

Creating a Powerful First Year Experience At Drake

Recommendations of the First Year Experience Study Group Spring, 2003

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FYE Study Group Participants:

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Introduction:

The First Year Experience Study Group was convened in the Fall of 2002 by First Year Seminar Coordinator David Skidmore and Associate Provost Wanda Everage. The group's purpose has been to evaluate the effectiveness of the overall learning environment that Drake offers to its first year students and to develop recommendations for improvement. The FYE Study Group included faculty, staff and students associated with a variety of programs that touch directly or indirectly on the first year. The group met five times (90 minutes each) over the course of the Fall semester. We also attended an all-day retreat on January 6 facilitated by Randy Swing, Co-Director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College at Brevard College.

In the course of our review, we examined the following programs, including relevant documentation (other programs were also discussed in passing). We also considered various survey data, including the Spring 2002 Drake Student Survey (DSS), the Spring 2002 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Spring 2002 Your First College Year (YFCY) and the Fall 2002 First Year Initiative (FYI). Additional survey and assessment data particular to various Drake programs were also examined. The group also consulted the relevant published literature (see Appendix A for list of readings).

- Open House
- Summer Orientation
- Welcome Weekend

- First Year Seminar
- Honors Orientation
- First Year Housing
- Residential Life Programming
- Writing Workshop
- Academic Services
- First Year Advising
- Greek Life

Summary of Findings:

We found that Drake does many things well with respect to the first year experience and that a number of recent initiatives have moved us in the right direction. Examples include the movement of first year students into the quads and grouping them by First Year Seminar, various enhancements to the FYS program (e.g., several new learning communities, student assistantship program, out-of-class activities fund, FYS Speaker Series and faculty training in the teaching of writing), the development of a new leadership and group dynamics activity at Camp Dodge and the creation of a strong new closing ceremony for Welcome Weekend as a replacement for convocation.

Yet we also identified five crucial areas where improvement is needed:

1. **Study Skills and Academic Practice:** Drake students receive an academically challenging education during their first year. Some students, however, are not well prepared to meet the level of academic expectations placed upon them by Drake faculty. While a variety of high-quality academic support services are available to first year students at Drake, these services are not well coordinated and many students who could benefit from these types of programs do not take advantage of them.
2. **Advising and Faculty-Student Interactions:** Drake emphasizes its small size and opportunities for faculty-student interactions as among the university's important strengths. Yet survey data indicate that first year students are dissatisfied with the quality of their interactions with faculty. The same data suggest that Drake's system of academic advising for first year students is deficient.
3. **Sense of Community and Belonging:** Research indicates that learning is a collaborative process and that students learn best when embedded in a community characterized by mutual trust and a shared commitment to inquiry. Also, many studies have found that a strong sense of community and belonging is crucial to student retention. A variety of indicators suggest that many first year students at Drake do not experience a strong sense of community and that the university must look for ways to develop a shared sense of identity, purpose and tradition.
4. **Wellness:** The first year of college is among the most stressful transition points in many people's lives. Comparative data on mental and physical health as well as time pressures indicate that Drake students experience somewhat higher levels of stress than first year students at most other schools. There are both academic and personal gains to be had from efforts to help students learn how to reduce or cope with high levels of stress. While Drake offers many quality wellness and counseling programs, these need to be better integrated into the first year experience for all students.

5. **Faculty-Staff Collaboration:** Drake is blessed with many faculty and student life staff who are deeply committed to the welfare and learning needs of our students. Unfortunately, however, the existing levels of interaction, communication and cooperation between faculty on the one hand and staff on the other are inadequate. As a result, we fail to grasp many opportunities for productive collaboration across this divide. Drake needs to develop a holistic approach which recognizes that student learning is not confined to the classroom and that our advantage as a full-time residential institution is the ability to create synergies between the academic and non-academic experience. For this to happen, faculty and staff must work more closely together.

Elaboration on the Major Findings: Evidence from Surveys of First Year Students

1. Study Skills and Academic Practice

According to the YFCY data, Drake students compare well with the national sample on some measures of study skills. Fewer Drake students have turned in assignments late (7.9% vs. 15.4%), a higher proportion of Drake students report discussing course content outside of class (50.4% vs. 39.7%), Drake students are more likely to study with other students (83.9% vs. 71.9%) and fewer report that they have arrived late to class (18.2% vs. 32.5%) or skipped a class (16.5% vs. 33.3%).

