

# **First Year Experience Task Force Report May, 2003**

## **Goals of the First Year Experience**

- Integrate students into the life of the campus so that they understand their role in the college community and are aware of the human and institutional resources available to help them be successful in all aspects of their college career.
- Introduce students to academic life including academic expectations, managing the student-professor relationship and working with an advisor.
- Introduce students to the intellectual life of the campus including their responsibility for their own education, thinking and working like a college student and taking advantage of opportunities that the campus presents.
- Introduce students to the value of liberal learning through a diverse and exciting curriculum. Make students aware of an array of college majors and the career possibilities within each.

To achieve these goals students must feel a sense of welcome and belonging to the campus community. They must know what resources are available to them and who will assist in their integration into the community. To accomplish this, the First Year Experience begins prior to the student's arrival on campus and continues throughout their first year, with primary focus during the summer and early in the academic year when students are most vulnerable to attrition.

## ***Program Areas***

Program areas are outlined below based on the timeline by which students will access various aspects of the program:

### Pre-College Activities

- June Orientation program that brings the students and parents to campus just as high school ends. The program focus is on academic orientation course advising, and transitioning from home to college. This program immediately connects students and families with the campus and provides resources during a time when the student is apt to change their mind and want to stay at home. Providing information about separation from home and family and re-assuring parents and students that they made the correct choice can strengthen the family's ties with the college.
- Students will be provided with contact information on key resource people during the summer (advising team members, Community Advisor, Ambassador or other Peer Advisor). These people would be available for student contact by e-mail and/or phone and provide a personal contact for students. The faculty and staff who serve as contacts can provide information or direct the student to appropriate offices.

- Contact information about students' roommates will be included in the residence assignments materials once residence hall assignments are made. This information facilitates the roommates getting to know something about one another prior to coming to the campus and eases the transition of living with a stranger.
- Develop an FYE Web site with academic and non-academic information both factual and advice for both incoming students and their parents. This will provide easy access to answering typical questions that students and parents have and another method by which they can access information. It can also include transition information to support parents and links to articles and other sites with general information about attending college.
- Moderated discussion list-serve/chatroom for first year students that will provide them with the opportunity to make friends over the internet, stay connected with students they met during June Orientation, and perhaps interact with the people with whom they will live. It will also support the off-campus students by giving them a place to meet resident students and other commuters prior to coming to campus.
- Students will receive information about the Summer Reading program during June Orientation. Currently the reading is related to the annual theme established by the Committee for Cultural and Intellectual Community (CCIC). Once the First Year Seminars are fully implemented it should be re-considered whether a common reading is important, or if the reading should relate to the students' seminar and discussed with the seminar faculty.
- The Welcome Week program will continue to focus on adjusting to college, social issues such as drugs, alcohol and sexuality that student address during their college careers, establishing a positive social experience and initiation into the college's values including appreciation of diversity and the ethic of service. The program will continue to offer a parents' session to provide re-assurance to parents and to help them separate from their student.

#### Academic Activities

- All students will participate in a First Year Seminar on a wide range of topics developed through the research interests of the faculty. Students will register for their seminar based on their personal interests and be placed as space is available. Seminars will not be counted as part of the students' major but rather as part of the general education requirement.
- Each student will participate in a First Year Seminar taught by full time faculty. Ideally the students in a particular seminar will live on the same residence hall floor and participate in out of class activities related to their seminar. Since typically three to four percent of our first year students live at home, these students will be incorporated into the seminars and included in seminar-related floor activities as a means of more closely engaging them with the larger student community.

- Seminar faculty will serve as part of the student's advisement team in first year. Their role is to introduce the student to the value of a liberal education, support them in taking on the academic rigors of the college, serve as a connecting point for those students who are unsure of what they want to study and be alert to the personal and academic issues that can de-rail a student's education. (See Advisement Task Force report for details of Advisement Teams)
- Because college is a major adjustment academically, personally and socially timely and consistent feedback about one's progress is essential for student success. To ensure that students receive academic feedback we recommend a mid-semester grade report be provided to students through TESS. A system for providing mid-term advisory grading is available through the current student records and reporting process. Faculty would post the progress the student is making either as a letter grade or whether the student is passing or failing. The student and members of their advising team (other than the peer advisors) would have access to this information and be alerted to any potential problems in time to do something about them.
- The advising team model will also allow for early alert to identify students who may be struggling emotionally or socially. Student Life staff – particularly Residence Life student and professional staff would be essential to this review.
- As part of the Advising Team, each school/department should develop a cadre of Academic Peer Mentors to assist students in adjusting to college courses, and provide support for course and major selection. A number of these students, distributed across schools can be placed in the Residence Halls to replace current Peer Advisors from other program areas, and provide on-site support and academic support programming for first year students.

