

Appalachian State University

Rationale for institution's approach to the first year

The rationale for Appalachian's approach is to enhance the intellectual and personal development of students. Since its founding in 1899, Appalachian has focused on student success. As it has developed into a premier public, four-year, comprehensive university, senior administrators have committed personnel and financial resources to the development and institutionalization of innovative freshman programs and policies that insure academic excellence and meet the social developmental needs of students.

Description of program(s), policies, strategies, etc.

Appalachian's approach to the first year is intentional, comprehensive and seamless. Beginning with the admissions process, students are introduced to expectations, experiences, and opportunities through recruiting materials that project a common message. The Admissions Office coordinates communication, connecting students with services such as Residence Life, Financial Aid and the Registrar's Office as well as appropriate academic programs. From the start, admissions officers and student ambassadors develop a personal connection with prospective students. Upon the student's decision to attend Appalachian, a sequence of orientation events, sponsored by Academic Affairs and Student Development, provide the students and their parents with an introduction to critical individuals and policies. All students must attend an academically focused orientation program during the summer prior to enrollment. They receive their first college assignment; they are to read a specially chosen book before they return in the fall. Parent Orientation, held concurrently in the summer, provides parents with an opportunity to learn about the academic and social expectations for their children. Upon their return in the fall, students participate in a second orientation introducing them to clubs, organizations, and leadership opportunities. During this program, small groups of students discuss the summer reading assignment with a faculty member. These orientation experiences serve as an example of how faculty, student development professionals and academic administrators assist first year students in making a successful transition to their new environment.

Further, the institution is committed to creating a safe residential environment that promotes academic success and personal growth within a diverse community. All freshmen are required to live on campus, and special theme housing (Wellness, Study, International Student) is available. A wide range of learning community options allow first year students to take classes together. The Watauga College Freshman Program—an interdisciplinary, residentially based program—and Student Support Services—a federally funded effort to support low income and first generation college students—have existed for over 30 years on the Appalachian campus. Freshman Seminar—a three-hour, graded graduation credit course focusing on issues of academic and personal transition—has existed in its current form since 1987; it serves over 50% of the freshman class. These effective programs provide the foundation for newer initiatives such as Freshman Learning Communities, a program that co-enrolls students in Freshman Seminar and a core curriculum course. In Fall 2002, over 1,700 freshmen (80%) will be involved in an intentionally connective, academic experience that links students to faculty, advisors, student development specialists, learning support and residence life personnel.

Attention to academic success is paramount during the first year. All freshmen are assigned an academic advisor (based on their learning community) to assist them with negotiating the academic environment. All freshmen have the opportunity to receive academic assistance through the tutoring program, Supplemental Instruction, and learning skills program. At-risk students (disadvantaged, disabled, and/or athletes) are involved in special services geared to their individual academic needs. Early warning processes for all first year students are in place to assure that academic progress is monitored, and problems are identified and dealt with in a timely manner. Finally, developing social and leadership skills in students is also important at Appalachian. Over 200 co-curricular activities offer students an opportunity to be involved in areas that complement their academic experience. To affirm the University's commitment to freshmen and their transition to the college community, freshman fraternity/sorority rush is delayed until the spring semester of the freshman year.

Evidence of effectiveness

Integrated into all programs and services for freshmen is an assessment model designed to assist educators in proving the value of attending to freshmen and improving the programs provided for them. Student satisfaction surveys, locally developed program surveys, enrollment, retention and performance data, UNC Office of the President surveys, and nationally-developed assessment tools such as CIRP, CSEQ, CSXQ, NSSE, NCTLA, FYI Benchmarking Survey, and Noel-Levitz CSI guide Academic Affairs and Student Development administrators in monitoring success and modifying programs and policies. Indeed, assessment is so important to the decision-making process it is part of the academic calendar, and student participation is connected to the ability to register early for classes.

Examples of evidence of success and institutionalization of effort include:

1. The freshmen to sophomore retention rate for the 2000 freshmen class is 83.2%, third highest in the UNC system. Significant rates within this finding include: Freshman Learning Communities 87.8%; Freshman Seminar course alone 86.4%; Watauga College Freshman Program 85.3%.
2. Five and six year graduation rates for Freshman Seminar students typically exceed other cohorts' graduation rates (5 year rate by 2-4% points; 6 year rate by 1-3% points).
3. 2001 NSSE results found Appalachian's first year students' responses exceeded other Master's comparisons by statistically significant differences in the following areas: quality of advising, and the institutional emphases of a) providing the support needed to succeed academically, and b) encouraging contact among students from different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds.
4. The Provost established the Learning Communities Council to improve communication among Academic Affairs and Student Development administrators responsible for freshman initiatives.

5. Regularly scheduled, paid training opportunities for faculty, academic affairs and student development administrators who teach in Freshman Seminar and Freshman Learning Communities.

Appalachian is recognized as an exemplary institution for the attention it gives to freshmen. These accolades are the result of intentionally integrating new ideas into a rich legacy of placing first year students at the center of its mission.