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The First-Year Experience Movement: History, Practice, and Implications for Student Development Professionals

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Abstract

This article explores the First-Year Experience movement's origins and influence on curricular and co-curricular practice in higher education. The First-Year Experience movement is historically based in the civil rights era of the 1960s and early 1970s. In response to the social unrest on college campuses, administrators at the University of South Carolina sought to humanize the college experience, particularly for first-year students. The resulting first-year seminar course led to the development of a national resource center which has provided models of practice for excellence in teaching, assessment, and training for many universities in the United States, as well as internationally. The implications resulting from the accomplishments of and continued challenges for the First-Year Experience movement are described. Additionally, the First-Year Experience movement values holistic education, particularly through the convergence of academic and student affairs. Therefore, discussion surrounding the work of student development professionals with first-year students is presented.

Introduction

The history of the First-Year Experience movement dates back to the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. The decade of the 1960s brought increasing social and political unrest, which was often expressed on college campuses (Gardner, 2006b, 2015; Hunter, Keup, & Gardner, 2015; Watts, 1999).

In May of 1970, following the Kent State shootings associated with the Vietnam War protests (Watts, 1999) and discipline proceedings against students at the University of South Carolina (USC) for their involvement in protests against the invasion of Cambodia, a peaceful student protest began outside of the USC administration building (Gardner, 2006b). The Governor of South Carolina called the National Guard to the campus which resulted in tear gassing the students. A riot began with students raiding the administration building and barricading the university president, Thomas F. Jones, in his office for 24 hours (Gardner, 2006b, 2015; Hunter et al., 2015).

President Jones reacted to the riot of his students by forming a committee tasked with program design intended to build personal relationships between students and the institution, hoping that these humanistic efforts would build unity on the campus of USC (Watts, 1999). One of those programs was the creation of an extended orientation course for new students called University 101. Jones believed that if students met in small groups with faculty to discuss engaging topics, a more humane and holistic education would occur and, subsequently, the university would be humanized (Gardner, 2006b). Essentially, University 101 began as an effort to "...re-engineer the beginning college experience [which would then] teach students to love the university [and would] therefore, prevent riots" (Gardner, 2015, slide 15).

John N. Gardner was appointed the first faculty director of the University 101 program, and the first course was launched in 1972 (Gardner, 2006b). According to Watts (1999), "In addition to his humanistic academic orientation, Gardner possessed administrative ability, political smarts, perseverance, and an entrepreneurial spirit" (p. 4). Gardner also invited student affairs professionals to join the University 101 endeavor to provide a more holistic education (Watts, 1999). University 101 was a success and is one of the few surviving programs that President Jones began following the USC riot (Watts, 1999).

In 1982, Gardner decided it was time to share the scholarship of University 101 and offered a conference in South Carolina for professionals interested in improving the first-year seminar; that conference grew into a conference series on The Freshman Year Experience, an attempt to consider all factors related to first-year students (Gardner, 2006b; Hunter et al., 2015). Later, in 1986, the National Resource Center was established at the University of South Carolina and in the same year, the first International Conference on the First-Year Experience was held in the United Kingdom (Hunter et al., 2015). In 1998, the center changed its name to the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition to more accurately represent the scope in which the center had developed (University of South Carolina, n.d.). Over the past forty years, the

efforts of one university president to improve the relationship between his institution and his students have led to a national movement that continues to advance the field of study and practice known as The First-Year Experience®.

Practice

Because of the work of Gardner and his colleagues with first-year students, there have been significant influences on how colleges and universities now understand and interact with new students. Full volume works have been authored by these experts to address how to build a comprehensive experience for freshmen (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). They advise how to challenge and support first-year students (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005), and how to achieve excellence for the entire institution by addressing first-year student needs (Barefoot et al., 2005). Additionally, there is a plethora of information directly related to the practice and implementation of the first-year experience from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (<http://www.sc.edu/fye/>).

There are many ways to describe the practice of the First-Year Experience. Most practices translate to programs. Some of the most common programs include a first-year seminar, orientation program, advising, learning communities, service learning, and support services (Upcraft et al., 2005). These all have developed as fields of study and practice, with professional standards and supporting organizations. Barefoot et al. (2005) highlighted twenty practices which contribute to excellence in the first year and have become the hallmarks for “Institutions of Excellence” for the high priority placed on the first-year experience (p. xvi):

- Advising
- Central Advising Center
- Common Reading
- Convocations
- Core Curriculum / General Education
- Electronic Portfolios
- Experiential Learning
- Faculty Development
- First-Year Seminars
- Leadership Programs
- Learning Centers
- Learning Communities
- Liberal Arts
- Mentoring
- Orientation
- Peer Leaders/Advisers
- Residence Life
- Service Initiatives
- Summer Academic Programs
- Supplemental Instruction

The variety of services and programs designed for first-year students across curricular and co-curricular lines is evidence of excellence regarding an institution's value of the first-year experience.

