

A History of the First-Year Experience in the United States during the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Past Practices, Current Approaches, and Future Directions

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Abstract

This article examines the historical factors in the United States that combined to form the postsecondary movement known today as “the first-year experience.” Included within this historical overview is an examination of the first year of university study in the United States prior to World War II; a discussion about the changes to American higher education, especially during the 1960s, that resulted in the launch of a first-year experience movement; a review of the events leading up to and reasons for the creation of several centers focused on improving the first year of college in the latter portion of the twentieth century; and recent developments in the first-year experience in the early twenty-first century. The authors then provide a synopsis of the current state of some of the initiatives proven to make a difference for first-year students. Finally, they make some suggestions about what lies in the future for the first-year experience in the United States.

Introduction

Like higher education in the United States itself, the first-year experience in American higher education has been a dynamic and contextually-specific movement – one that has consistently changed to meet the needs of students, institutions, and the broader society of which they are a part. This essay tracks that history, with particular emphasis placed on events that occurred during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The authors’ pragmatic intent for providing this overview is to furnish readers – especially Saudi higher educators and policy makers – with perspective on the first-year experience’s past that can be used to shape the lives of present and future first-year students – in the United States, Saudi Arabia, or elsewhere. While it is understood that not all the lessons of the American first-year experience are transferable, it is hoped that knowledge about the successes and the failures of the movement in the United States can be used by others – especially in Saudi Arabia – to enhance and expand the efforts that they undertake on behalf of first-year students in their own countries.

The authors use the phrase “first year experience” to describe a multiplicity of efforts used by American universities during the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to enhance the academic and social success of first-year students. The first-year experience is both cultural- and time-specific – that is, it varies by institutional context at any point in time, and it varies within a specific institution over the course of time. Because of this, within the past ten to fifteen years, the expression has been used by many American educators in ways that were not intended by John Gardner, the developer of the phrase. For example, any search by Saudi educators of the US literature would find that the phrase “first-year experience” is also widely used to describe a particular initiative in the curriculum or co-curriculum, most notably something known as a “first-year seminar” which will be described later in this article. In short, there is much ambiguity associated with a definition for “the first year experience.” But the authors of this article are using this concept to describe the entirety of an educational institution’s approach to the beginning university experience: everything it does with and for new students.

For the purposes of this article, the phrase “first-year experience” is not a single program

or initiative, but rather an intentional combination of academic and co-curricular efforts within and across postsecondary institutions. It is used to name a purposefully connected set of initiatives designed and implemented to strengthen the quality of student learning during and satisfaction with the first year of college – the stage in American higher education during which the largest proportion of university dropout occurs (Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot 2003). The first-year experience has contributed both meaningfully and measurably to the ability of universities in the United States to educate and retain students and maintain or enhance institutional financial well being. For this reason, the first-year experience is a movement that should be examined by both educational scholars and practitioners alike from across the globe – persons who are interested in enhancing learning and, as a by-product, increasing retention and institutional financial well being. Another fundamental context in which this “first-year experience” must be understood is that it is part of US efforts to expand access to post secondary education and simultaneously improve university completion rates through enhanced student “retention.” As we shall make clear in this article, the “retention and completion agenda” has been the single greatest motivator for US institutions to adopt the first-year student success-focused efforts.

Background History of Higher Education as Context for the First-Year Experience in the United States

History of Higher Education in the United States Leading up to the First-Year Experience Movement

From the founding of Harvard College – the oldest university in the United States – in 1636 through most of the nineteenth century, higher education in the America was largely an experience enjoyed by a select group of privileged, white, land owning males. The combined impact of mid-nineteenth century reform efforts, abrupt technological and societal changes associated with the Civil War, and the sweeping economic and social effects of the industrial revolution produced both changes in the structure of American higher education – which adopted a model similar to that of the German research university – and a gradual but steady alteration in the size and composition of the postsecondary student body in the United States during the latter part of the nineteenth century. While still not an experience in which the

masses participated, postsecondary education in the United States on the eve of the twentieth century was pursued by a steadily increasing number of men and a gradually increasing number of women. In short, if they displayed their merit, and had the means, they could attend – although for most non-Caucasians, attendance occurred in racially segregated institutions (Brubacher and Rudy, 1997; Rudolph, 1990).

The merit-based stage of American higher education continued up to the onset of the Second World War. During that conflict, however, war-related training needs brought tens of thousands of men and women to university campuses for accelerated educational experiences that would help the United States in its war effort (Cardozier, 1993; and Rudy, 1991). In addition, the government poured massive sums of monies into the universities to sponsor war-related research. This large-scale, federal role in higher education during the Second World War was a mere shadow of things to come.

With the end of World War Two in sight, the federal government began to plan for the return of millions of soldiers. In an attempt to offset the impact that this large group of job-seeking men and women would have on the American economy, the government introduced what would come to be known as the G. I. Bill – a program that provided financial resources for returning soldiers to both attend universities and support their families while doing so. The post World War II and Korean War G. I. Bills transformed the relationship that the federal government had with higher education and the purpose of higher education in the United States itself (Bennett, 1996; and Olsen, 1974). During the 1940s and 1950s, postsecondary education became an accepted norm for many American citizens, and with the “democratization” of higher education came increased enrollments and resources. The stimulus for this change was the Second World War and the ensuing Cold War. It must be noted that the United States’ federal government enacted the higher education-related funding and access legislation during the 1940s and 1950s to address economic and political pressures – civil rights would not become a significant higher education access-related goal for the federal government until the 1960s. Nevertheless, on the eve of the 1960s, American higher education had been transformed. No longer was it an experience offered by a small cluster of private institutions to a limited number of privileged students. It had become something promoted by the federal government, enjoyed by a considerably larger segment of the

population, and provided by an expanding number of public institutions.

