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UStart: a peer-designed and led orientation initiative

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Attracting and Retaining First-Year Seminar Faculty

Attracting faculty, especially tenured, senior faculty, to the first-year seminar (FYS) classroom is not always an easy task. Some faculty members, preferring the greater depth of academic discussion possible in upper-level courses, might hesitate to work with first-year students. Some, lacking pedagogical training, may avoid the exploration of learning style or creative teaching strategies that FYS programs encourage. Others could resist discussion of transition issues, such as homesickness or conflict management, claiming they are not trained psychologists. Still others, preferring total control over the courses they teach, may not be comfortable working with an FYS team. Finally, overworked faculty could find the individual and institutional rewards of teaching FYS inadequate. Saint Joseph College (SJC) has confronted all these challenges over the nine years of its FYS program and has overcome them by developing successful strategies for attracting and retaining faculty.



Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

SJC is an undergraduate (women's) and graduate (co-educational) liberal arts college whose first-year class averages 200 students. The first-year seminar is a three-credit course required of all entering students during their first semester. The dual purpose of FYS is to help students with both academic and social or emotional transitions to college and to emphasize critical thinking, reading, and writing. There are 13 sections with an average class size of 15-16 students. Two thirds of the instructors are full-time faculty, as is the director, and the remainder are staff primarily from the Center for Academic Excellence. Each class is assigned a peer mentor who serves as a resource for first-year students and creates a link between curricular and cocurricular activities and student and instructor. Every section receives \$100 for course enrichment, and there is also a \$1,000 pool for special events. SJC employs the following four strategies to attract and retain FYS faculty: (a) voice and choice; (b) FYS training with peer mentors and Student Services representatives; (c) respect and institutional rewards; and (d) consistent, effective assessment.

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Voice and choice. FYS was a faculty-generated initiative that required acceptance by the Curriculum Committee and the Faculty Committee of the Whole (faculty governing body) and received approval as a required course only when faculty were confident it would be academically rigorous. FYS instructors, as a group, make all major decisions, including course commonalities and Training Workshop content and format. However, many decisions are left to the individual instructor, such as choice of course theme. Faculty are encouraged to teach their passion, and they often choose topics they are not able to teach within the established curriculum. Examples have included *Beauty and the Beast: Romance to Reality* (French faculty) and *War Through Women's Eyes* (Psychology faculty).

Training. Instructors receive training in May at a five-session, 15-hour, required workshop. Topics vary but generally follow Cuseo's (1999) suggestions of " (1) understanding first-year students, (2) understanding the institution, (3) selecting and sequencing course content, and (4) [developing effective] teaching and learning strategies" (p. 4). Peer mentors and representatives from Student Services also attend the training sessions. The benefits of teamwork are emphasized, and ideas are offered in an atmosphere of collegiality, small- and large-group activities, and shared food and drink. (Hunter & Cuseo, 1999). Cost is controlled by recruiting trainers from the community. By training with students and Student Service personnel over the years, faculty have become increasingly comfortable with the nonacademic components of FYS and learned to balance academic-theme content with transitions issues. To enhance collegiality, the sharing of pedagogical insights, and ownership of curriculum decisions, all FYS instructors (i.e., veteran and new) are required to take the full 15-hour training prior to the semester they will be teaching the seminar. Not only do new instructors benefit from the experiences of past instructors, but veterans also hone their teaching skills through discussion of the new topics. The FYS Training Workshop is now recognized on campus as a major faculty development opportunity. Workshop evaluations have included such comments as: "This is a lifelong learning experience!!!" and "Truly a professional development gift!"

Respect and institutional rewards. From the beginning, FYS instructors have received respect and support from the administration. The academic dean initiated the program and established a budget for FYS. Teaching FYS is recognized as a significant contribution to one's tenure package and is viewed as an important professional development tool for faculty. Depending on their departmental needs, instructors teach FYS as part of their regular course load (the majority), as adjuncts, or as a course overload. They are also paid for attending the training sessions (\$500 compensation). (Note: Saint Joseph College is not a wealthy institution, but has found the FYS program well worth the costs incurred.)

Consistent, effective assessment. For the past nine years, the success of the FYS program has been validated by several assessment tools, the most important of which is The Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) First-Year Initiative Survey. Consistent and increasingly posi-

“Teaching FYS is recognized as a significant contribution to one's tenure package and is viewed as an important professional development tool for faculty.”

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tive feedback has convinced faculty of the validity of the program. For example, the mean (based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Extremely Poor to Superior) for EBI Factor 15–Overall Course Effectiveness–improved from Fair in 2002 ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.64$, middle range) to Excellent in 2010 ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.2$, second highest category).