Furthermore, Barefoot (2000) described the practice of the First-Year Experience as:

...programs and activities that have the following overall research-based objectives:

- Increasing student-to-student interaction
- Increasing faculty-to-student interaction, especially out of class
- Increasing student involvement and time on campus
- Linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum
- Increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement
- Assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college. (p. 14)

Additionally, Cuseo (2013) described ten evidence-based target areas which are critical in the practice of a comprehensive first-year experience program. These include (1) program mission; (2) new student orientation; (3) classroom teaching and learning; (4) academic advisement; (5) the curriculum; (6) academic support services; (7) the co-curriculum (student support services); (8) faculty-student contact outside the classroom; (9) administrative leadership, policies, and practices; and (10) program assessment. He also added that successful first-year programming must be intentional and purposeful, mission-driven, student-centered, intrusive, proactive, diversified, holistic, developmental, collaborative, systemic, durable, and empirically based (Cuseo, 2013).

Finally, the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (2005) established an externally guided self-study process by which institutions evaluate programs and practices related to first-year students. The evidence-based criteria used for evaluation are known as the "Foundational Dimensions," which for four-year colleges include:

Philosophy: programs and processes informed by a philosophy of the first year

Organization: organizational structures and policies reflect a complete, cohesive, and organized practice of the first year

Learning: curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students to develop holistically, associated with institutional outcomes

Faculty: high priority placed on the first year of college for faculty

Transitions: intentional policies and practice which facilitate student transitions

All Students: attend to the various needs of all first-year students

Diversity: all first-year students explore and evaluate the beliefs, philosophies, and ethos of others

Roles and Purposes: communicate to students the roles and purposes of higher education for the individual and broader culture

Improvement: ongoing, continuous quality improvement efforts related to first-year programs and practices

While practices related to first-year students entail a variety of programs and departments, there are common elements which address the transitional needs of first-year students: co-curricular and curricular offerings for first-year students, relationships between students and faculty in and out of the classroom, orientation services, academic advising, academic and student support services, and collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. However, support and advocacy of leadership for institutional priority of the practice of First-Year Experience is essential for success (Gardner et al., 2005).

Implications

According to Gardner (2006b), the many years of practice within the First-Year Experience movement have yielded much success. The accomplishments of the movement which were begun and championed at the University of South Carolina include:

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- Credibility has been established for the uniqueness of first-year student needs and is valued within student affairs and academic affairs.
- Ideas and practices related to the First-Year Experience are well-established in higher education. Thousands of institutions now have signature first-year initiatives (e.g., first-year seminar, learning communities, service learning) and an all-inclusive First-Year Experience program.
- A professional focus has developed within higher education for work with first-year students, resulting in dedicated positions and departments, professional organizations, graduate courses, scholarship and research, dedicated funding through foundations and grants, and related material developed by the for-profit industry.
- The impact of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has increased related to (1) the expanded application to other critical transitions during the undergraduate years (e.g., sophomore and senior year experiences), (2) accreditation reaffirmations through work on the first year (e.g., PEAQ or AQIP), (3) a set of standards for excellence for two- and four-year colleges regarding first-year initiatives, and (4) a national and “...international set of partnerships, scholarly works, convenings, and movement” (Gardner, 2006b, p. 10).

While the accomplishments of the First-Year Experiment movement are commendable and noteworthy, there continue to be challenges facing those working in higher education. According to Barefoot (2000),

A pervasive and central problem is that many of the programs and activities that constitute the “first-year experience” are in a continuous battle for status within the academy. Generally, they are housed in marginal facilities and managed by entry-level employees, never becoming a central, sustainable part of the institution’s fabric. First-year programs often have a single champion rather than broad-based institutional support and frequently operate with a minimal budget or no budget. With the exception of a few innovative strategies used in discipline-based courses, these activities are most often centered in student affairs and involve few faculty (the ultimate determinants of legitimacy in the academy). (p. 17)

Gardner (2006a) supported this view and additionally acknowledged other challenges for first-year initiatives including lack of engagement of students, instability of first-year programs and leadership, program versus comprehensive institutional response, lack of and/or competition for resources, and purposes which are not academically compelling (retention).

Another challenge is that institutional support for first-year experience programs often centers on retention (Barefoot, 2000; Gardner, 2006a, 2015). While various agencies are demanding evidence of improved education and thus retention, Gardner stated, (2006b),

Retention is not really the end(s), the goals of higher education. There is nothing fundamentally, intrinsically academic about retention. Retention is a measurement, a benchmark, of educational attainment. And I would argue, often a minimum one at that. Retention is a C minus and a pulse, the ability to fog a mirror. This is not sufficiently aspirational. (p. 8)

Furthermore, Gardner (2006b) asserted that by focusing on retention, institutions become self-serving versus serving students and that faculty are less likely to invest in first-year initiatives if the focus is retention because that focus is more closely associated with the business model of higher education.

