

CHICAGO STATE Inside

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The Freshman-Year Experience: Keystone of Distinctiveness

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A keystone is a stone in an archway that holds all others in place. Depending on the size and mass of the arch, a great deal of preparation is essential before the keystone is added. After the cornerstones are set in place, and building blocks piled up to support the weight of the arch, a wooden structure is erected in the center to support the upward curving stones, until they meet. Once the two sides of the archway are completed, the keystone is slipped into place, the structure is locked into a solid formation, and the scaffolding is removed. What is built can endure for centuries. We believe the University has approached the matter of student learning and student success intentionally and carefully, like the building of an arch. Each expression of this effort contributes to a strong and distinctive learning structure. The Freshman-Year Experience initiative reflects the integration of many efforts.

The cornerstones upon which the Freshman-Year Experience rests are (1) Strategic Priority #1 of the Strategic Plan for the Future, “believing in the primacy of student learning, we will continue to develop high-quality learning environments both in and outside of the classroom,” and (2) the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. Working to implement our first strategic priority has animated the campus for years, because it is ultimately what the University is all about—teaching and learning and the recognition that it occurs in many dimensions of students’ lives. Our second cornerstone grew directly out of efforts by a number of groups to define what constituted good teaching. We embraced the Seven Principles because these are proven practices that allowed students to succeed.

The Seven Principles are so important to the campus that they now inform our General Education Program; they are embedded in our retention, tenure, and promotion processes; and they guide the continued development and elaboration of co-curricular programs and academic programs. They will shape the development of our campus Master Planning efforts as we design a green campus and create a physical environment that can help us realize these principles, e.g., enhancing student-faculty interaction, creating additional spaces for students to come together and learn, and using the physical spaces and features of the campus to reinforce messages about the environment and the history of the region.

Assessment of our programs and implementation efforts is driven by our primary goal, which is to assure student success. A primary question that we have posed is whether or not we are in fact practicing the Seven Principles and whether or not it makes a difference to our students. One of our first efforts along these lines was to poll a random sample of all of our freshmen and seniors, as part of the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE questions were designed to find out whether or not a campus was engaged in the kind of practices that would enhance student learning. The study also allowed us to compare ourselves to similar campuses, and to measure our accomplishments against those of others. Some of the results (e.g., compared to other campuses our students were not getting off to a good start and were not actively involved in their learning) were a bit surprising, because we all thought that we were doing what was necessary to help students succeed. We administered the same questionnaire after two years and found that the results of the second poll paralleled the first. This suggested that we needed to examine more closely the experiences of our first-year students and campus practices.

We became involved in the national “Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year” project in 2003. A campus-wide Task Force was formed to assure that all vice-presidential units were focused on student learning inside and outside of the classroom, and to bring coherence to the planning efforts of the three vice-presidential units to assure we were working as one university to achieve distinction. National leaders in the first-year experience and experts in program development and assessment crafted nine basic performance indicators to be answered by all institutions involved in the project. The first step was for us to create an inventory of everything we were doing across campus that related to our first-year students. This is a

substantial and informative list. Then, using a list of all practices and programs, we set out to answer a set of questions designed to determine how well we were doing and where we needed to seek improvement. The nine performance indicators, which can link classroom practices to such key efforts and goals as diversity and civic engagement, compel foundation institutions to

- Approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy of the first year that informs relevant campus policies.
- Create organizational structures that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.
- Facilitate appropriate recruitment, admissions, and student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional.
- Offer faculty development workshops that focus on teaching first-year students.
- Serve all first-year students according to their diverse learning needs.
- Provide first-year courses and out-of-classroom experiences that include pedagogies of engagement.
- Ensure that students experience diverse worldviews.
- Encourage academic rigor.
- Assess and improve the first-year experience and contribute to the national knowledge base on the first year.

Examining how well we accomplish these activities generates an entire set of questions, which ultimately links back to program improvement. Some things we already know. We know, for instance, that students who are in course-linked courses report higher satisfaction with their first-year experience and are more likely to be retained. We know that if students are in a course link that includes a University Life Course, they are even more likely to have a successful first year. We know that those programs that practice the Seven Principles are cited by the students as reasons for their success and satisfaction. We know that civic engagement and service learning contribute to student learning and student success.

Putting all of the pieces together is not a simple process. We have been constructing and redesigning the complicated educational arch of the University for decades, and we will continue to do so, using knowledge, data, and answers to questions to craft a distinctive learning community. But the keystone to all of our efforts is the Freshman-Year Experience Project, because it allows us to evaluate systematically what at times have seemed to be separate activities: the recruitment and retention of a diverse student body, the creation of programs designed to attract and support high-achieving students, the expansion of service-learning opportunities, the development of co-curricular programming in housing, and the development of student athletic and leadership programs. These are all building blocks, all learning focused, and their success depends on embracing the Seven Principles.

One of the first actions of the Task Force on the Freshman-Year Experience was to develop a philosophy of the First-Year Experience. The entire campus has received a copy of that document, which underscores the fact that we can intentionally help first-year students succeed. We subscribe to a broad definition of success to include higher levels of academic, intellectual, cultural, social, and civic engagement and personal development. To promote student success, we will purposefully structure, restructure, and nurture learning environments that facilitate the broad scope of student engagement. We invite you to learn more about this effort and to become involved with your colleagues in expanding and sustaining this important effort.