First Year Program at UNK: Recommendations for the Future

Submitted by Kristi Bryant, FYP Interim Director

Background

The First Year Program at UNK was developed as an attempt to help incoming students transition to college life. It was determined that a multi-disciplinary approach would be most suitable for implementation at UNK, and the infusion model, in which the goals of the program could be infused into an already established academic course, was chosen. Instructors were able to submit proposals for making their introductory courses First Year courses, and those proposals were reviewed and approved by the First Year Program Advisory Council. The First Year classes, from a wide variety of disciplines, were then limited to only twenty-five students, all freshmen, and were also given a student peer leader to assist the instructor and act as an additional point of contact for the students. The First Year Program was piloted in the fall of 2002 and was conducted using this model through the fall of 2008; the program’s goals and objectives are provided in Appendix A.

The First Year Program underwent an Academic Program Review in February of 2008. In preparation for the APR, an intensive self study was conducted. Although the Review Team and external reviewer pointed out many positive aspects of the program, the sustainability of the program was questioned. However, the Review Team’s report contained ideas for possible changes to the program.

The First Year Task Force was also formed in the spring of 2008 with the express purpose of evaluating the fiscal sustainability of the existing program. The task force considered the Program Self Study in addition to other relevant materials in their deliberations. In the fall of 2008 the First Year Task Force recommended the First Year Program be put on hiatus for at least a year. The hope was that during the hiatus the program would be adjusted so it could then be brought back in a new form that will more efficiently and effectively address the needs of UNK’s incoming freshmen.

The efforts to reevaluate the First Year Program at UNK and determine the best course of action coincided with the visits of Noel-Levitz Senior Consultant Dr. David Trites. The course of action described below is outlined in the Action Plan developed with guidance from Dr. Trites to work towards the key retention strategy of “providing an enhanced first year experience for incoming freshmen to support student success throughout their tenure at UNK.” This action plan, provided in Appendix B, has been accepted by Dr. Gail Zeller, Interim Dean of Student Life, as well as the Enrollment Management Council.

In order to determine the best course of action in reformulating the First Year Program, it was necessary to get the best picture possible of what UNK’s incoming students face when they transition to college. To do this, it was important to talk to people from across the campus.
Faculty Perspectives

It was determined that the most expedient way to gather information from faculty across the campus was to attend department meetings. This process began in February of 2009. Dr. Deborah Bridges, Faculty Assistant to the Senior Vice Chancellor of Academic and Student Affairs (SVCASA), and First Year Program Interim Director Kristi Bryant attended the Chairs Council meeting in each of the four colleges. At each of these meetings Dr. Bridges requested that the chairs allow Ms. Bryant to attend a department meeting during the spring semester to gather information directly from faculty. After the chairs meetings, Ms. Bryant emailed the department chairs in that particular college and requested to attend a meeting. Most department chairs responded with an invitation to join their next meeting.

At each department meeting the following questions guided the discussion:

1. What are the main challenges faced by incoming freshmen?
2. Are there challenges unique to your department that freshmen face?
3. Do freshmen have the requisite skills to be successful in your classes during the first semester?
4. What are the specific skills you feel incoming freshmen lack and/or need to develop during their first semester?
5. What do you wish someone would tell incoming freshmen before they get to your class?

Several common responses arose during these discussions. Communication skills, particularly written skills, are of concern in many departments. Other departments (math, physics, and chemistry) feel students are not prepared in math. This is particularly surprising when students have taken four years of math in high school and still don’t understand the foundational skills. Other areas of concern are using technology and finding appropriate sources of information. Faculty members also expressed concern about students’ critical thinking and problem solving skills. Other potential problems lie in the areas of study skills, note taking, and time management.

Other challenges identified by UNK faculty members included a fear of taking risks and of asking questions. Some instructors felt that students don’t seek out help or even identify when they need help. They also indicated that students should expect college to be rigorous. Several departments expressed that students should have a longer view – to think about their futures (grad school/professions) when in the classroom. Students should also think about the impression they make on instructors.

