

National Survey of First-Year Curricular Practices Summary of Findings

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The National Survey of First-Year Curricular Practices was conducted in October of 2000 by the Policy Center on the First Year of College, supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts. This survey instrument was one component of a larger survey initiative to investigate both curricular and co-curricular practices in the first year at American colleges and universities.

This is the first and only descriptive research study in American higher education that aims to look broadly at the first year. Its findings describe common policy and practice and may be useful for institutions that wish to compare their first year to the first year at other similar colleges and universities. But the findings do not necessarily identify “best practice.” The survey included an open-ended question that asks respondents themselves to describe “exemplary” or “best-practice” programs at their institutions. Although a number of interesting programs were identified, additional research must be conducted to determine whether these programs actually meet high standards of impact and effectiveness.

Survey Procedures

A Web link to the survey instrument was imbedded in an e-mail message sent to 621 randomly selected chief academic officers. The message was successfully received by 586 individuals, and responses were received from 323 for an overall response rate of 54%. For more information about the sample go to

www.brevard.edu/fyc/survey/currentpractices/index.htm

To view a list of responding institutions, go to

www.brevard.edu/fyc/survey/currentpractices/curricularrespondents.htm

Data were analyzed for two-year vs. four-year institutions, by size, and by Carnegie classification, but generally the factor that was most likely to differentiate findings was Carnegie classification, which, of course, generally correlates with size.

Some responses to the survey were consistent across institutional types, and some supported commonly held views or anecdotal evidence about first-year academic programs, structures, and policies. But others were in stark contrast to “common wisdom” or differed dramatically depending on two-year/four-year status and/or Carnegie classification. Following is a brief summary of selected findings that includes both general information on selected questions, in addition to information that is categorized by institutional type. For the complete report on all 28 survey questions, go to

www.brevard.edu/fyc/survey/currentpractices/curricular.htm

Selected Findings

Teaching and Class Size

Overall, with respect to both teaching and size of first-year classes, the survey found both anticipated and unanticipated differences depending primarily on an institution's mission, size, and student body—characteristics that are most clearly discriminated by Carnegie classification. For example, it is not surprising to find that students who enroll at a small liberal arts institution, a community college, or a small masters-level institution are likely to experience classes in every discipline limited to no more than 25 students and taught by senior faculty. Even at large research universities, the overwhelming majority of respondents report that English sections are limited to 25, and math sections, to 50 students. But first-year students at large universities are also likely to experience one or more very large classes (> 100 students), especially in the sciences and social sciences. In addition, the responsibility for first-year teaching in the research university is shared by a broader range of “instructor types,” including graduate students.

In spite of a body of research evidence attesting to the positive influence of upper-level students on the cognitive development of first-year students, the use of upper-level undergraduates in co-teaching roles is very infrequent across all first-year classes. When “peer teachers” are utilized, it is most likely to happen in first-year seminars.

Special First-Year Programs/Interventions

With reference to special first-year programs or interventions, one surprising survey finding was that research universities—the sector that so often bears the brunt of criticism for inadequate attention to the first year—is the sector offering the largest variety of special first-year programs and structural interventions. This survey finds that research university campuses appear to be working harder with more intentionality (and perhaps more resources) to do what the small institutions take for granted—creating an atmosphere characterized by manageable size and close connections between students and faculty. These programs include first-year seminars, learning communities, first-year courses in residence halls, service learning, and supplemental instruction.

Developmental Education

Another surprising set of findings relates to remedial/developmental education. In a nutshell, some level of developmental education exists in every sector of American higher education. Not only are two-year campuses offering developmental courses, selective baccalaureate colleges and research universities offer them as well, albeit to a smaller percentage of students. But in spite of the prevalence of developmental education in the four-year sector, it is disappointing to note that less than half of these institutions reportedly know anything about

the impact of developmental education on student readiness for the regular curriculum.