In 2010, the FYS director surveyed current and past instructors asking, Which factors influenced your decision to teach FYS? Using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = No Influence and 5 = Strong Influence, this survey addressed the following 10 factors:

1. Opportunity for creative teaching
2. Opportunity for collegial interaction
3. Opportunity to further my professional development goals
4. Belief it will enhance my promotion and tenure credentials
5. Opportunity to make a difference in FYS students' social and emotional transition to college (e.g., dealing with issues like homesickness, conflict management, diversity, time management)
6. Opportunity to help FYS students develop academic skills for success in college (e.g., critical thinking, written and oral expression, research, team-building)
7. Opportunity to teach a topic I am passionate about
8. Opportunity for pedagogical training during the annual Faculty Training Workshop
9. \$500 training stipend
10. Budget for hospitality and special class projects

Although the data (Figure 1) represent a small sample, and the survey will need to be replicated each year to expand the data base, preliminary results suggest FYS directors should stress internal motivators to create, teach, and mentor (highest rated factors: 1, 5, 6, 7), over

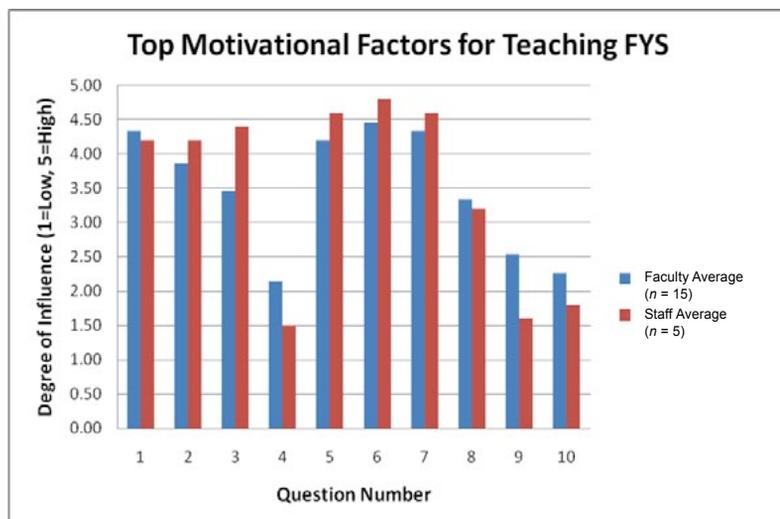


Figure 1. Top motivational factors for teaching the first-year seminar.

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UStart: A Peer-Designed and Led Orientation Initiative

To reduce student isolation in the university (ACER, 2010; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010) and increase student engagement with the campus, faculty, staff, and peers, the University of Wollongong (UOW) adopted a new one-day, orientation initiative. Modeled after the successful UniStart program developed at the University of Newcastle, Wollongong's UStart@UOW program is wholly designed, developed, and facilitated by students and is based on the premise that enrolled students play a vital role in welcoming and immersing



Student facilitators participating in a support services.

new students into the university culture. By grounding the content of the program firmly within current student experience, the emphasis is on the skills and information the more experienced student facilitators lacked upon their arrival at the University rather than what the institution assumes is lacking. UStart also employs Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory (1978), which argues knowledge

is socially constructed within a situated environment, to provide the scaffolding for the development of interpersonal relationships between new and experienced students, assisting in the creation of an effective learning environment.

UStart was piloted in 2010-2011 in four faculties (i.e., Arts, Education, Law, and Science) and targeted students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, who represent approximately 14% of UOW's total first-year cohort. SES status was identified according to mailing address indicators, and invitations to attend the program were mailed to 297 students. Nearly one third ($n = 79$) of the invited students attended the program, which was held immediately after the students had accepted their University offer (i.e., approximately two weeks prior to the traditional week of orientation).

Peer facilitators, who fulfill a dual role providing social networking opportunities and practical, University adjustment strategies, were competitively recruited from current second- or later-year students within the four faculties. As part of the application process, students were asked to submit a 500-word written statement describing their interest in UStart, course of study, and previous work experience. To ensure more authentic contexts and content, students who had a disrupted or difficult personal journey to the University were especially encouraged to apply. Selected students attend a one-day training highlighting basic adult learning theory and facilitation skills. Participants also engaged in small-group discussions designed to encourage reflection upon the fears and expectations they held

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prior to and during their initial weeks of University attendance. Using this reflection as a basis, the facilitators developed program content centered on their own University experiences and what they felt was critical information for new students. Content included tips for deciphering an assignment cover sheet, a definition activity explaining university terminology, and strategies for academic success (e.g., personal study planners, essay plans, note-taking techniques). Incorporating authentic materials (i.e., those actually used by the facilitators) and using facilitator-developed programs are core components and main strengths of UStart, lending further immediacy and credibility to content.

The approach and content of the UStart sessions differed according to the faculty the student facilitators represented, with three of the groups developing faculty-specific student guides and the fourth group creating a webpage for entering students. Groups also focused on relevant faculty content, such as specific disciplinary terminology and academic expectations of degree programs. For example, the Faculty of Education facilitators included a session that highlighted the professional experience aspect of that degree, which requires students to attend a local school as preservice teachers from the onset of their studies, and offered insights on appropriate behavior and attire. The groups also provided information on general campus resources (e.g., navigating the University webpages, locating the offices for financial or personal assistance).

Prior to delivery at UStart, each team presented an overview of their program to an audience of faculty members and staff and received written feedback. A faculty-based staff member was assigned to each group to assist with room bookings, photocopying, and other tasks as well as providing ongoing program feedback.