Other aspects of student performance pertain to being present in class. Instructors talked about the importance of attendance as well as engagement in the classroom. Being prepared for class, being alert in class, and engaging in the class activities were all identified as important, as were matters of classroom etiquette and acceptable communication.
In the summer of 2009 Ms. Bryant met with various representatives of the Division of Student Life. Dr. Gail Zeller, Interim Dean of Student Life, sent an email to her staff requesting they accommodate Ms. Bryant’s request for meetings. Ms. Bryant met with people from the following divisions or areas:

- Orientation
- Counseling and Student Health Care
- Residential and Greek Life
- Office of Multicultural Affairs
- Career Services
- Academic Success (Tutoring Services, Student Support Services, and Writing Center)
- Academic Advising
- Athletics

The following questions guided the discussion during these meetings:

1. What are the main challenges faced by incoming freshmen?
2. What are the specific skills you feel incoming freshmen lack and/or need to develop during their first semester?
3. What does your office/department currently do to support incoming freshmen as they strive to overcome these challenges and develop the skills they’ll need to be successful at UNK?

Some of the concerns that were voiced in these meetings had also been identified by faculty, particularly time management, note taking, and study skills. The importance of becoming involved on campus, learning about resources, and self-advocating were also important topics that emerged.

Perhaps the most important element to come out of these meetings were the number of good ideas for activities and/or components to be included in the revised First Year Program that might help students become aware of particular services or resources as well as make use of the programming already in place. In addition, these meetings laid the foundation for future collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, collaboration which will be essential for the First Year Program to achieve its goals and objectives.

**Conclusions**

After talking to various faculty members from across the campus as well as Student Life personnel, it seems that the best thing a First Year Program could do for UNK’s students would be to help them become successful Lopers. In order to do this, the program would address what it means to be
successful college students as well as becoming aware of and involved in the UNK community. Other areas of concern, including issues of etiquette and appropriate behavior, could potentially be addressed in fun and meaningful ways.

Although addressing skill gaps may be beyond the scope of such a program, it may be possible for a First Year Program to help students identify resources that can help them fill in any existing gaps in their foundational skills. It may also be possible to help introduce students to effective research and academic resources. The ongoing problems of introducing students to UNK’s library and teaching them to utilize the resources at their disposal could be addressed within the First Year Program.

The restructuring of the First Year Program also presents the opportunity to develop a program that will make the best use of the resources that are already in place at UNK. For example, a First Year Seminar could incorporate many of the topics identified as areas of concern as well as introduce students to tutoring services, the Writing Center, Health Care, and Career Services in ways that are engaging, useful, and universal.

With an understanding of the needs of UNK’s incoming students and the challenges they face as well as what is currently in place to help students transition to college, UNK is better positioned to determine the best course of action for reintroducing the First Year Program. To that end, it is important to keep in mind that a student’s experience during the first year of college is multifaceted, and the most effective way to impact student success is to strategically integrate the different facets of that experience. What follows are recommendations for establishing a First Year Program that can effectively work hand-in-hand with other aspects of a student’s first year experience, including academic expectations, Fall Orientation, a Student Convocation, Residential and Greek Life activities, and athletics.

Recommendations

- **Create First Year Program Office with a full time director as well as adequate support staff.**

  In order to carry out the proposed changes to the First Year Program and be positioned to ensure a level of institutional excellence regarding a student’s first year experience at UNK, the First Year Program needs to have a full time director and adequate staff. This office could work closely with other offices such as Admissions, Academic Advising, and Residential and Greek Life and could assist with or be involved in Summer Advising and Enrollment, New Student Orientation, Blue & Gold Welcome Week, and a Fall Convocation.

  The Office could coordinate the curriculum, with faculty input and involvement, for the First Year Seminar. In addition, the Office could collaborate with the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) to provide faculty development opportunities (e.g., workshops, panel discussions, etc.) that give faculty the awareness of what first year students experience and the skills to assist those students in being successful at UNK.
The First Year Program Office should remain under the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs. A physical office in the Student Affairs building would aid collaboration and communication.

- **Create a required one credit hour First Year Seminar for incoming freshman.**

  The Seminar would provide consistent contact with First Year students throughout the semester as well as a forum where some of the concerns expressed by faculty and Student Life personnel can be addressed.

  The recommended seminar would have the following characteristics:

  - **Seminars should meet for one hour a week for a total of sixteen contact hours.** Regular weekly meetings can help avoid the problem of overloading students with information early in the semester and also provides the flexibility to address needs as they arise. For example, we can talk to students about academic advising when they’ll need the information.

