

20<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the First-Year Experience  
Hawaii's Big Island, Hawaii  
July 9 – 12, 2007  
**Conference Report**

Submitted by: Andrea Lynch, Asst. Prof. Business and Technology and Trip Coordinator  
Submitted to: Thomas N. Wilfrid, Vice President for Academic Affairs

**Attendees:**

Dr. Donna Hall, Ed.D. – LA Faculty  
Andrea Lynch, MBA – Business/IT Faculty

**Executive Summary and Recommendations:**

The conference on the First-Year Experience (FYE) was an interesting learning experience for me. During the conference, I attended many 60-minute formal presentations, participated in informal group networking sessions during the lunch and dinner times, visited and networked with colleagues at the Poster Session which was arranged like a vendor's exhibit area, met and talked with key players in the study of student outcomes in their first year of college such as Dr. John Gardner, Mary Stuart Hunter, and Dr. Patrick Terenzini, and discussed the benefits of what we were learning and how this will best benefit Mercer with my traveling colleague, Dr. Donna Hall. I can see the potential we at Mercer have to make our FYE a model program and I have a renewed commitment to working collaboratively with my colleagues to make this happen.

Throughout the conference, I observed that there were common ideas that were reiterated in both the formal and informal sessions that I participated in. These common ideas were that:

- First-year Experiences are effective. Much of the assessment data that I observed showed that students who were involved in some type of First-Year Experience course received better grades in subsequent courses than students in those same courses who did not take a First-Year Experience course. The data also showed that the retention rate of students from freshman to sophomore year was greater after a collaborative First-Year Experience had been implemented. The research is clear that a collaborative, comprehensive First-Year Experience improves student transition to college, supports academic success, and facilitates successful student goal oriented completion of college.
- First-year experience needs to be comprehensive. It is much bigger than the silver bullets such as a freshman seminar course. It includes policy, curricular, and co-curricular efforts. Isolated silos of initiative are missing the point. A student's first year begins with recruitment and ends with the start of class in the second year of school. It involves many departments working together to create a common message.
- First-year experience needs to be collaborative. It is important to have a working commitment across the college. No one department / person are responsible to the First-year experience; it is everyone's problem. It is not just the concern of

counselors that students are successful in their first year. Student services alone cannot address many of the factors that contribute to student success such as curricular and classroom experiences. It is imperative to the success of a first year experience that administration, student services, and academic services are working together.

- First-year experience needs to be systemic. We need to think of this as a system and not a program. It is less about “what” we are doing and offering the students but more about “how” we are doing it. It is more than a course or orientation or service learning. It is the synergy that is produced when all of these and more are integrated and working together.

I have several recommendations which should be considered toward advancing the Mercer County Community College FYE based upon the information I gained from the conference, my perceptions of our needs, opportunities and resources, and my nearly 9 years of work experience with Mercer.

#### Administrative Recommendations:

1. An FYE committee needs to be formally created and charged. This committee should be a standing committee that is a part of the college governance process.
2. The new Vice President for Academic Affairs needs to be committed to FYE and involved from the start.
3. Involve FYE in the strategic plan. Directly address the FYE by defining long term goals and establishing an action plan.
4. Create a vision of a Mercer FYE that includes all divisions and is for all students. It is important to breakdown the stigma that this is for “at-risk” students.
5. It might be helpful to begin now to consider grants that would support the FYE efforts. It may be necessary in the near future to hire a FYE coordinator.

#### Policy Recommendations:

6. Create a vision where FYE is not optional for students.
7. More faculty need to attend FYE seminars and staff development sessions.
8. If an FYE committee is properly formed and charged and a clear vision is created then specific policy recommendations should be a natural consequence of their work.

#### Instructional / Curricula Recommendations:

9. A significant part of the FYE needs to be instructional. Faculty need to be encouraged to develop alternative teaching and learning environments such as learning communities, service learning activities that are integrated into discipline-based courses, and clustered and/or paired courses.
10. At Mercer, the classroom is the locus of community. For some students this is the only place where they will experience a sense of community. Faculty need to be aware of this and encouraged to use cooperative learning activities so that students can feel connected to the college.
11. Develop a second College Success Seminar, CSS102. Model this course after some of the successful examples presented at the conference. The course should be developed to:
  - a. provide students with college –level credit,

- b. meet requirements for Gen. Ed.
- c. are writing intensive with college-level rigor,
- d. encourage the use of technology, writing, and critical thinking

#### General Recommendations:

- 12. Representatives from Mercer should be preparing to present at the next international conference.
- 13. Present this information to the college community in an effort to continue dialog and gain support.

