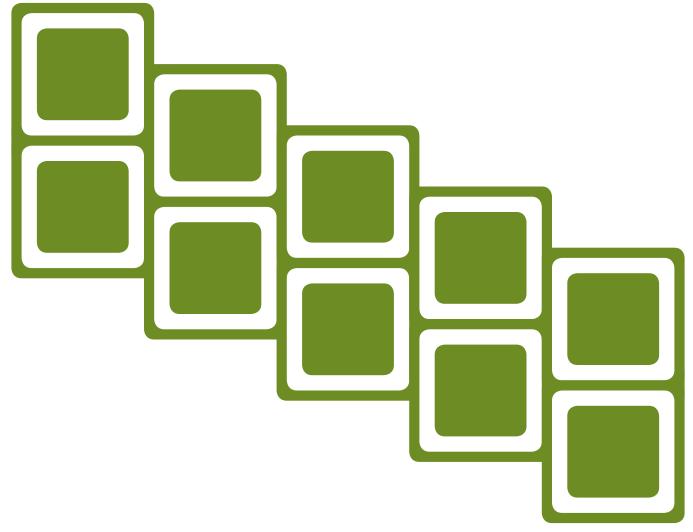Summer Academe

Best Practices

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Building a Summer First-Year Experience Program from Start to Finish

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Abstract

This conference paper examines how to implement a summer first-year experience program. We address practical, hands-on steps on how to initiate and sustain a credit-bearing summer session program for entering freshman and transfer students at the institutional level. The step-by-step process is not limited only to first-year student programming; it may be beneficial for launching other institutional initiatives. Also discussed are the benefits of internal and external institutional collaborative efforts and strategies for creating a summer first-year experience program that aligns with institutional culture.

Background

Administrators are often challenged to quickly plan and execute a campus-wide initiative with little or no institutional frame of reference, resources, or precedent. Such a challenge can be daunting, even overwhelming. In this paper, a step-by-step process is outlined to jump-start a summer first-year program from start to finish.

In fall 2011, senior administrators at Virginia Tech charged the director of summer and winter sessions to explore the feasibility of launching a summer session first-year program that would

- address capacity issues in general education courses,

- facilitate support of retention initiatives for student success,

- provide opportunities to connect faculty with small first-year classes,

- foster faculty collaboration,

- respond to state-level concerns for optimizing physical resources year round, and

- expose students to the value and potential of summer enrollment early in their academic career.

The director investigated benchmark summer academic programs designed for entering freshmen at peer institutions across the United States. The program that emerged as a framework and was compatible with the goals of Virginia Tech was Penn State University's Learning Edge Academic Program (LEAP). After conferring with colleagues on both campuses, Virginia Tech Summer Academy took flight in 2012 (Virginia Tech, 2015).

In 2015, summer session administrators from Purdue University and Virginia Tech began discussions around the fundamental components for developing a summer program for entering students. Professional counterparts from both institutions met to further explore this topic, just as faculty and staff at Purdue were preparing to welcome its first cohort in Summer Start in 2016 (Purdue University, 2015).

By engaging collaborative forces, each of the counterparts discovered mutually beneficial methods to promote student success on their campuses. Suggested action steps are delineated for the first three years in establishing a summer academic experience for new students. These suggestions are not exhaustive and may vary by institutional type, administrative goals, and funding availability. