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It takes a Mob: Retention and Success through First Year Experience

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Abstract

The First-Year Experience at West Chester University (FYE @ WCU) is a dynamic, high-impact practice program that prides itself on retaining students through a university-wide effort by preparing the whole student for success. This four-credit course works from common student learning outcomes combined with disciplinary goals to emphasize student-faculty interaction, to introduce research, and to explore the campus community. The hallmarks of FYE @ WCU in its early years are partnerships and flexibility. By building strong relationships with digital services, co-curricular programming, and academic resources, FYE @ WCU was able to navigate a pilot year, one year of full-implementation, and a COVID-19 remote year. The program today is even more focused on student success and retention because of the unique iterations in three years. The quality of FYE @ WCU, as a high-impact practice, shows in preliminary improved retention rates and resonates throughout the University.

It Takes a Mob: Retention and Success Through First-Year Experience

You've probably heard that a group of fish is a "school," and a group of lions is a "pride." For WCU, whose mascot is the Golden Ram, a group of rams is called a "mob." How appropriate, since we have seen that to help our students succeed through the First-Year Experience program, it takes a mob—of faculty and administration, of academic and student affairs. Our first-year experience program retains students by integrating them into the community, teaching them key study skills, and sharing the structure of general education and liberal arts curriculum, all while introducing them to key foundational principles of disciplinary studies.

Introduction

Transitioning to a university environment is exciting and challenging, as first-year students navigate academic and social changes. If it wants to retain these students, the university must contribute to this transition by helping students adjust to their new lives. Supporting student success and retention, however, must be a systemic effort, enlisting academic affairs and student affairs, integrating university-wide buy-in from the top to the classroom, leveraging pedagogy and technology specialists, and showcasing collaboration (Hunter, 2006). Student success depends on more than a well-developed class or cohort. By preparing students with academic context and evidence-based strategies

for learning and by asking them to think about and reflect on their learning, FYE @ WCU's program has developed an effective bridge to first-year student success and retention.

The four-credit FYE @ WCU is a critical component of the revised General Education curriculum in effect for first-year students since Fall 2019. As part of a liberal arts education, FYE @ WCU is a required course that provides students with a platform to plan their continuing growth and development while at the University and beyond.

Retention and Student Success

Keeping students at a university is a multifaceted, dynamic issue. Tinto's (1999) student integration theory argues that the strongest factor in student attrition is lack of social and academic integration. Academic integration, in the forms of study groups, meetings with academic advisors, and conversations about academics outside of class time, is important to first-year persistence (Ishitani, 2016). Austin's (1984, 1985) theory of student involvement posits that the more students are invested, the more likely they will be satisfied with and succeed in their educational experience.

Kerby (2015) proposed a new way of looking at attrition that considers external factors, such as national and educational climate, as well as "pre-college" factors, including high school GPA, family background, sociocultural factors, and educational goals. Kerby focuses on four components: grade performance, intellectual development, social integration, and institutional commitment to develop a "sense of place" (and avoid academic dismissal and voluntary dropout). Further, Kerby argues that universities need to be flexible in their approach, considering factors, individual students, school climate, and changing needs. Goodman and Pascarella (2006) report that retention and student success are positively associated with first-year experience courses because students have meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, become involved in co-curricular activities, have an increased level of satisfaction with college, and earn higher grades.

High Impact Practices

To address the concerns about retention and student success articulated in the literature, the Association of American Colleges & University identified First-Year Experience (FYE) courses as a high-impact practice, which is defined as "The teaching and learning practices [that] have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds, especially historically underserved students, who often do not have equitable access to high-impact learning." FYE courses are high-impact practices implemented widely across public and private universities ("First Year," n.d.) to improve retention, completion, and engagement, especially among first-generation and underrepresented students.

High-impact practices have shown increased rates of student retention and student engagement. FYE @ WCU's program follows closely to Kuh (2008)'s descriptions: "The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies." Furthermore, FYE @ WCU incorporates other high-impact practices: Diversity/Global Learning that "help students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own" and ePortfolios that "enable students to electronically collect their work over time, [and] reflect upon their personal and academic growth." FYE @ WCU integrates a combination of Service/Community-based Learning and Undergraduate Research, which involves students in research experiences in a variety of disciplines, as

well as gives them hands-on experience with a topic they are studying and time to reflect on the community impact (Kuh).

