

National Survey of First-Year Co-Curricular Practices Summary of Findings

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The National Survey of First-Year Co-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 student affairs officers. The message was successfully received by 568 individuals, and responses were received from 291 for an overall response rate of 51%. 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/cocurricular/respondents.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 co-curricular 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 information on selected questions. For the complete report on all 41 survey questions, go to www.brevard.edu/fyc/survey/cocurricular/survey.htm

Selected Findings for All Institutions

Administrative Responsibility for the First Year

Overall, fewer than 50% of institutions assign oversight of all first-year co-curricular programs to one individual or office. Baccalaureate-liberal arts institutions are most likely to designate one individual or office with such responsibility. Generally, first-year programs are one of a number of responsibilities given to larger student affairs divisions. Approximately 30 institutions assign specific first-year responsibilities to “Deans of Freshmen,” “First-Year Experience Directors,” or “Directors of Retention.”

Although we would hesitate to recommend one best way to coordinate first-year programs, some degree of oversight and communication between units is important. Failure to develop some coherence in first-year co-curricular initiatives results in duplication of effort, confusion, and wasted resources.

Admissions Structures and Policies

The admissions/enrollment management function is a critical aspect of an institution’s ability to manage its resources and plan for the future. And it is no surprise that the survey found a direct correlation between an institution’s dependence on tuition as its primary revenue source and the likelihood of a direct reporting line from admissions officers to the institution’s president. At institutions that are less tuition dependent—public research and master’s institutions, and two-year institutions—admissions officers are more likely to report either to a vice president for academic affairs or, in the case of two-year institutions, a vice president for student affairs. At the majority of institutions of all types, admissions and financial aid functions are administratively linked.

This survey finds that continued contact in the first year between admissions counselors and first-year students is rare. Students are most likely to experience such contact at two-year institutions (where admissions counseling is often part of a larger counseling function) and small baccalaureate-liberal arts institutions. Students who attend large research universities will likely have only chance encounters with the individual who “sold” them the institution. While this situation is certainly understandable—admissions counselors are always focused on “next year’s entering class”—we think that this is unfortunate. Not only would students benefit from continued contact with admissions counselors, the counselors themselves would gain important feedback from the students they encouraged to attend the institution.

The survey finds that the likelihood of students meeting and interacting with faculty during the admissions process is directly correlated with institutional size and type. Such interaction is less likely at the two-year institution and at research universities, more likely at small baccalaureate institutions where, in all likelihood, involvement in recruiting students is one of many faculty responsibilities.

Small institutions are out in front in recognizing the important of early faculty-student contact. Not only does this interaction “sell” the institution, it gives students a more realistic view of college life and the centrality of academics.

Orientation

New student orientation is one of the “staples” of the first-year experience; therefore, this survey asked a number of questions about the organization, delivery, and evaluation of campus orientation. Almost 100% of respondents offer some type of orientation to college. Generally, orientation reports to the vice president for student affairs. The length of orientation correlates with institutional type. As could be expected, two-year institutions are more likely to schedule an orientation of ½ day or less; research universities 1&1/2 to 2 days, and baccalaureate colleges over two days. Interestingly, few institutions reported using the ½ to 1 full day format for orientation. Orientation is scheduled at various times, but most frequently in the summer and just prior to the beginning of class. A surprisingly large percentage of institutions indicated that they “require” some form of orientation. These responses leave many unanswered questions—there is no “best length” and no “best time” for orientation as validated by empirical research. The timing and length must be determined by each campus in consideration of its students and their needs. But the other important issue is what students do during orientation—how valuable is the experience for them—is it strictly social, or does orientation introduce students to the academic expectations of the college or university.

Although a clear majority of respondents indicated that orientation on their campus is “required,” there is no indication of what happens to students who choose not to attend either all or part of orientation or who are admitted after the orientation period ends. We would argue that orientation in some form is a critical component of a successful first year and that students should be required to attend as a condition of being admitted to the institution.

Most four-year institutions (from 85 - 100%) offer some type of orientation session or sessions for family members. But family orientation is much less common at two-year colleges, perhaps because orientation tends to be shorter in length and is less likely to be a “required” activity. Less than ½ of the two-year respondents indicated that they offered families the opportunity to participate in orientation sessions designed specifically for them. Similarly four-year institutions are more likely than two-year institutions to offer special orientation sessions for some student sub-populations—especially minority students and international students as well as student athletes. Almost 2/3 of research extensive university respondents report that their campus offers special orientation sessions for honors students, perhaps as part of an “honors college” or “honors program.”

A recognized trend in orientation is the inclusion of more “academic” activities. For all institutions, both two- and four-year, the types of academic activities most likely to be included in orientation are small-group student/faculty sessions to discuss academic programs. Of all institutional types, baccalaureate-liberal arts institutions are more likely

to integrate various types of academic activities into campus orientation. Over 50% of baccalaureate-liberal arts campuses report that orientation includes special “reading groups” designed to discuss designated books or articles that students have read during the preceding summer. Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of liberal arts institutions also that academic convocations are scheduled during orientation.

Although a large percentage of all institutional types report that faculty routinely meet with students during orientation, fewer indicate that faculty meet with family members or that faculty and students engage in service activities at that time. Again, the institutional type where faculty/student service activities are most likely to occur during orientation is the baccalaureate-liberal arts college.

