



## Introduction

Many universities experience low retention rate among first-year students.<sup>1</sup> Research has revealed that several factors have an influence on first-year students' achievement outcomes.<sup>2</sup> To tackle the issue, many universities have developed first-year experience programs for first-year students.

The main objectives of these first-year experience programs include:<sup>3</sup>

- Assisting first-year students to transit successfully
- Building academic skills
- Increasing academic success
- Developing a sense of community

## Strategies for effective first-year student success programs

According to our research, effective first-year student success programs often adopt some of the following strategies.

### **Take a proactive and integrated approach to improve first-year experience**

Studies have shown that student aspiration and expectation regarding a university are the results of socialization prior to the first-year enrolment. This is why first-year students from under-represented groups in higher education have often experienced anxiety and uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> Thus, some Australian universities have proactively reached

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<sup>1</sup> In the US, post-secondary institutions consistently lose one-third of their students after the first year. Heller, M.L. and Cassady, J.C. (2017). The impact of perceived barriers, academic anxiety, and resource management strategies on achievement in first-year community college students. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 29(1), pp.9-32. Retrieved from [www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/fyesit/fyesit/2017/00000029/00000001/art00001](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/fyesit/fyesit/2017/00000029/00000001/art00001)

<sup>2</sup> Level of university preparedness, contextual factor (e.g. first generation university student), and familial factor (e.g. low income families) are some examples (Heller and Cassady 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Belanger, M.J., Myers, J., Stevens, A. (2016). Online first Year Experience Best Practices. Southern New Hampshire University. Online Learning Conference 2016 Feb 9-11. Retrieved from [www.pearsoned.com/wp-content/uploads/Cite2016\\_OnlineFirstYearExperiencesNEW\\_Wednesday\\_425-510PM.pdf](http://www.pearsoned.com/wp-content/uploads/Cite2016_OnlineFirstYearExperiencesNEW_Wednesday_425-510PM.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Browne, S. and Doyle, H. (2010). Discovering the benefits of a first year experience program for under-represented students: A preliminary assessment of Lakehead University's Gateway Program. Retrieved from [www.heqco.ca/en-ca/Research/ResPub/Pages/Discovering-the-Benefits-of-a-First-Year-Experience-Program-for-Under-represented-Students.aspx](http://www.heqco.ca/en-ca/Research/ResPub/Pages/Discovering-the-Benefits-of-a-First-Year-Experience-Program-for-Under-represented-Students.aspx)

out to the under-represented groups in higher education. The objectives of the outreach are to build aspiration and to shape expectation. To present a holistic view of the university experience, these programs adopt an integrated approach that involves student representatives, student support, academic, and recruitment staff.<sup>5</sup>

### **Create a continuum of services for a continuum of needs**

While first-year programs are critical to student success, studies have shown that many students will also require supports throughout the entire degree program. Thus a continuum of services is needed to respond to a continuum of needs.<sup>6</sup> Currently, many universities have adopted this approach and provided support to all students. The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) at Carleton University is an example of such services.<sup>7</sup>

### **Provide support for faculty**

Universities have recognized the critical role of teaching in accommodating diverse learners. Many support centers offer seminars, supports, and services to the faculty of first-year students. At York University, workshop sessions and Community of Practice meetings are organized for faculty teaching 1000 level courses.<sup>8</sup>

### **Build an academic monitoring system to inform early alert and effective interventions**

Some universities have started to use an academic tracking system to monitor students' academic performance. The monitoring system lets students know their academic progress, and also informs academic and support staff when to mobilize intervention. At the University of North Carolina, the academic progress of undergraduate students is closely monitored. Students who fall on academic probation after the first semester must take the "Strategies for Academic Success" course.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Krause, K.L. (2006). Transition to and through the first year: Strategies to enhance the student experience. Inaugural Vice-Chancellor's Learning and Teaching Colloquium 2006. University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Retrieved from [www.researchgate.net/publication/248771621\\_Transition\\_to\\_and\\_through\\_the\\_first\\_year\\_Strategies\\_to\\_enhance\\_the\\_student\\_experience](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/248771621_Transition_to_and_through_the_first_year_Strategies_to_enhance_the_student_experience)

<sup>6</sup> Cleyle, S. and Philpott, D. (2012). Developing an effective first year experience for students with academic challenges. Retrieved from [https://blog.citl.mun.ca/teachingandlearning/files/2015/01/FYSP\\_Initial\\_Report\\_120212.pdf](https://blog.citl.mun.ca/teachingandlearning/files/2015/01/FYSP_Initial_Report_120212.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Centre for Student Academic Support. Carleton University. Retrieved from <https://carleton.ca/csas/pass/>

<sup>8</sup> First Year Experience Working Group. (2016). A case for change: A first year experience framework at York University. Retrieved from [http://vpstudents.yorku.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FYECASEFORCHANGE\\_FINAL.pdf](http://vpstudents.yorku.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FYECASEFORCHANGE_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Cleyle, S. and Philpott, D. (2012). Developing an effective first year experience for students with academic challenges. Retrieved from [https://blog.citl.mun.ca/teachingandlearning/files/2015/01/FYSP\\_Initial\\_Report\\_120212.pdf](https://blog.citl.mun.ca/teachingandlearning/files/2015/01/FYSP_Initial_Report_120212.pdf)

## **Identify specific groups of students, determine their needs, and develop programs accordingly**

Students' have cultural and socio-economic differences. Specialized programs are therefore recommended to meet the needs of special student groups (Cleyle and Philpott 2012). Examples include an Indigenous center for Indigenous students and second-language learning services for international students.

