

CHAPTER THREE

Current Institutional Practices in the First College Year

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Since Jossey-Bass published *The Freshman Year Experience* (Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates, 1989), American higher education has witnessed, and many of us have participated in, a dramatic increase in intentional institutional initiatives designed to improve the first year of college. This heightened focus on the first year was tracked by two surveys conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE). In 1987, ACE's survey, entitled *Campus Trends*, found that only 37 percent of American colleges and universities were "taking steps to improve the first year." When the same survey was repeated in 1995, that percentage had swelled to 82 percent and would likely be even higher today (El Khawas, 1987, 1995). But neither the magnitude nor number of these steps to improve the first year is the same for all institutions. Some institutions "improve the first year" by patching on a single course or intervention that at best serves as an antidote to the rest of the experience. Other colleges and universities attempt far more systemic changes that span various points of inter-face between students and institution.

While the first college year has become part of the national higher education conversation, many questions remain: How is the first year organized and structured in American higher education, and what kinds of policies and practices comprise the curriculum and cocurriculum? How is the first year different in institutions of varying type, size, and mission? Is there evidence that the first year is being designed in ways that are consistent with existing principles of good practice that promote learning and retention? In order to provide answers to these questions, the Policy Center on the First Year of College in the fall of 2000 undertook the first-ever comprehensive national survey of the first year.

Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, et al. (2005). *Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

This research project was one of several projects of the Policy Center and was supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

This chapter reviews selected results of that national survey and provides observations about the findings as well as implications and recommendations derived from this research. (To see the complete survey report, go to <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc> and click on "National Survey Findings.")

OVERVIEW OF SURVEYS

The first-year curricular and cocurricular surveys were designed to investigate the way institutions intentionally (or unintentionally) structure and organize the first year. Although some of the initiatives that respondents identified may in fact be exemplary, it is important to note that the surveys did not attempt to validate "best practice" programs, structures, or policies. The surveys found evidence of similarity in some current first-year initiatives but also many differences within and between institutional sectors. Some of the obvious differences relate to two- or four-year status, size, location, and whether students live in campus residence halls. But others are more closely related to mission, how the institution views its primary role in American higher education, and therefore how resources are allocated among competing priorities. Some of the findings supported commonly held views or anecdotal evidence about first-year curricular and cocurricular programs, structures, and policies. But others were in stark contrast to common wisdom or the way the first year is often represented in the media.

Although I, along with other Policy Center staff, analyzed survey data in aggregate, by two-year and four-year status, and by size, we found that the factor that tends to differentiate findings most dramatically was Carnegie classification. This classification system, developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Improvement of Teaching and revised most recently in 2000, is the leading typology of American colleges and universities and provides a framework by which institutional differences in U.S. higher education are commonly described. Therefore, this chapter references primarily Carnegie-type comparisons, as well as some aggregate findings and differences for which institutional size is the key variable.

In spite of the wealth of information that can be gleaned from survey findings, this research has a number of limitations. The accuracy of responses to each survey instrument relies on the knowledge and perception of a single individual on campus: either the chief academic or chief student affairs officer (or surrogates). It is possible that senior administrators do not always have a completely accurate picture of how the first year is being organized and delivered in the trenches, especially on large campuses. Because this is the first national survey initiative of its kind, findings do not identify change from a previous practice or trends over time. Although the surveys review current practices, they do not evaluate best practices. And finally, although findings may serve as a cat-

alyst on some campuses for rethinking the first college year, the survey instruments themselves were not designed to diagnose problems or prescribe ultimate solutions. Rather, findings represent a description of the first year as it exists in American higher education at the beginning of the twenty-first century that offers institutions a way to compare their own approach to the first year, for better or worse, with that of peer institutions.

SURVEY DESIGN, SAMPLES, AND PROCEDURES

The National Survey of First-Year Practices was actually composed of two separate Web-based survey instruments: a survey of first-year curricular practices and a survey of first-year cocurricular practices. Following pilot testing of both instruments, a random sample of 621 institutions, stratified by Carnegie classification, was selected, and names of both chief academic and chief student affairs officers were identified. E-mail messages with an embedded link to the relevant survey instrument were sent to each of these individuals. The e-mail message and link to the first-year curricular survey were successfully received by 586 chief academic officers. Responses were received from 323 chief academic officers or their surrogates for an overall response rate of 54 percent. Precise response rates by Carnegie classification are provided in Table 3.1.