On the day of the program, students attended a general welcome and were led across campus by their facilitators who provided a brief campus tour en route to their faculty. Participants then typically engaged in a social networking activity before moving on to explore personal fears about starting university and the strengths individuals brought with them. The sessions that followed ranged from explaining the structure of a typical faculty day, campus living tips, and different expectations in lectures and tutorials right through to highlighting how students print in the library. Where appropriate, facilitators introduced new topics with a short narrative of their personal experience (and mishaps or successes) with that subject. Some groups also invited key staff members to share their insights with new students. Delivery incorporated lecture style as well as hands-on demonstrations and fun activities (i.e., The Amazing Race around campus).

UStart assessment consisted of individual faculty surveys, qualitative interviews with student participants, and facilitator focus groups. Overall, responses were positive and participants seemed to appreciate the insider nature of the material and felt more confident on how to use campus resources and adjustment strategies as evidenced by the following comments:

The information about the website and how to use it [was most useful]. Also receiving advice from other uni students was very beneficial.

Practical tips from students and lecturers about how to make the most of first-year studying [was most useful].

“Enrolled students play a vital role in welcoming and immersing new students into the university culture.”

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The peer facilitators were also required to submit reflective journals during their involvement with the program, including the planning and development of sessions over the months preceding the event. The journals were not graded but used to further analyze program outcomes and demonstrate the multiple benefits UStart provided to the facilitators (e.g., increased campus engagement, leadership and program development skills). For example, one of the facilitators explained how her involvement had encouraged her to reflect more upon her own UOW pathway:

[Ustart] provides students with an overview of what to expect when attending university so there are no shocks when they begin studying. U-Start@UOW provides a welcoming student face to those who are disadvantaged in any way. I feel that as a U-Start facilitator I can make a difference in prospective students' lives. I loved working with other students across all different faculties; everyone has a different story about how they ended up at university. This allowed me to reflect on my own, family members', and friends' pathways into university...

Such positive sentiments were common throughout the facilitator reflections, some of whom also describe involvement as an opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with the University community.

This program represents a wonderful chance to give back to the University.

I believe right from the word go, we were all very proud of the opportunity to deliver our own program...It did involve lots of late nights and a LOT more work than I personally expected, but it all paid off in the end.

I wanted to have greater involvement in the university lifestyle; I haven't really done anything on the campus before and wanted to help first-year students and learn more about the uni as well and the services that we have to offer. After doing the program there's a lot that I didn't know myself so it was really good for me and the first-year students as well.

Based on the success of the pilot in the four faculties, the University of Wollongong is planning to expand the UStart program across more faculties in 2012. The program has also been adopted by the Indigenous Learning Centre on campus, which has trained indigenous student facilitators to deliver IStart@UOW to entering indigenous students. There are also plans to develop a program aimed at mature-age students, again drawing on the experiences of that student cohort. UStart is a democratic approach to assisting students in that it is an inclusive program allowing participants, both entering students and facilitators, to learn from each other. The use of student facilitators ensures currency and legitimacy and has kept the program cost effective (e.g., peer leaders receive vouchers and certificates as payment) with the ability to expand. The UStart program also lends itself to a variety of environments as it is firmly rooted in the learning context of the institution. 

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Common Read Impact Reaches Campus and Community

South Dakota State University (SDSU) implemented a common reading program for the first time during fall semester 2009. The program targeted first-year students and was designed to enhance learning and engagement. Program objectives were to (a) increase student knowledge and awareness of contemporary global issues; (b) enhance student awareness of social, economic, and cultural diversity; (c) involve students in meaningful classroom interactions with fellow students and faculty; (d) engage students outside the classroom through a series of enriching educational experiences; and (e) encourage students to become involved in campus and community service.



Greg Mortenson, 2010 common read author, answers student questions.

More broadly, SDSU's common read also sought to address National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicators, including level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences. These factors were incorporated into and measured through student opinion surveys in participating courses. The program was designed around the concept of the common intellectual experience, as described by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates. (2005) and documented as a high-impact approach to enhancing student engagement.

Common read texts were introduced to incoming students and their families during New Student Orientation. In 2009, more than 1,000 first-year students (i.e., one third of the cohort) read *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World* (Kidder, 2004). Some 1,500 first-year students (i.e., two thirds of the entering class), in an expanded series of courses, read the 2010 selection, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace, One School at a Time* (Mortenson & Relin, 2006).

Participating courses included first-year opportunities and orientation classes in general studies, agriculture and biological sciences, pharmacy, nursing, engineering, and the Honors College. Faculty involvement was encouraged, but optional. In addition, several upper-division courses integrated the common read. Pedagogical approaches varied among the courses and included classroom lectures, online and face-to-face discussions, reflective essays, and service projects. Residential Life staff also incorporated common read discussions and activities in the residence halls. In addition, a common read Facebook page and Twitter feed posed questions and program updates.

With both books, a series of enriching cocurricular, educational experiences were designed to enhance student engagement in the issues of the text. The extent to which the programs were incorporated into the various courses was determined by the individual instructors with some requiring full or significant participation and others making attendance optional.