On the other hand, Drake students do no better than and in some cases slightly below the national sample on a number of other measures of academic preparation. 37% of Drake students report that they feel only somewhat successful or unsuccessful in developing effective study skills, as compared with 33.7% of the national sample. 24% of Drake students lack confidence in their ability to adjust to the demands of college, compared with 22% nationally (i.e., roughly equivalent). 46.3% of Drake students worried about their ability to manage time well, compared with 39.2% nationally. And 43% of Drake students felt overwhelmed by all that they had to do, compared with 37.7% nationally.

According to the YCFY data, students at Drake are less likely to express satisfaction with available tutoring and academic assistance programs (55.1% vs. 64.4%). In varying degrees, the same is true of other academic support facilities and services, such as classroom facilities (76.8% vs. 80.8%), computer facilities (65.5% vs. 79.3%) and the library (77.7% vs. 81%).

The NSSE data indicate that our students consider the level of academic challenge at Drake to be relatively high. On an index of items relating to “Level of Academic Challenge,” scores for first year students at Drake ranked at the 90th percentile among Master’s institutions. On “Active and Collaborative Learning,” Drake ranked in the 60th percentile among Master’s institutions. On both measures, Drake’s 2002 rankings for first year students were higher than the corresponding rankings for 2000 or 2001.

On the Fall 2002 FYI survey, Drake’s First Year Seminar program ranked number one against six comparison schools (pre-selected because these schools have FYS programs similar to Drake’s own) on the following items: writing skills, reading skills, meaningful class discussions, encouragement to speak in class, ability to see multiple sides of issues and evaluating the quality of opinions and facts. Drake’s program ranked lower, however, on variety of teaching methods (6th), productive use of class time (6th), whether the course contributed to the student’s ability to succeed academically (6th) and whether the students would recommend this course to other first year students (6th).

DSS data suggest that a substantial majority of first year students are satisfied with the quality of the education they are receiving and confirm the NSSE findings that Drake is considered academically challenging. 75% of first year students are satisfied with the quality of their classes at Drake. High proportions are satisfied with the quality of education they are receiving in the major (81%), in their second major or minor (78%) and in their other courses (75%). Even higher percentages of students report that their classes have been challenging in their major (90%), in their second major or minor (80%) and outside of their major (83%).

In general, students consider Drake to offer a quality education and a challenging academic environment. Many students express some anxiety, however, about their ability to manage these demands and concern about the level of academic support available to aid them in doing so.

2. Advising and Faculty-Student Interactions:

According to the spring 2002 YFCY survey, 59% of first year students at Drake report contact with faculty one or two times per month or once a week or more (combining both categories) during office hours. This compares to only 49.5% for the national sample. 38.8% of Drake students report similar levels of contact with faculty outside of office hours, compared with 36.9% of the national sample.

Nevertheless, the YFCY data show clear evidence of dissatisfaction among students about the quality of their interactions with faculty. Most strikingly, 54.5% of first year students at Drake indicated that they felt intimidated by their professors, compared with 30.8% for the national sample. Only 51.9% of Drake students were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of academic advising, compared with 62.2% for the national sample. Finally, only 5.4% of first year students at Drake reported that they worked with a member of the Drake faculty on a research project, compared with 10.8% nationally.

NSSE data offer a similar story. Among first year students, levels of satisfaction regarding interaction with faculty at Drake rank in the 30th percentile among all Master's institutions. Moreover, while Drake's scores on this measure were above the mean among Master's institutions for 2000 and about equal with the mean for 2001, Drake fell below the mean for 2002 – suggesting a downward trend. On a measure of the quality of relationships with faculty, Drake's score for 2002 fell significantly below the corresponding scores for 2000 and 2001. The same was true for quality of advising as compared with 2001.

The Drake Student Survey paints a somewhat more positive picture. 66% of first year students reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with academic advising while 72% were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall experience with faculty. Both figures, however, are below the level of overall satisfaction with the Drake experience (76%) and while first year students and sophomores report roughly equal levels of satisfaction with advising and interaction with faculty, figures for both classes are somewhat lower than the corresponding figures for juniors and seniors.

