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## Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College

Betsy O. Barefoot

*Reviewed by Robert C. Pepper*

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To the delight of all of those who work with first year students, the literature on the first year of college is steadily growing. The first-year experience movement is now over 30 years old and those who have spent time designing, evaluating and researching the first-year experience contend that a student who makes a successful transition in the first year of higher education are more likely to persist in college and eventually graduate. A recent publication that adds to the literature on the first-year experience is *Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College*. This lengthy volume (448 pages) joins two other recent publications as a valuable resource to those in higher education that are concerned about the first year experience (Feldman, 2005 & Upcraft, M.L., Gardner, J.N., & Barefoot, B.O., 2005). This book was the result of a 2002 Policy Center on the First Year of College research project. Six of the eight authors of this book were or are members of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. This study, and subsequent volume, was conducted by some of the patriarchs of the first-year experience movement. Their professional background and expertise in the first year is well established and thus their collaboration on this research project adds to the significance of their findings.

In 2002, the Policy Center sponsored a project to recognize institutions of higher education in which the first year is a high priority and central to the collegiate experience. Their research did not focus on transfer students, but is limited to the first 30 semester hours of a student's collegiate experience. The authors describe these case studies as snapshots of thirteen institutions that provide portraits of excellence in the first year. The purpose of their study was to promote and assess the first year, advance the conversation of the first year from the periphery of campus to the center and to define and assess excellence in the first year of college.

Following a brief preface, chapter one outlines the purpose of the research project including the selection criteria used in identifying the thirteen institutions, a general description of each of the campuses and a table that lists the most common first-year initiatives found at the thirteen institutions of excellence. This table is very helpful and should serve as a quick reference guide for those looking for best practices and programming areas – but readers should not stop there, the value of this book comes from reading the case study chapters that describe these programs and the individual campus cultures in-depth.



Chapter two explains the research methods utilized by the Policy Center. In describing the multiple case study method, the authors adequately support their use of qualitative methodology. The use of three data sources for each case study, i.e., documentary information, semi-structured interviews and on-site observations, is consistent with best practices in case study research (Yin, 1994). The corresponding appendices provide the reader with the details of the selection process and written correspondence with the institutions that participated in the excellence project and add further support to their research methods. In selecting the thirteen campuses, the authors investigated institutions of different sizes, types and missions. These campuses were placed into six cohorts based on type and size. They ranged from two-year institutions to four-year institutions with fewer than 2,000 students to those with more than 20,000 students. How the researchers determined the parameters for their stratification (i.e. size of the institution) was unclear to me. Grouping by size seemed rather arbitrary to me as many institutions use additional demographics when benchmarking. It may have been more helpful if the researchers had either clearly outlined why they chose to group the institutions by size or if they would have considered additional demographics including selectivity, retention rate, cost, etc. While each case study describes a specific campus at a specific time, the authors contend that their findings have implications for other institutions of higher education.

Chapters three through fifteen are the specific case studies of the institutions studied. Five of the six groups have two corresponding case studies, while the section on four-year institutions with 2,000-5,000 students offers three case studies. Each case study is well written by two researchers and includes a brief description of the institution. The authors also describe the specific programming initiatives of the institution. Most offer a conclusion section, while others offer a section on future challenges and considerations. While each chapter does a more than adequate job of describing the nuances of the institution studied, it would have been helpful if the authors had agreed upon a set of categories to organize their findings. This would have tied the individual chapters together and allowed the reader to more easily compare the institutions. In short, the thirteen case studies are helpful because they offer new ideas as well as confirm current practice.

Unlike the thirteen case study chapters that are each authored by two writers, chapter sixteen is a collaborative effort of the eight researchers. This chapter identified the programs that were common in most of the case studies. The authors listed twelve findings that were consistent at all of the institutions. While they openly admit that some of the findings were what they were looking for at the onset of the study, other findings were unexpected. None of these findings were surprising, but when listed together, these common elements of excellence and success provide a theoretical framework for others to follow. The twelve themes should prove useful for those in the curricular as well as co-curricular (fields?). In particular, the themes of institutional support, leadership, collaboration, assessment and an environment characterized by a willingness to learn all remind me of themes that I have read about in *The Book of Professional Standards for Higher Education*, (Miller, 1999). Written in the context of first-year programs, these findings were a good reminder that all programs, regardless of how successful, have room for improvement.

Finally, the authors offer conclusions and recommendations. This section was underdeveloped (4 pages out of 448), but nonetheless useful. Six recommendations are offered for using this book at various campuses. The authors challenge readers to consider how each institution can personalize this book to further the conversation on the first-year experience at their respective campus. While the research is not conducted with faith-based institutions in mind and does not include church-related or CCCU institutions, practitioners at Christian colleges and universities should still be able to apply their findings and recommendations to their institution's mission and identity.

At first glance the book is limited in its scope to thirteen institutions, but the findings that emerge from these case studies are important for consideration by student affairs professionals, faculty and administrators in enrollment management as well as those who determine educational policy and budgets. The findings are also insightful in that the work transcends the all too common emphasis on retention as the primary focus of improving the first year. The authors take a more holistic approach to the first year. This approach fits nicely with the focus of many Christian colleges and universities.

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