

## Northern Kentucky University

**Rationale for Institution's Approach to the First- Year:** Our rationale is based on two key factors: up-to-date information about our freshmen, and the "Core Values" of the institution as defined in our new strategic plan. This plan, developed in 1998 under the leadership of our then new President James Votruba, reaffirms the institution's commitment to retention ("Access with the Opportunity to Succeed") and defines us as a "Learner-Centered" institution ("placing the learner at the center of all that we do"). Data from an NCHEMS study, from first- to second- year retention studies, and from several national surveys (the NSSE, and the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory, and the CIRP) have, in the last 4 years, provided us with a clear picture of our freshman learners. *The data tells us that NKU freshmen look significantly different from students at similar (four-year, public/low selectivity) institutions: they are younger, they work more and study less, they have higher high school GPA's and are less realistic about their academic abilities, they have lower expectations of college than students at similar institutions, and, a significantly lower percentage expect to get involved on campus, make friends and get to know faculty. This sobering snapshot of our new students, together with our mandate from the strategic plan, have shaped our approach to the first year: we must raise expectations, provide academic support, and connect students to campus activities, and to faculty and other students.*

Our strategy has been intentional and comprehensive. Working in the curriculum and in the co-curriculum with both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, and reaching diverse students (developmental, "modal," and Honors), NKU has developed--under the leadership of a 4-year old First- Year Programs office--a "web" of connected and mutually supportive programs for new students. These include: Freshman Specialists, University 101 , Honors 101 , Learning Communities, Running Start, Mid- Term Grades for Freshmen, Supplemental Instruction, The Book Connection, and "FRESHFUSION."

### Description of Selected Programs and Evidence

**Freshman Specialists:** Three years ago, the university committed \$200,000 to fund five renewable advisor/lecturer positions in First- Year Programs. The Freshman Specialists report to First- Year Programs as well as to an academic department (where they advise freshmen majors) and teach first-year/general education courses in the Learning Communities. These unique positions have strengthened freshmen advising and teaching in academic departments which serve large numbers of freshmen. They have challenged the University to create more full-time positions for freshman instructors, and have been a model for creating Freshman Advisor/Lecturers in other departments.

**Improved, Expanded University 101 Program:** NKU has a 15-year-old University 101 (UNV 101) program which now enrolls 1200 (of 2000) entering students in 56 sections. This semester- long, graded, 3-credit hour elective course is taught by a combination of faculty, student affairs staff and administrators (including the President and two Vice-Presidents). Recent institutional data demonstrates that UNV 101 students are retained at the university at a 5% higher rate than students who choose no freshman program. UNV 101 has utilized nationally normed surveys (the CIRP , the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory, and the new First Year Initiative Survey) to guide and assess the program. The most dramatic and successful changes in the program in the past 4 years have been to develop focused sections, to include 101 in Learning

Communities, and to expand the co-curricular reach of the program. One of the many results has been that last Fall 1000 new students attended FRESHFUSION, our welcome event for new students.

**Increased Number of Freshmen in the Honors Program and New Honors 101:** In Fall 2001, the Honors Program, recognizing that honors students also needed more connection to the university, developed a new required freshman Honors course which combines aspects of UNV 101 with an introduction to the Honors Program.

**Large and Diverse Learning Community Program:** In the Fall of '97, NKU launched the first Learning Community Program with 10 course clusters; in Fall 2002 we will offer 43 clusters and pairs to almost 1000 students (approximately 50% of the incoming first-year students). The LC Program typically links popular general studies courses that most students take in their first year as well as UNV 101. A number of Learning Communities develop particular themes ("Exploring the Arts," "The Underground Railroad") and some focus on the needs of particular sub-populations of freshmen (African-American, Latino, and Evening/Adult, & Honors). "RunningStart," a Learning Community for students who need two or more developmental courses, builds in academic assistance to improve the rate of success for freshmen in developmental courses. Institutional research on the effectiveness of Learning Communities indicates that students enrolled in LCs and UNV 101 are retained at 69.3% (versus 60.6% for no first-year programming). *Additionally, LC students have higher GPA's (despite having a lower average composite A C1) and are statistically more satisfied with the University's services, the campus climate, and their relationships with peers and faculty.* The rate of retention for African American students enrolled in the Learning Community (including UNV 101) is 84.2% (versus 51.4% for no first-year programming).

**Mid-Term Grades for Freshmen:** This program was launched in Fall 2000 with the goal of improving freshman students' awareness of their academic performance. Student participation in the program has increased from an initial 61% to 73% in Fall 2001 and the number of freshman students earning a 0.0 semester GP A dropped by 55% (from 153 to 85). Students earning a D or F grade receive a warning letter. This program is a model for interdepartmental cooperation and involves the Registrar's Office, Information Technology, Enrollment Management, and First-Year Programs.

**The Book Connection:** NKU's summer reading program creates a shared reading experience for new students. This co-curricular program (entering its 3rd year) draws support from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and the University Development Office (which secured a corporate donor who buys the books and provides the writer's honorarium). A May faculty forum brings together 60 freshman instructors from across disciplines to generate ways to use the book in their classes. Freshman attendance at the writer's lecture in 2001 was 1200—the largest audience ever for a freshman event.

## Summary

Several years of data collection and analysis have conclusively shown us that this "web" of first-year programs and initiatives is positively impacting the university's freshman students, increasing retention and building a more "freshman friendly" campus.