  - **Seminars should focus on helping students learning to be successful UNK students.** In order for students to be successful at UNK, they need to be able to pursue their academic goals, and they need to be invested in UNK enough to want to continue pursuing those goals here. Reaching these goals will require students do the following:

    - Understand what is expected of them as UNK students
    - Learn to identify what they need in order to meet those expectations as well as locate and utilize any resources that can help them achieve their goals
    - Feel at home here at UNK, meaning they feel both comfortable and necessary.

  - **Seminars should have an intentional, common curriculum.** The curriculum, supervised by the First Year Program Office and developed with input from faculty, should focus on achieving the goals of the First Year Program and provide students an opportunity to develop the skills to succeed at UNK.

  - **Seminars should have a common textbook.** This would help ensure the commonality of the first year experience as well as assist instructors when addressing the various topics. There are many textbooks developed specifically for first year seminars. Two of these are *Thriving in College & Beyond* by Joseph B. Cuseo, Viki Sox Fecas, and Aaron Tompson, and *Step by Step To College & Career Success* by John N. Gardner and Betsy O. Barefoot.

    The common curriculum would include required elements as well as some flexibility for instructors to tailor first year seminars to the needs of their students.
The common curriculum would also provide an opportunity to reestablish the Common Reading Program. Students could be given a book either during Summer Advising and Enrollment or at the beginning of the seminar. A theme from the book can provide a backdrop for programming throughout the semester. The book does not have to be required reading but can still help set a tone for the semester. (Some schools increase student fees to cover the cost of the book.)

- **Seminars should be team taught by Student Life personnel and student peer leaders with input and support provided by faculty.**
  - Student Life personnel have the educational background and training necessary for delivering a curriculum designed to assist students’ transition to higher education.
  - Student Peer Leaders should go through an application and selection process as well as a training program. Application and selection process for Student Peer Leaders could be modeled after those used for the Chancellor’s Ambassador.
  - Training should be provided for all instructors teaching first year seminars.
  - Having faculty involved in the first year seminars will also encourage faculty/student interaction.

- **Seminars should be linked (or offered) by each of the four undergraduate colleges.** This approach allows the colleges to offer seminars more closely aligned with the different disciplines in their college (e.g., physical sciences and social sciences). This approach also provides students the option of either taking a seminar related to their program of study (e.g., a student majoring in Biology could take the physical sciences seminar) or to investigate other opportunities (e.g., a student majoring in Biology could take the business seminar). In addition, this approach allows for more specific discussions of study skills, making discussions about note taking and test preparation as concrete as possible; this also helps facilitate the development of study groups and positive peer pressure.
  - Having each college offer seminars with instruction provided by Student Life personnel provides colleges an opportunity to reach incoming students without committing significant faculty resources.
  - This approach also facilitates the delivery of a common curriculum that achieves a set of common outcomes, while still providing the flexibility necessary for colleges to inform students about opportunities offered through their programs of study. For example, each Department could be given time during the
semester to present the students with information regarding individual majors, internships, student activities, etc.

- This approach would provide the option of delivering the seminars using fewer sections with larger enrollments while still achieving the personal attention experienced in small classes by breaking the students into smaller groups and using the Student Peer Leaders as group leaders. For example, a seminar of 50 students can be led by one instructor and two student peer leaders.

- Linking the seminar to an individual college would allow for revenue cost sharing between the college and the First Year Program.

  - **Seminars should be scheduled at a common time or times.** Scheduling seminars at a common time or times would create a convenient time for larger group presentations or activities. This, in turn, would help develop a sense of community for the students. For instance, seminars could be offered on either Tuesday mornings or Wednesday afternoons.

    The problem with this scheduling, of course, would be difficulties with student availability and conflicts with other classes.

    The benefits of this method would be the ease with which we could schedule large group presentations or activities and ensure student availability.

  - **Seminars should be graded and should count for credit towards graduation as either fulfilling a general studies requirement or as an elective.**

First Year activities can help strengthen ties to UNK and develop a sense of community for students. Things like competitions between classes or learning the school fight song can strengthen student identity as Lopers. Thus, the seminars can be used as a mechanism to help establish and develop traditions within the campus community.