3. Sense of Community and Belonging

The YFCY data are somewhat mixed regarding the sense of community and belonging that first year students experience at Drake. Drake students report occasional or frequent involvement in volunteer or

community service at a higher rate than the national sample (76.4% vs. 60.4%). Drake students are far more likely to join fraternities or sororities than students at other schools (32.6% vs. 12.7%). Drake students are more likely to study together with other students (83.9% vs. 71.9%). And Drake students are slightly more likely to report a much stronger knowledge of people of different races and cultures at the end of the first year (19.4% vs. 15.4%). These are positive indicators.

Nevertheless, there are also signs that the sense of community at Drake is weaker than it should be. 66.8% of first year students at Drake were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall sense of community, compared with 69.7% for the national sample. Drake students were more likely to feel lonely or homesick (49.6% vs. 42.5%), worry about meeting new people (46.7% vs. 37.3%) and feel isolated from the campus (32.6% vs. 30%). Only 11.6% of Drake students reported that they experienced a much stronger ability to get along with others, compared with 14.1% for the national sample. And Drake students were less likely to socialize with someone of a different racial or ethnic group (56.6% vs. 59.9%). Some of these differences are small and probably do not reach statistical significance. Given Drake's small size, however, it is somewhat disappointing that the sense of community here is no better than, and perhaps slightly worse than, the overall national sample.

NSSE data suggest that the 2001-2002 first year class experienced a lower sense of community than first year classes in either of the previous two years. The 2001-2002 class also reported fewer opportunities to learn about diversity. Items on which the 2001-2002 class scored lower than either the 1999-2000 or 2000-2001 classes are shown below:

- “Had serious conversations with students that have different religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values.”
- “Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity.”
- “Campus environment encourages contact with students of different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds.”
- “Understanding people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.”
- “Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially.”
- “Contributing to the welfare of your community.”

On the Fall, 2002 FYI survey of 84 institutions, Drake ranked 24th when students were asked whether they felt accepted by other students, 36th when students were asked whether they were able to identify students with similar interests and 32nd when students were asked whether it was easy to make new friends at this university. These scores generally place Drake in the second quartile among participating institutions.

The DSS data on community are somewhat mixed. High proportions of first year students reported satisfaction with “opportunities for personal freedom and independence” (82%), the “opportunity to make friends” (80%) and the “friendliness” of the campus (77%). First year students reported lower levels of satisfaction with “campus activities” (53%), “Greek life” (47%) and “social options on campus” (54%). A strikingly low proportion of first year students reported satisfaction with “school spirit” (36%) at Drake. Overall, 56% of first year students expressed satisfaction with the “sense of community” at Drake.

Two things deserve note about the DSS data reported above. First, it seems unsatisfactory that only slightly more than one half of the first year class at Drake is happy with the sense of community here. Second, across all of the data cited in the previous paragraph, levels of satisfaction uniformly decline for sophomores, juniors and seniors as compared with first year students. In other words, the sense of community at Drake is tenuous among students in the first year and then continues to decline as students move toward graduation.

4. Wellness

The YCFY data provide evidence that many first year students at Drake experience considerable stress. 43% of first year students at Drake report feeling overwhelmed with all that they have to do, compared with 37.7% for the national sample. Compared with national data, fewer Drake students spend 6 or more hours per week exercising (26.6% vs. 33.4%) and a higher proportion of Drake students work 11 or more hours per week for pay off campus (10% vs. 5.3%). A higher proportion of Drake students also worry about their ability to come up with the funds needed to pay for their college education (23.6% vs. 16.8%). Drake students are somewhat more likely to feel lonely or homesick (49.6% vs. 42.5%). Rates of depression (11.2% vs. 10.8%) and smoking (12.8% vs. 10.4%) at Drake are roughly equal to those at the national level.

The Fall, 2002 FYI data are similar. As compared with respondents at the 84 schools in the FYI survey, a smaller proportion of Drake students reported no extracurricular activities (15% versus 23%) and a larger proportion reported spending at least some hours in paid employment (50% versus 41%). The most striking difference, however, is that 57% of Drake students reported spending 11 or more hours studying compared with an average of 32% for all respondents. Across activities, work and study, Drake students experience greater demands on their time.

The FYI survey shows that 30% of Drake first year students consume alcohol more than once per week (exactly the same as for all schools). 36% of Drake first year students reported consuming five or more drinks per event (also exactly the same as for all schools), while 12% reported that they typically consumed eight or more drinks per event (compared with 13% for all schools). While these figures are typical when compared with other schools, they are nevertheless reason for concern.

