

Foundations of Excellence Organization Dimension Sub-Committee Report

The Foundations of Excellence (FOE) Organization sub-committee was charged with identifying the structures and policies that influence the services provided to first year students (FYS) at West Virginia University. To determine the degree to which WVU provides comprehensive, integrated and coordinated approaches to the first year experience, data were collected using the FOE surveys, interviews with student groups, and focus groups of university personnel who interact with FYS. Specifically, four groups of first-time freshmen were surveyed in mid-October 2006 during University 101 classes regarding their knowledge about university services for FYS. Two focus groups of administrators, staff and faculty met in November 2006 and were queried about their perceptions of the organizational structure and policies regarding FYS. The committee also met with a group of sophomores to better understand the difference in knowledge about university services at the completion of a full year versus the beginning of their first year.

Organizational Dimension - Structure of the First-Year Experience at West Virginia University (WVU)

In 2005, the Office of Student Affairs created the Office of the First-Year Experience (FYE), which is headed by the Associate Dean of Students. The Office of the FYE coordinates University 101, the Academic Resource Centers (tutoring centers), and Welcome Week. Campus-wide, other first-year opportunities and experiences are coordinated by other offices and include the following: a) New Student Orientation that hosts one to two day orientation prior to the first semester, b) Academic Advising which provides one-on-one and group advising sessions, c) the Probation Program which offers a second semester intervention for at-risk freshmen, d) the Resident Faculty Leader program that links faculty to freshmen in the residence halls, e) Adventure West Virginia, which provides an alternative University 101 experience, f) the Seamless Transition Program (summer bridge program for first time freshmen) and g) mid-semester rescue courses for at-risk freshmen.

These programs and services are housed within both academic affairs and student affairs, and there appears to be limited coordination both within and between these units. In focus groups with administrators, faculty, and staff, repeated comments were made regarding their lack of familiarity with many first year (FY) programs. Many faculty and staff who work with FYS were not aware of many of the resources available at WVU and this contributes to an underutilization of FY programs and services.

The lack of a central organizational structure or conduit contributes to communication difficulties between academic affairs and student affairs. There is little doubt that the individual academic units offer many innovative and effective FY programs and services. These effective programs and services could be augmented by other academic units; however, the lack of communication and possibly a lack of perceived importance regarding the FY experience by some units has prevented the duplication of effective programs. WVU has a number of channels to communicate

information (GroupWise, MIX, Vista, listservs, E-News, *The Mountaineer Spirit*), but many employees do not avail themselves of these channels. Thus, units may want to consider not only what they are sharing but the medium by which the information is best received.

Redundancy of programs and services offered to FYS does not appear to be a serious problem. Although some specific instances of redundancy were identified (e.g., the number of times units receive information about registering for classes or the last date to drop), statements gathered from focus group members suggest that when redundancy does occur it can be helpful in getting information to students.

Although faculty and staff survey responses indicate they are familiar with campus resources, evidence gathered during focus groups with faculty and staff suggest that many programs and services are not apparent faculty and staff, and that even “key players” who work with FYS are often unaware of programs and services that are offered by other units.

Organizational Dimension - Integration of the First-Year Experience at WVU

There appears to be the lack of a strategic plan to guide the FYE. This plan should support a transparent and seamless environment for both students and employees. Without such a plan employees are vulnerable to be reactive rather than proactive and students may become frustrated as they seek assistance.

Employees who have critical contacts with FYS must be properly trained and equipped for the task. This includes being aware of services offered to FYS and having the proper training necessary to keep current on best practices in the field. Although many employees in the units directly related to FYS communicate among themselves, a more systematic effort is needed to establish regular communication between units.

The challenging geographical layout of WVU’s campus, coupled with the fact there are no central information centers on the Downtown, Evansdale or Medical Center campuses where FYS can seek face-to-face help, often leaves students frustrated. Although the web site is a great source of information, students need easily accessible locations where information can be obtained. Many students now informally look to fellow students for information, which may or may not be correct.

Based on the results of FoE student surveys and student focus groups, it appears the University is good at providing FYS with information. The University should not only be concerned with providing information but also should consider when and by what venues the information is provided.

Organizational Dimension - Faculty & Staff Development Initiatives at WVU

As indicated above, WVU offers many academic, health, social and other support services designed to assist FYS in having a successful and enjoyable experience. Faculty, staff, and administrators participating in focus groups indicated that they had significant gaps in their knowledge base regarding the services available to FYS. Although efforts are underway to share information, programming and ideas through such venues as the

Critical Student Lunches, the bi-annual Advisor’s Round Table, and various listservs dedicated to specific topics or students, focus-group participants agreed that more formal organizational structures are needed to address the professional development of employees working with FYS and ultimately facilitate the integration of academic and student affairs.