The number of successful transmissions to chief student affairs officers was slightly smaller: 568 received the message with the link to the first-year cocurricular survey, and 291 chief student affairs officers or surrogates responded for a response rate of 51 percent. Precise response rates by Carnegie classification are provided in Table 3.2.

Research findings reference Carnegie institutional types as developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Improvement of Teaching. For readers who are not familiar with changes in the 2000 version of this system, a word of explanation may be helpful. The 2000 version is a significant revision of the earlier system, which designated postsecondary institutions as Associates, Liberal Arts I and II, Comprehensive I and II, Doctoral I and II, and Research I and II (with additional

Table 3.1 National Survey of First-Year Curricular Practices: Responses by Carnegie Classification

<i>Carnegie Classification</i>	<i>Survey Population (n = 586)</i>	<i>Response Population (n = 323)</i>
Associate	237 (40.4%)	120 (37.1%)
Baccalaureate-General	73 (12.4%)	38 (11.7%)
Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts	55 (9.3%)	34 (10.5%)
Master's I and II	154 (26.2%)	90 (27.9%)
Research Intensive	28 (4.6%)	15 (4.6%)
Research Extensive	39 (6.4%)	22 (6.8%)
Unknown	4 (1.0%)	

Table 32 National Survey of First-Year Cocurricular Practices: Responses by Carnegie Classification

<i>Carnegie Classification</i>	<i>Survey Population (n = 568)</i>	<i>Response Population (n = 291)</i>
Associate	235 (41.3%)	106 (36.4%)
Baccalaureate-General	70 (12.1%)	34 (11.6%)
Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts	54 (9.4%)	30 (10.3%)
Master's I and II	145 (25.4%)	76 (26.1%)
Research Intensive	26 (4.5%)	13 (4.4%)
Research Extensive	38 (6.6%)	26 (8.9%)
Unknown	6 (2.0%)	

special institutional categories). In 2000, these nine primary categories were consolidated into seven: Associates, Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts (BC-LA) and Baccalaureate-General (BC-GEN), Master's I and II, Research Extensive, and Research Intensive. With reference to the research university category, Research Extensive institutions are universities awarding fifty or more doctorates per year and Research Intensive institutions at least twenty doctorates annually. Master's institutions include many campuses that continue to have a mission grounded primarily in the liberal arts. Therefore, although the new "condensed" system is less cumbersome than the previous one, it creates far more variance within each institutional category. (For a more complete explanation of the new Carnegie classification system and a listing of institutions by category, go to <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classification/index.htm>.)

SURVEY FINDINGS

In this synopsis of findings, I include results for selected questions from both the first-year curricular and cocurricular surveys to provide a more or less chronological view of the first year—what new students encounter from the moment of recruitment and admissions through orientation to their later class-room, advising, and out-of-class interactions. A few questions overlay this chronology, and I address these at various points in the synopsis.

Who's in Charge?

On each survey, an initial question asked which office or individual has primary responsibility for the first-year curriculum or cocurriculum. First-year curricular survey results indicated that across all institutional categories, the first-year curriculum is most frequently the responsibility of the chief academic officer (42.5 percent). However, as institutional size increases, this responsibility is somewhat more likely to be relegated to deans of colleges, department chairs, and faculty. Only eight respondents (one two-year and seven four-year) indicated that a dean of freshmen has responsibility for the first-year curriculum.

Overall, slightly less than one half (48 percent) of institutions designate someone as being "in charge" of the first-year cocurriculum. The BC-LA colleges were most likely to assign first-year cocurricular activities to one individual or office (70 percent), followed by research-intensive universities (56 percent). Across all Carnegie categories, the unit most often mentioned was the college or university's chief student affairs officer or division of student affairs. Seventeen respondents (6 percent) identified a director of the first year as the person specifically charged with first-year cocurricular initiatives.

Based on our interactions with numbers of first-year educators, my colleagues and I at the Policy Center would argue that the absence of centralized or focused responsibility for the first year, in either the curriculum or cocurriculum, is a central problem on many campuses. Various departments, divisions, and individuals interact with new students with little or no coordination. And when first-year initiatives are one of multiple responsibilities in a major institutional division or for a senior administrator, they are less likely to command focused attention. Rather, they become just one more in a long list of important responsibilities.