Institutional Policies - Attendance & Mid-Term Grade Reporting

Although research finds that class attendance is a strong predictor of student success, less than 40% of institutions have an official undergraduate attendance policy, and less than 5% have any sort of special attendance policy for first-year students. Although the majority of campuses seem unwilling to mandate a behavior that correlates with success (attendance), over 60% of them do collect and report mid-term grades, thereby giving first-year students an important source of early feedback on their academic performance. A few institutions (slightly less than 10% overall) even find a way around privacy laws and report these mid-term grades to parents.

Academic Advising & Major Selection

The survey finds that every advising structure is represented within each Carnegie institutional type. Predictably, centralized advising systems and professional advisors are more likely to be found in large universities. Overall, however, faculty still perform the largest proportion of academic advising. Although technology is almost sure to impact the way advising is conducted in the future, face-to-face advisor/advisee contact is currently mandated by about $\frac{3}{4}$ of institutions, whether the advisor is a faculty member or an advising professional.

Slightly over 50% of institutions overall take a laissez-faire position with respect to major selection: Students may choose a major in the first year, but they are neither required nor strongly encouraged to do so.

Faculty Focus on the First Year

Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of institutions report a recent faculty development initiative focused on the first year, and just over half report recent institutional efforts to increase the amount of out-of class contact between faculty and first-year students.

Selected Findings by Carnegie Classification

Two-year (AA) institutions. Two-year institutions are equally as likely to use senior faculty in first-year teaching as selective liberal arts with some differences by discipline. These institutions almost never use upper-level students as peer teachers (many interpreted our use of the term “upper-level student” to be a junior or senior). Class sizes are almost comparable to those of small liberal-arts colleges with some slight disciplinary differences. Only $\frac{1}{4}$ of these institutions have any required common first-year course or courses. Virtually all (98.3%) responding two-year institutions offer remedial courses, and approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ have student populations that are comprised of over 50%

remedial students. Two-year institutions are more likely than other institutional types to evaluate the impact of remedial courses on regular courses in the disciplines. Two-year campuses are more likely than four-year campuses to have an institution-wide attendance policy, but are less likely to collect/report mid-term grades.

Some of the most striking differences between two- and four-year institutions relate to the offering of special first-year programs and services. In spite of the fact that, as a whole, two-year institutions enroll more at-risk students than do four-year campuses, they are much less likely to offer first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, and supplemental instruction. They are more likely to offer distance education or on-line courses for first-year students, and over 50% have in place an early-alert system that identifies students in academic difficulty.

About 60% of two-year campuses either “strongly encourage” or “require” first-year students to select an academic major, and academic advising is far more likely to be centralized, but provided by faculty (some of whom may have faculty status as “counselors.”) Two-year institutions as compared to four-year institutions are far less likely to require that each student have face-to-face contact with an academic advisor and are also less likely to engage in efforts to increase out-of-class interaction between students and faculty.

Baccalaureate institutions [both Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts (BC-LA) and Baccalaureate-General (BC-Gen)]. These institutions are more likely than any other institutional type to offer small first-year classes, and those classes, across the board, are likely to be taught by senior faculty. These institutions are also more apt to offer a course or courses required of all first-year students. As a group, they are least likely to offer on-line instruction, courses in residence halls, distance learning options, and learning communities. BC-LA institutions generally either disallow major selection in the first year or allow, but do not encourage, major selection. Academic advising in this sector is almost totally the responsibility of faculty rather than professional advisors, and face-to-face contact with an advisor is almost always required prior to registration.

Baccalaureate-general institutions are most likely to require all students to participate in an introduction to campus computing. Baccalaureate-liberal arts colleges are most likely to report that teaching or advising first-year students has a positive effect on the likelihood of tenure and promotion.

Masters institutions. In general, the response pattern for masters institutions is most like the response pattern from baccalaureate colleges, especially those in the less selective baccalaureate-general category. This is not surprising: Many small, residential colleges and universities with a primary liberal arts mission offer a few masters degrees and are therefore classified in the Carnegie system as master’s institutions. This category, however, also includes regional comprehensive colleges and universities, many of which have large

populations of commuting students. With respect to special first-year programs, such as learning communities, service learning, supplemental instruction and the use of early alert systems, masters institutions are most similar to research intensive universities. Overall this institutional category is “in the middle” rarely being particularly high or low on any response category.