#### **Detailed Summary:**

I found it noteworthy that there was no single, overwhelming representation present at the conference. Four-year universities and community colleges were in attendance. I sat in on presentations for programs that were designed for at-risk, college-ready, and honors students. Counselors, advisors, program coordinators and directors, admissions personnel, Deans, faculty from all disciplines, and even a few college presidents were in attendance. Some programs are funded and get considerable money to implement their programs and there were other schools that didn't even have a budget. Some programs were staffed with a formal FYE coordinator, others were led by counselors, and others still were coordinated by faculty members. Some programs had multi-department collaboration and still others were struggling to get the administration and/or faculty to see their value. Some programs had a mandatory freshman seminar course and freshman orientation and others were still working to get approval for a course. Some schools have been paying attention to FYE for many years and others have just begun exploring what the hype is all about. Among the delegates in attendance there was representation from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, China, Australia, Japan, and Egypt; all of whom are looking to improve their First Year Experience.

I participated in many learning opportunities during the conference and have selected the most significant formal sessions that I attended to detail below.

#### **1) Opening Session and Keynote Address**

*Pat Terenzini, Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior Scientist in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Penn State University.*

Dr. Terenzini is co-author (with Ernest T. Pascarella) of *How College Affects Students* (Jossey-Bass, 1991, 2005), the two-volume synthesis of more than 30 years of research on the impacts of the college experience on students. The 1991 volume was selected as “one of the 100 most important and influential books about US colleges and universities published in the 20th century.” Dr. Terenzini has also published more than 100 articles in refereed journals and made more than 150 presentations at scholarly and professional conferences.

Dr. Terenzini's presentation was entitled, “Missing the Forest for the Trees: Rethinking What Influences Student Learning”. The presentation began with Dr. Terenzini outlining the 6 questions driving the review of his first work, *How College Affects Students*

(Jossey-Bass, 1991) and that led to his second book, *How College Affects Students (Vol. 2)* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). The questions were:

1. Do students change
2. How much change is due to college?
3. Do different institutions have different effects?
4. Do different experiences have different effects?
5. Do the same experiences have different effects?
6. What are the long term effects of college?

Major results of this research are as follows:

- *Curricular and classroom experiences have an impact on academic and cognitive outcomes.* Among the instructional approaches that have the greatest impact on academic and cognitive outcomes are supplemental instruction, computer-based instruction, and collaborative / cooperative learning. Among the instructor behaviors that are most effective are clarity and understandableness, expression and enthusiasm, preparation and organization, and availability and helpfulness.
- *Out-of-class experiences have an impact on psychosocial growth, attitude/value change, and moral reasoning.* Experiences that have the greatest impact are interactions with peers, especially those of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, interactions with faculty members, community service, cultural awareness workshops, leadership development experiences, and involvement in co-curricular activities.
- *Out-of-class experiences have an impact on academic and cognitive outcomes.* The four out-of-class experiences that have a positive impact on academic and cognitive outcomes are 1) quality of student effort, 2) interaction with peers, 3) interaction with faculty members, and 4) “diversity” experiences. Both on- and off- campus part-time employment had a neutral impact on academic and cognitive outcomes. There were 2 out-of-class experiences that have a negative impact on academic and cognitive outcomes; fraternity memberships and intercollegiate athletic (revenue –producing sports).
- *Curricular and classroom experiences have an impact on psychosocial growth, attitude/value change, and moral reasoning.* Courses such as women’s studies, diversity and ethnic related studies, learning in multiracial / ethnic classrooms, service learning, membership in racial/ ethnic organizations, active and collaborative teaching methods, and study abroad enhance the overall student psychosocial growth, attitude/value change, and moral reasoning.

These findings illustrate that it is important that we value both in-class and out-of-class experiences as significant. Both types of experiences have a positive impact on a student’s overall development both cognitively and psychosocially. Students who are developing in this manner are more likely to have a good transition to college, have academic success, and stay in school until they reach a student-defined completion point.