#### Out of Class Activities

- If all students will be taking the FY seminar in the fall, students will be placed on their residence hall floor by their Seminar section. As currently configured students from three sections will fit on a residence hall floor. The Community Advisors (CA) on those floors will be introduced to the seminar topic and work with the faculty to provide programming in line with the topic. The CA will be a direct link to the faculty for emotional and social concerns of students.
- Maintain level of residence hall student staffing – one Community Advisor per approximately 25 students and one Peer Advisor per every 50 students.
- In the event that the formal program of course-related Service Learning is no longer an expectation, all CA's will implement service activities with the goal of including all students in a structured, reflective service project in their first year. Ideally the service project will be related to First Year Seminar topic and involve the faculty in planning and implementation.

- Residence Hall programming will continue to address the important social issues that students deal with as they begin their college careers. CA's will also focus attention on developing community on the floors. These programs will be presented based on what is known about first year student development and current campus issues.

Program focus areas include:

- Drugs and alcohol, sexual assault, diversity, community building
- Time management, engagement in campus activities
- Related to seminar topic and involving faculty

### ***Leadership***

Leadership for the program will be provided through a collaborative effort across the college. It is essential that the leadership team be composed of individuals empowered to make decisions by virtue of their roles in the college, and those who have primary responsibilities for the success of the program. We recommend the establishment of a First Year Experience Council composed of the following individuals

- Provost or designee (Vice Provost or Dean)
- Dean of Student Life or designee (Assistant Dean)
- Dean of Academic Services
- Director of Residence Life
- Director of Liberal Learning

This team would be responsible to develop and review policies and procedures related to the FYE, ensure that all elements of the program are working together toward the program goals, and conduct periodic assessment of the program elements.

### ***Structural Recommendations***

- Students should not declare majors at time of application or admission; rather they would indicate a school or area of interest in which they could pursue courses to determine interest and begin classes related to their future major. Those students who do not have a specific area of interest can remain open option.

The College is committed to providing a liberal education to all of our students. This means that students should be exposed to a wide variety of courses and subject matter that will both inform their ultimate determination of a major and provide them with an educational foundation upon which to build their college experience. Forty-eight percent of our students currently change their major at least once, suggesting that selecting a major upon enrollment does not tie students to that major for the term of their education. Further, it has been reported through Assistant Deans who advise open option students that more students are coming in truly undecided, therefore this structure provides for academic exploration without the pressure to declare a major pre-maturely.

This proposes that at time of application students could declare an area of interest and would be able to take major courses in their first year but departments would not admit them until the end of their first year at the earliest. This will allow students to explore a field of interest by taking the first year courses in the major (which they

now take as designated majors) and allow faculty to determine whether or not the student will be successful in their chosen field prior to admitting them to a major. Students would have to be properly advised and guaranteed admittance to a course in their field of interest in one of the two first year semesters. As students are exploring majors the courses they take could be looked upon to fulfill general education requirements thus facilitating a timely graduation despite being without a major for the first year.

Art and Music majors are required to demonstrate proficiency and aptitude in the field through an Art portfolio or Music audition. Students wishing to declare an interest in these areas would have to demonstrate proficiency and aptitude. Students who do not declare an interest initially can apply to the major at the end of their first year and be accepted at the discretion of the faculty based on their abilities and aptitude. Faculty members would then advise such a student as to a likely graduation date.

Departments and/or Schools may choose to continue offering an 099-like course to help first year students adjust to TCNJ and to obtain the important information about School/Departmental/field issues. Students who had declared an interest in this field could be required to attend and participate and as a result be given first consideration for acceptance into the major.

- A pilot program will be set up to house students according to their FY Seminar with approximately three classes sharing one residence hall floor, the number of seminars involved in the pilot will depend on the level of faculty interest. Seminar faculty will provide mentoring for students and complement the advising currently provided by departmental advisors. They will engage in programming with the CA and floor in areas related to the seminar topic.
- Advising space should be set up in residence hall – if possible now, or after building renovation.