During the 1960s, five factors combined to expand postsecondary education at a rate that had not been seen before. These factors included: 1) the growth of the overall pool of the university-age students due to the rise of the post World War II Baby Boom generation; 2) the robust economy during the 1960s – an economy that created an ideal job climate for university graduates; 3) the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – which resulted in the federally enforced desegregation of higher education; 4) the legislation associated with President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program, in particular the Higher Education Act of 1965 – which created the legal basis for federal financial aid programs and academic preparation and support initiatives for economically disadvantaged students such as the TRIO programs (see: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>); and, 5) the war in Vietnam – during which, draft deferments were granted to men who pursued a postsecondary degree, and many young men chose going to attend a university over going into combat. In addition, the G.I. bill was again authorized, and many who served in Vietnam used it to gain access to higher education upon their return from the war.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore these factors in any additional depth. However, it must be stated that, when examined collectively, that these five factors all combined to bring steadily increasing numbers of students to campus from varying backgrounds. By the end of the decade, university enrollments totaled nearly 8.6 million students – more than double the 1960 level (American Council on Education, 1984, 58). New campuses opened across the nation at a previously unimaginable rate; and many of these new institutions were “community colleges” – institutions that were designed to award two-year associate degrees. Within the ranks of the growing student body were many non-white and low-income students – students who added racial and socioeconomic diversity to the previously heavily white, upper and middle class campus populations. Simply making room for a large group of diverse students in such a short period would have created strains. The social, racial and political factors of the era brought the tensions to a boiling point.

During the late 1960s, student activists energetically displayed their displeasure over racial inequality and the federal government’s Vietnam War policies by staging protests on

campuses across the United States. On many campuses, these protests became violent, and at some universities, such as at Kent State University and South Carolina State College, they resulted in student deaths. The violent protests and their human costs shook public confidence in higher education. Searching for ways to curb student unrest and restore their position in society, many American postsecondary institutions began experimenting with more student-centered approaches to education. One such institution, the University of South Carolina, responded to student unrest on its campus by instituting a first-year seminar named University 101 – a type of course that will be described later in this article. While its faculty and staff did not know it at the time, this action would place South Carolina at the vanguard of a new movement in American higher education – the first-year experience movement.

Re-Emergence of First-Year Seminars and the Emergence of the First-Year Experience

First-year seminars – small enrollment courses that help beginning students with their academic and social transition – were not new to American higher education in 1972, the year in which the University of South Carolina initiated its University 101 seminar. The initial first-year orientation seminar was launched at Reed College (in Oregon) in 1911. Slowly gaining momentum, by the 1915-16 academic year, four other American postsecondary institutions followed Reed's example and offered credit-bearing first-year orientation seminars of their own. By 1925-1926, eighty-two American universities did (Brubacher and Rudy, 1956, 331) – including Princeton, Indiana, Stanford, Northwestern, Johns Hopkins and Ohio State (Gordon, 1989, 185). By 1938, nine out of ten freshmen in American universities were required to take them (Gordon, 187). However, this would be the apex of first-year seminar offerings during the first half of the twentieth century. Following the middle part of the 1930s, the courses began to wane in both number and, where they still existed, scope. The first-year experience scholar/practitioner Virginia Gordon shares that the courses were reduced “because of faculty objections to offering credit for their ‘life adjustment’ content” (Gordon, 188). In the minds of those who objected to them, the first-year seminars were too remedial and non-academic in scope to be tolerated. By the early 1960s, the first-year orientation seminar was practically non-existent on American university campuses (Gordon, 188).

It took a campus riot to convince Thomas Jones, the President at the University of South

Carolina, to bring back a first-year seminar at his institution. In his words, the University was offering the course to “teach students not to riot” (Watts, 1999, 246). In its early days in the 1970’s, the course was not without its opponents. Faculty critics decried the course’s lack of “structure” and pointed out that it was missing any credible evaluation results that could convince them of its educational value. With little surprise, when Jones announced his intention to resign following the end of the 1974 academic year, the future existence of University 101 was not guaranteed. Jones and his administrative colleagues did what they could to preserve the course and shore it up for the future. One such action was finding a person to serve as the course’s director. Of the four names considered for the search, the first two persons to whom the job was offered declined to take it. The third person who was offered the position was one of the original faculty members who had been trained to teach the course – an untenured faculty member by the name of John Gardner (Watts, 274).

Over the next few years, Gardner set out to add more traditional course structure and academic content to University 101, boost student enrollment, and provide credible research data to prove that the students and the University benefited from offering the course. He succeeded at accomplishing all three objectives – working with Paul Fidler, a faculty member and administrator at the University of South Carolina who focused his research efforts on student outcomes, to conduct the assessment. By the end of January 1975, Fidler and his associates provided outcomes results showing that there was a statistically significant positive difference on retention for University 101 students when compared to students who did not take the course. In other words, students who started at the University of South Carolina during the fall of one academic year were more likely to return for the start of the next academic year in the subsequent fall if they had enrolled in the University 101 first-year seminar. The outcomes also showed that students who took the course were better informed about the University, made more frequent use of the University’s resources and services, and participated in extracurricular activities to a greater extent than non-participants. With these outcomes presented to him, the President decided that the course would continue as long as student interest and need continued to exist (Watts, 274-84).

In the robust enrollment years of the 1960s, retention-related findings such as those associated with University 101 might have actually hindered the longevity of the course as

opposed to helping it because administrators and faculty may have assumed such efforts were a waste of time due to the fact that departing students could easily be replaced. However, by the late 1970s, concern over retaining students, and with them their tuition, was beginning to mount. The end of Vietnam War-related enrollments and the tailing off of the Baby Boom generation meant that the double-digit annual enrollment increases that were common in the previous decade shrank to a more typical two-to-four percent increase. In addition, many higher education enrollment analysts predicted that by the 1980s American universities would experience enrollment decreases (Centra, 1980, 18). Consequently, as a means of preserving themselves and avoiding drastic financial cutbacks, universities focused more attention on efforts that would help them retain the students that they already had. Proven retention-enhancing programs were sought out and, when found, quickly imitated. And, because of Gardner's tireless efforts to share outcomes associated with University 101 at regional and national conferences, the first-year seminar was one of the most frequently copied retention enhancing initiatives.