Recruitment and Admissions

The recruitment and admissions function is a critical aspect of an institution's ability to manage its resources and plans for the future. And it is no surprise that the first-year cocurricular 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 functions to the institution's president. Such was the case for 60 percent of BC-LA respondents and 44 percent of BC-GEN. Both institutional sectors comprise predominantly private institutions (75 percent of BC-LA and 80 percent of BC-GEN) in which tuition dollars constitute a significant portion of each year's budget. Institutions less dependent on tuition—public research universities and two-year colleges—are more likely to link admissions with other units. The most common reporting line for research university admission offices is to the vice president for academic affairs (44 percent) and for two-year campuses, to the vice president or dean of student affairs (66 percent).

The cocurricular survey found that continued contact in the first year between admissions representatives and first-year students is rare. Students who attend BC-LA colleges are most likely to experience such contact (47 percent), followed by students who attend two-year community colleges (42 percent). In the community college sector, admissions counseling is often part of a unit that includes follow-up academic and personal counseling. Fewer than one of every ten research universities, however, indicated that admissions counselors have continued contact with first-year students.

While it is easy to understand why opportunities for contact between enrolled students and admissions counselors are infrequent, especially on large campuses, this situation represents a missed opportunity for institutions to continue an important connection between each first-year student and his or her first point of contact with the institution, and for the admissions staff to receive

feedback from students about their experience on campus and their level of satisfaction and perception of institutional fit.

For some students, the recruitment and admissions phase also offers the first opportunity for contact with the institution's faculty. The cocurricular survey found that the likelihood of such contact was also a function of both institutional size and type: baccalaureate colleges were most likely to report that over half of first-year students meet faculty during recruitment and admissions (41 percent) and research universities were the least likely (10 percent).

Orientation

New student orientation is one of the core features of the first college year, and the cocurricular survey found that it is offered in one form or another at virtually all American colleges and universities (96 percent). (For more information about current trends and issues in orientation, see Chapter Fourteen.) This survey found also that for 76 percent of institutions, orientation reports to a vice president or dean of student affairs. A similar finding (68 percent) was reported in the 2000 NODA Data Bank of the National Orientation Directors' Association (Strumpf & Wawrzynski, 2000), which is drawn from a survey of NODA member institutions.

Survey responses to a question about the length of orientation yielded few surprises. Two-year campuses are more likely to limit preterm orientation to a half-day (62 percent), research-extensive campuses seem to favor the one and one-half day format (52 percent), and BC-LA colleges are more likely to design orientation that comprises more than two days (73 percent).

Responses indicated that for students entering during any given fall term, orientation may be scheduled in the spring, summer, or just prior to the first day of class; however, spring orientation is rare across all institutions (7 percent). BC-LA institutions are most likely to conduct orientation just prior to the beginning of classes (87 percent), while two-year colleges and research-extensive universities are more likely to conduct orientation sessions during the summer (62.3 percent and 82.6 percent, respectively). Two-year colleges are less likely than other institutional types to require participation of full-time, degree-seeking students in orientation. The survey found that 50 percent of two-year campuses, but up to 80 percent of BC-LA campuses, report that orientation is officially required.

Most four-year institutions (from 85 to 100 percent depending on Carnegie classification) offer some type of orientation sessions for family members; however, family orientation is much less common in the two-year sector (44 percent). Similarly four-year institutions are more likely than two-year institutions to offer special orientation sessions for various student subpopulations. Of special note is the finding that approximately two-thirds of research-extensive university respondents report that their campus offers special orientation sessions for honors students.

A recognized trend in orientation is the inclusion of more academic activities. (See Chapter Twenty-Three.) For all institutions, both two and four year, the academic activities most likely to be included in orientation are small-group sessions with faculty to discuss academic programs (approximately 65 percent).

The institutional type most likely to integrate various kinds of academic activities into orientation is the BC-LA campus. Slightly over 50 percent of these institutions report that orientation includes special reading groups designed to discuss designated books or articles student have read during the preceding summer, and approximately three of every four report that academic convocations are scheduled during the orientation period.

The practice of charging a separate fee for orientation is most common in four-year institutions, with one interesting exception. While over 60 percent of BC-LA, master's, and research institutions charge a separate orientation fee, only one-third of BC-GEN colleges levy such a charge. Only 10 percent of two-year institutions charge a separate orientation fee.

Virtually all institutions (95 percent) report some level of orientation evaluation by some combination of students, faculty, parents, staff, or others. One institution reported, "We conducted a mock orientation for administrators and staff for evaluation purposes."

