Student Success in College

Creating Conditions That Matter

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reinforces the idea that the college experience will be much more academically challenging than high school.

For the first time in 2002, Wofford introduced "the Novel Experience," a common reading for all incoming first-year students. As described in Chapter Two, the eight best student essays about the novel are published and distributed to the new students. As one administrator explained, "How do you become a celebrity here? Academic excellence." In addition to reading a common book, incoming students at Wheaton College have access to a Web site that contains essays written by faculty in response to the assigned text and essays written by other scholars. The assigned readings and faculty responses combine to introduce new students to the ways the academic community at Wheaton examines an issue in depth. Wheaton students told us the summer reading prepared them for a high level of academic engagement and challenge once classes started. As one faculty member put it, "We want students to become young intellectuals." These reading programs provide students with interesting and important academic challenges even before they arrive on campus.

Most first-year experience programs aim to facilitate students' socialization to the academic expectations of undergraduate education. The University of Maine at Farmington offers a first-year course, LIA 101 "Explorations in Learning." The course is optional during the summer before school begins and required during the academic year. Approximately 20% of new students enroll in the intensive summer course, called the "Summer Experience," which has a common curriculum and readings from a number of disciplines and traditions. The course creates a learning community to introduce students to the liberal arts through active discussions of the readings. Students record their thoughts in journals and discuss the readings with peers both inside and outside the classroom. The Summer Experience emphasizes the importance of communicating thoughts clearly and effectively and reflecting on and integrating in-class learning with other college experiences.

Ursinus establishes academic expectations through the Common Intellectual Experience (CIE), which is required of all first-year students. According to the academic dean, a motivating factor in the development of the CIE was "to raise intellectual discourse on campus." Thus, its
emphasis on writing and a wide range of challenging readings on complex philosophical topics sets appropriately high academic expectations. Although first-year students have mixed feelings about the course, several upper-division students described how CIE prepared them for the rest of their time at the college, especially through the development of writing skills. Indeed, as one junior told us, “The classes are pretty rigorous and the professors demanded a lot of us—a lot of time, a lot of work outside of class.”


Support to Meet Academic Challenges
DEEP schools balance academic challenge with various types of support so that students are not left to fend on their own to figure out how to succeed.

Fayetteville State University’s Early Alert System, described in Chapter Five, is one such supportive initiative. Another is FSU’s Extension Grade policy which permits students in certain introductory courses to request a temporary “extension grade” in lieu of a D or F. To be eligible, students must have signed an Extension Grade Contract with the instructor no later than the end of the fifth week of the semester and re-enroll in the course the next semester. In addition, the student must have completed all requirements of the course and any others that may be a part of linked academic support services, such as supplemental instruction. This practice provides students “the support they need to measure up to the tough academic standards,” as one staff member put it, and encourages them to take