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For example, *Beyond Mountains* tells the story of Paul Farmer and Partners in Health's work bringing health care to the poorest of the poor in Haiti and around the world. Campus events included a lecture from SDSU Men's Basketball Coach, whose family adopted a child from Haiti; a lecture from the head of UNICEF's HIV/AIDS division; a hunger banquet featuring a meal shared according to world food distribution patterns; and a community night showcasing local opportunities for service and involvement, including the Brookings Rotary's solar oven project and a student-faculty team who had visited Haiti with Engineers Without Borders.

In *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson describes the Central Asia Institute's work building schools, mostly for girls, in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mortenson tells how in the culture of the people of the mountains, sharing tea is significant: with the first cup—people are strangers, with the second cup—friends, and after the third cup—they are like family. Activities associated with the book included a diversi-tea, which engaged students in conversation around issues of diversity as they shared three cups of tea; an interfaith dialogue presenting Muslim, Christian, and Jewish perspectives; a lecture on the complex geopolitics of Central Asia; a second hunger banquet and community night featuring representatives of local literacy initiatives and students and community members who had traveled to Pakistan doing hunger relief work; and a presentation from a local volunteer who had recently returned from work with a women's empowerment project in Afghanistan.

Both years, students engaged in service-project fundraisers on behalf of Partners in Health's malaria net challenge in 2009, and Central Asia Institute's Pennies for Peace in 2010. The central character of each story (i.e., Paul Farmer - 2009; Greg Mortenson - 2010) visited campus and delivered a culminating address, which were among the best-attended lectures in the history of the university.

An assessment of the program's impact included quantitative and qualitative data from faculty and student participants. Students involved in the program's comprehensive assessment effort numbered 782 in 2009 and 1,421 in 2010. Positive progress was reported toward each of the program's objectives. Student responses to survey items on Likert-type scales, with 1 = not at all; 3 = some; and 5 = very much, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Common Read Student Progress on Program Objectives

To what extent did participation in the common reading program...	Fall 2009 Mean (n = 782)	Fall 2010 Mean (n = 1,421)
Increase your knowledge of contemporary issues	4.11	3.70
Enhance your awareness of social, economic and cultural diversity	4.05	3.90
Involve you in meaningful interactions with fellow students and faculty	3.92	3.62
Engage you outside the classroom	3.70	3.62
Involve you in a campus or community service activity	3.78	3.58
Cause you to consider how you might use your talents to serve others	3.96	3.71
Raise the level of academic challenge in this course	3.33	3.33
Increase the level of active and collaborative learning in this course	3.62	3.59
Increase student-faculty interactions	3.68	3.59
Provide enriching educational experiences	3.76	4.11

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In 2010, variability among approaches to the common read was assessed between courses. Based on a review of course syllabi, common read courses were categorized into high, medium, and low engagement. Students enrolled in high-engagement courses reported the strongest progress toward program objectives. While means for most of the items were lower in 2010, the doubling of the number of participants, with many of these coming in large-section classes characterized as having low engagement in the common read, provides insight around these downward shifts. In all cases, some progress toward student learning outcomes was achieved.

Common read students wrote evaluative reaction papers based on their experiences with the texts and program activities. These data helped identify what students saw as best approaches and program benefits. Among the most popular features were the lectures featuring Farmer and Mortenson, service projects, and class discussions. Students cited diversity awareness, self-improvement, and helping others as the most common program benefits. Other emergent themes included a sense of enlightenment, understanding the importance of education, desire to make a difference, and enhanced connection to the SDSU community. One first-year math major summed her (2009) common read experience this way:

The common read activity was not only rewarding, but extremely enlightening this fall. The book really opened my eyes to the issues presented...and how one person can make a difference in the world. I also enjoyed the common read activities. At the time, I thought they were a nuisance and my homework more important, but looking back, I believe they were very beneficial. The entire experience...filled me with a greater understanding of the world I'm living in.

The common read was also perceived by students as enhancing their engagement with fellow students in the campus community, as evidenced by these remarks:

This experience opened my eyes and I think opened me up to more things at State. I am more willing to get out of my comfort zone and expand through going to different campus activities.

This [the common read] just made it [the course] better, creating an environment that everyone on campus is being a part of. This book is creating unity throughout campus.

Participating faculty were also positive about their experience with the program. Teachers described the common read as adding to class discussions, academic challenge, out-of-class student-faculty interactions, enriching educational experiences, and inclusion of diversity. Activities aimed at engagement were commonly cited by faculty as program strengths. A faculty member teaching an orientation course in plant science shared this comment: "The greatest strength of the common read project was the exposure to different ideas and diverse cultures."

"The greatest strength of the common read project was the exposure to different ideas and diverse cultures."

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First-Year Initiatives in a Residential Program

In an effort to improve first-year student success, Angelo State University (ASU) recently undertook significant changes to address low retention rates—particularly first-to-second-year—as part of a greater University goal to increase overall enrollment. ASU is a midsize, Hispanic-Serving Institution (26.1% of student population) with an undergraduate enrollment of 6,155 as of fall 2010 and an open enrollment policy that has resulted in recruitment of underprepared students. The retention rates for the institution (i.e., 59.3% first-to-second-year retention and a 34.1% six-year graduation rate for fall 2007 cohorts) were signaled as a primary hindrance to the vision of increasing enrollment to 10,000 students.