These findings raise and leave unanswered many questions. There is no empirically validated "one best length" or "one best time" for orientation activities. Rather the timing, length, and composition of orientation are decisions best determined by each campus in consideration of its students and their needs. A somewhat surprising percentage of institutions requires that students participate in orientation, and yet questions still remain about whether such a requirement has teeth or how it is monitored. Although this research finds that most campuses conduct some form of evaluation, the data do not provide more detailed information about the evaluation methods or how findings are or are not used.

The First Year in the Classroom

In this chronological view of the data, we are at a fork in the road: for some first-year students, the next major activity may be involvement in Greek rush or adjusting to campus residence life. But for the majority of American first-year students who neither live in campus residence halls nor join Greek social organizations, it is time for class. The first-year curricular survey asked several questions related to classes and the curriculum, and responses represent some of the most complex and surprising findings of this research initiative. The bottom line is this: Who teaches first-year classes and the size of first-year classes depend on academic discipline, institutional size, and Carnegie classification. The frequent media allegations that all first-year classes are very large and taught by very inexperienced faculty or teaching assistants do not hold up in this particular study. Here is a snapshot of findings across common first-year disciplines:

- Across all institutional sizes and types, first-year English tends to be taught in section sizes of no more than twenty-five students (89 percent).
- Although part-time instructors or teaching assistants teach the majority of first-year English classes at research extensive universities (55 percent), at two-year institutions senior faculty reportedly teach the majority (58 percent) of first-year English sections.

- The majority (from 58 to 74 percent) of first-year math and fine arts courses also are taught by senior faculty at both two-year and baccalaureate institutions (both BA-LA and BA-GEN). In master's and research institutions, the instructor pool is more likely to comprise a mix of senior, junior, nontenured, and part-time faculty.
- At all institutions, the majority (about 60 percent) of first-year psychology, biology, and history classes are taught by senior faculty.
- Large first-year classes (more than one hundred students) are most common at research-extensive universities in the disciplines of psychology and biology.
- At all institutions, first-year seminars use the greatest variety of instructors including nonfaculty (17.3 percent).
- In spite of a body of research evidence attesting to the positive influence of upper-level students on the cognitive development of first-year students (Astin, 1993), the use of upper-level undergraduates in coteaching roles is very infrequent across all first-year classes. When "peer instructors" coteach a class, it is most likely to be the first-year seminar at a four-year college or university (24.5 percent).

Faculty Preparation, Interaction, and the Reward Structure

Related to the first-year classroom are the issues of relevant faculty development, faculty interaction with first-year students—especially out-of-class interaction—and the relationship of first-year teaching or advising to the institution's primary reward structure. Sixty-two percent of respondents overall indicated that within the past five years, their institution has offered a "faculty development initiative focused on teaching first-year students." Only 40 percent of two-year and 57 percent of four-year institutions reported that their institution has attempted to increase the level of out-of-class interaction between first-year students and faculty within the past five years.

Finally, the common myth that teaching or advising first-year students is often negatively correlated with the likelihood of tenure and promotion was not confirmed by this research. The picture is far more complex. The most frequent response was that these activities have no effect one way or the other on tenure and promotion decisions. Twenty-one percent of respondents reported a positive effect, 13 percent an effect that varies by department, and only 0.6 percent (one two-year and one four-year institution) a negative effect.

Developmental Education

The first-year curricular survey posed three questions related to developmental education: whether the institution offers courses that are categorized as developmental/remedial, what percentage of first-year students is enrolled in one or more of these courses, and whether the institution has evaluated success rates in regular introductory courses for students who complete a prerequisite developmental course.

What may be surprising to some readers is the finding that developmental education exists in every sector of American higher education. Not only are 98 percent of two-year campuses reportedly offering developmental course work, 64 percent of research-extensive and 48 percent of BA-LA colleges are doing so as well, albeit to smaller percentages of students. But in spite of the prevalence of developmental education in the four-year sector, it is disappointing that fewer than half of the four-year respondents (42 percent) report assessment to determine whether completion of developmental courses prepares students for the first-year curriculum. In contrast, 67 percent of two-year respondents report such evaluation. (For a more extensive discussion of developmental education, see Chapter Seventeen.)

