

University of South Carolina, Columbia

The University of South Carolina has long been recognized as an institution committed to the success of first-year students. As a result, first, of the vision and dedication of institutional leaders during the 1970s and, second, the most recent renewed commitment to undergraduate education from the central administration, the University of South Carolina has created an institutional culture that fosters cross-campus partnerships to create and administer curricular and co-curricular programs that effectively enhance the transition experience for the entering class each year.

With a multi-pronged campus-wide assessment approach that includes the CIRP, the YFCY, the CSEQ and the NSSE as broad foundations, first-year students at the University of South Carolina have benefited from the support of countless faculty, staff, graduate students, and their fellow undergraduate students through collaborative programs designed to improve the first college year. A new assessment study in which telephone interviews are conducted with students who do not return as sophomores is in the early stages of implementation and holds promise for qualitative longitudinal data. The office of Institutional Planning and Assessment hosts an outstanding interactive web site (<http://kudzu.ipr.sc.edu/>) providing open access to the institution's assessment and research data warehouse.

Three programs with broad impact serve as a basis for reaching the vast majority of first-year students and are complemented by numerous other traditional and innovative programs, some of which are targeted for specific populations. All of these programs have contributed to a significant enhancement of the first-year and undergraduate culture in recent years.

University Housing prides itself on offering creative services and programs while providing quality facilities for 88% of the first-year students at Carolina. Freshman Living and Learning Centers exist in residence halls for the academic and personal needs of first-year students. Each Center has front-loaded support services specifically targeted to help students succeed in their first year. These include a staffing ratio of a Resident Advisor for every twenty students (national norms are 1:40), an Academic Center for Excellence offering tutoring services and computer labs, in-house classrooms, and full-time professional staff responsible for the overall freshman center community. Residents performing poorly academically after the first semester meet with the live-in staff to address academic concerns and to better connect with academic resources. For those students excelling academically, their efforts are recognized at an annual First Academic Excellence Reception. To assess overall program effectiveness, all first-year residents complete an exit survey at the end of the academic year. The results are used to redefine the program each year and to make improvements.

Recognizing the importance of continuous improvement, multiple measures beyond the Student Success Initiative are now in effect. The Resident Perception Study annually measures students' perceptions of their living environment. Results are compared to those from another assessment tool, the American College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I) Educational Benchmarking Initiative (EBI) Resident Satisfaction Survey, which analyzes students' level of satisfaction with both the facilities and services provided, allowing the department to compare services with those of five other comparable institutions. Finally, in a cooperative effort between University Housing and the Division of Student and Alumni Services, students complete a "Computing Survey" that assesses their computing and technology needs.

The University 101 first-year seminar serves approximately 80% of the first-year class each year. A national model, University 101 has been replicated at countless institutions in this country and abroad. Course content and process are designed to introduce students to the culture of higher education; to expose students to the University of South Carolina's traditions, services, facilities, and resources; to provide a support group of peers with a faculty/staff

mentor; and to introduce students to significant academic content that will contribute to their likelihood of success. The course continually evolves to meet the changing needs and characteristics of first-year students, the institution, and society. Assessment of the program takes a dynamic approach, changing as needed to continually enhance the course. For many years, an ongoing assessment demonstrated that the course process achieved increased student persistence, involvement, and academic achievement. In more recent years, in addition to the annual student course evaluations, assessment efforts have focused on effectiveness of specific course content areas such as sexual responsibility, alcohol use and abuse, relationship violence, and literature used to illustrate course content. Other important parts of the course are also assessed regularly such as the faculty development workshops and the peer leader/graduate leader experience. New assessment efforts involve the participation in two pilot studies: the benchmarking study of first-year seminars created by partnership between the Policy Center on the First Year of College and Educational Benchmarking, Inc., and the Your First College Year Survey created by a partnership of the Policy Center on the First Year of College and UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. These many assessment measures allow the course administrators to provide important feedback to the instructional staff and to continually improve the course.

For well over twenty-five years the English Department has made a concerted effort to ensure that its composition program offers first-year students meaningful and effective instruction. The program is continually assessed. Instructors are provided the training, resources, and encouragement needed to teach courses that both improve student writing skills and intellectually challenge students. All new GTAs are required to take a two-course, six-hour in-service training sequence during their first year of instruction in which teaching strategies are introduced, instruction is observed, and their paper marking is evaluated. In addition to program-based assessments, students in First-Year English courses complete written evaluations of each instructor for each course. The evaluations are reviewed by program directors. Furthermore, a student representative from each section taught by a new GTA is invited to a forum in which they discuss the course, the course materials, etc. This focus group approach has proven to be the primary vehicle for gathering student perceptions about the course. The First-Year Program is supported by the whole department. Professors, professional staff, and graduate students contribute directly by performing evaluations and offering advice on curricular and organizational matters. Furthermore, the Provost's Office has provided additional support for the First-Year Program by funding the Common Reading Experience, an initiative that brings in a well-known writer or scholar to speak about a work all students have studied.

Numerous innovative programs are now in existence that involve and positively affect special sub-populations of first-year students at the University of South Carolina. Each has its own internal assessment measures. New Student Orientation is offered to all students during the summer to facilitate course registration and an introduction to student life on campus. A faculty-staff moving crew assists students as they move into the residence halls, providing a warm welcome to the campus before classes begin. The following afternoon, parents and new students attend a New Student Convocation and are received into the University by faculty and University officers in full academic regalia. The First-Year Summer Reading Program creates a common academic activity for new students early in their first week on campus. First Night Carolina is an official welcome to student life at Carolina designed to help students connect to campus, and meet other newcomers.

The First-Year Scholars Program provides opportunities and activities that build community and institutional commitment among the recipients of prestigious undergraduate scholarships. The Preston Residential College provides an opportunity for first-year students to live with returning undergraduates and with faculty and graduate resident tutors in a communal academic setting. In addition to the residentially-based academic support offered to all first-year students, University Housing has living and learning communities for first-year engineering students, pre-med students, honors students and Teaching Fellows. The Transition Year Program provides a structured academic program for first-year students who are provisionally admitted. The Minority Assistance Peer Program pairs first-year minority students with successful junior and senior level minority students for mentoring

during the first-year transition stage. With support from the central administration, several large academic departments have set up special academic advising programs targeted at first-year students, and a number of other colleges have special advisement centers for first-year students. Academic advisers from across campus meet monthly to assess advising processes and to share ideas for improving campus advising. The Emerging Leaders Program is a nine-week program offered in the fall where first-year students learn how to become involved on campus and develop their personal leadership skills. The Freshman Council provides its members early involvement in campus life with an emphasis on leadership training in Student Government.

The University of South Carolina's commitment to first-year student success through curricular innovation and co-curricular programs that enhance student involvement would not be possible without the encouragement and unusually strong financial and intangible support from central administration. The culture of cross-department collaboration required for many of these important programs benefits both students and faculty/staff and, indeed, makes the University of South Carolina a better institution than it would be without the sharp focus on first-year students.