In 1981, after conducting numerous presentations about the University of South Carolina's first-year seminar at an array of professional meetings over the previous five year period, assisting a host of other postsecondary institutions to launch their equivalent of the course, and finding no literature or higher educator professional association focused on first-year students, John Gardner decided to host a national conference on the first-year orientation course in Columbia South Carolina. Approximately 175 higher educators from the United State and Canada came to take part in and listen to more than thirty descriptions of courses comparable to University 101. The conference exceeded its organizers expectations – prompting Gardner to make a decision to offer the conference on a recurring basis under the title “The Freshman Year Experience.” By doing this, he gave the first-year experience movement an annual focal point and, just as important, a name – one that was flexible enough to accommodate the growth and increased scope of the movement in the years to follow (Watts, 343).

The first-year experience and its by product, retention, both grew in importance in the United States during the 1980s as a result of increased attention to educational performance and decreased direct federal funding for higher education – all of which was spurred forward

by the administration of President Ronald Regan. In particular, changes in federal financial aid funding policies – that made retaining the individual student of greater and greater significance – and increasing public attention to the quality of education brought about by reports such as *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* released in 1983 by the Presidential Commission on Excellence in Education helped to fuel both interest in improving the first-year experience and, as a by product, attendance at the annual conference and the variety of professional meetings associated with the first year of college (Zeller, 1984, 6).

As a result of the steadily increasing interest in the first-year experience, John Gardner began actively advancing a plan to create a research and “resource” center for first-year experience at the University of South Carolina. After nearly two years of planning, the National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience opened in July 1987. Soon thereafter, the Center launched its Freshman Year Experience Newsletter. During the same year, it also began the scholarly, blind refereed, *Journal of The Freshman Year Experience*. Hitting desks and library shelves in fall 1988, the journal, like the newsletter, found a ready and eager readership. In an effort to provide research reports that exceeded twenty pages in length, the center also initiated a monograph series. To date, the monograph series includes over fifty titles – several of which have multiple editions (Watts, 380). The newsletter, journal and monographs provided an important and previously non-existent literature base for higher education administrators and faculty in the United States who were interested in research-based approaches to improving undergraduate education. The emphasis on quantifiable reports, particularly as found in the *Journal*, satisfied, in a distinguished scholarly fashion, academe’s demand for credibility and the growing call for accountability and evidence of effectiveness (Watts, 386-87).

During the 1990s, increased public pressure for educational accountability combined with changing demographics and further efforts to expand educational access to create new growing pains for America’s higher education institutions. Specifically, a series of books, notably Allan Bloom’s 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and reports, such as *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* issued by the Wingspread Group in 1993 and *The Student Learning Imperative*, published by the American

College Personnel Association in 1994, prompted educators to concentrate on showing measurable improvement within the core functions of the educational enterprise – student learning and development (Johnson Foundation/Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993; and American College Personnel Association, 1994). This quality movement – in part, an extension of the quality movement in American industry – was endorsed with vigor by the major postsecondary professional associations in the United States, especially American Association for Higher Education, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The emphasis on quality came at the same time as a wave of new immigration, principally from Latin America and Asia, and increased racial diversity in higher education brought less prepared but nonetheless eager students to American campuses.

To meet these challenges, John Gardner and his colleagues in the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition broadened both the scope of the Center’s activities and the diversity of the projects that the center undertook within this expanded scope. The Resource Center continued to conduct the national and regional conferences that helped to establish the movement – with the annual combined attendance at these events numbering in the thousands. It also added an array of monographs, journal articles, and a host of newsletters and occasional papers that addressed issues important to the success of underrepresented students and those in need of supplemental academic support and services. Reflecting the technological innovations of the era, in 1994, the Center launched an internet listserv for first-year issue-oriented faculty and staff, established a website and created a satellite-transmitted videoconference series – all of which continue to be offered today – the listserv alone having over seventeen hundred subscribers (Hunter, 2001).

With an ear on the increasingly louder call for accountability and an eye on the growing influence of accrediting agencies – organizations that serve to certify the quality of the institutions that make up American higher education – John Gardner and his colleague, Betsy Barefoot, launched a second center focused on the first-year experience in 1999 – the Policy Center on the First Year of College (now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education). With funding provided by three American philanthropic organizations –The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Atlantic Philanthropies and Lumina Foundation for Education – the Policy Center on the First Year of College expanded the first-

year experience movement in the United States by focusing squarely on helping institutions use assessment to improve the entirety of what they do as part of their respective first-year programs. Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year (FoE) is an example of one of the assessment-based project projects that the Gardner Institute's staff created to achieve their mission. Since 2003, FoE has helped over 250 American college and universities develop and implement a research-based, aspirational, model for the entirety of the first year. The comprehensive, assessment-based plans of action that institutions generate by participating in FoE are subsequently implemented with the aim of increasing first-year student learning, success, and retention (see: <http://www.jngi.org/institute/our-history/>).

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the same types of philanthropic funding agencies that supported the Gardner Institute's development of Foundations of Excellence were also supporting broader higher education policy and practice initiatives across the United States – projects with implications for the ongoing development of the first-year experience movement. Specifically, organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and Kresge Foundation, began using their resources to transform higher education in the United States – so that the U.S. would not only be among the world's leaders in access to higher education, but it would once again lead the world in the rates at which its citizens also complete a postsecondary certificate or degree. The “Completion Agenda” that has emerged out of these organizations efforts has greatly influenced higher education in both the states and the nation as a whole (see: http://www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025.html).