As part of the University's broad retention initiative, the Housing and Residential Programs Office altered its programming model to focus primarily on the first-year experience with hopes of improving the first-to-second-year retention rate. Two significant changes were implemented in fall 2008. The first involved adjusting the programming requirements of the current student staff of resident assistants (RAs) to promote



Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

more academic-achievement programs and increase attendance at campus events that involved academic or life-skills subjects. Prior to 2008, RAs conducted primarily social programs for their students, taking them to socially oriented campuswide events (e.g., popular movies, sporting events, student organization festivities). To better address lagging academic achievement, which was believed to be at the heart of the low retention rates for the first-year population, RAs are now required to conduct a minimum of two programs each semester with academic, intellectual, or cultural awareness topics. While this resulted in a significant increase in hall programs intentionally designed to tackle low retention issues, the programming need remained greater than the time RAs had available to devote to this duty, given their other staff obligations (e.g., facility checks, on-call rotation, desk hours).

To address this time constraint, a second change was instituted, creating a new programming arm consisting of eight part-time, student program assistants (PAs) who conducted needs-based programs (e.g., informational lectures from professors, advising and life skills programs, study halls) in all of the residence halls in addition to assisting with RA programs. PA position qualifications were similar to RAs (e.g., high GPA and campus involvement); however, PAs did not share in the RA hall facility duties. The PAs devoted their time specifically to programs that addressed lagging performance of the first-year students, with a particular emphasis on developing academic skills and self-efficacy. While the content of PA programs closely resembled that of RA programs, the PAs were able to significantly increase the number of academic program offerings in the halls while serving as liaisons to other departments across campus.

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Initial implementation of the new model was met with some resistance on the part of the RA staff who felt that students did not wish to participate in academic-oriented programs in the residence halls. This was mirrored by a decrease in program attendance and in Educational Benchmarking (EBI) data, which showed a drop in residential students' satisfaction with hall programming from a pre-implementation score of 5.4 (on a scale of 1 to 7) to a postimplementation score of 5.2 in 2009. The EBI data, however, did not reflect the impact of PA programming since many of these programs occurred after data collection.

Despite the rocky start, Housing and Residential Programs resolved to continue with more academic-oriented programming in 2010 and introduced three strategies to improve the success of the new model. The first was to increase the PA student staff from 8 to 15 with the intention of providing more academic programs for hall residents. Second, the Making Achievement Possible-Works (MAP-Works) survey, an assessment and data collection tool from EBI that tracked first-year students' expectations from the beginning to the end of their first year, was added to the model. MAP-Works data were then used to create timely and meaningful programs that addressed students' concerns as they demonstrated a need. For example, after students reported homesickness through their survey results, RAs conducted several different programs on the weekends and specifically invited those who indicated missing home. Additionally, Map-Works data led the PAs to develop a series of roundtable discussions on a myriad of transitional issues, along with study skills workshops for identified, high-difficulty courses. These programs required substantial time commitments, which the RA staff could not have met due to their other requirements. Academic advisors, along with the residence hall area coordinators, were given access to the survey results, and follow-up meetings were scheduled with students identified as at risk for leaving ASU. Lastly, the programming model for the RAs was adjusted to grant them greater flexibility with timing and implementation. For example, the minimum two academic and educational programs requirement remained intact; however, RAs were able to focus on more social programs during the first six weeks of class (almost daily) to help establish strong student communities. In each residential facility, programming attendance rose and the student staff expressed satisfaction with the programming requirements.

To further improve the model, a new documentation system was implemented in 2010 that attached learning objectives to the programming planning forms along with learning outcomes to the final program evaluation forms. These changes resulted in an increase in EBI student satisfaction results to pre-implementation levels of 5.4 in 2010 and an upward trend to 5.6 in 2011. More importantly, the original impetus for the changes to the programming model was realized when institutional data from fall 2010 indicated an 8.53% increase in the first-to-second-year retention rate. Modest improvement was also made in the fall-to-spring retention rates for on-campus, first-time students as well (see Figure 1, p.12). Moreover, the percentage of entering, first-year students (on campus) placed on probation after their first semester dropped significantly: 16.10% at the end of fall 2007 to 10.50% in 2010.

“ RAs are now required to conduct a minimum of two programs each semester with academic, intellectual, or cultural awareness topics. ”

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Many different campus departments worked to improve retention and employed different strategies (e.g., tightening of probationary requirements, increased Supplemental Instruction and tutoring offerings, changes to campus programming). Based on the EBI data and the increases in on-campus retention rates, the Housing and Residential Programs Office is proceeding with its programming model with the following recommendations for improvement:

- Differentiate between PAs and RAs on EBI student staff member satisfaction survey questions to better assess the efficacy of each group
- Select an evaluation tool to be used consistently among the individual RA and PA programs that are assessed
- Track PA and RA events separately for record keeping purposes and distinguish between traditional programs and promotional events, ongoing and single events, and various learning outcomes
- Develop a set of global Residential Programs learning outcomes to better define the office's overarching purpose and measure effectiveness

Data suggest ASU's residence hall programming is having a positive impact on student retention rates. By employing recommended minor corrections, ASU's Housing and Residential Programs Office will be able to more precisely identify key programs to bolster and ineffective programs to cut. Some of these efforts are currently underway, such as developing program learning objectives and outcomes and better record keeping. By adding academic programs to the traditional social offerings, Angelo State University has created a residence hall programming model that has been successful in terms of both student satisfaction and working toward the institutional goals of retaining students. Such a model could easily be replicated on other campuses. 