In addition to these findings, Dr. Terenzini outlined 6 characteristics that influence student learning. According to Dr. Terenzini, “virtually ALL student experiences that influence learning involve one or more of these characteristics”. He further concludes that learning involves “multiple influences, operating in multiple settings, affecting multiple outcomes.” Experiences that best effect student learning will:

1. Entail encounters with challenging ideas and people. Students need to experience other points of view; something different from themselves.
2. Require active engagement with these challenges. Students need to get involved. Expecting students to create reflective responses to their challenges is an important learning opportunity.
3. Be provided in a supportive environment.
4. Stress real-world activities.
5. Entail social / relational activities
6. Are found everywhere unbound by time or place.

It is important to note that students NEED diversity and differences of opinions. The implication for us is that we structure opportunities for students to interact with people who are different from themselves, experiences that are different from those they have previously been exposed to, and learning methods that challenge them to think.

According to Dr. Terenzini, the implications for practice and policy that we as practitioners and policy makers must consider are that we:

1. Align what we do with what we know. Refer to the 6 characteristics of learning as touchstones.
2. Use out-of-class experiences as a significant source of cognitive development, persistence, and program completion.
3. Resist the desire to create “silver bullets”, those stand-alone initiatives that are often disconnected from a student’s total experience. It is important to keep in mind that there are no simple solutions.
4. Think systematically and collaboratively. It is important to include, inform and involve all departments in creating programs and policy.
5. Concentrate on the first year. According to Dr. Terenzini’s 2005 findings, 60% of an entering cohort who withdraw from college within the first 5 years do so before the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. In addition, 4-year colleges and universities lose on average about 29% of their students before the start of their second year of school.

Dr. Terenzini’s work is significant and important. If we take his advice and concentrate on including the 6 characteristics of learning into courses and student experiences, encourage and support use out-of-class experiences in our academic offerings, and think systematically and collaboratively about our student’s first year we will be building a system of success for our students.

## 2) **Primer for First-Time Attendees**

M. Stuart Hunter, Assistant Vice Provost and Executive Director, National Resource Center on the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina and  
 John Gardner Executive Director, Policy Center on the First Year of College, Senior Fellow, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina

John Gardner started the session with two key points of encouragement for first time attendees at this conference: 1) get the “Big Idea” and stay with it and 2) you don’t have to be powerful in the organization to make a difference. He also gave a brief history of how this movement toward a First Year Experience has evolved. In 1970 the US invaded Cambodia. Students at the University of South Carolina protested and were gassed by the National Guard. Following this attack, students barricaded the president of the college in his office so that he might hear their demands. As a result, the president decided that there would never be another riot. He wanted to “humanize” the college and make it more student centered. In an effort to teach students to love the campus, a course called “University 101” was offered. An interesting by-product came out of this course; administrators found that it was enhancing student retention. Thinking that they were on to something, an organization was formed and in 1983 the first FYE conference was held.

Several key points were brought out in this session:

- In order for a FYE program to be most effective it is necessary to remove silos of initiative and bring together people and programs. There needs to be collaboration. An attendee asked how we can get rid of these silos. Both Mary Stuart and John Gardner responded with 3 significant points. 1) College leadership sets the standard. It is important that they are involved and committed to seeing a FYE program. Among the college leadership, the academic leader’s commitment is critical. There are also opinion leaders who may not hold a formal position. These people need to be involved because they can be very effective at swaying opinions. 2) It is important to get this topic into the college governance process. Having FYE as part of the strategic plan ensures college buy-in. 3) Create an environment where there can be collegial discussion about FYE such as an FYE task force. The more people are talking about it the more opportunity there is for collaboration.
- The behavior of our students tells us a lot about our college. When the students choose to riot and assault the president, their value of the college was very low. A challenge was presented to us during this session to consider the behavior of the students at our respective colleges and determine what that tells us about the school.
- It is important to use assessment to find out what we are doing. It is most significant when the assessment comes from an independent person outside of the program. An important finding was revealed about the University 101 course at University of South Carolina; student retention was improving. Again we were challenged to assess our programs and see what is uncovered.
- The First Year Experience has become synonymous with retention. There is a current trend in the FYE programming to move from retention to excellence in education and student learning. There is a move to look beyond cognitive predictors of success and measures of student outcomes toward non-cognitive measures such as emotional intelligence/maturity.
- Another challenge was for us to look at what the institution values. In order to best know what a college values, follow the money. Is FYE a standing committee or an ad hoc committee or task force? If this is important to the college there needs to be a move from an idea toward implementing policy.