Institutional Policies: Attendance and Midterm Grade Reporting

Although both attendance patterns and whether students receive midterm feedback on academic performance are issues that affect students beyond the first year, many would argue they have a disproportionate impact on first-year students. Both research and mountains of anecdotal evidence support the importance of class attendance, especially in the first year (Swing, 1998), and yet only 39 percent of institutions report an official attendance policy. Only about 4 percent have an attendance policy for first-year students that "differs in any way from the institution-wide policy."

Over 60 percent of all institutions collect and report midterm grades to first-year students, thereby giving them an important source of feedback on their academic performance. Some educators would argue that midterm feedback is too late: first-year students need some idea within the first few weeks of the semester about their performance, hopefully in time to withdraw from classes that are "hopeless." One interesting finding of this survey is that a few institutions (10 percent overall) report midterm grades to parents, obviously finding some way around federal privacy regulations.

Academic Advising and Major Selection

The first-year curricular survey investigated common structures of advising and found that every advising structure—from centralized advising units staffed by professional advisers to faculty-only advising—is represented within each Carnegie institutional type. Predictably, centralized advising systems are more common at research universities and two-year colleges; 91 percent of research-extensive campuses and 75 percent of two-year institutions indicated that at least some students are advised in centralized units by professional, nonfaculty advisers. In contrast, approximately 60 percent of baccalaureate institutions and

40 percent of master's institutions report that all advising is decentralized and performed by faculty. Although technology will surely continue to have an impact on the way advising is conducted in the future, this survey found that face-to-face adviser-advisee contact is currently mandated by about 75 percent of institutions, whether the adviser is a faculty member or advising professional. (For more information on first-year academic advising, see Chapter Nineteen.)

The first-year curricular survey also found that overall, few institutions (8 percent) require first-year students to declare a major at point of entry. In fact, 36 percent of BA-LA colleges do not permit entering first-year students to select an official major. First-year students at two-year institutions are most likely to be "strongly encouraged" but not required to select a major (45 percent), while at four-year campuses, students are most likely to be permitted to select a major but neither forced nor strongly encouraged to do so (54 percent).

Special Curricular Programs or Structures

The first-year curricular survey investigated the degree to which certain academic programs and curricular structures are used in the first year. These include first-year seminars, learning communities, classes taught in residence halls, service-learning, Supplemental Instruction, "early alert" systems, distance education, and on-line courses.

First-Year Seminars. First-year seminars are offered by 80 percent of all four-year and 62 percent of all two-year institutions. These findings are consistent with research conducted by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina in its 2000 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (<http://www.sc.edu/fye/research/surveys/survey00.htm>), and indicate that the first-year seminar is the most commonly implemented curricular intervention designed specifically for first-year students. The percentage difference between two- and four-year institutions is noteworthy and begs the question: What factors account for the lower percentage of first-year seminars in the two-year sector, which enrolls the highest percentage of at-risk students? (For a more extensive discussion of first-year seminars, see Chapter Sixteen.)

Learning Communities. Learning communities, defined as two or more linked courses that coenroll a single cohort of students, are now found at 37 percent of four-year and 23 percent of two-year institutions. But within the four-year sector, there are dramatic differences related to Carnegie classification. While 77 percent of research-extensive universities offer these structures, only 15 percent of BA-LA and 22 percent of BA-GEN do so. These findings could indicate that research universities are perhaps seeking ways to make the large environment seem smaller by creating defined, manageable academic structures, while small liberal arts institutions believe this to be an unnecessary expenditure of energy and resources. (For a more extensive discussion of learning communities, see Chapter Twenty-Two.)

First-Year Classes in Residence Halls. Only research-extensive universities report significant use of this structure that is designed to link academic and residential life. Forty-six percent of these institutions report offering one or more first-year classes in a campus residence hall. (For a more extensive discussion of living environments, see Chapter Twenty-Four.)

Service-Learning. Service-learning, described in depth in Chapter Twenty-One, links nonremunerative service with academic courses across the curriculum. Currently, 37 percent of all institutions offer one or more service-learning courses for first-year students, with specific percentages ranging from a high of 46 per-cent of research-intensive campuses to a low of 29 percent of two-year campuses.

Supplemental Instruction. Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a well-known structure for providing students a weekly supplemental class meeting, attached to high-risk courses, that is facilitated by an outstanding upper-level student. High-risk courses are those with a 30 percent or higher rate of Ds, Fs, or withdrawals. The curricular survey finds that currently 36 percent (39 percent four-year and 30 percent two-year) of colleges and universities offer SI, linked to one or more "killer" courses taken by first-year students. (For more detailed information about SI, see Chapter Eighteen.)