While high-impact practices have become more common in undergraduate higher education, McNair and Albertine (2012) point to the importance of getting faculty invested, so that they “engage students at high levels,” which is particularly beneficial for students from underserved populations (Kuh, 2008). McNair and Albertine stress that high-impact practices, like first year experience courses, (a) must be intentional in design, focusing on learning outcomes, as well as developmental and academic needs of students, and (b) must encourage innovation, which include professional development, mentoring, reward structures, and partnerships across disciplines and co-curricular opportunities.

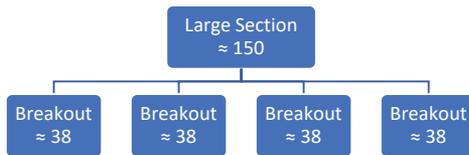
FYE @ WCU

Background

First-year students at West Chester University who have less than 24 credits are assigned, by their major or area of interests, to a large section of approximately 150 students, team taught by four or five faculty members. Students are also registered for a smaller breakout section of 37-38 students taught by one of the faculty team members. In general, concepts are presented to student in the large section and then applied and elaborated on in the smaller breakout sections.

Figure 1

FYE Course Structure



Outcomes and Course Development

FYE @ WCU syllabi are developed through a “grass-roots” approach with six common Student Learning Outcome (SLOs) alongside disciplinary outcomes. Common SLOs are designed to orient students to the underlying values of the Liberal Arts tradition, as well as the structure of WCU’s general education program. FYE @ WCU introduces students to the logic behind degree and general education requirements so that they understand not just what classes to take, but also why they are taking them. In addition, students are introduced to research-based approaches to learning, university policies, ethics, and co-curricular activities, and they are asked to apply that knowledge in ways that will transfer across their academic careers (McNair & Albertine, 2012). All sections, regardless of disciplinary focus, must address the following SLOs:

- A. An overview of the Liberal Arts tradition
- B. An overview of the structure of General Education
- C. An introduction to the ePortfolio and its use across the undergraduate degree
- D. An overview of research in the Science of Learning
- E. An overview and discussions about university policies, ethics, student life
- F. An Experiential Learning Project (either research- or service-learning-based)

FYE courses are organized in nine meta-disciplinary areas (1) arts, (2) business, (3) culture and communication, (4) education, (5), exploratory, (6) health, (7) humanities, (8) social science and (9) STEM. Disciplinary outcomes, which are developed by each team, emphasize unique approaches to research, theory, and practice. These outcomes are addressed through assignments like the experiential learning project.

Although not an academic department, in many ways, FYE @ WCU functions like one. FYE @ WCU has two co-directors who have led the program since its pilot in 2018. Like a department chair, they arrange teaching schedules for their instructors (who come from five colleges), initiate curricular changes, develop and organize training sessions, collaborate with campus partners, distribute vital information to teams, and maintain an online repository of resources, among other duties. Each faculty team has a team leader who receives additional compensation for their work and is ultimately responsible for ensuring that their section meets student needs.

Program Development

FYE @ WCU grew from the University's 2011 Middle States self-study recommendations. This multi-year General Education reform integrated recommendations from the entire university community and was led by the General Education Advisory Board. Alongside the electronic portfolio and cross-disciplinary "pathway certificate programs," FYE @ WCU was one of the new components of students' general education requirements.

Timeline

Creating a new first-year experience program, one that applied to students across disciplines and that integrated faculty and resources from across the university, was an enormous task. Over summer 2018, four faculty teams created a proof-of-concept pilot that was implemented in the Fall of 2018. Approximately 700 exploratory studies, or undeclared, students participated in the pilot in sections of business, education and social work, exploratory studies, and health.

The FYE @ WCU 2018 pilot was very successful from student, participating faculty, and administration perspectives. The pilot also set the foundation for creating an "experience" by integrating campus partners. With the pilot complete, it was time to think about full implementation, serving a much more diverse audience of first-year students and encompassing the entire University (see Table 1). While very pleased with the academic SLO outcomes, FYE @ WCU was not yet fully integrating the strong co-curricular programs the University had to offer.