Some of the challenges can be addressed by focusing efforts toward current trends in first-year initiatives. According to Hunter et al. (2015), orientation programs, peer leadership, and learner-centered teaching can foster early student engagement. Additionally, attention to student mental health and family programs can create support networks for student success. Finally, partnerships, collaboration, and data-driven decision making can also build institutional support.

Assessment is another implication of the continued success of the First-Year Experience movement. Barefoot (2000) contended that institutions must go beyond simply measuring retention since the primary outcome of education is learning. She further stated:

We need more information about what works, as well as tested models and tools for assessment. We need evidence—not assumptions and not tightly held beliefs based on our own experience. Even classic student development and retention theories, which many of us seem to believe are timeless and irrefutable, need to be reevaluated in light of the changing characteristics of today’s students: the way these students conceptualize involvement, the degree to which they want or need to be assimilated into “the college way,” and their many options for learning environments in addition to the traditional college classroom. (Barefoot, 2000, p. 18)

Upcraft (2005) recommended assessing first-year student needs and satisfaction of collegiate experiences, the campus climate for first-year students, and intended outcomes. He also suggested benchmarking with comparable institutions and using nationally-accepted standards (Upcraft, 2005).

The implications specific to student development professionals are best described by Skipper (2005), who encouraged all faculty and staff charged with supporting first-year students to “...intentionally consider developmental processes as they design individual courses, programs of study, and support services for students so that students might leave college having achieved the critical competencies needed...” (p. 107). Student development professionals have much to offer to the first-year experience efforts because of their unique role within the institution to see the integrated learning that occurs for students both in and out of the classroom. One of the reasons for the focus on the first year of college in higher education is due to the nature of the developmental milestones that occur during the transition (Skipper, 2005). Student development professionals can give voice or language to the academy by providing information and insight into the psychosocial development of first-year students and the developmental impact on learning (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Attention to students’ developmental needs in the curricular and co-curricular design can increase overall student learning both in and out of the classroom. First-year seminars, learning communities, and service learning are examples of curricular experiences which benefit from incorporating developmental needs in course design. Furthermore, involvement in residence life, service experiences, diversity experiences, and leadership experiences are examples of co-curricular programs which can increase student learning when combined with developmental aspects of college students (Skipper, 2005).

Furthermore, student development professionals can create collaborative partnerships with academic affairs faculty to promote student success, provide academic support,

increase multicultural awareness, increase effectiveness of advising, improve general education courses for first-year students, and expand university assessment to include mastery of skills beyond content (Schroeder, 2005, pp. 212-213). Additionally, collaboration between academic affairs and student development related to first-year experience initiatives can occur through the following campus partnerships: cross-representation on committees, mutual institutional change projects, faculty workshops, faculty invited to student development meetings, direct involvement of faculty in student development programs and services, cosponsor campus events, and new organizational patterns and physical arrangements (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Although the First-Year Experience movement has contributed significantly to fostering relationships between academic affairs and student development, there is still much to be done in higher education to accomplish the unfinished business of helping students succeed during their freshmen year of college in ways that will equip them to take "... advantage of the collegiate experience by growing and developing to one's maximum potential" (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 4).

Discussion

Discussion Questions for Student Development Professionals:

1. Does your institution have a philosophy and design for the first-year experience?
2. How does your department contribute to the first-year student initiatives on your campus?
3. In what ways can you contribute to the practice of the first-year experience at your institution?
4. What is a specific area in which you can collaborate with academic affairs faculty to address the developmental needs of first-year students?
5. How can you contribute to the body of scholarship related to the first-year experience?

Conclusion

This article has examined the First-Year Experience movement's origins and influence on curricular and co-curricular practices in higher education. In 1972, when University of South Carolina's (USC) President Jones introduced the idea of a first-year seminar designed to build a positive relationship between students and the institution, he did not realize that the resulting course would change the trajectory of higher education's response to the needs of first-year students. That first-year seminar course led to a national conference, which led to the development of a national resource center to provide information and training related to the collegiate first-year experience. What began at USC as a new course design developed into a national and international field of study and practice, now known as the First-Year Experience movement.

The practice of the first-year experience is often linked with programs, most notably the first-year seminar, orientation, learning communities, support services, and advising. However, practitioners, including Cuseo (2013) and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (2005), advocate for institutions to go beyond specific programs and to consider a comprehensive, institutional approach to the first-year experience.

Accomplishments of the First-Year Experience movement include achieving credibility to the practice and field of study, thus establishing a professional focus within higher education. Challenges related to the practice of the first-year experience continue to exist, particularly limited institutional resources and lack of support by administrative leadership.

However, a hallmark of the First-Year Experience movement is the value placed on holistic, developmental education as executed through collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. Student development professionals can provide expertise related to the developmental needs of first-year students and offer innovative partnerships with academic affairs faculty on their respective campuses. As the First-Year Experience movement continues to adapt to the changing needs of students, student development professionals play an essential role in leading this established field of practice and study toward a future that also pays homage to the past with the ultimate goal of helping first-year students succeed in their transition to college. 

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