President Barak Obama made this completion-focused agenda abundantly clear to the American people during his first joint address to Congress on February 24, 2009. During that address, Obama set a goal that the nation should once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020. According to U.S. Department of Education projections, reaching this goal means that the proportion of college graduates in the U.S. will need to increase by fifty percent nationwide by 2020. This means that eight million more persons will need to earn associate's and bachelor's degrees by the end of the current decade. Achieving this ambitious goal will require higher education institutions and systems to implement far-reaching reforms to improve college success and, ultimately,

degree completion while ensuring quality (see: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education>). And the first year of college is the foundation on which the success of the Completion Agenda must be built.

In the 2012 edition of its annual report, National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates, ACT noted that first-to-second year degree rates across all higher education institutions in the United States was 66.5%. In other words, more than a third of all first-year students did not return to the college at which they began their studies the subsequent year (ACT, 2012). This is by no means a one-year trend. ACT has conducted its retention and completion analysis since 1983, and first-to-second year retention rates have remained relatively flat over the near thirty year period examined for the study (ACT, 2012). In short, in the early 21st century, the first college year is period in American higher education during which the largest proportion of dropout occurs. The realization of national education policy goals hinges, at least in large part, on the ability of higher education institutions in the United States to make sure that first-year students succeed.

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into all the factors that further complicate this first-year student success charge. For purposes of this submission, it suffices to share that the financial implications of the Great Recession that started in 2008 – specifically the decline in state and federal financial support for higher education since that year – and increases in military veteran enrollments and the needs that those veterans bring with them to higher education institutions following their service in the Persian Gulf and/or Afghanistan, have combined with the Completion Agenda-related policy directives to add complexity to and enhance the need for increased student success during the first college year and beyond. With this context in mind, the nation's ability to successfully support and improve first-year student success will be a key indicator of whether the Completion Agenda's admirable goals will be realized or left unfulfilled.

As evidenced by the content on the preceding pages of this article, from its beginnings to its current state, the first-year experience movement has been a story of innovation and adaptation meeting the postsecondary education needs of a steadily diversifying and increasingly accountability-oriented society. In the process of doing so, the first-year

experience has become a part of the fabric of higher education in the United States today – it has both shaped and reflected the broader U.S. postsecondary culture of which it is a part. The next section profiles some of the contemporary initiatives that are used in varying ways across postsecondary institutions in the United States to continuously reframe the first-year experience.

Current Practices for First-Year Students in the United States

This section includes overviews of the initiatives and approaches used by many higher education institutions in the United States to support and enhance first-year student success. For the readers' convenience, the content is divided into three sub-sections. The first, Pre-University Programs for First-Year Students, examines the academic and social efforts employed by universities in the United States to help their first-year students with the immediate transition into postsecondary education. In the second sub-section, First-Year Initiatives Focused on the Curriculum and/or the Faculty, information is shared about academic-based programs and services that benefit first-year students directly, or indirectly through the faculty who teach them. The third and final sub-section, Structures, Services and Activities that Benefit First-Year Students, details the out-of-class initiatives in which students participate, institutional approaches to the delivery of services, and organizational structures that enhance the first-year experience. In all cases, footnotes are provided to the readers so that they can readily find sources that will provide more in-depth information on the first year-related topics found within each sub-heading.

Pre-University Programs for First-Year Students

New Student Orientation Programs – New student orientation programs are a core feature of the first-year initiatives found in American universities. According to the National Survey of First Year Practices, ninety-six percent of all postsecondary institutions offer some form of orientation program (Barefoot, 2005, 52). While the duration of the programs and their components may vary from institution to institution, these initiatives generally provide an introduction to the academic and social aspects of the institution – either during the months immediately preceding the students' first days on campus or during the first days themselves.

Given the timing during which they are conducted, orientation programs serve as one of the earliest forms of outreach and intervention offered to first-year students in the United States. Frequently, orientation programs include time for an explanation of the curriculum, course placement testing and registration, an overview of campus resources and services, and opportunities to meet with staff, faculty and students (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). A major influence on the development of orientation programming in the United States is the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA). NODA's website (provided at the end of this article), publications and conferences are excellent resources for practitioners in the United States or elsewhere who would like to learn more about the ways in which new students can and should be successfully oriented to a university setting (see: Barefoot, Griffin and Koch, 2012, 6-10).

Parent/Family Orientation Programs – Like orientation programs for students, parents and family orientation programs provide resources and information about a specific institution. The information is tailored to meet the needs of parent and/or family members so, in turn, they can help their respective first-year students succeed. While the approaches to and reasons for parent/family orientation vary by institution, generally, universities in the United States use these programs to devote some attention to the changing roles and relationships between parents and students issues and what these roles mean for a successful transition to a university (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005).

Summer Bridge Programs – Summer bridge programs are initiatives that offer incoming first-year students a structured transition from high school to college. These programs traditionally occur in the summer that immediately precedes the fall term during which the students will matriculate. Focused on developing academic skills and awareness of campus resources, summer bridge programs are targeted at participants who come primarily (but not necessarily solely) from student populations historically at greater risk of not succeeding in universities in the United States – such as racial minorities, females in male-dominated fields and students from low-income backgrounds. The first summer bridge programs were started as part of the TRIO and Upward Bound efforts that came into existence with the Civil Rights and Higher Education Acts of the mid 1960s. Exemplary models are presently found in the City University of New York system and at the University of California at Berkeley. Summer

bridge programs have somewhat different goals than orientation programs, and they last longer as well – spanning weeks compared to orientation programs that last for a few days. While they vary in structure across the universities that offer them, these programs generally include intensive academic experiences – in many cases they include credit-bearing courses. Additional components found across summer bridge programs include residential living experiences, time management sessions, study skills programming, academic and career planning, programs that help students network with faculty, staff and other students, and efforts that familiarize students with campus resources and services (Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, 401-405; see also Barefoot, Griffin and Koch, 2-5).

