sources of support, as appropriate. (*Transitions*)

**Foundations Institutions serve all first-year students according to their varied needs.** The process of anticipating, diagnosing, and addressing needs is ongoing and is subject to assessment and adjustment throughout the first year. Institutions provide services with respect for the students' abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. They also ensure a campus environment that is inclusive and safe for all students. (*All Students*)

**Foundations Institutions ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.** Whatever their demographic composition, institutions structure experiences in which students interact in an open and civil community with people from backgrounds and cultures different from their own, reflect on ideas and values different from those they currently hold, and explore their own cultures and the cultures of others. (*Diversity*)

**Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society.** These roles and purposes include knowledge acquisition for personal growth,

learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Institutions encourage first-year students to examine systematically their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college/university. Students are exposed to the value of general education as well as to the value of more focused, in-depth study of a field or fields of knowledge (i.e., the major). (*Roles and Purposes*)

**Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.** This assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis—a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institutions' overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year. (*Improvement*)

*The Foundational Dimensions are nine aspirational principles of excellence, developed in four-year and two-year versions. Please visit [www.fyfoundations.org](http://www.fyfoundations.org) to view the two-year version. The Dimensions were developed collaboratively by the Policy Center on the First Year of College, its design partners from Penn State University's Center for the Study of Higher Education and Campus Compact, and over 300 four- and two-year institutions.*

tion reports, recruitment and admissions materials, and existing assessment data to evaluate the institution's level of achievement of the aspirational principles of excellence represented by the Foundational Dimensions. Each committee is responsible for using multiple forms of evidence to make recommendations on how to improve or maintain institutional practices. Committees structure their work around specific performance indicators that help to break the Foundational Dimension statements into measurable components. While each task force receives off-site support and feedback from a staff member of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, it is not obligated to use such feedback in any formal manner. The voluntary nature of this work is honored; the final report on the self-study is based on the recommendations of the nine Foundational Dimension committees, not those of an external body or reviewer. At the end of the yearlong

process, the institution may end up with well over one hundred specific recommendations that range from those with low or no resource implications to those with high resource implications. Recommendations are often grouped by theme, evaluated for redundancy, and sorted by their potential level of impact on students. The final report recommendations become part of a strategic implementation plan for improving new student learning and success. The center often hears early reports of increased first-to-second year persistence rates from participating campuses. These reports leave us scratching our heads because the outcome precedes any significant implementation of the campus action plan. However, the explanation may be as simple as the Hawthorne effect, the product of an immediate increase in attention to first-year students. While those initial retention changes may or may not be temporary, they provide the momentum and excitement needed

to build campuswide support for improvement plans that are often staged across several years.

**Collaborations Between Two-Year and Four-Year Campuses.** One of the most important developments in the evolution of the FoE process is its application by two-year and four-year campuses located in the same service area to provide a collaborative structure and process for evaluating the first college year. This initiative was first undertaken in 2006 by two California institutions: California State University (CSU), Bakersfield (a four-year college), and Bakersfield College (a two-year college). To address shared concerns, including how best to serve a large geographic area with low college attendance rates, these two institutions devised a plan for marrying their self-study efforts. The partnership began with a meeting of senior administrators, including presidents, and faculty leadership of both institutions. Self-study leaders continued biweekly meetings, rotating back and forth from one campus location to the other throughout the year.

The partner institutions developed strategies for moving the project forward and enhancing the collaborative effort, such as sharing FoE faculty/staff and student survey results. In hindsight, both leadership teams wished they had brought the larger task force groups together earlier in order to have a collective self-study launch. However, one of the most successful components of their collaborative efforts was a retreat held halfway through the yearlong process. Task force members from both campuses met in a retreat setting, with a facilitator, to share status reports from each committee and discuss shared issues and concerns. Upon returning to their respective campuses, committee members were provided with a transcript of the retreat to assist them in planning their next steps. Dimension committees from both campuses met with each other and sometimes with specific departments, which created an opportunity for cross-campus dialogue. Shared concerns included tracking reverse transfer students, developing appropriate placement policies, focusing on student success rather than competition, and creating easier pathways for students who might benefit from starting at the community college rather than the university and vice versa.

