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### Starting Strong: Inside Taylor's First-Year Experience Program

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# Starting Strong: Inside Taylor's First-Year Experience Program

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Navigating the first year of college can be a challenge, and everyone handles it differently. Some incoming students expect to stay up until 2 am every night, eager to meet new friends every day. They want to sign up for every club imaginable and be experts on campus lingo by week two.

Other first-year students might worry about living with a roommate or miss their family and friends back home. They may be concerned they'll never find a sense of belonging on campus.

Most students carry a mix of these emotions, each person bringing different backgrounds, experiences, past hurts, and future hopes with them when they move in for their first semester.

That's why the [First-Year Experience \(FYE\) program](#) at Taylor exists: to help students transition smoothly to college and the Taylor community. In particular, the purpose of the First-Year Experience is to help students:

Cultivate and understand the ideals of the Christian liberal arts

- Embrace the intentional purpose of the foundational core
- Become better learners in a college environment
- Successfully transition to Taylor as home away from home

FYE accomplishes this through communal learning as freshman and transfer students join groups called *preceptorials* that are led by upperclassmen peer-leaders. Their journey through the FYE curriculum lasts through the whole first semester, with student groups starting as strangers and ending with new friendships.

## Setting Students Up for Success

According to the director of Taylor's [Academic Enrichment Center \(AEC\)](#) Scott Gaier, in addition to an emphasis on spiritual development, the program seeks to specifically address common struggles first-year students face. These struggles can include homesickness, poor time management skills, and wrestling with feeling connected in their new environment.

“Working to help students create a home at Taylor is really important,” Gaier said. “We also help create academic stability, making sure students are engaged in the classroom. Since there's definitely a difference between high school and college and the level of rigor, we're really wanting students to develop some good learning habits and develop themselves as a learner as well.”

Preceptorial groups provide a network of support from all across campus and a wealth of wisdom from Taylor student leaders who have already completed their freshman year.

Twice a week, students take what they are learning in their FYE class—Foundation of Christian Liberal Arts—and engage with the material in a discussion-oriented setting. This allows for continual structure and stability throughout the students' first semester.

Students are also encouraged to share and process their triumphs or challenges, finding common ground with peers who may be facing similar circumstances. Preceptorial groups foster understanding and new perspectives while students support each other through their unique seasons of life.

## Tim's Story: From Nervous Freshman to Active Member of the Taylor Community

Sophomore Tim Petroelje remembers the buzz of nervous energy and anticipation in the room when his preceptorial group gathered for the first time. He appreciated the opportunity to bond with other freshmen who felt just as confused and excited as he was.

Meeting with his preceptorial weekly helped him connect to people he may not have met otherwise, and Petroelje especially valued discussing the lessons on the [integration of faith and learning](#) with

his group. He made friends through FYE he has continued to stay in touch with long after he completed the program, and he has learned how his relationship with others and Christ enhances his classroom experience.

Petroelje said FYE also helped him lay the groundwork for his understanding of the true value of a [liberal arts education](#) and how it mirrors the faith journey.

“FYE really just showed me that our faith and the liberal arts are both about breadth and depth,” Petroelje said. “In classes at Taylor, we seek to understand broad topics while being able to explore what interests us deeply... Similarly, in our faith, we should seek to take a wide kingdom-minded approach to life—evangelism—while also having a deep personal relationship with Christ and with others in Christ—true discipleship.”

Petroelje grew from a nervous freshman to an active member of the Taylor community who has since pursued several leadership positions of his own. He even initiated and co-led a weekly Bible study with members of his preceptorial after their time in the First Year Experience program was over.

## Jacob's Story: Leading by Lifting Up Others

The First Year Experience program not only prepares incoming students for Taylor, it provides upperclassmen with unique leadership opportunities. All FYE preceptorial leaders are hired in pairs to facilitate weekly class discussions, lesson-plan, create a safe place for students to receive support, and walk beside their fellow students as friends and mentors.

Senior Jacob Ferguson has personally witnessed the impact of the FYE program: both from his own experience as a freshman and from two years of preceptorial leading his sophomore and junior year.

“As a freshman, the FYE program gave me an opportunity to make a new group of friends right from the beginning and made me feel welcome to Taylor,” Ferguson said. “It broke down the barrier between lower and upperclassmen as our leaders walked alongside us and went above and beyond to give us advice and guidance as we navigated the new world of higher education. My Taylor experience got off to a great start because of it and wouldn't be the same today without it.”

His confidence in the program's importance to the Taylor community led Ferguson to apply with a friend to be preceptorial leaders their sophomore year.

Ferguson was thrilled to be hired as an FYE leader—called a *preceptor*—as he is passionate about helping others discover their vocations.

“As a peer leader, I was able to listen in as they wrestled with ideas about having a right relationship with self, others, God, and creation as well as when they began integrating faith with each of their own major areas of study,” Ferguson said. “Ultimately, we challenged them to view every aspect of their life as ministry and to find opportunity in even the smallest ways to live the Gospel to those

around them—at Taylor and beyond.”

Co-leading a preceptorial was an enriching experience for Ferguson’s own faith, as the truths embedded in the FYE curriculum taught him all aspects of his academic and social life are opportunities for ministry.

One of Ferguson’s favorite memories with their preceptorial was shortly after they met their group during [Welcome Weekend](#). He and his co-leader asked each student to text them one way they could uniquely contribute to classroom discussions. During their first “roll call,” at the beginning of their class, Ferguson and his co-leader read aloud each name and told each student how they mattered individually. The students were touched and they repeated this activity at the end of the semester to show their group how far they’d come.

“We did this to illustrate the importance of a diversity of ideas and life experiences when pursuing the Christian liberal arts,” Ferguson said. “We also wanted to show them that this sacred endeavor is [whole-person-focused](#), and every aspect of who they are contributes value to the education of those around them. As a unique person with a sacred goal to accomplish with their life, they are a vitally important piece of the larger puzzle that is Taylor University.”

## Growing in Christ and in the Classroom

From the first weekend students arrive on campus, [First-Year Experience](#) faculty, staff and students want to make the transition to Taylor as meaningful as possible. A student’s first year at a new university is a challenging, growing time, and the [Taylor community](#) is prepared to make sure no student has to navigate it alone.

“Our hope is we’re really equipping students to become deep learners to develop an ability to engage content that may not be as naturally interesting to them,” Gaier said. “You know, the great thing is, as we develop the ability to become better learners with tools and strategies, those things apply directly to our relationship with Christ and engaging scriptures and one another.”