The surveys completed by administrators, faculty, and staff revealed both perceptual similarities and differences that have implications for employee-development activities. These are listed point by point below.

1) A greater percentage of administrators and professional staff ranked themselves high or very high in their ability to refer students with administrative, personal, social and academic questions than did faculty and GTAs. On questions regarding help with coursework, GTAs outranked the other three. See percent of high and very high ratings for the various categories below:

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Administrators</u> | <u>Staff</u> | <u>Faculty</u> | <u>GTAs</u> |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| Administrative (Q17) | 94.4% | 84.8% | 63.3% | 60.9% |
| Academic Rules (Q18) | 83.3% | 80.5% | 77.5% | 72.5% |
| Coursework (Q19) | 83.4% | 82.6% | 78.2% | 85.5% |
| Personal (Q20) | 70.8% | 91.1% | 48% | 47.8% |
| Social (Q21) | 77.8% | 88.9% | 50.6% | 47.8% |

2) There was relative consistency regarding percentages of faculty, administrators, staff and GTAs who believe the institution rates high or very high in its ability to effectively organize itself to develop an integrated first college year that supports communication and collaboration among FY functions and between academic affairs and student affairs. The high and very high ratings are as follows:

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Administrators</u> | <u>Staff</u> | <u>Faculty</u> | <u>GTAs</u> |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| Among functions (Q22) | 45.5% | 47.7% | 40.5% | 42.3% |
| Between academic and student affairs (Q23) | 41.5% | 42.2% | 38.0% | 41.1% |

3) Faculty, staff and administrators agree that personnel and fiscal resources are sufficient for extracurricular activities but fewer agree that personnel and fiscal resources are adequate for FY courses and support services for FY students. The high and very high percentages are as follows:

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Administrators</u> | <u>Staff</u> | <u>Faculty</u> | <u>GTAs</u> |
|------------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| FY course | 46.3% | 46.5% | 42.1% | 58.2% |

| | | | | |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| (Q24) | | | | |
| Support services | 44.9% | 53.5% | 45.8% | 55.6% |
| (Q25) | | | | |
| Extracurriculars | 72.1% | 72.1% | 68.3% | 70.5% |
| (Q26) | | | | |

4) Administrators and staff are somewhat more likely than faculty and GTAs to believe that student affairs and faculty partnerships are adequate. A larger difference in opinion is evident regarding persons feeling like they have a voice in FYE decisions with administrators and staff feeling more involved in FYE decision making than faculty and GTAs.

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Administrators</u> | <u>Staff</u> | <u>Faculty</u> | <u>GTAs</u> |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| Student affairs/ Faculty partnerships encouraged (Q27) | 50.0% | 51.3% | 44.1% | 41.2% |
| Has a personal voice in FYE decisions (Q28) | 48.6% | 41.3% | 27.3% | 18.2% |
| Department has a voice in FYE decisions (Q29) | 54.5% | 53.3% | 35.0% | 47.0% |

Organizational Dimension - Evaluation of the First-Year Experience at WVU

West Virginia University does not have an overall evaluation plan in place for the FYE. Some units have their own assessment methods, but there is no consistency between units nor are there systematic efforts to share data in a meaningful way. University-wide evaluations, such as Noel-Levitz's Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI), have been administered, but not widely communicated. Faculty and staff are not aware of any university-wide consensus regarding WVU's goals in working with FYS.

Adequately assessing programs and services for FYS will require an articulated and better communicated strategic plan. The lack of an overall plan leaves WVU vulnerable to duplication of efforts whereby units operate separately rather than in unison on common goals. The committee recommends that a comprehensive plan for assessment of FY interactions and interventions be implemented and communicated. This will allow the University to analyze and utilize data as a decision making tool for first-year programming.

The FoE survey conducted in October 2006, during the third month of the freshmen experience, provides data regarding FYS perceptions about the types and organization of services available. Additionally, focus group sessions were held with FYS in University 101 classes. For the most part, FYS felt they knew what they needed to know (at the time). They knew about the Carruth Center but they did not know how to change their majors. Currently University 101 covers mental health issues but does not

include a chapter on advising issues. As a result of discussions between the FYE office, Academic Affairs and the Undergraduate Academic Services Center the fall 2007 syllabi includes a chapter on advising issues

When compared, female FYS reported only slightly higher scores than male FYS. In general, in the third month of their freshmen year, WVU students are aware of the services that are available and feel that WVU attends to their organizational needs. The data supports the institutions' efforts to add chapters on 1) academic management and 2) non-academic issues to University 101.