Summer or Common Reading Programs – More and more American higher education institutions – particularly those with a liberal arts foundation – provide their incoming first-year students with a book to read during the summer before the students’ first year of college. Frequently, these institutions will invite the author to campus for convocation – a ceremony that sets the tempo for the rest of the year. In addition, the books are commonly discussed during orientation and/or within a first-year course, such as a first-year seminar or an English composition course in which students are required to enroll. With these components, summer reading experiences are offered as a means to increase students’ academic integration and to provide a common experience at the onset of the first-year of college. Both of these intended outcomes are associated with greater levels of student success (see: Laufgraben, 2006).

First-Year Initiatives Focused on the Curriculum and/or the Faculty

Academic Advising – Academic advising is considered by many higher education practitioners in the United States as one of the most important ways that first-year students interact with a representative of their respective universities. Through academic advising, students gain vital curricular information and guidance that helps them shape their academic programs of study. Advising services can be offered in a variety of ways – face-to-face, on the telephone, on-line – and they can be provided in a number of formats – through a central advising office, by faculty, by professional staff, by peer advisors. Regardless of how academic advising is provided or by whom it is offered, if done correctly – in a manner that helps students put their course selections within the context of a broader life plan – it

will enhance student success (King and Kerr, 2005). A major influence on the development of academic advising in the United States – both as a service and as a profession – is the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). NACADA’s website (provided at the end of this article), publications and conferences are excellent resources for practitioners in the United States or elsewhere who would like to learn more about the ways in which academic advising helps new students succeed.

Developmental Education – Drawing from the fields of developmental psychology and learning theory, developmental education includes programs and services that: enhance academic preparedness; provide diagnostic evaluation and corresponding course placement; decrease social barriers to education; and, augment learning skills. Because of this, developmental education strategies have collectively served as a method for providing opportunities to first-year students who are not totally prepared for the rigors of college. In essence, developmental education is based on the premise that some first-year students are better prepared than others, and that those who are less prepared can nevertheless be successful in college if they are offered the appropriate forms of support. Some of the reasons why students may need to take advantage of developmental education offerings include coming from a low-income background or from a family in which no one has ever attended a university. While not without controversy (Complete College America, 2012), developmental education has provided and continues to provide access to higher education for millions of first-year students in the United States as it has been shown to enhance their academic achievement and retention (Highbee, 2005). Two professional groups that have had significant influence on developmental education in American universities are the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE).

Distance Education and On-Line First-Year Courses – During the last decade, American universities have taken steps to make use of technology to offer classes to and provide support for their first-year students. These approaches are particularly used by two-year institutions – fifty percent of all two-year colleges report offering on-line courses in which their first-year students can enroll compared to nine percent of the four-year colleges and universities (Barefoot, 2005, 57). On-line education requires that educators

focus concerted attention to delivering services such as academic advising and orientation to students in a careful manner – so that students feel connected to the university and that their instructional and support needs are being met. While the curricular and programmatic aspects associated with offering on-line courses to first-year students is relatively new to American universities, some exemplary programs and services exist. These include Brigham Young University’s web-based student planning system; Pennsylvania State University’s automated notebook system; Ball State University’s on-line degree audit system; and Pima Community College’s video academic advising system. When planned and supported well, on-line courses and services can help first-year students succeed and make progress toward completing their degrees (Kramer and Childs, 2000).

Faculty Development – Issues of faculty preparation are directly connected to efforts that focus on enhancing first-year student academic success – particularly those efforts that are related to or based in the classroom experience. For that reason, many universities in the United States offer workshops or other professional development activities that are intended to help their faculty enhance the way they teach first-year students. According to the results of the National Survey of First Year Practices, sixty-two percent of all postsecondary institutions indicated that they had provided development initiatives within the five years leading up to the survey (Barefoot, 2005, 54). An example of a first-year student-focused professional development initiative is found in the “Teaching First-Year Students” resources and podcasts offered by Vanderbilt University (see: <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/interactions/firstyears/>). Often, the pedagogical enhancements made within the context of these development initiatives lend themselves to teaching in general. Thus, by improving the manner in which they teach first-year students, faculty can serve all students better.

First-Year Seminars – Offered by eighty percent of all four-year and sixty-two percent of all two-year institutions, first-year seminars are the most commonly implemented curricular strategy designed for first-year students (Barefoot, 2005, 56). In addition, they are one of the most researched, and as a result, most measurably successful of all the first-year initiatives presently employed in American universities (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, 400-3). First-year seminars come in many forms. Some, like the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina, are extended orientation courses. Others, such as at Princeton University, are

focused on intensive study of an academic topic or theme. By definition, seminars are small in size – but in some cases institutions involve more than twenty-to-thirty students in their first-year courses. Regardless of their form or size, all variations of first-year seminars are focused on assisting students in their academic and social development and with the transition to college. Specifically, first-year seminars help students learn about a subject or combination of subjects. In the process, students learn about themselves and their institutions in ways that can meaningfully increase their ability to succeed and, ultimately, graduate (Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot, 2005, 275-91).

Learning Communities – Learning Communities are defined as two or more linked courses in which the same small group of students is enrolled. Often focused on an academic theme or major, learning communities are found at thirty-seven percent of all four-year and twenty-three percent of two-year institutions (Barefoot, 56). Large research-focused universities, such as Purdue University, make use of learning communities to help make their environment feel smaller and more manageable for their first-year students. Learning communities benefit students by connecting the content in their courses in a complimentary manner. In addition, students are likely to make friends with the other students in their learning communities – making the formation of study groups easier. Finally, learning communities facilitate the interaction of students with their faculty. When combined, these benefits result in enhanced learning, greater satisfaction with the university experience and, a by-product, higher retention rates (Barefoot, Griffin and Koch, 20-24; Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot, 371-90; Pascarella and Terenzini, 109-10 & 422-23). An important source of information on learning communities in the United States is the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.