The practice of charging a separate fee for orientation is most common in the four-year sector with one interesting exception. Only $\frac{1}{3}$ of baccalaureate-general colleges levy such a charge. Also, fewer than 10% of two-year institutions charge a separate fee for orientation, a finding that is probably linked to the fact that two-year college orientation is most often only $\frac{1}{2}$ day in length—involving no overnight stay and limited meal functions, if any. Although there are certainly costs incurred in orientation, educators disagree about whether those amounts should be built into tuition or charged separately. It is certainly possible that the orientation fee serves as a disincentive for some students and provides for them a socially acceptable reason to skip orientation altogether.

The majority of institutions in every category report that orientation is evaluated by both staff and students and occasionally by “others,” who include parents (39 institutions), student orientation leaders, the office of institutional effectiveness, and outside consultants. One institution reported, “we conducted a mock orientation for administrators and staff for evaluation purposes.” Respondents across all institutional types further reported that students are “generally pleased with orientation.”

Special First-Year Activities and Athletics

Although first-year students can generally find opportunities for involvement at any campus, they are more likely to encounter special “first-year activities”—especially leadership and student government activities—at research universities than at other types of institutions. With respect to athletics, however, larger percentages of first-year students tend to be involved in intercollegiate athletics in small, rather than large, institutions. Research universities, which are more likely to have NCAA Division I status, are also more likely to mandate academic support programs for intercollegiate athletes.

Respondents at research universities and master’s level institutions reported that retention rates for student athletes are “better” than for non-athletes—not surprising given the increased level of attention and academic support given those students. Only a few respondents indicated that retention was “worse” for athletes.

Residence Life

Of the 291 respondents to the National Survey of First-Year Co-Curricular Programs, 193 (66%) indicated that they house at least some first-year students on campus. The survey found the following:

- Residence life divisions are most likely to report to Student Affairs across all institutional types
- First-year students are required to live on campus by 4 of 5 baccalaureate-liberal arts colleges, 3 of 4 baccalaureate-general colleges and by over 50% of both research university and master's campuses.
- Although two-year campuses are less likely to have residence halls, approximately 20% of the two-year respondents (23 institutions) do house some students on campus.
- Both baccalaureate-liberal arts colleges and research extensive universities report that over 75% of first-year students live in campus residence halls.
- Restricted first-year halls or first-year wings are most likely to be found at baccalaureate-liberal arts campuses
- Residence life is linked to academic programs and structures. Just under ¼ of residential institutions offer residential learning communities, just under 1/3 link residence life with first-year seminars. Approximately ¼ have some honors housing and approximately 1 or every three offers tutoring or academic advising in the residence hall.
- The most common type of faculty involvement in residence life is faculty presentations in the residence hall.
- Finally, the most common type of assessment of residence life is the assessment of satisfaction.

Greek Life

Ninety-three of the 291 responding institutions (32%)--all of them four-year colleges or universities—sponsor Greek social organizations that first-year students may join. But the percentages of first-year students who join Greek groups are low—approximately 60% of respondents indicated that no more than 10% of first-year students join Greek fraternities and sororities. The timing of rush, an issue subject to much debate, is most likely to be during the first term of college (43% of all respondents). But over 1/3 of respondents indicated that first-year students must wait until the 2nd term of college to join a fraternity or sorority.

Research conducted on the impact of Greek membership is most likely to be the type of research required by the organizations themselves—that is, the comparison of members' grade point averages to those of non-members or the institution's "average" GPA. About 1/3 of respondents indicated that hazing has occurred on their campus during the past two years involved first-year Greek students. And finally, membership numbers seem to

be fluctuating. Respondents reported that male Greek membership has decreased over the past five years, while female Greek membership has increased.

Although Greek life affects only a small proportion of the nation's first-year students, its impact on those students, whether positive or negative, is often dramatic. The process of rush can also be very disruptive to new students—especially when it occurs during the first few weeks of the college experience—and devastating to students who do not receive a “bid” from their preferred fraternity or sorority. On the other hand, research has found that Greek affiliation is positively correlated with student retention and institutional satisfaction. We believe that the central issue for campuses to consider is whether Greek life supports or is a deterrent to the academic mission of an institution and whether the institution is able to effectively monitor and control the activities occurring within or sponsored by these organizations.

Conclusion

What matters in the first year? Are certain co-curricular structures, systems, policies, and programs more desirable than others, and where do we turn for guidance on these most important questions? 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. Those factors are:

- Academic preparation of entering students
- Involvement in the total life of the campus
- Faculty/student and student/student interaction
- Institutional commitment
- Goal commitment, motivation

(This list gathered from the work of many higher education scholars and researchers including Vincent Tinto, Ernest Pascarella, Patrick Terenzini, and Alexander Astin.)

In summation, the degree to which institutions take responsibility for assuring that co-curricular initiatives intentionally support the above factors will affect the impact of these initiatives on student success. And the degree to which co-curricular initiatives support the academic mission of a campus will directly impact the likelihood that co-curricular units will be supported and perceived essential to the overall success of students.

We would argue that co-curricular life has its potential maximum impact during the first college year. We would therefore encourage a special first-year focus in all divisions or departments of student affairs to guarantee maximum positive impact during the period when students most need to make a campus connection and are most amenable to the positive and affirming influence that co-curricular life can provide.