Although it was not a requirement of the FoE process, CSU Bakersfield and Bakersfield College task force

members determined that in addition to their respective final reports, they would produce an integrated report to outline their plan for linking their missions and strategic goals to better serve new students. The steering committees developed joint overarching goals that were defined in a very detailed implementation plan that staged improvement plans over five years. Faculty involvement will be critical throughout implementation. Continued reporting to the campus communities and intentional media coverage keep the plans for improvement at the top of the institutional priority list. The focus on first-year students ended up being CSU Bakersfield's theme for reaccreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. CSU Bakersfield and Bakersfield College are working to cultivate a strong collaborative relationship that enhances the academic and social experience of new students on both campuses and broadens access to college for their entire community.

The idea of intentional collaboration between two-year and four-year colleges has begun to catch on, and in 2007, two additional institutional teams—the University of Texas at El Paso and El Paso Community College, and Minnesota State University Moorhead and Minnesota State Community and Technical College—engaged in the FoE process to improve the experience of their new students.

**Cross-Institutional Collaborations.** The State University of New York (SUNY) at Fredonia provides an example of yet another collaborative idea that institutions engaged in self-study work might consider. SUNY Fredonia and Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania participated in the 2006 FoE project launch meeting, at which they met and discussed their approaches to the self-study. Given the relative geographic proximity and similar size and mission of these two public, regional universities, they developed a plan for being each other's external "eye." They became deliberate in sharing their rationale for the choices they were making throughout the process, and it gave them the advantage of learning how another institution approached campuswide planning and improvement. Like all FoE institutions, Slippery Rock and SUNY Fredonia used an online software platform called *Foundations of Excellence Technology* (FoEtec®). FoEtec is designed to meet the communication and reporting needs of institutions participating in the

Recommendations are grouped by theme, evaluated for redundancy, and sorted by their potential level of impact on students.

self-study. Each Web-based, password-protected FoEtec site provides a central location for all data, committee reports, evidence, survey results and analysis tools, task force membership information, and communication tools. Slippery Rock and SUNY Fredonia chose to grant each other's task force members read-only access to their respective FoEtec sites.

This type of collaboration makes learning about best practices from peer institutions a much more accessible possibility for a large group of people. In addition, the two institutions had the opportunity to collaborate on effective means for developing a representative task force, processes for efficient committee meetings, professional development opportunities, and appropriate processes for reporting self-study findings and recommendations. At the functional level, committee members could look at their peer institution's current practices inventory or evidence library and note the sources of evidence they had not considered in their own analysis. At an annual gathering of all FoE participants, these two institutions shared some important advice. While the benefits of their collaboration were very helpful, they cautioned that institutional culture must always be a factor in implementing new practices. Simply finding best practices and plugging them in is unlikely to be effective. However, finding a good institutional partner expanded each institution's resources and added varied perspectives on working through the self-study process.

### INTEGRATING VOLUNTARY SELF-STUDY OF THE FIRST YEAR WITH REACCREDITATION

**WE WISH** to be completely transparent about our long-term agenda of making the beginning college experience a higher priority for campus leaders and resource allocators, and we believe that one way to achieve this is to combine something voluntary (improving the first college year) with something required (reaffirming regional accreditation). Thanks to such relatively new options as the Quality Enhancement Plan in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the special emphasis self-study available to the North Central Association Higher Learning Commission (HLC) institutions, a campus can now undertake a special self-study of the effectiveness of its first year as a lens for overall reaccreditation. This is also true for the HLC's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) campuses, which may develop action plans to improve targeted components of their educational offerings. We recommend that readers who are advocates of first-year improvement consult with

those on their campus who lead reaccreditation efforts to determine what options might be available through regional accreditors' processes to link reaffirmation of accreditation with a focus on improving the first year.