Early Alert Systems. Early alert systems come in many forms but have in common early identification of and intervention with students in first-year classes who are at risk for academic failure. The first-year curricular survey found that 66 percent of four-year and 56 percent of two-year campuses have some sort of early alert system in place within first-year courses.

Distance Education and On-Line First-Year Courses. The curricular survey found these course delivery methods to be far more common in the two-year sector than the four-year sector. Currently, 41 percent of two-year colleges, compared to only 9 percent of four-year institutions, offer first-year courses through distance education. Online courses are offered for first-year students by 50 per-cent of two-year colleges but only 15 percent of four-year institutions. Educators interested in alternative methods of course delivery will want to track this particular finding in future national surveys of the first year (For more information about the implications of technology on the first year, see Chapter Thirteen.)

First-Year Activities, Including Athletics

After first-year students settle into their classes, many begin identifying other out-of-class opportunities that will enrich their academic experience. The first-year cocurricular survey investigated the prevalence of out-of-class activities that are specifically designed for first-year students and the role of athletics in the first year.

Although new 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. First-year leadership programs are offered by 61 percent of reporting research-intensive universities. Student government opportunities are available for first-year students at 47 percent of research-intensive universities and approximately 42 percent of baccalaureate institutions. Approximately 57 percent of two-year colleges offer no out-of-class programs specifically designed for first-year students.

Involvement in athletics (defined as participating as a team member) is more likely at small, rather than large, campuses. Over one-third of baccalaureate campuses report that 25 to 49 percent of first-year students play an intercollegiate sport, while only 4 percent of research-extensive universities report the same level of athletic involvement. Research-extensive universities are more likely than other institutions to mandate academic support programs for inter-collegiate athletes (78 percent), a finding that is not surprising as a larger number of these institutions have NCAA Division I status and are thereby held to stringent NCAA regulations and reporting requirements.

Residence Life

For first-year residential students, the transition from life at home to life in the residence hall carries with it both anticipation and anxiety. The nature of room-mate relationships, the condition of the residential facility, and the overall atmosphere of the hall can have a significant impact, for better or worse, on the totality of the first-year experience. Although residence life can be a source of significant culture shock and initial dissatisfaction for first-year students, research finds that residential living is correlated with many positive outcomes of college (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). (For a detailed discussion of residence life issues, see Chapter Twenty-Four.)

Of the 291 institutional respondents to the first-year cocurricular survey, 192 (66 percent) indicated that they house first-year students on campus. In fact, first-year students are required to live on campus by four of every five residential BA-LA colleges and by three of every four residential BA-GEN colleges. About half of responding residential research universities and master's-level institutions also require first-year students to live on campus. Although two-year colleges are less likely to have residence halls, approximately 20 percent of the two-year respondents (twenty-three institutions) reported that they house some first-year students on campus. Residence halls or wings of residence halls restricted to first-year students are more likely to be found at BA-LA campuses (45 percent) than at other institutional types.

Residence life is linked to other academic programs and structures at 60 percent of residential institutions. The most frequently reported form of faculty involvement is faculty presentations in the residence halls (46 percent). About 24 percent offer residential learning communities for first-year students, 32 percent link residence life with first-year seminars, about 25 percent offer special housing for honors students, and about 33 percent offer tutoring or academic advising in residence halls.

Greek Life

Although Greek organizations involve a small percentage of the nation's first-year students, the impact of Greek life on an institution, for better or worse, is often disproportionate to the actual numbers or percentages of students involved. Many divisions of student affairs have a person or persons charged

with monitoring and policing the activities of these organizations, which are all too frequently the subject of troubling national or local media headlines. For students who elect and are selected to be members of Greek social organizations, that experience often overshadows all other social interactions and activities, especially during the first year when students are most impressionable and most anxious to be accepted by other college students.

Of the 291 respondents to the first-year cocurricular survey, 93 (32 percent)—all of them four-year colleges or universities—have Greek organizations that first-year students are permitted to join. But the actual percentages of first-year students who join Greek groups are low: approximately 60 percent of respondents indicated that no more than 10 percent of first-year students on their campus join Greek organizations.

The timing of rush, an issue subject to much debate, is most likely to be during the first term of college (43 percent of all respondents). But over one-third indicated that first-year students must wait until the second term of college to join a fraternity or sorority. About one-third of respondents indicated that hazing involving first-year Greek students occurred on their campus during the past two years. And finally, membership in Greek organizations is reportedly fluctuating. Responding institutions reported an overall increase in female membership but a decrease in male membership in Greek organizations during the past five years.