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Moderate to Very High</u> | <u>High to Very High</u> |
|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| WVU freshmen know where to go for answers regarding administrative questions (fin. aid, registration, tuition payment) (Q29) | 97.1% | 85.5% |
| WVU freshmen know where to go regarding academic rules questions (withdrawal/probation) (Q30) | 57.0% | 85.0% |
| WVU freshmen know where to go for help with coursework (tutoring/academic coursework) (Q31) | 90.4% | 67.9% |
| WVU addresses students' need for help with non-academic matters (money management/family matters) (Q32) | 80.0% | 53.3% |
| WVU addresses the need for institution sponsored organizations/events (Q33) | 82.9% | 54.3% |
| WVU students are referred to the right offices (Q34) | 92.2% | 70.1% |

Organizational Dimension - Financial Resources

Available funding opportunities for offices and academic departments involved in providing services for FYS appear to be inconsistent. For example, the School of Journalism uses creative, entrepreneurial financing to hire new staff to provide FY support for students entering Journalism, but other units have not or cannot create their own revenue stream. A reduction in revenue has reduced the overall budget of the FYE program, resulting in a 50% loss in the number of graduate assistants assigned to the residence halls. Whereas capital improvements like renovating Oglebay (classroom space) and Lincoln Hall (freshmen housing) are keeping pace with the increasing student base, service units like the Carruth Center for Counseling and Psychological Services, Student Health Services, Office of Admissions and Records, the Undergraduate Academic Services Center, and the Office of Financial Aid have not received corresponding increases in budget and staffing to accommodate the growing student population.

Organizational Dimension – Summary and Recommended Action Items

The FoE surveys, interviews with freshmen and sophomores, and round table discussions with university employees suggest that while there are many initiatives designed to assist FYS, several areas could be addressed to improve the FYE. The most important suggestions are provided below.

Administration & Organization

- 1) Establish an administrative position to coordinate the academic affairs and student affairs aspects of the FYE.
- 2) Develop and implement an FYE strategic plan that includes programming, staffing, funding, and assessment. This plan should take into consideration WVU's 2010 plan.

Communication

- 1) Create a systematic plan for faculty and staff from academic and student affairs to interact on a regular basis. For example, have FY staff attend Assistant/Associate deans meetings once each semester to update academic administrators on FYE programs and services. Conversely, invite academic Assistant/Associate Deans to attend a student critical contacts meeting each semester.
- 2) Establish regular communication with parents during the FY regarding academic and student affairs.
- 3) Establish a help desk or center on every campus where all students can easily access information.
- 5) Develop an "Ask Jeeves" type of search engine on the university homepage.
- 6) Encourage more faculty to use their MIX email account or have their MIX email forwarded to their GroupWise account.

7) Coordinate MIX, Groupwise, and Vista so that faculty and students have a single way of communicating rather than three.

8) Encourage faculty to use Vista for grade reporting during the semester, which would help students track their progress.

7) Create a plan that examines when students will need specific information and how the students would like that information distributed.

Faculty/staff development

1) Establish regularly scheduled roundtable or joint meetings with the FYE service providers for collaboration, sharing of new programs, services, and activities.

2) Integrate information regarding the FYE at WVU in the new administrator, faculty, staff, and GTA orientations. Augment new administrator, staff, faculty and GTA orientations with on-going workshops that focus on the philosophy, programs, advising, service learning opportunities, and effective advising in the FYE.

3) Create opportunities for administrators, staff, faculty, & GTAs to interact about the first-year experience so that academic affairs and student affairs develop a closer, more mutually supportive and integrated relationship.

4) Reward administrators, staff, faculty, and GTAs for involvement and leadership in first-year workshops and programs.

5) Encourage more faculty to teach University 101.

Financial Resources

1) Adequately fund the support and programming to FY students as well as the providers of the services.

2) Employ a grant writer or increase a currently established position to seek outside funding for FY programs.

3) Earmark funding for:

a. staff to attend professional conferences on FYE so they can network with other universities and gain information on best practices;

b. training and workshops for all staff involved in providing services to FY students;

c. staffing to develop and maintain a FYE website; and

d. staffing to coordinate all services for FY students to eliminate duplication of services as well as recruit university personnel who may be willing to serve as adjunct advisors and mentors.

Assessment

- 1) Implement a comprehensive plan for the assessment of FY interactions and interventions. This will allow the University to analyze and utilize the data for FY programming.
- 2) Evaluate University 101 general studies sections based on Fall 2006 post-test for University 101 general studies students.
- 3) Establish a Consumer Relationship Management database to better track a student's progress through the FY, but could also be used through graduation.

Committee Members

Anita Mayer – Co chair

Cy Logar – Co chair

Lynn Housner

Brenda Thompson

Morgan Cira

Cheng Khoo

Ian Kellems

Regan Bruni

Bonnie Anderson