

Eagles Taking Flight: Designing a First Year Experience Program at FGCU  
A Quality Enhancement Plan Proposal

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## **Introduction**

The most recent data reported to the FGCU Board of Trustees identified the first to second year retention rate of First Time in College (FTIC) students as 74.9%. A closer examination of the most recent demographic data of full-time FTIC students who left FGCU (2008-09) indicates that there are specific populations of FTIC students that are at a higher risk of leaving FGCU. We lost nearly 30% of our First Generation FTIC students (16% of all leavers), 33% of the FTIC students who left had a HS GPA below 3.0, and 28% of the FTIC students who left FGCU were on Academic Notice at the time of departure (48% of the total number of FTIC students on Academic Notice).

Because these students are at such a high risk for leaving FGCU, we feel it is essential to develop and/or enhance a set of support services that will provide a structured source of academic assistance and mentoring throughout the first year of college. In addition, we would like to see the university develop a set of programs for all FTIC students to participate in during their first year of college that gives their experience meaning and helps them feel a greater sense of connection to the university. According to Tinto (2006), involvement or “engagement” matters significantly to retention and “it matters most during the critical first year of college,” (p.4).

## ***A Model for a First Year Experience for At-Risk Students***

The mission of FGCU supports access to higher education for individuals in Southwest Florida who might otherwise not be able to attend other institutions in the state, so the university will continue to admit FTIC students with academic and personal profiles that put them at greater risk for leaving the university. As noted above, we are using institutional data to initially define “at risk” to include:

- First Generation and/or low income students eligible for participation in programs offered by Student Support Services within the Office of Outreach Programs;
- Students with remedial SAT/ACT test scores in English, Reading or Mathematics;
- Students with a high school GPA below 3.0.

We envision this population of students forming a cohort that would progress through a three stage program during their first year of college:

- Stage One – Students in this cohort would be admitted for the Summer B term to complete the *Step Ahead* program. Over the past 3 years, nearly 90% of the participants completed the program successfully, which included meeting their remediation in mathematics, so expanding the current program to involve students needing to meet remediation in English and/or Reading would be ideal.

Not all of the students who are deemed “at risk” for leaving FGCU have an academic profile that makes the current *Step Ahead* program necessary or appropriate. In order to be an effective program for these students, *Step Ahead* would need to be modified to include programming and resources that are more psychosocial in nature. Collaboration with the Office of Outreach Programs and Multicultural Student Development Services (as well as a host of other offices, including Residence

Life, Student Involvement, New Student Programs, Campus Recreation, and Civic Engagement, just to name a few) will be essential to building the *Step Ahead* program, as a highly successful model is already in place for working with a limited number of qualified students (through Student Support Services) that could be used as a guide for program development.

- Stage Two - Students who complete the revamped *Step Ahead* program successfully would then be able to enroll in *The College Transition*, a new course that would be designed specifically to provide the support and knowledge new students need to make sense of the transition from high school to college and experience a successful first semester at FGCU.

We feel that *The College Transition* should be a separate and distinct course program from *Effective Learning* (SLS 1501). The focus of *The College Transition* is on helping students adapt to the intellectual, social, and psychological changes that come with attending a university like FGCU. There is a large focus on mentoring students and taking advantage of teachable moments early in their college careers to educate them about what it means to handle freedom and responsibility, make mature decisions, set appropriate goals, and form positive habits.

- Stage Three - Students in this cohort who wind up on the Academic Standing List after the fall semester would be expected to enroll in *Effective Learning* during the Spring Semester, to focus specifically on the development of a concrete set of academic skills that are necessary to be successful in the college classroom.

There will be some overlap in topical content with *The College Transition*, especially in addressing the reasons for poor academic performance, which are often rooted in a lack of developmental maturity, low motivation, or personal issues impacting the ability to focus on academics. While *The College Transition* does include topics of time management, study skills, and test taking, they would be discussed in a much broader fashion; *Effective Learning* would zero in on learning and practicing the specific skills that are vital to mastering college-level material. Coordinators of both programs should work together to ensure that content of these courses is as unique as possible, and that they work “hand in glove” as a two-course sequence, with *Effective Learning* building on the foundation that was established in *The College Transition*.

It will take a number of years to build *The College Transition* and *Effective Learning* to the point where we can enroll the numbers of students who should be taking both courses, so a method of communication with the entire “at risk” cohort will be important. At the point of admission, these students can be tagged in Banner to allow for a regular pattern of communication through the Banner Relations Module (BRM), to send reminders about deadlines, notifications of campus events (like CAA workshops), and words of encouragement and support. In addition, Individuals in the cohort who do not enroll in *The College Transition* or *Effective Learning* during the fall or spring semesters need to be monitored throughout the year in an intentional manner by designated staff whose role it is to check on academic progress and ensure students are adapting well to college life.

### ***Identifying FTIC students not initially identified as “at risk” who struggle in their first semester***

There are a significant number of FTIC students who would not be included in this “at risk” cohort, but whose behavior quickly leads them to perform poorly on their first assignments and examinations during the fall semester. In order to allow the university to identify these students, we recommend that faculty teaching 1000 and 2000-level courses be trained to utilize FASTTRACK to send an email message to designated staff members regarding students’ poor attendance and/or poor academic performance. FASTTRACK needs to be marketed to faculty as an early alert system designed to retain students at the university, rather than a notification of poor performance late in the semester when it is clear the student is going to fail their course. A greater use of the system within the first few weeks of each semester would identify a significantly larger number of students in need of early intervention. It is essential that the needs of these students be addressed in a proactive fashion early in their academic careers rather than reactive fashion in their second semester of college; as noted in the introduction, once these students wind up on the Academic Standing List, nearly 30% eventually leave the university.