Assessment of First-Year Initiatives

An overriding interest of the Policy Center on the First Year of College is the issue of assessment. Therefore, both the curricular and cocurricular surveys included several questions aimed at investigating both frequency and types of program assessment. In summary, the majority of institutional respondents indicated that their college or university evaluates orientation (92 percent), residence life (87 percent), Greek life (64 percent), and advising (63 percent), but evaluation is often limited to measures of satisfaction rather than measures of impact. For example, 86 percent of responding institutions that house first-year students reported the assessment of "satisfaction" with the residence hall, but only 37 percent reported evaluating the impact of residence life on retention, 31 percent on academic performance, 18 percent on campus involvement, and 7 percent on social development. One exception to this pattern is that 68 percent of the four-year institutions with Greek organizations evaluate the impact of Greek membership on grade point averages, a measure that is mandated by many of these organizations at the national level. The impact of Greek affiliation on retention, however, was evaluated by only 30 percent of responding institutions. In spite of what seems to be a rather surface-level approach to assessment, 75 percent of respondents to both the first-year curricular and cocurricular surveys judge their institutions to be either "average" or "above average/superior" in their level of assessment as compared to other institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While this national survey was not designed to discriminate between effective and ineffective approaches to the first year, many of the questions were nevertheless developed based on principles derived from research on student success, as well as a set of common values grounded in experience and articulated for many years by John Gardner, other colleagues, and me. A secondary aim of this survey process was to encourage respondents, who were senior campus administrators, to focus on the first year, to consider additional approaches or ways of doing things, and to recognize those areas of the first year that are over-looked, resulting in all-too-frequent "don't know" responses.

Generally, findings from this national survey imply that many institutions are investing in a wide range of programs and structures believed to make a positive difference for first-year students. But the findings also indicate significant room for improvement in a number of specific areas. The following recommendations flow from and respond to survey findings:

- Create an institutional mechanism or structure for oversight of the first year, in both the curriculum and cocurriculum. College and university educators value coherence and seamlessness (Boyer, 1987), but results from the national surveys raised serious questions about the degree to which any meaningful level of first-year coordination exists on most college and university campuses. It is highly unlikely that the first year on any campus will be a coherent, seamless experience unless some person or persons are in charge. There are many ways for this responsibility to be accomplished, from the establishment of a single first-year office or designated individual to the creation of a permanent campuswide committee or task force. Over the past five years, the Policy Center on the First Year of College has worked with over one hundred campuses to design institutionwide first-year task forces to evaluate common practices and both recommend and act on change, whenever and wherever needed. The key is to find an appropriate organizational mechanism for focusing on the first year in order to facilitate cross-functional communication and create a coherent and meaningful first college year.

- Structure numerous opportunities for informal interaction between first-year students and faculty from the point of recruitment and admissions through the first year. This recommendation, reiterated by several chapter authors in this book, is based on the body of research linking out-of-class faculty-student inter-action to retention and student engagement (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). The survey finds, not surprisingly, that such interaction is easier to accomplish on small, residential campuses than on two-year or large four-year campuses. Admittedly, both large and nonresidential institutions will need to be more intentional and more creative about making this interaction a reality. But the gain is clearly worth the minimal effort involved in recruiting faculty to meet with, eat with, advise, and mentor students while simultaneously encouraging students to take advantage of those opportunities.

- Select first-year faculty carefully (including upper-level student coteachers), and provide faculty development opportunities for them. Decisions about who teaches first-year students are inherently complex and often driven by financial and workforce realities. And there is no hard evidence to indicate that senior faculty "do it better" or part-timers "do it worse." But whoever holds this important responsibility can benefit from focused faculty development activities. Upper-level students also are a powerful source of influence on new students (Astin, 1993) and therefore have a meaningful role to play in coteaching first-year courses across the curriculum. National survey results show that upper-level students are an untapped source of positive impact on the first-year academic experience.