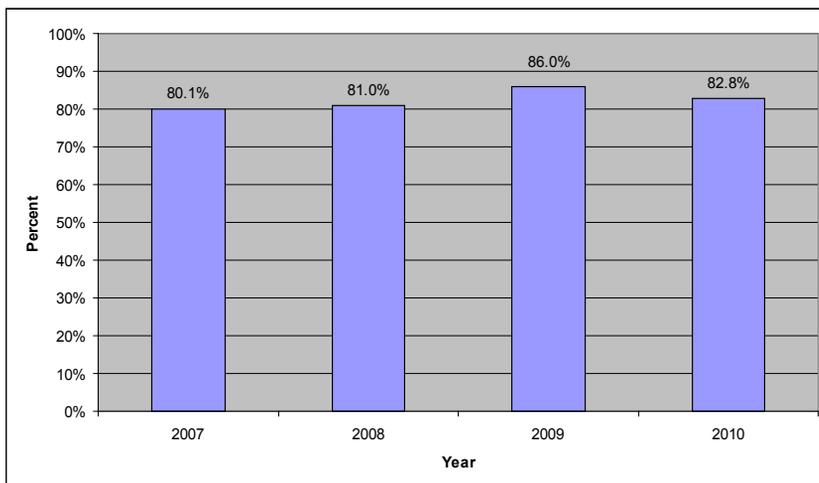


Figure 1. Fall-to-spring retention rates for on-campus, first-time students.

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external motivators (lowest rated factors: 4, 9, 10) when recruiting faculty. One anecdotal observation: although the opportunity to help students develop academic skills is the highest rated item for faculty, the high rating for factor 5, which concerns transitions issues, is gratifying, given the resistance to such issues by faculty early in the program.



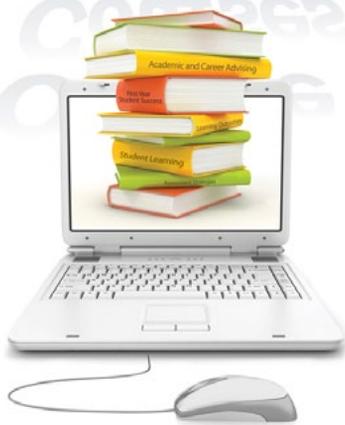
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Each college and university must respond to the values, needs, and expectations of its own constituents when developing a first-year seminar program. The four strategies presented in this article can assist other institutions in developing a strong academic program, which also attends to student transition needs; attracts faculty instructors; creates a bond between students and faculty; promotes cross-campus collaboration; and encourages faculty creativity, pedagogical development, and commitment to first-year students. ➔

Each college and university must respond to the values, needs, and expectations of its own constituents when developing a first-year seminar program. The four strategies presented in this article can assist other institutions in developing a strong academic program, which also attends to student transition needs; attracts faculty instructors;

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Most commonly discussed program weaknesses were a lack of consistency among participating courses and faculty and what some perceived as difficulty integrating the common read into courses that were already full of major-specific content. Although overwhelmingly positive, student criticisms were most often related to the increased workload associated with common read activities (especially out-of-class events) and a perceived lack of direct relevance of the text to their major and professional goals. Biennial NSSE results in 2009 (including the first common read) did not show significant improvements from 2007 (precommon read); however, based on other assessment data, an upward trend on NSSE is anticipated over time.

In its first two years, the common reading program at South Dakota State University has had positive impacts on the campus and community by engaging participants in a common intellectual experience and providing them with an array of compelling cocurricular learning opportunities. The effort shows promise and progress toward outcomes, including enhanced knowledge of contemporary issues, awareness of diversity, and increased level of academic challenge and student engagement in the campus and community. Because of these results, SDSU is incorporating the common read into a first-year seminar requirement as part of its new general education core curriculum. Future efforts will share some of the lessons learned, provide faculty development around best practices, and continue to build on the program's success. 

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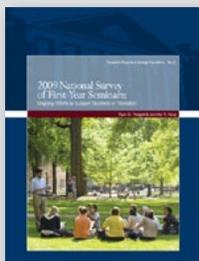
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Resource Spotlight: The Successful First-Year Seminar: What's Learning Style Got to Do With It?