According to the 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars, 84.8% of responding schools indicated that they offer first-year seminars. There is a wide variety of types of seminars offered across the nation and around the world. The seminar described above would be considered an “extended orientation” seminar with the purpose of helping students acclimate to college and begin to develop habits that will lead to their success. Thus, the seminar described above is designed to enhance the student’s academic experience while also preparing them to meet the challenges the future might present.
Goals

- Acclimate students to the academic culture
- Promote higher-order skills that aid in scholarly endeavors
- Develop responsible individuals to combine career competency with cultural awareness and intellectual curiosity
- Give a foundation for clear thinking and expression
- Read intelligently in the field which an educated person ought to be acquainted
- Foster in the student a commitment and responsibility to the UNK community
- Create and energetic, thoughtful approach to the challenges of contemporary life and an awareness of the student’s place in the global society

Objectives

First Year courses will meet the following objectives in addition to the academic content associated with each course:

Communications Competencies

- Writing. Although the course does not need to be designated as WI, it should provide opportunities to practice college writing, such as essay exams, response papers, position papers, and extended essays.
- Oral skills. Introduction to academic etiquette and civil discourse should provide opportunities to experience discussion, debate, and argumentation in University forums.

Academic Competencies

- Library Research. Students will become aware of resources available in the library through a project that exposes them to library resources (general library information; searching and acquisition process; research methodologies).
- Critical Thinking. Students are expected to engage in critical, analytical, reflective, and transformational thinking about issues and ideas they encounter during this course, implementing communication competencies in written and oral format.
- Problem-solving/Decision-making. Students will understand the process of identification of problem, discovery of alternatives available, and selection of appropriate solutions in relation to issues relevant to individuals participating in the campus community.
- Technical Knowledge and Skills. Students will understand the process of access, analysis and synthesis of information available through information technology. Integration of computer and academic experience will be demonstrated through successful use of the campus Blackboard system, word processing, and research assignments.
Awareness of and Participation in a Diverse University Community

- Students will explore the definition of “diversity” as it exists on the UNK Campus.
- Students will develop an understanding of why knowledge of other cultures is important in their development as a student and as a contributing member of a global community.
- Students will become aware of how their own cultural heritage (worldview) personally and professionally affects their definition of normality and their effectiveness in intercultural communication.

Dedication to the General Studies Core

- Students will investigate acquisition of knowledge from a broad perspective of science and culture.
- Students will become aware of the relationships among disciplines and ways to apply that knowledge to their personal development and the contemporary social and political environment.

Expectations of the Students within the UNK Community

- Students will explore the Student Handbook, Undergraduate Catalog and other important university policies in relation to classroom expectations, sexual harassment, academic dishonesty, privacy guideline, and graduation requirements. Students will also become familiar with resources available for academic, personal and career concerns.
- Students will become aware of the principles of academic freedom and their responsibilities to an active, student-centered learning environment.
### ACTION PLAN

**KEY STRATEGY:**
*Providing an enhanced first year experience for incoming freshmen to support student success throughout their tenure at UNK.*

**DESCRIPTION/EXPLANATION:**
*First year experience is multi-faceted and includes both academic and co-curricular components.*

### IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE/TIMETABLE

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<th>Steps</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Completion Date</th>
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<td>Gather faculty input regarding what incoming freshmen students need</td>
<td>Kristi Bryant</td>
<td>May 2009</td>
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<td>in terms of making a successful transition to college and identification of the skills students lack</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gather input from Student Life regarding what incoming freshmen</td>
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<td>August 2009</td>
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<td>students need in terms of making a successful transition to college</td>
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<td>and identification of resources currently available to meet those</td>
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<td>needs</td>
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<td>Investigate opportunities for collaboration with revised General</td>
<td>Kristi Bryant</td>
<td>January 2010</td>
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<td>Studies curriculum, especially in the area of preparing students for</td>
<td>Debbie Bridges</td>
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<td>the portal course</td>
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<td>Investigate opportunities for collaboration with fall orientation</td>
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<td>program (identification of components of program and ways to link</td>
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<td>orientation with first year).</td>
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<td>Identification of structure of first year program which combines</td>
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<td>both academic and co-curricular activities for presentation to</td>
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Champion(s): Debbie Bridges

Budget:

Evaluation/Control: Debbie Bridges (?)