5. Overall Levels of Satisfaction with Drake

On the DSS, 76% of first year students expressed satisfaction with their overall Drake experience. YCFY data, however, show that the overall level of satisfaction with their Drake education fell significantly among first year students in 2002 as compared with the 2000 and 2001 surveys.

The Fall, 2002 FYI survey also includes a number of questions that allow comparisons between satisfaction levels at Drake and those at the other schools that participated in this study. Among the 84 schools, Drake's score ranked 32nd on the question of whether the student received a high-quality learning experience. Drake's ranking was 38th when students were asked whether they wanted to return to this university. When students were asked whether they would recommend this school to a friend, Drake ranked 45th. On the value of the investment made in their education at this school, Drake's score ranked 53rd. Drake ranks highest when the question stresses academic quality (i.e., "high-quality

learning experience”) and lower when the question pertains to the overall university experience or to returns on investment.

Recommendations:

In consequence of our findings, the FYE Study Group has developed the following recommendations. The wisdom, feasibility and fate of particular items listed below will undoubtedly vary. Some suggestions can be implemented quickly. Others will require considerable time and planning. We expect that broader consultation will result in considerable modification to the specific elements of the following plan. What remains essential, however, is that the university develop a holistic and integrated approach to guiding students through the transition from high school (or, in the cases of non-traditional students, other endeavors) to college. This will require better recognition of the special and particular challenges that students face during the first year and enhanced levels of coordination and collaboration across all relevant units of the university. We believe that a good faith effort to make progress on these recommendations will lead to better academic performance and enhanced student satisfaction. A stronger first year experience should also allow Drake to sustain recent improvements in first to second year retention rates.

Structure:

1. The campus community should come to think about Drake’s first year experience in terms of an integrated whole. We recommend that a title or slogan be used to refer to the cluster of programs and resources that focus on the first year, e.g. “Changes and Choices.” A high-quality brochure should be developed that lists and describes the programs and resources available to first year students. This brochure should be used both in recruiting new students to Drake and to orient new students once they arrive.
2. Develop an appropriate organizational structure for coordinating and integrating both academic and non-academic components of First Year Experience program. To this end, the First Year Experience Study Group should become a permanent coordinating body with the new title of First Year Experience Committee. The First Year Seminar Coordinator and the Associate Provost for Academic Services should serve as co-facilitators for this group. The FYE Committee will meet once each year at an annual retreat to be held over either winter or spring break. At this retreat, the FYE Committee will review available assessment data, discuss research on the first year experience, examine topics of special concern and track progress toward implementation of the recommendations contained in this report.

Programmatic Recommendations:

1. **Early Intervention:** The Early Intervention Program should consist of a set of coordinated practices designed to communicate learning goals, monitor student progress toward meeting these goals and mobilize effective support and intervention where students are falling short. The Early Intervention Program might include the following:
 - a. Develop a new self-assessment instrument which guides students in setting their own first year learning goals. These learning goals should encompass both academic and non-academic aspects of the first year experience. Students will fill out a learning goals statement

during Welcome Weekend. A copy of each student's learning goals will be provided to the academic advisor. Academic advisors will invite their first year advisees to meet with them during the first three weeks of the Fall term to discuss student learning goals and how they can best be achieved.