Table 1

Student Enrollment and FYE Teams

Semester	First Year Students	FYE Teams
Fall 2018 (Pilot)	707	4
Fall 2019	2,833	19
Fall 2020 (Remote)	2,815	19

Administrative Support

FYE @ WCU was situated for success from its earliest days. At the top levels, the University saw the value of FYE @ WCU as a high-impact practice and an opportunity to build relationships with

students from the first semester. The University President, Provost, and Deputy Provost provided financial support, time, and unwavering commitment to the success of the program. University leadership saw no request as absurd. From the tower to the trenches, everyone had the attitude that if FYE @ WCU succeeds, then our students succeed.

Partnerships

Fundamental to FYE @ WCU is the ability to provide students with the most current, research-based content and scholarship and contemporary social and cultural experiences. FYE @ WCU has developed these partnerships across the University, always prioritizing flexibility, openness, and how to best serve the students.

Digital Partnership

FYE @ WCU's early campus partnership was the Office of Digital Learning and Innovation (ODLI). ODLI's expertise in combining technology and pedagogy to engage students helped prepare faculty for the new experiences of team-teaching large sections. At first, the focus of this partnership was less about technology and more about the pedagogy of how to engage students in a large section settings. Most faculty saw technology as "cool, but not crucial." After the Fall 2018 pilot, faculty found that the tools available for attendance and engagement were somewhat haphazard and insufficient. Working together, ODLI and FYE @ WCU created a pilot program for Poll Everywhere, an online classroom response system. Once the right tool was in place, faculty began using the software as strategic pedagogy, driving student engagement. Subsequently, the university wide FYE @ WCU faculty began to employ the tool in their own disciplinary courses, expanding the boundaries of FYE @ WCU to benefit the entire student population.

Extending Improvements

The digital development was not limited to a student response system. Beginning in Fall 2019, ODLI assigned each FYE team an individual instructional designer to provide targeted and customized support. This, in turn, broadened faculty knowledge about the services ODLI provided, leading to more faculty engaging with their instructional designer outside of FYE interactions and improving the student learning experience across the campus. Growing relationships between faculty and instructional designers allowed for improved problem solving. For example, one faculty identified a need for better formative assessment and found a tool called H5P to address the concern. The faculty member worked with their instructional designer on securing licenses via the ODLI office and piloted the tool with a few FYE sections. The data generated from the pilot justified increasing the number of H5P licenses available to the whole university and thus improved the student learning experience beyond FYE @ WCU. Equipping faculty with the proper training and tools prior to and during implementation helped create successful and engaging learning environments for students.

Responding to COVID-19

Keeping student needs at the forefront, FYE @ WCU prioritized adaptation and improvement, which in turn prepared the program to adjust when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived at the University. During the Spring 2020 two-week switch from face-to-face to remote learning, one of the co-directors received a text from an FYE faculty member that said, "I just had a dreadful thought, what if next fall we are virtual. What do we do with FYE if we are virtual?" It was at that point, in April 2020, that the planning for an all-virtual FYE began. Given the uncertainty of the fall, planning had to account for

numerous possibilities ranging from fully remote to a hybrid mix. Recognizing that the creation of online courses is a time-consuming process (Kebritchi et al., 2017) and that not all FYE faculty had experience teaching in that modality, FYE @ WCU engaged with the ODLI office to construct a series of online units for each of the common SLOs. The units were designed to be both modular, so that FYE faculty teams could pick out specific activities to use alongside other materials, or comprehensive and complete units. The units were structured with a synchronous breakout session as the core element to emphasize students achieving academic and social integration opportunities that could promote first year retention (Ishitani, 2016; Kerby, 2015). The goal was to relieve faculty fear of teaching online and time pressure of developing materials by providing an interactive, SLO-centered model. Every FYE section in Fall 2020 had both asynchronous and synchronous components and leveraged the expertise and relationships between FYE @ WCU and ODLI, which resulted in tangible positive outcomes for students. See Table 2 for key results.