Research universities. The research university category, comprised of both research intensive and research extensive institutions, often represents some of the most strikingly different responses to the survey. Institutional size, whether large or small, does influence structure, policy, and programs, and the research universities’ approach to the first year is often because of or as an antidote to their large size. In these institutions, overall responsibility for the first-year curriculum tends to be assigned at the dean level—either dean of a general or university college or an academic college rather than at the “Chief Academic Officer level,” which is the most common response for other institutional types. Not surprisingly, the largest first-year classes can be found in the research university, specifically in the disciplines of psychology and biology. Faculty teaching responsibilities are also more evenly divided between the various instructor categories including graduate students who provide a significant portion of instruction, especially in English and math.

Research universities are less likely than baccalaureate and masters institutions to require that first-year students take one or more courses in common, but are more likely to implement this requirement than are two-year institutions. Remediation is quite common in the research intensive sector (80% of respondents); somewhat less common in the research extensive institutions (63.6%). As a group, less than 30% of these universities have an undergraduate attendance policy; virtually none of them have a special first-year attendance policy. Mid-term grades are generally collected and reported, most often to students, academic advisors, and coaches.

The percentage of these large institutions offering programs designed to “make the large university seem small” and create a greater sense of community is striking. This sector is more likely to offer first-year seminars, courses in residence halls, learning communities, and supplemental instruction than are other sectors of American higher education. These institutions generally either permit students to select a major or strongly encourage them to do so. But few have policies that either disallow or require major selection in the first year.

The structure of academic advising in the research universities is mixed, but these institutions are significantly more likely to offer at least some centralized advising than are baccalaureate colleges. Advising itself is far more likely to be done by professional advisors than at baccalaureate institutions. Although research institutions are less likely than baccalaureates or masters institutions to require face-to-face advisor/advisee contact, a significant number (> 50%) do require this interaction.

Research universities are most likely to report that teaching/advising first-year students has either no effect or “an effect that varies by department” on tenure and promotion decisions.

Conclusion

What matters in the first year? Are certain structures, systems, policies, and programs better than others, and where do we turn for guidance on these most important questions? Whereas some aspects of curriculum design and implementation may affect student retention and academic growth differently or not at all, other curricular policies and practices matter a great deal. To answer the “what matters” question, educators often turn to the retention literature for guidance, and many of the questions on the survey are directly linked to the factors that predict student retention. However, we would also like to emphasize what we believe is a strong link between a number of these findings and the often-cited “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). We would argue that “what’s good for undergraduates” with respect to the quality of their educational experience—including, but not limited to retention—is essential for first-year students. Of the seven principles, the first six are particularly relevant to this research. They are as follows:

1. Encourages Contact between Students and Faculty
2. Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students
3. Encourages Active Learning
4. Gives Prompt Feedback
5. Emphasizes Time on Task
6. Communicates High Expectations

We believe that small classes taught by experienced faculty and involving, whenever possible, upper-level students as co-teachers, are more likely to result in high levels of interaction, cooperation among students, and active learning (Principles 1, 2, & 3). These factors also communicate to students that the institution cares and invests in them and has high expectations, in turn, for their academic and social development (Principle 6). Feedback given to students via mid-term grades (Principle 4), direct, face-to-face advising assistance (Principle 1), and out-of-class contact with faculty (Principle 1) are particularly important in the first year. We believe that time on task (Principle 5) begins with class attendance, and we urge colleges and universities to take more seriously the mandating of attendance, especially in the first year. The implicit bargain many institutions strike with first-year students—“Don’t expect too much of us and we won’t expect too much of you”—will only be broken when faculty are reinforced and rewarded for teaching first-year students and when institutions design and manage the first year intentionally with an understanding of its importance either as a launching pad and framework for collegiate success or one year out of four (or fewer) that is wasted.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this research—some imposed by the 2000 Carnegie classification system itself and some imposed by the nature of the questions. The survey format and method of administration did not permit us to investigate in depth a number of the responses. Additional qualitative research, planned by the Policy Center, will help us gain a deeper understanding of institutional differences and how to create the best and most effective experience for first-year students in American higher education, wherever they choose to enroll.