## **Monitor and evaluate the quality of the first year experience**

To determine the efficacy of first-year programs, a common practice is to conduct a systematic, institutional program evaluation. Data derived from the evaluation measure will inform the ongoing review of the first-year learning environment (Krause 2006).

## **Three categories of first-year experience program components**

Three categories of first-year experience program components are identified in our literature review.<sup>10</sup>

- Transition-themed seminars
  - Discipline-based first-year seminars, success strategies seminars
- Learning Support Services
  - Writing center, learning communities
  - Specific support services for specific groups of students
- Proactive Communication
  - Advising - faculty advising program, peer advising

## **Examples of effective first-year experience programs**

### **Griffith University and the School-based First-Year Programs<sup>11</sup>**

Griffith University is one of the largest multi-campus post-secondary institutions in Australia, with 37,000 students from 122 countries.

Since 2005, Griffith University's School of Human Services and Social Work (HSV) has developed a range of school-based first-year programs to enhance the first-year experience for HSV students. These programs have received the long-term support of senior administration. One of the key components of the HSV-based first-year program is Common Time, an award-winning program in Australia.

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<sup>10</sup> Belanger, Myers, and Stevens (2016), COMEVO. (2018). A look at the Top 5 ranked institutions for first-year experience. Retrieved from <https://www.comevo.com/look-top-5-ranked-institutions-first-year-experience/>

<sup>11</sup> Larmar, S. and Ingamells, A. (2010). Enhancing the first-year university experience: linking university orientation and engagement strategies to student connectivity and capability. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 5(2), 210-223. Retrieved from [https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/35304/65529\\_1.pdf](https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/35304/65529_1.pdf)

- Common Time

Common Time is designed to provide students with social and academic support within a flexible learning environment which assists their transition into the university and their integration into the HSV programs.

First-year students meet with the first-year course conveners and the first-year advisors twice a week throughout the academic year to address first-year learning issues. Students' academic competence is enhanced through a structured informal academic and professional development sessions.

### **Evaluation and Results**

To determine the efficacy of the HSV-based first-year programs, the School of Human Services and Social Work conducted three surveys among first-year HSV students.

The findings indicated that the programs were effective. Experiences such as Common Time has developed positive connections with the first-year staff and established student networks. Overall, the HSV first-year programs assisted first-year students in integrating successfully into the school and university culture.

### **Lakehead University and the Gateway Program<sup>12</sup>**

Lakehead University is a Canadian comprehensive university that offers its 8,200 students a range of undergraduate and graduate programming in nine faculties.

Lakehead University introduced the Gateway program in the fall of 2007. The program is designed for students who do not meet the university's traditional entrance requirements but who exhibit academic potential. These students will receive a lot of guidance and support from the university. There are two major components in the program, which include:

- Mandatory academic advising sessions

Each student is assigned an academic advisor with whom they work throughout the academic year. Students are required to meet with their advisors monthly to work on course selection, transition issues, and goal setting.

- Student success course

Students are required to successfully complete a student success course in order to continue into the second year of their program. The full-year, non-credit course helps students to develop their academic competence and time management, etc.

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<sup>12</sup> Browne, S. and Doyle, H. (2010). Discovering the benefits of a first year experience program for under-represented students: A preliminary assessment of Lakehead University's Gateway Program. Retrieved from <http://www.heqco.ca/en-ca/Research/ResPub/Pages/Discovering-the-Benefits-of-a-First-Year-Experience-Program-for-Under-represented-Students.aspx>

## Evaluation and Results

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among students in the Gateway program. Findings suggested that the program was an effective intervention for students. It helped students develop academic skills and integrate into the campus life. At the end, the majority of students in the Gateway program continued into the second year.

Table 1. Preliminary Retention Statistics

Cohort	Headcount	Retained to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Retained to 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year
2007-2008	72	72%	60%
2008-2009	32	78%	-

Source: Browne and Doyle (2010).

## The University of Manitoba and the University 1 (U1) program

The University of Manitoba is one of the oldest universities in Western Canada. Currently, the university has 30,000 students.<sup>13</sup>

### The University 1 Program <sup>14</sup>

According to a study from the University of Manitoba, first-year students see their grades plummet by as much as 15 percentage points from high school levels for both high achievers and those with low entry grades.<sup>15</sup>

To improve the academic performance of first-year students, the University of Manitoba created the University 1 program ten years ago. It is one of the two admission options at the University of Manitoba for incoming students.

Figure 1. Admission options at the University of Manitoba



Source: University 1 First Year Centre

University 1 gives first-year students an opportunity to design an individualized schedule that meets the admission and/or first year requirements for target degree programs.

After students finish “University 1” (i.e. 24 to 30 credit hours), students can apply or transfer to another undergraduate faculty at the university. This is considered ‘advanced entry’ to a faculty or program.

<sup>13</sup> <http://umanitoba.ca/about/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://umanitoba.ca/u1/about/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> Drolet, D. (March, 2008). Conference on first-year experience. University Affairs. Retrieved from [www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/conference-on-first-year-experience/](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/conference-on-first-year-experience/)

In addition, First Year Centre, a help centre, and transitional program are designed to help students stay on track.

## **Result**

Since the implementation of the “University 1” program, retention rate among first-year students have improved. 86% of first-year students moved into the second year, compared with 82% in 1998 when “University 1” was introduced (Drolet 2008).

## **Summary**

The high attrition rate among first-year students is a challenge to many post-secondary institutions. Therefore, many universities have developed first-year experience programs to address the issue. Research has shown that effective first-year experience programs share several common strategies. When institutions have developed and implemented such effective programs, both student achievement and retention will be improved.