Service Learning – Service learning is a pedagogical approach that ties together voluntary service to the community with credit-bearing, academic activities. In essence, the approach relates meaningful community service actions to course materials through reflection activities such as directed writings, class presentations, and small group discussions. Technically then, service learning becomes mandatory, non-remunerative work that is incorporated by faculty into their credit-bearing courses. What differentiates service learning

from regular community service is the fact that the service activity is intentionally placed in context with the curriculum and, as a result, it reinforces course objectives as it enhances civic responsibility. Many universities in the United States make use of service learning with their students, with over a third of them – 37% – reporting that they involve their first-year students in these service learning endeavors (Barefoot, 57). Doing so helps first-year students to: gain a better understanding of who they are; develop a sense of connection with their new university community; create a sense of cohesiveness with their classmates; and, apply their course content to “real world” situations. Thus, service learning helps first-year students integrate into their new communities as well as understand and apply academic content (Zlotkowski, 2005, 356-70; see also Barefoot, Griffin and Koch, 35-38).

Supplemental Instruction – Pioneered at the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1976 and replicated across American higher education and numerous countries abroad, Supplemental Instruction, or “SI,” is a peer-led, out-of-class learning assistance program that is targeted at “historically difficult courses”. What differentiates SI from other forms of academic assistance, such as group or individual tutoring, is that SI is focused on high-risk courses, not high-risk students. In other words, institutions use Supplemental Instruction to address student performance issues in courses that historically have high rates of low grades – with low grade being defined as thirty percent or more of the grades being “F” for failure, “D” for unsatisfactory or “W” for withdrawal. SI is targeted primarily but not exclusively at introductory level courses. SI does not “water down” content or lower expectations. In fact, by requiring students to attend the review sessions outside of regular class time, and usually for no credit, students actually put in more work. The SI leaders – the session facilitators – are students (either undergraduates or graduate students) who previously earned a high grade in the course. By combining study skills concepts with the course content, the SI leaders help the session participants apply proper study strategies to the material they are learning in their classes. Consequently, Supplemental Instruction helps first-year students learn how to learn at the same time that it reinforces what they should be learning. As a result, SI improves both grades and overall retention rates Hurley, 2005, 308-19; and Pascarella and Terenzini, 106-7).

Structures, Services and Activities that Benefit First-Year Students

Early Alert/Warning Systems – According to Barefoot, Griffin, and Koch, early warning systems are used by institutions to monitor student academic performance and guide appropriate intervention. Often affiliated with courses in which students experience great difficulty, “early warning/academic alert systems take on many different forms across and even within institutions. Some rely heavily on technology, others on direct human observation and actions, and still others on a combination of human and technological monitoring and intervention” (2012, p. 25). In addition, “early warning/academic alert support may also vary within an institution across student classification levels (class standing) and by student subpopulations” (2012, p. 25). Some limitations with early warning systems have to do with the degree to which monitored behaviors are physically observed by faculty and/or other staff – because they can only act on what they see – and the frequency with which warnings occur. Often, early alert programs do not occur as early as their names imply – they may rely on mid-term grades, and these grades may account for as much of half a course grade. Thus, interventions may occur when it is too late to make meaningful changes in student performance and the grades they earn. Arkansas State University hosts the National Clearinghouse for Early Alert Initiatives in Higher Education with a website, listserv, and other resources dedicated to providing “a collective forum for higher education where faculty and professionals can join discussion of and access research on early alert strategies” (National Clearinghouse for early Alert Initiatives in Higher Education, 2010).

Learner Analytics – Learner analytics is one of the newest and most promising forms of early warning / early intervention tools. Learner analytics tools can mitigate the aforementioned issues associated with early warning systems due to their ability to provide more timely feedback and their ability to do so with great granularity. An example of this is Boise State University’s Student Success Monitoring System – a tool that draws on data from the institution’s student information system, learning management system, and a variety of other sources on a routine basis to monitor performance and guide intervention in twenty-eight challenging courses (Chacon, Spicer & Valbuena, 2012). Purdue University’s Signals project is another innovative and successful form of learner analytics that is making a difference in course success. When compared to a sample that controlled for the volunteer

effect, students in courses with Signals earn more A and B grades, fewer D or F grades, make greater use of help resources, and graduate sooner (Pistilli, Arnold, & Bethune, 2012). With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, EDUCAUSE has placed great focus on promoting and researching analytics, most recently devoting an entire issue of its bi-monthly publication to analytics efforts.

First-Year Activities such as Athletics, “Greek Life” (membership in social organizations that have existed on American residential campuses for several hundred years and which are designated with Greek letters), and Residential Life – Once first-year students settle into classes, and in some cases even before they do, they will begin to identify out-of-class activities in which they will get involved to help enrich their lives and make meaning in their new collegiate worlds. In some cases, this may include involvement in student organizations and clubs, including leadership thereof. Other students will take part in intercollegiate athletics – defined as being a member of an athletic team. With nearly two-thirds of all American universities indicating that they provide housing for their first year students, it should come as no surprise that students also get involved and identify with their residence halls. In addition to these activities, first-year students also involve themselves in fraternities or sororities – referred to as “Greek” organizations because of the Greek letter used to name many of these fraternal groups. In all cases, particularly Greek life, participation in these out-of-class activities can have a negative impact on first-year students – as involvement can cause some students to lose focus of their academic responsibilities. Greek life, in particular, has long been associated with stereotypical concepts of “the intoxicated university student” – despite the fact that actual involvement in Greek life is declining due to the financial costs associated with membership and heightened concerns about socially inappropriate behavior and the liability risks and costs associated therewith. However, when placed into the proper context, especially with the help of faculty and staff who intentionally set out to do so, involvement in activities such as those described about can compliment learning, accelerate socialization and, as a result, increase college success and retention for first-year students (Barefoot, 57-59).