In addition to FASTTRACK, we also recommend the implementation of mid-semester grade reporting for 1000 and 2000-level courses, to provide another early warning to students that can be shared with key staff across campus whose role it is to assist students.

Finally, FTIC students not initially deemed “at risk” who wind up on the Academic Standing List after the fall semester would also be strongly encouraged to take *Effective Learning* during the Spring Semester. It will be critical, therefore, to have the financial resources to offer enough sections of the course for any student who winds up on Academic Notice during the freshman year.

### ***The Bigger Picture: Developing a First Year Experience program at FGCU for all FTIC students:***

In addition to a plan for working with those students most at risk for leaving FGCU, we feel it is equally as important to develop a First Year Experience for the entire entering class of incoming FTIC students that fosters greater engagement with faculty, staff, peers and the offices and resources of the university. These programs could include (but are not limited to):

- *Expanding Week of Welcome* to include a pre-semester program that brings the freshman class together before the start of the fall semester, while continuing the standard array of activities currently offered during the first week of classes. This program would take place during the weekend before classes begin and conclude with a Convocation event that is student-friendly and focused on creating a sense of community. Programming would be tied to key academic, social, and behavioral outcomes developed by a campus-wide committee comprised of faculty, staff, and students and build on topics that were discussed at Eagle View Orientation. While initially starting as a voluntary program, attendance would eventually be required after several years of pilot programs and building a positive reputation in the student culture.
- *Creating and growing The College Transition* course program to allow any interested FTIC student the opportunity to take the course during the fall semester. The topics, content, and philosophy of the course would be valuable for any student to gain in the maturity and self-management skills needed for success in college, while allowing the

university to mentor as many students as possible and communicate a set of expectations for how to function as college students.

- Expanding the One Book, One Campus program beyond the first semester, through course development grants for faculty to apply the themes of the book, providing additional service learning opportunities that are also tied to the themes of the book, and fostering the development of a greater number of programs and events by both Academic and Student Affairs that bring the campus together in a spirit of collaboration and community throughout the entire year.
- Developing a set of First Year Seminars to be taught by faculty in the Spring Semester. These seminars would be 1 credit hour electives focused on topics of interest to faculty, taught in a seminar format to a small (10-15 student) group of interested students. These courses would enhance faculty-student interaction and allow faculty to engage students in their academic and personal areas of interest, while helping students gain a greater understanding of their field of interest and solidify their choice of a major.

### **Program Outcomes**

We envision creating a set of behavioral outcomes that are rooted in the five benchmarks measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE):

- Level of Academic Challenge – Through participation in the First Year Experience, FTIC students will be better prepared for the academic rigor associated with a college level curriculum.
- Active and Collaborative Learning – Through participation in the First Year Experience, FTIC students will increase their level of peer-based collaborative learning that takes place both inside and outside of the classroom.
- Student-Faculty Interaction – Through participation in the First Year Experience, FTIC students will increase their level of collaborative dialogue and interaction with faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom.
- Enriching Educational Experiences – Through participation in The First Year Experience, FTIC students will be involved in a larger number of co-curricular activities that promote an understanding of their role and place in a diverse community.
- Supportive Campus Climate – Through participation in The First Year Experience, students will develop stronger and more supportive relationships with faculty, staff, peers, and the offices that are here to assist them.

### **Programmatic Assessment**

We recommend that the university continue to administer the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) on a two-year cycle (in 2012, 2014, and 2016) to allow for a standardized assessment of the program outcomes noted above. The NSSE is administered annually to freshmen and senior students at two year and four year colleges and universities and measures students' participation in activities that are provided for them in order to enhance their experience and development. "The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college," (NSSE, 2009, p. 1).

In addition, individual program assessment tools need to be developed (or modified) to include a number of common questions about the first year experience that can provide longitudinal and cross-sectional data about our students' lives on and off campus: both the factors that impact their success and the issues that impede success. Finally, a withdrawal survey is being developed and will be implemented during the spring 2012 semester, to gather information about why students choose not to return to FGCU.

As we learn more about the impact of the experience of attending FGCU on our students, and discover the reasons why students stop out, transfer, or stop attending college, this data should be "fed back" into the university to improve the programs and services we offer.

### **Conclusion**

Through the creation of a multifaceted First Year Experience program at FGCU, we hope to provide a set of intentional experiences throughout the first year of college for all of our FTIC students, with a special emphasis on those most likely to leave FGCU at the end of their first year. Our focus is highly collaborative in nature; developing and/or expanding key programs will involve strong working relationships between Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and Administrative Services, and the involvement of many offices across campus. As Beal and Noel (1979) contend, retention efforts must not be a single area's responsibility but a university-wide effort, including examination of curricular offerings, support services and attitudes of staff and faculty (p. 5).

Ultimately, we envision this plan as a vehicle to provide greater opportunities for students to increase their level of engagement with the university, with the hope that there is a significant impact on our ability to retain FTIC students beyond the first year.

### References

- Beal, P. E., & Noel, L. (1979). *What works in student retention: A preliminary summary of a national survey conducted jointly by the American College testing program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems* (American College Testing Program). Iowa City, IA: ACT.
- National Survey of Student Engagement (2009). *Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education: Lessons from the field* (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention, 8*(1), 1-19.

Appendix A - A Diagram of the Proposed First Year Experience Program at FGCU