- The FYE begins with recruitment. We were challenged to consider our common message. It was suggested that we create a dummy student and inquire about the college, register for classes, etc.; test the systems that are currently in place. Observing the correspondence that comes to that student will be very telling about the common message we are sending to our first year students.

3) **The Community College Longitudinal Retention (CCLR) Study: Phase 1**  
*Claire Ellen Weinstein, Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, the University of Texas at Austin*

Dr. Weinstein is the author of a well respected assessment instrument, the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI). She and a team of researchers are currently working on a 5-year longitudinal study, the Community College Longitudinal Retention (CCLR) study. The study will begin July 2007 and end in July 2012. An 8-page student survey will be given to all entering students (approximately 27,000) at the community college, San Antonio College in Texas.

The current FYE literature examines factors affecting students' success in their first year and focuses on predictive variables of student outcome such as parent's education level, socio-economic status, and prior school achievement. We can predict how well a student will be in school statistically by looking at these variables.

This new study is looking to identify prescriptive measures which are causative in nature such as measures of learning styles, ability to generate academic achievement motivation, and attitudes and expectations for what college will be like. With this information we could measure a student's learning style and help them to develop more effective learning strategies. This study is important because we may not be able to change that a student is a first-generation college student but we will be able to help him or her develop more realistic expectation for what college will be like. I was able to get a copy of the 8-page survey for anyone to review.

4) **"Comm" and Stay: Creating and Sustaining the First-Year Experience at a Community College**  
*Paige Wilmeth, First-Year Experience Coordinator, Kapi'olani Community College, Hawaii*

The FYE at this Community College represents four things: 1) Common ground, 2) Communication, 3) Community, and 4) Commitment. The common ground is that there is support of administration; FYE is a part of the tactical plan. The first year students are identified and required to take a mandatory freshman orientation. A hold is placed on the student's registration until this orientation is completed. There is also collaboration with Academic Affairs to infuse FYE into the curriculum.

The communication means that there is a Task Force where faculty and staff are discussing important issues. The community refers to the creation of FYE strategic plan. In order to build and retain commitment, debriefing meetings are held to evaluate and improve the program. A full-time FYE coordinator was hired.

This session was interesting to me because I learned how this grass-roots effort of faculty and staff was able to implement policy change by making freshman orientation mandatory.

**5) Meeting the Needs of Underprepared First-Year Students in College-Level Courses: A Pilot Study**

*Jack Thomas, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Middle Tennessee State University*

The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) is the state governing body that monitors public higher education in the state of Tennessee. TBR mandated that developmental courses in English and math be removed from the curriculum at Middle Tennessee State University. This presentation was the Academic Affairs solution to removing developmental education from the curriculum and the assessment data that shows the overall effectiveness of the change.

The solution they arrived at was very similar to the learning community model developed by Dr. Donna Hall here at Mercer. The two levels of math remediation, totaling 6 credits were condensed into a newly-developed 100-level college course for 3 credits / 5 contact hours. The same model was applied to English. Some sections of the 100-level course were specifically for developmental and others were not. The data presented shows that developmental students taking the 100-level course had higher overall grades than the non-developmental students who took the same course. In addition, it was found that discontinuing the remedial courses had no significant impact on student retention from freshman to sophomore year.

This presentation was significant because it showed that underprepared students can succeed by taking college level courses if the courses are structured in this format. This is significant for Mercer because we are motivated to use many methods to reach our most at-risk students.

**6) Cast a Wide Net: Creative First-Year Retention Initiatives**

*Carrie Zimmerman, Director, First-Year Experience and Assistant Dean, Texas Christian University*

The approach that was used at Texas Christian University was to first do an in depth analysis of the students who were not returning to school after their first year. They wanted to focus their retention efforts on the group of students with the lowest retention rate. The study revealed a few surprises and a few predictables. The students who were most likely not to return were the low academic achievers (less than 2.0 GPA), students who attended the late (August) orientation, and non-Greek female students who live with sorority members. They were surprised to find that out-of-state students did not have a low retention rate.

This school presented 12 components to their first year retention initiative.