4MAT is a teaching methodology posited by Bernice McCarthy (1987) based on learning styles and a natural learning cycle. At Central Connecticut University (CCSU), the 4MAT model was piloted in a variety of college courses in a University-sponsored Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project during the 2007-2008 academic year. Based on the project's findings (Nicoll-Senft & Seider, 2010), 4MAT for College, a three-credit, academic first-year seminar, has been offered in CCSU's School of Education and Professional Studies since 2009. While the course is open to all first-year students, given its focus on learning styles



Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

and their relationship to teaching and the improved acquisition of knowledge, the seminar is of most interest to education and psychology majors. 4MAT's premise is that individuals learn primarily in one of four different, but complementary, ways based on how they perceive and process information (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). The four styles are described from a learning and teaching perspective as follows:

- **Imaginative Learners (Type One)** learn best through personal experience. These students benefit from opportunities to find meaning in what they are learning and enjoy discussing their beliefs, feelings, and opinions with others. They are reflective in nature, skilled at perspective taking, sensitive to the needs of others, and acquire knowledge primarily through dialogue. As college students, Imaginative Learners learn best when professors emphasize personal connections to the content via ongoing class discussions, group sharing, and self-reflection.
- **Analytic Learners (Type Two)** approach learning in a logical, organized manner by examining details and specifics. They enjoy reflecting on new ideas and connecting new learning to other information they know to be true, as well as formulating theories and models. In addition, they strive for precision and prefer professors that do so as well. As college students, Analytic Learners prefer instructors who deliver well-organized and logical lectures in a teacher-centered classroom environment.

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- **Common Sense Learners (Type Three)** learn by doing. When presented with new information, these students immediately focus on practical applications. As college students, they are active learners and dislike learning that does not have an obvious purpose or application. They prefer professors who provide ample opportunities for hands-on activities and demonstrations in the classroom.
- **Dynamic Learners (Type Four)** are active learners. They enjoy taking risks and learn primarily through self discovery. Type Fours like to connect their new knowledge to things that matter in their lives. They enjoy synthesizing new information and ideas and applying their learning in new ways. As college students, Dynamic Learners prefer flexible professors that challenge students by creating real-life learning experiences and creative, open-ended assignments in their classrooms.

Students enrolled in 4MAT for College begin the semester by identifying their learning style using 4MAT's Learning Type Measure (LTM) (About Learning, Inc., 1994). Next, the focus shifts to their professors' teaching styles. Learning and teaching styles are strongly related to one another (Nicoll-Senft & Seider, 2010); therefore, students are taught to look for clues they can use to anticipate their professors' teaching styles.

For example, professors who are Type One (Imaginative Learners) often see their role in the classroom as a facilitator of student learning. Students in their classes need to have strong interpersonal skills to be successful. The primary teaching activities of a Type One professor include small group work and class discussions. Students' grades are often based on group projects, journals, and reflective writing. In contrast, professors who are Type Two (Analytic Learners) are more teacher-directed in the classroom, preferring to lecture and give traditional exams that emphasize scholarly knowledge and factual information. Equipped with this knowledge, students are able to adapt to classes where their learning style and their professor's teaching style conflict. For instance, Type One student learners who thrive on interpersonal connections can create study groups to prepare for an objective exam given by their Type Two professor.

Further, what separates 4MAT from other learning style models is the relationship of its four styles to the cycle of teaching and learning. In the course, students also discover how to use this framework to become more effective learners. For example, when applied to a written assignment, each of 4MAT's learning styles can be represented as a prompt (Figure 1) to help organize a project and improve writing skills.

“4MAT is a teaching methodology... based on learning styles and a natural learning cycle.”

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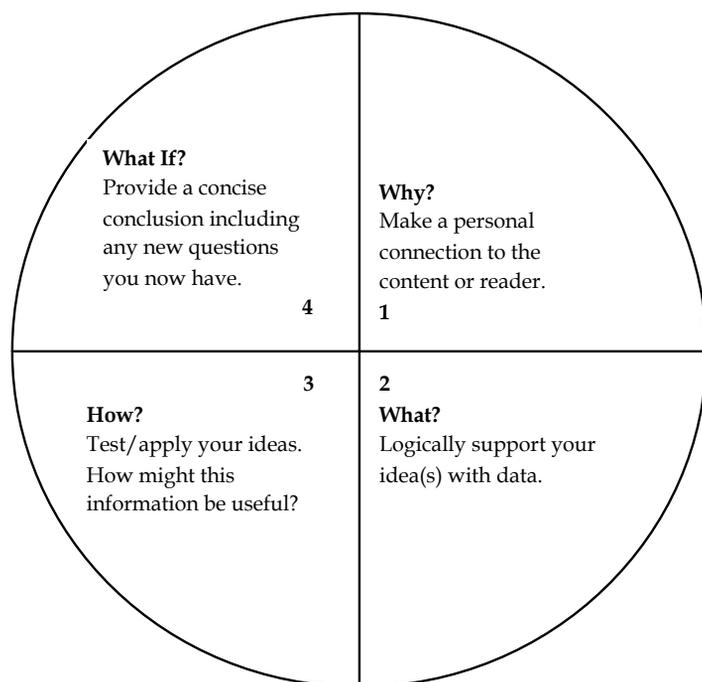


Figure 1. 4MAT learning cycle applied to a writing task.

Starting in Quadrant One (Imaginative), the writer begins by making a personal connection to the reader. Then, the student uses the Quadrant Two (Analytic) question to organize the main ideas of the paper in a logical manner and supported by factual information. In Quadrant Three (Common Sense), the writer turns to the practical side of writing—perhaps testing a hypothesis or illustrating applications of ideas. Finally, Quadrant Four (Dynamic) is the author's conclusion, summarizing the main ideas of the paper and any new questions that may have surfaced. Students can use similar frameworks to improve their reading comprehension and study skills.