Institutional Policies, Attendance and Mid-Term Reporting – The policies that American higher education institutions adopt and enforce have a significant and direct impact on the

success of their first-year students – particularly those policies that are associated with class attendance and grade reporting. When sharing and reflecting on the results of the National Survey of First-Year Practices, the researcher Betsy Barefoot asserted the following about these practices:

Although both class attendance and whether students receive midterm feedback on academic performance are issues that affect students beyond the first year, many would argue they have disproportionate impact on first-year students. Both research and mountains of anecdotal evidence support the importance of class attendance, especially in the first year, and yet only 39 percent of institutions report an official attendance policy. Only about 4 percent have an attendance policy for first-year students that “differs in any way from the institution-wide policy.”

Over 60 percent of all institutions collect and report midterm grades to first-year students, thereby giving them an important source of feedback on their academic performance. Some educators would argue that midterm feedback is too late: first-year students need some idea within the first few weeks of the term about their performance, hopefully in time to withdraw from classes that are “hopeless” (Barefoot, 55).

Where American universities have recognized the power of their practices and acted to augment their approaches accordingly, it is no surprise that first-year students are often better informed and, as a result, experience higher levels of success. This is a valuable lesson to institutions seeking ways to enhance student learning and success – often small changes in administrative policies and reporting patterns can make a big difference.

Living-Learning Communities/First-Year Living Environments – Many universities in the United States operate on-campus residence halls in which their students elect to live for a part or all of their educational experience. An increasing number of the institutions that provide such living arrangements also opt to offer unique spaces and/or services for the first-year students living in these residence halls. Frequently called living-learning communities, these offerings vary in form, but generally attempt to create an emphasis on an academic theme by including such aspects as faculty interaction, academic and/or cultural programs, academic

advising, and mentoring. In some cases, particularly at large, research-focused universities such as Indiana University, some of the first-year classes are taught in the residence halls. Efforts of this nature connect aspects of the student learning experience to their living environment and, in the process, they seem to blur the boundaries between students' academic and social lives. Another example of a combination of the academic and residential enterprises is the "Residential College," such as the Preston Residential College at the University of South Carolina. Residential Colleges serve as a location in which students and faculty both live and learn. They differ from learning communities in that some of the faculty actually live in the residence halls with the students. Whether offered as a living-learning community or as a residential college, intentionally connecting first-year students' residential and academic realms tends to lead to greater success in both the academic and social aspects of college and, in turn, higher retention (Zeller, 2005, 410-27; and Pascarella and Terenzini, 109-10 & 420-22).

Additional Comments on the Current Practices for First-Year Students in the United States

Having shared information on the practices most frequently used to help first-year students succeed in American universities, we must note that not all of these initiatives and approaches are found in every higher education institution in America. More often than not, institutional resources and culture combine to produce environments in which only some, or perhaps even one, of the approaches are employed. In addition, even when initiatives exist commonly across institutional settings, there is great variation between the respective programs and services described in the preceding section. There is no "magic pill" – no single effort that can help all first-year students across all universities in the United States.

But even though differences exist, there are commonalities – if only at a broad level – that allow universities to adopt successful approaches and adapt them accordingly. Those making decisions at their institutions about which programs to adopt will do well to keep in mind the unique cultural contexts in which they are working so that they can select initiatives and strategies that fit their respective environments and needs well. And, as the last section of this article reveals, every effort should be made to intentionally connect the various components that constitute the first-year experience at a particular university.

Conclusions About the Past and Recommendations for the Future of the First-Year Experience in the United States

Since the early 1970s, faculty and staff working with the first-year experience in higher education institutions in America have succeeded in establishing and advancing a national reform movement with numerous participants coming from hundreds of institutions. With help from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, many colleges and universities in the United States have made the first-year experience a higher priority. Faculty and staff working with first year programs have established and sustained the growth of a scholarly literature base and a national network of higher educators focused on a common concern – the legitimization of a unique field of endeavor, inquiry, and action called the first-year experience. Simultaneously, they have encouraged and supported the growth of an array of programs and services to enhance the experience of first-year students as discussed in the previous section of this article. But there is still much work to be done.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is still too much failure in the first-year of college in the United States. Attrition is still too high. The first year is still not sufficiently valued on some campuses. Intentional, mission-focused design is lacking in the first-year experience at most institutions. And, with a number of initiatives, for example the signature intervention known as the first-year seminar, it can be argued that much more attention needs to be paid to the educational quality of such offerings. Assessment is not practiced throughout first-year experience activities in the United States and, where it is practiced, decisions are often not being made on the basis of the findings. Assuming that once the first year is over, students no longer need support, the first-year experience ends abruptly – often leading to an inevitable drop in performance during the second year of study known as “the sophomore slump.” Although it is widely recognized now that the beginning experience does make a great difference in student outcomes, nevertheless, most institutions have not subjected themselves to a rigorous “self-study” of the first year (with the exception of about 250 institutions that have engaged in the self-study and improvement planning process known as “Foundations of Excellence” designed and offered by the John N. Gardner

Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. Clearly, there is an enormous unfinished agenda associated with the first-year experience across all institutional types in the United States. In short, it is time to apply the lessons of the past to the present and, in the process of doing so, make necessary structural, policy, curricular, and pedagogical changes to better meet the needs of our students so that they have fuller and richer futures. To achieve this goal, we recommend that faculty and staff associated with the first-year experience movement focus attention and effort on accomplishing the following objectives.