Table 2

FYE @ WCU Student Survey Results, Fall 2020

Taking the FYE @ WCU made student feel . . .	Percent of students who Agree
They belong @ WCU	85%
Their work has value	94%
They have grown personally	86%
They gained remote learning skills	84%
They understood remote learning expectations	87%
They learned how to use remote learning resources	88%

N=1,770

Teaching Modality

The success of the COVID-19 response led FYE faculty teams to reconsider the modality in which FYE courses would operate. The Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 FYE courses were 100% face-to-face offerings that made minimal use of digital modalities. The remote teaching experience of Fall 2020 and feedback from the students inspired faculty to re-envision the course delivery for future iterations. A proposal to allow up to 50% of the course to be delivered through an online modality is working through University-curricular approval process, and all but one of the FYE faculty teams is planning to implement at least 25% online delivery for Fall 2021. This change addresses students' post-pandemic desire for some online instruction (Seaman & Johnson, 2021).

Student Affairs Partnership

FYE @ WCU helped students foster connections with the university beyond academics. Some faculty in the pilot teams reached out to individual Student Affairs areas for programming. After Fall 2018, Student Affairs proposed a partnership, in alignment with their learning outcomes, and developed a menu of programs designed especially for FYE students: career readiness, community engagement, health and wellness, involvement and leadership, and social justice (Kerby, 2015). Some of the programs were asynchronous, some included guest lectures, and some required students to complete activities outside of class. Further, when the University switched to remote learning in Fall 2020, Student Affairs

adapted their programming for synchronous and asynchronous presentations to meet the needs of students from a distance. Seventeen of nineteen FYE teams participated in at least one Student Affairs program during the remote Fall 2020. The evolution of the Student Affairs partnership and its impact on students was evident in student survey data. In the Fall 2019 implementation, 77% of FYE students reported a sense of belonging to the WCU community after completing FYE, but that improved to 85% after the Fall 2020 FYE offerings. Throughout 2019 and 2020 FYE offerings, 82% of students reported understanding student service resources after completing FYE.

Academic Affairs Partnerships

WCU is replete with academic resources as a crucial support system for student success. From the University Libraries and Summer Undergraduate Research Institutes to RAMp UP and Compass, WCU prides itself on student success through retention. Several programs, some old, some new, but all geared towards student success, have become a serendipitous part of FYE @ WCU.

Success Coaching

The partnership between FYE @ WCU and Success Coaching is a natural outgrowth of student success and retention. Unlike traditional tutoring, which is also offered at WCU, success coaches focus on practical skills and strategies to guide students to their academic and personal goals. The personalized support reinforces the Science of Learning concepts developed in FYE @ WCU. This partnership provides targeted outreach to some of our most vulnerable students.

Academic Success Program

FYE @ WCU is currently working with the coordinator of the University's Academic Success Program (ASP), a special admissions program for students who show potential to succeed but who have not met admissions markers. ASP includes a five-week summer program that provides students with foundational preparation and academic support so that they are fully prepared to enter the Fall semester. To avoid duplicating efforts in each other's programs and to enhance each other's offerings, FYE @ WCU and ASP are partnering to ensure that content delivered in both programs are not repetitive but aligned to reinforce academic support for the students in ASP. Moreover, FYE will register ASP students in the same sections, with experienced ASP faculty, for Fall 2021.

STEM Spinoffs

Like the University-wide integration of Poll Everywhere, changes were not limited to just FYE. As faculty encountered other ideas and teaching methods, those concepts began to trickle out beyond the FYE courses. For example, a group of STEM faculty who participated in the first full year of FYE implementation recognized the value of the Science of Learning concepts. To encourage student success in introductory science and mathematics courses, the FYE STEM faculty hosted a college-wide meeting where they presented the Science of Learning applications and solicited feedback from faculty with the goal of improving student success within the college.

Internal Adaptations

Adaptation is a natural outgrowth of the FYE @ WCU development process. The partnerships highlight the value of student involvement across campus (Hunter, 2006), leverage technological resources, and capitalize on faculty expertise. FYE @ WCU encourages faculty to bring not only their content expertise, but also new ideas for teaching methods as a means of maximizing the incorporation of cutting-edge opportunities for students. The co-directors take a proactive attitude of "If you have a good idea, let's talk about it. Let's think about best practices." Building and FYE community helps faculty

feel invested and encourages innovation, which could benefit students from underserved populations (Kuh, 2008; McNair & Albertine, 2012). As innovations develop, it is necessary to share the new information across all the teams so they could take it and adapt it themselves.