- b. Monitor attendance in selected "at-risk" courses during first six weeks. Send data on a weekly basis to a central collection point. Residential staff and academic advisors will be notified of absences in these courses. The course instructor will immediately contact students who miss class without explanation. A pattern of absences will trigger contact by the student's academic advisor. This policy for dealing with attendance problems is supported by studies which show that students who miss classes early in their first semester are less likely to continue this pattern or to fall into academic difficulty if they receive quick feedback that such behavior is unacceptable.
 - c. FYS instructors will be asked to give students at least one short written assignment to be submitted no later than the second week of classes. Assignments will be returned with grade and instructor feedback no later than the third week.
 - d. PMACs will be given explicit tasks to accomplish with first year student groups. One task, for instance, might be to help students do time logs as a means to facilitate discussion of time management issues.
2. **Community Building:** The Community Building Program will include a set of coordinated practices designed to create a sense of shared enterprise and belonging among students in their relationships with one another and with faculty and staff. This program will emphasize the two critical elements of community: the responsibilities that individuals have toward the community and the ways in which the community empowers the individual. The Community Building Program might include elements such as the following:
- a. The First Year Seminar Speaker Series will be reorganized. First year students will gather during their FYS time bloc with classmates and instructors for a luncheon to be held in Parent's Hall. A member of the Drake faculty or staff will be invited to give a luncheon address on the topic of "The Book that Changed My Life." The summer reading program for first year students will assign either the book to be discussed or excerpts from it. The luncheon format will provide more opportunities for social interaction while the lecture will underline the powerful influence that the written word can have in our lives.
 - b. Continue practice of grouping first year students in dorms according to FYS assignment.
 - c. Continue practice of organizing cooperative activity for students during Welcome Weekend centered around FYS groups – e.g., Camp Dodge challenge course.
 - d. Continue and enhance practice of assigning PMAC to each FYS section. Develop more explicit guidelines for PMACs and increase their interaction with FYS instructors.
 - e. Require that each FYS instructor organize an out-of-class activity (e.g., field trips, pizza party, cultural event) with FYS students during first half of Fall semester. Financial support will be provided through the FYS program.
 - f. Develop more explicit and scripted mentoring guidelines for academic advisors focusing on first year interactions with advisees. Revisit the issue of how advisors are assigned to

- first year students and consider placing a cap on the numbers of advisees assigned to faculty involved in first year advising. Develop a stronger advisor-training program (especially for new faculty). All schools and colleges should separate out advising as an independent and more heavily weighted category in criteria for tenure and promotion.
- g. Recruit one faculty member to live full-time in each of the first year dorms. The purpose is to provide more opportunities for students to interact informally with faculty.
 - h. Develop a targeted faculty-student lunch program whereby the Provost's office pays for faculty lunch when faculty members eat meals with small groups of first year students.
 - i. Delay Greek rush until early in the spring term in order to avoid dividing students into Greek and non-Greek during first semester and to minimize documented risks to academic performance of male Greeks.
3. **Transition to College:** Develop a one credit transition-to-college program to help students develop the skill sets and knowledge base that will allow them to succeed at Drake. Topics will include study skills, wellness, diversity, writing, campus information systems, academic policies and procedures, career planning and community building. This program should be designed by a committee of faculty and staff drawn from relevant programs (e.g., Residential Life, Cowles Library, the Center for Writing and Speaking, the Center for Digital Learning and Technology, The Counseling Center, the Wellness Center, Academic Services, the Career Center, the Adams Leadership Academy, etc.). This new one credit program will be graded on a pass/fail basis. Participation in this program will be optional for students who are otherwise enrolled in existing one credit transition programs (e.g., Honors Orientation, Pharmacy Dean's Hour, etc.).

Appendix A Reading List

ACT, "More First Year College Students Return for Second Year; Fewer Students Graduate in Five Years," *news release*, April 21, 2001

Barefoot, Betsy and Michael J. Siegel, "National Survey of First Year Co-Curricular Practices: Summary of Findings"

Bergen-Cico, Dessa, "Patterns of Substance Abuse and Attrition among First Year Students," *Journal of the First Year Experience*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2000

Dilley, Patrick, "20th Century Postsecondary Practices and Policies to Control Gay Students," *The Review of Higher Education*, Summer, 2002

Kim, Mikyong Minsun, "Historically Black vs. White Institutions: Academic Development among Black Students," *The Review of Higher Education*, Summer, 2002

Lee, Jenny L., "Religion and College Attendance: Change Among Students," *The Review of Higher Education*, Summer, 2002

Leppel, Karen, "Similarities and Differences in the College Persistence of Men and Women," *The Review of Higher Education*, Summer, 2002

Magolda, Marcia B. Baxter, "Helping Students Make Their Way to Adulthood," *About Campus*, January/February, 2002

Pascarella, Ernest, "Cognitive Growth in College," *Change*, November/December, 2001

Perrine, Rose, "Stress and College Persistence as a Function of Attachment Style," *Journal of the First Year Experience*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1998

Reynolds, Katherine and Claudia Nunn, "Engaging Freshmen in Classroom Discussion: Interaction and the Instructor Techniques that Encourage It," *Journal of the First Year Experience*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1998