1. Make assessment an integral part of the first-year experience – The noted first-year experience scholar, Betsy Barefoot, has often mused during her presentations, that the first-year experience cannot be an “assessment free zone.” Making use of nationally normed instruments, American universities must strive to collect data on the implementation and performance of first-year programs and on the first year of college in general. Examples of these instruments include: the Your First College Year (YFCY) survey produced jointly by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles; the First-Year Initiative (FYI) Benchmarking Survey developed by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and Educational Benchmarking, Inc.; the First-Year Data Audit Toolkit created by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education; the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) directed by researchers at Indiana University in the Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning; and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) launched as a project of the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin in conjunction with the NSSE efforts at Indiana University.
2. Link the first-year experience with the university’s mission by focusing on measurable forms of learning excellence and as integral part of this focus, conduct a comprehensive self study of the institution’s approaches to its first-year students. – American universities must envision a more effective experience for their beginning students and, in conjunction with this, assess the degree to which they actually

achieve excellence in accordance with these statements and aspirations. To do this, institutions of comparable types should work collectively to develop a research-based, comprehensive model of the first year that is attainable and immediately usable to increase student learning, success, and retention. In addition, they must develop a method to measure and evaluate their respective levels of achievement in accordance with this model. An example of a process that helps universities focus on measurable forms of learning excellence is the Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year project presently being conducted by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (see: <http://www.jngi.org/foe-program/>). This is a process that uses a set of aspirational principles for excellence in both the design and measurement of the beginning college experience; it includes a process for conducting a comprehensive self study which leads to an “action/improvement” plan to both confirm existing practices that are educationally sound, and to produce change to improve educational effectiveness. Such a system could be directly tied into the accreditation process that each institution undergoes on a routine basis – a process that provides the public and potential employers with a reasonable assurance of the quality of a specific university’s academic programs and graduates. External evaluation correlates the high implementation of a Foundations of Excellence-generated action plan with significant increases in first-to-second year retention rates (Drake, 2010).

3. Examine and positively transform “gateway courses” – In their nearly seventy years of combined work in the first-year experience movement, the authors have come to conclude that improving institutional and student performance in high enrollment, undergraduate, foundation-level courses that typically enroll first- and second-year students – a.k.a. gateway courses – is the “great untapped frontier” of the first-year experience movement (Koch, 2012, 21). These courses enroll high numbers of students within and across course sections – often first-year students – yet, for decades, the rates at which students earn unsatisfactory grades in these courses – alarming rates as high as 40%, 50% and even 60% – have remained unchanged. Lack of success in gateways courses is directly tied to significantly lower rates of degree completion (Adelman, 1999 and 2006). While some of this lack of success

may be due to lack of student effort, higher education institutions bear some of the responsibility associated with these failure rates as well. The time has come for institutions to focus on what they can control – faculty selection, instructor professional development, academic support efforts, course policies, etc. – and directly address gateway course success. One approach for doing so is the newly initiated Gateways to Completion effort. Initiated by the John N. Gardner Institute in 2013, this effort provides a structured analysis and gateway course improvement plan implementation process (see: <http://www.jngi.org/g2c/>). Whether through a structured process such as Gateways to Completion, or through a self-generated approach, U.S. colleges and universities must begin to intentionally and directly address the success of first-year (and other) students in gateway courses if the nation is to realize its Completion Agenda goals.

4. Make intentional connections between the first-year programs within a given college or university – Just as John Donne asserted “No man is an island,” we assert that no first-year program can realize its full potential by operating alone. While American colleges and universities have done a laudable job at starting programs and offering services for first-year students, far too often these initiatives are atomized and disconnected. A truly effective first-year experience is more than the sum of its parts. Students can, and often do, make sense of these various pieces on their own – and unfortunately they do so at both their and the institution’s peril. The best learning occurs when an institution intentionally connects its first-year components in a meaningful and explicit manner. For example, rather than allowing them to operate on their own, a university could maximize the benefits of its Supplemental Instruction and first-year seminar programs by imbedding both within a learning community. Research conducted at Purdue University shows that when connections of this nature occur, retention outcomes are greater than when students participate in any of the programs in a stand-alone fashion (Koch and Drake, 2009). In essence, regardless of where the various portions of an institution’s first-year programs may be administratively housed, efforts must be made to create an integrated first-year experience that reflects both how and what universities want students to learn.

5. Treat the first-year experience as a part of a broader continuum – The first-year experience is but one of a number of transitions that a student will undergo while she or he attends a university. Far too often, American higher education institutions focus heavy attention on helping their first-year students and then believe that the rest of their students' educational experience will take care of themselves. The initial analysis of the first-year experience movement as a response to student needs must continue to evolve into a much broader conversation, with connections made with efforts that are evolving to address the “sophomore slump” and the senior year experience. In essence, just as universities must make efforts to link their first year programs together in an intentional manner, so they should make sure that the combined package that these linked programs comprise – the first-year experience – is intentionally linked with what occurs in other years of study.

These recommended objectives are germane to the unique needs of higher education in the United States during the second decade of the twenty-first century. But despite their context, they should not be ignored by university faculty and staff in other countries who are seeking to enhance their respective nations' own first-year experience. Simply stated, the future directions that we suggest for the first-year experience in the United States tell the reader a great deal about where the movement has gone and where it still needs to go. In the process, it suggests ways and approaches that others might want to consider when they craft their own version of action on behalf of first-year students in their own unique countries and institutional settings. On that note, we hope that our article has provided you with valuable resources and insight to help you achieve your first-year experience-related objectives in Saudi Arabia, and we wish you and your students great success and gratification in this important international enterprise.

Internet-Based Resources Associated with the First-Year Experience in the United States

- College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) – <http://www.crla.net/>
- Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) – <http://www.ccsse.org/>
- Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year – <http://www.jngi.org/foe-program/>

- Gateways to Completion – <http://www.jngi.org/g2c/>
- Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) – <http://www.heri.ucla.edu>
- International Center for Supplemental Instruction – <http://www.umkc.edu/asm/si/index.shtml>
- John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education – <http://www.jngi.org>
- National Academic Advisors Association (NACADA) – <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/>
- National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) – <http://www.nade.net/>
- National Clearinghouse for Early Alert Initiatives in Higher Education – <http://registrar.astate.edu/earlyalert/>
- National Resource Center for Learning Communities – <http://registrar.astate.edu/earlyalert/>
- National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) – <http://www.nodaweb.org/>
- National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition – <http://www.sc.edu/fye/>
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) – <http://nsse.iub.edu>

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