Faculty Training

FYE @ WCU has no shortage of professional development through a weekly newsletter during the fall and various workshops throughout the year, all funded by the Provost's Office. After the pilot, a three-day workshop on a diverse array of topics trained the 70 faculty who would conduct the full implementation in 2019. Regular workshops were run with the campus partners to cover topics such as how to use Poll Everywhere, attendance taking techniques for large lectures, ePortfolio, and Student Affairs programming. Each Winter and Summer, FYE faculty engage in regularly scheduled debriefing and planning workshops, giving teams time to prepare for the next iterations. FYE @ WCU also sponsors "training as needed workshops," which give teams opportunities to learn new technologies and reflect on best practices.

FYE Repair

A four-credit required course in a student's first year could be a boom or a bust for a student's GPA and for gaining crucial skills for college success. In general, and informally, FYE @ WCU is considered among faculty as a "not an easy A, but a hard F." Recognizing that they are only first-year, first-time students once, students cannot repeat FYE; however, FYE @ WCU needed to address the fact, through the lens of student success, that some students are going to fail the course. A unique solution to this dilemma is FYE Repair, a credit- and tuition-free, self-paced, online program offered to those who earned less than a C-. FYE Repair students are provided an opportunity to complete a series of online modules, covering the learning outcomes, during the following semester: in so doing, they can raise their FYE grade up to a C-. A student's first Fall GPA has been predictive of retention and graduation rates; therefore, FYE Repair takes on even greater importance. Historically at WCU, a student earning a cumulative GPA of 2.67 or higher at the end of their first Fall is two times more likely to graduate. Thus, it is crucial that students have the opportunity to "repair" their GPA.

Diversity and Equity

The Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020 crystalized on-going conversations about a hole in the FYE curriculum in the areas of diversity and equity. FYE @ WCU brought together a small team of FYE faculty who specialized in concepts such as privilege, racial identity development, social determinants of health, and systemic oppression to develop an online learning module. The unit was designed to be both flexible and introductory, allowing faculty to use the components that would best meet the needs of the students in their FYE sections without putting instructors in situations they felt unprepared for, similar to the remote units developed over Summer 2020. The Diversity and Equity module covered the high impact practice of helping students explore different life experiences and worldviews. In a survey of faculty, one team reported, "The Justice and Equality Module went really well. Many students brought it up during the end of the semester reflection as eye-opening and insightful." The success of the model has inspired others to begin constructing similarly structured units on other topics such as sustainability for incorporation into the resource collection for future FYE sections. The thoughtfulness of the initial design allows for continued updates and improvements as ongoing reflection and identification of blind spots highlights future areas for improvement.

Resources

FYE @ WCU created and curates a site on D2L, the University Learning Management System, to share resources among the teams. What started as a mechanism for sharing syllabi quickly expanded to include sample assignments that were effective at helping students learn and remain engaged. As faculty began to create video resources, the D2L site evolved to include a video library that FYE teams could draw on for content. When COVID-19 arrived, the teaching resource site, alongside the FYE online materials developed with ODLI, became the backbone of the remote semester, and situated faculty to continue to successfully serve and support students.

Conclusion

Through a joint rammin' effort of all our partnerships, we mobbed COVID-19. Students came, they learned, and they thrived. FYE @ WCU's "grass-roots" development, ability to adapt, plentiful resources, and dynamic partner programming demonstrates that status quo is not the game. FYE @ WCU maintains a nimble and evolving partnership structure in order to encourage faculty innovation to maximize the incorporation of cutting-edge opportunities for students. As a high-impact practice, FYE @ WCU is adaptive yet intentional, professional yet innovative, always with student needs first (McNair & Albertine, 2012).

Preliminary data suggests FYE @ WCU is an effective retention program, despite COVID-19, despite going fully remote in 2020-21, and with WCU's increased acceptance rate and the increase in size of the incoming class. Our success relies on a university-wide effort to shepherd our students into our WCU mob. As West Chester University has grown and changed, so too has the First-Year Experience, and FYE @ WCU looks forward to meeting new challenges and continuing to propel our students into success.

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