In course evaluations from fall 2010, 22 of the 25 students enrolled in 4MAT for College (87%) reported they continued to independently use the strategies they learned in the seminar in other classes during the semester. In addition, in a qualitative review of these students' journal entries, more than 20 occurrences of enhanced learning as a direct result of 4MAT for College were reported by students, ranging from improvements in test scores, lab reports, and papers, to increased participation in class activities and discussions. These results suggest students enrolled in CSUU's 4MAT for College first-year seminar benefited academically from an increased awareness of their individual learning strengths and weaknesses and were able to apply specific learning strategies in other class environments.

For Central Connecticut State University, the 4MAT model has been shown to be an effective pedagogy for a first-year seminar. Given its potential application across a variety of college courses, the 4MAT methodology merits further investigation by institutions considering or implementing academic first-year seminars or study skills classes. 

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Colleague Spotlight: How Effective Are High-Impact Practices?

Findings from national research as well as observations from individual campuses were discussed at a symposium on the effectiveness of high-impact practices at the 36th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). Kuh (2008) identified 10 high-impact practices that have the potential to positively benefit student learning. These include

1. First-year seminars
2. Common intellectual experiences
3. Learning communities
4. Writing-intensive courses
5. Collaborative assignments and projects
6. Undergraduate research
7. Diversity and global learning
8. Service-learning and community-based learning
9. Internships
10. Capstone courses and projects



Photo courtesy of USC Creative Services.

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Such practices have also been linked to the achievement of 21st century learning outcomes that are the focus of the Association of American College and Universities' (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative. Susan Albertine of AAC&U noted this list has served as a catalyst for engaged learning and curricular innovation at the institutional level. Panelists (see sidebar) described the benefits associated with participation in high-impact learning experiences and discussed the practical implications for providing such opportunities to students.

Panelists agreed all students received positive benefits from participating in high-impact practices; however, several panelists also highlighted the increased benefits associated with participation in high-impact practices for underrepresented students. Ernest Pascarella suggested high-impact practices are not the same experience for all students and conditional effects are likely taking place. Jillian Kinzie supported this assertion with National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) research suggesting compensatory effects occurring for underrepresented, low-income, first-generation students participating in

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high-impact practices leading to higher grade point averages, retention rates, and graduation rates. Acknowledging the potential for increased benefits for underrepresented students, Albertine stressed equity is essential if these benefits are to be realized. Kinzie echoed this notion, stating participation in high-impact practices varies by institution type and student characteristic, but added inequities are decreasing as investments in programs specifically geared toward underrepresented students increase.

In addition to equitable access to high-impact practices, several other issues were discussed, including student involvement in multiple high-impact practices and the heavy emphasis on front-loading opportunities during the first year of college. Jennifer Keup of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition noted several practices are year-bound (e.g., first-year seminars, senior capstone experiences) or may be offered as a single opportunity (e.g., a one-day service-learning event) while other strategies can span the entire undergraduate experience. Regardless of type or length of time, she emphasized high-impact practices need to be combined in a comprehensive, intentional, and integrated manner if they are to have the greatest possible effect on students.

Much discussion during the symposium focused on the specific components within high-impact practices that may lead to positive benefits for students. For example, Charles Blaich of the Center of Inquiry at Wabash College stressed the importance of incorporating reflective opportunities in high-impact practices. He suggested the value within these practices comes from discerning the experience, not just participating in it. Pascarella highlighted the importance of good practices, especially interactions with diverse others, as having a significantly beneficial effect on multiple cognitive-related outcomes, including improved critical thinking and a positive attitude toward literacy (i.e., an increased desire to continue to read more complex literature and poetry).

Blaich stressed the importance of connecting the research on high-impact practices with their practical implementation on campuses. He illustrated the differences between the opportunities students are offered and the experiences they are actually having (e.g., A university website may promise specific multicultural outcomes from a study-abroad placement; however, the student's actual experience overseas may have emphasized his or her academic gain.). He also highlighted the need to assess high-impact practices and measure what is actually working for students within them. Keup echoed the importance of continual assessment of high-impact practices to determine how well they are being implemented and their effect on student success, noting findings from the most recent National Survey of First-Year Seminars suggest only about half of these courses are being assessed.

Symposium Participants

Jennifer Keup, Director of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition

Susan Albertine, Vice President, Office of Engagement, Inclusion, and Success at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

Charles Blaich, Director of the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College and the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium

Jillian Kinzie, Associate Director for the Center for Postsecondary Research and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Institute at Indiana University Bloomington

Ernest Pascarella, Professor and the Mary Louise Petersen Chair in Higher Education at the University of Iowa and Co-Director of the Center for Research on Undergraduate Education

Ryan Padgett, Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment at the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (symposium moderator)

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In summary, higher education professionals should consider several factors when providing and implementing opportunities for students to participate in high-impact practices:

- Availability to all students
- Equitable opportunities for participation by students from underrepresented groups
- Participation in multiple high-impact practices, which are intentionally integrated, combined, and spaced to not overload students during any particular year
- Implementation of best practices within high-impact strategies (e.g., diversity interactions, reflection opportunities)
- Continued assessment

For more information on high-impact practices, Albertine directed individuals to visit AAC&U's LEAP Campus Toolkit at <http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit/>. 

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