- a. Academic orientation – 2day sessions, ongoing from June to August, mandatory



- b. Summer leadership camp – outdoor camping experience, optional but about 70% attend
- c. Common reading
- d. Truth or consequences – 90-minute session divided by gender
- e. Chancellor’s assembly – candlelight service where light of knowledge is passed from faculty to students, mandatory
- f. Ice Cream social
- g. Dean’s weekly email to all freshmen students
- h. Freshman seminar – 8-week, not for credit course
- i. First home football game and tailgate
- j. Dinner with the Vice Chancellor
- k. House calls – faculty and staff visit dorms
- l. College 101 – full day workshop for at-risk students

This session was interesting because it showed the breadth of programming that is possible.

**7) Comprehensive College Success Courses Increase Student Persistence, Self-Confidence, and Satisfaction**

*Marsha Fralick, Counselor and Personal Development Chair, Cuyamaca College, ElCajon, California*

I found this session to be useful because this First Year Experience course (Personal Development 124) receives high school and college credit. The course meets Gen. Ed. requirements because it has significant academic rigor, it covers a broad scope, and it articulates with nearby universities. 1600 students in 56 sections take this course each year. The course has a high level of technology; the majority of sections are either online or blended. The course has a reputation for quality and is recommended by counselors and faculty and is transferrable to the California State University.

Data was also analyzed and showed that the persistence rate of students who enrolled in the fall and returned in the spring was higher for students who took the course as compared to the general population.

The course is successful because it has the following key elements:

- Transferability – Students are motivated to enroll in a course that meets graduation requirements and can be transferred toward a bachelor’s degree. The course does not focus on study skills but emphasizes career and life planning.
- Career exploration – students are motivated to enroll because they get needed help with career planning. Students are more likely to persist in their education when they have a clear academic goal.
- Institutional support – this course is supported because the college values student success. There is also high enrollment in the course which generates revenue.
- Counseling support
- Reputation – Former students have taken the course and recommended it to others.

It was very beneficial to get the materials for this course. I would recommend that we consider this course when enhancing our College Success Seminar.

**8) Honors Programs and the First-Year Experience**

*Gregory Waters, Professor of English and Director University Honors Program, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ*

This session made me very aware that FYE is truly for “all” students! This presenter was from New Jersey and spoke about the honors program at Montclair State University. One of the challenges they are facing is that the honors program creates an attitude of elitism among the students. They are especially diligent about offering the freshman seminar course to honor’s students in mixed sections. It is important to expose like-minded students to differences of opinion.

Much of this round table discussion dealt with the living learning communities, helicopter parents, issues of entitlement among the students, and recruiting students of color into the program.

**9) A Twenty-Year Program: The Highs and Lows, and Now Learning Outcomes**

*Gerry Strumpf, Director of Orientation, University of Maryland College Park*

In 1986 University of Maryland offered their first freshman seminar course. It was an experimental 1-credit course and students who took the course had higher GPA’s and retention rates than those who did not take the course.

Twenty years later the course has no funding, it is not transferrable but there is total college support. The course is mandatory in 4 schools and is offered in 90 sections. The data shows that the course improves student success.

Attending this session was significant for me because I observed another successful model of a First Year Experience course.

**Conclusion:**

My overall opinion is that the FYE concept is very broad and dynamic. It covers many areas and touches almost all parts of the college. There is no one “right” way to have an FYE because it is defined by the needs of the students and the vision of the college leadership. FYE can work for our students to set a standard of academic excellence improve attitudes, skills, and expectations, build relationships with college personnel, increase retention and improve academic success. It needs to be collaborative, comprehensive, and systemic in order to be effective. It begins at recruitment and ends with the start of classes in the sophomore year.

We at Mercer are realizing that it is time for us to have a more comprehensive, multi-level First-Year Experience program. Mercer is fortunate to have some of the important components of a successful FYE already in place, such as the College Success Seminar,

New Student Orientation, Academic Alert System, Peer Mentoring, and a supportive President.

It is my opinion that we at Mercer are very much in the middle of the pack with regard to our First Year Experience. We are ahead of some colleges because we are offering many of the critical components of a successful FYE. However, we are still working to get overall college-wide acceptance and collaboration which puts us behind other colleges. I believe that we have what it takes to become an exemplary FYE program. There is more work to be done as I have described in the “Executive Summary and Recommendations” section of this report and I am confident that we have what it takes to make the Mercer FYE a model program.