Missouri Southern State University, a 2005–06 Foundations of Excellence participating institution located in the Higher Learning Commission accrediting region, took advantage of the opportunity to focus on the first college year by completing a FoE self-study that also met the requirements of the HLC special emphasis reaccreditation requirements. To begin, approximately eighty-five self-study task force members collected information and evidence relevant to both the five HLC Criteria for Accreditation and the nine Foundational Dimensions. A self-study report was provided to HLC peer reviewers to help them prepare for the 2008 site visit. The focus and structure provided by the FoE self-study allowed educators at Missouri Southern State University to use their reaccreditation efforts as an opportunity to advance a culture that emphasizes and enhances the success of their new students.

New Mexico State University's president, Michael Martin, challenged the institution to concentrate on student success efforts while retaining and expanding access in a manner consistent with the institution's land-grant mission. In 2005, New Mexico State chose to focus on facilitating access for potential students and easing the transition for new students through a HLC special emphasis self-study. NMSU used the FoE self-study process in combination with the HLC's set of evaluation criteria to structure an honest and intentional assessment of their first-year efforts. A steering committee representing various campus constituencies was formed to draft a campus self-study report and to help prepare the campus for the 2008 peer review visit. More than sixty faculty, administrators, staff, and students were involved in the yearlong study process, providing opinions from the front lines about how to capitalize on the institution's strengths and overcome challenges. Ten priority action items were outlined in Chapter Seven of their special emphasis self-study report, *NMSU in 3D: Dedicated, Diverse, Dynamic*. This report notes an encouraging increase in fall-to-fall retention rates for their first-year students and has strengthened campuswide commitment to enhancing the success of new students.

### A BASIC MODEL FOR ASSESSING THE FIRST YEAR

**YOUR INSTITUTION** does not have to undertake the self-study model crafted by the Policy Center on the First Year of College in order to develop

an effective process for evaluating the first college year on your campus. No matter what process is developed, we strongly recommend the use of aspirational standards as a basis for the evaluation of institutional performance. The most universal and replicable steps in our first-year self-study are the following:

1. Determine project leadership, vesting authority in at least two senior leaders for overall process management. Structure a steering committee from different critical constituencies such as senior faculty and student affairs leadership.
2. Select a pre-existing set of aspirational standards for use in evaluating your institution's performance, or develop your own. To get started, take a look at both the Foundational Dimensions and your institution's mission statement. Many campuses now have a statement of core values that also suggest aspirational standards. In addition, the criteria of your regional accreditor should be considered.
3. Create subcommittees whose task is to use each aspirational standard to evaluate your institution's approach to the first year.
4. Work with your campus institutional research office to create an evidence library of data on first-year students, their demographic characteristics, and their academic performance, as well as information on campus policies and programs directed to new students. Make this information available in order to educate and inform all participants in the self-study process.
5. Use performance indicators or specific questions to help task force members break down the larger components of each Foundational Dimension statement (or equivalent standard). In general, it is necessary to make big-picture standards more accessible by creating measurable pieces.

6. Create a final action plan based on the recommendations from each subcommittee after they have been vetted by the steering committee and project leaders.
7. Submit the action plan for governance review and implementation.
8. Create a continuing oversight committee to monitor and manage ongoing implementation.

## CONCLUSION

**F**INALLY, so what? We hold that a substantial campus task force with diverse stakeholders is what makes the Foundations of Excellence process so valuable. Building campuswide appreciation for the far-reaching implications of a solid first college year is the initial step in creating advocates for change. There have been enormous strides in what has truly become an international movement to improve the beginning college experience. We believe that were it not for many of the programmatic interventions that have been developed to support new students' transition and success, retention and graduation rates would not have held up to their current level. But much work is left to be done. Many campus leaders and advocates for strengthening the first college year have been asking, "What next?" We argue that a comprehensive self-study is a next step and that the results of such strategic action planning can be transformative.

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## NOTES

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