- Understand the impact of class size on the retention and academic performance of first-year students. Although the national survey found that large classes are not as ubiquitous as the media would have us believe, they are a common component of the first year on research university campuses. We need more evidence to determine the impact of large classes on the academic performance and retention of first-year students. Research to date conducted on student learning and its relationship to class size is somewhat inconclusive, although according to McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, Smith, and Sharma (1990), the weight of the evidence favors small classes. But research does find that large classes are a major source of frustration and dissatisfaction for both faculty who teach them (especially graduate teaching assistants) and first-year students (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Wulff, Nyquist, & Abbott, 1987; Ratcliff, 1992; Light, 2001). Although there are always exceptions, many large classes are environments characterized by student boredom, poor attendance patterns, high levels of plagiarism, absence of writing (Stones, 1970), and almost exclusive use of multiple-choice tests (Scouller, 1988). We clearly need more evidence to determine whether the savings generated in instructional costs for large classes are perhaps offset by higher levels of student disengagement and dropout. A recent study conducted by researchers at Iowa State University (Hamrick, Schuh, & Shelley, 2002) does, in fact, provide evidence to support the argument that reducing instructional expenditures may backfire by decreasing institutional graduation rates over six years.

- Investigate the impact of developmental courses on student readiness for the regular curriculum. One of the most troubling findings of this national survey was the percentage of institutions that have no knowledge of whether developmental education actually prepares students to enter nonremedial courses. Campuses within every Carnegie category are teaching some percentage of first-year developmental students and courses, and it is critical that we understand whether, and to what degree, developmental course work is providing students the level playing field they need and deserve.

- Consider the impact of attendance policies (or lack of) on first-year students' patterns of classroom attendance. In brick-and-mortar institutions where classes convene at a fixed place and time, the evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, indicates that attendance matters, especially during the first

four weeks of the college experience (Swing, 1998; Friedman, Rodriguez, & McComb, 2001). But each of us can probably recall a class so poorly taught that attendance made little, if any, difference in actual learning. The issue of requiring attendance or punishing absentees for simply being absent represents a major philosophical debate in higher education. But establishing attendance as an institutional expectation, however that is accomplished, gives students the clear message that what happens in class is important. Then it is up to the institution and the student to deliver.

- Two-year institutions should invest more in the first year across the board and not forget the influence of families. It is not my intent to point the finger at two-year institutions for insufficient attention to the first year. This sector of American higher education is bursting at the seams, addressing the needs of students at all levels of academic ability and personal circumstance. But with only a few exceptions, the national survey found that two-year institutions are less likely to report that they offer the kinds of programs and strategies found to correlate with retention and academic success. Two-year campuses are advised to develop a set of intentional intervention strategies to meet the needs not only of developmental students, but also of all students who choose to begin higher education in this sector. These strategies should include some means of involving families (broadly defined) in an orientation to higher education and an introduction to the particular campus in which the student is enrolled.

- Invest in assessment: know what works on your campus. One of the toughest and occasionally most humbling activities in which any of us can engage is evaluating the impact of the programs that we cherish. But if we believe in student learning and overall development as the goals for higher education, our initiatives should contribute to those goals. This national survey found that although assessment of first-year programs (orientation, residence life, academic advising, Greek life) is widely practiced, it tends only to scratch the surface—either taking the form of satisfaction surveys or measuring out-comes that are externally mandated by a particular regulatory body. It is far less common for institutions to report evaluating the impact of various components of the first year on student learning, behaviors, and attitudes.

CONCLUSION: THE ESSENTIAL FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

A central thesis underlying this research is that the first-year experience is the sum of many parts; it is more than a single seminar course, orientation program, or learning community. For some students, it represents total immersion—classes, residence life, student activities, Greek affiliation—and for others, it involves a juggling act between home, work, and a handful of first-year classes. For the impact of the first year to be clearly understood, it is important to view and evaluate it as a whole, comprising many interacting components that may differ according to institutional type and mission, students, and the external environment.

Although there are research-based objectives that can be used to inform the way we structure and deliver the first year (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Bare-foot, 2000; see Chapter Two), much about day-to-day policies and practices and their impact on first-year students is essentially untested. Comparing one institution's approach to another is an important first step. But it is only a first step. As higher education continues to be transformed by market pressures, changing levels of external financial support, and the impact of technology, it is more important than ever before to understand and deliver the essential first-year experience for students. This experience would not be a specific template or a listing of quick fixes but a set of broad constructs that could be used as a yard-stick against which to measure current or intended practices. This understanding of what is essential will emerge only as a result of the willingness to engage in continuing evaluation of student outcomes as a function of how colleges and universities organize and deliver the first year and to share those findings broadly within the higher education community.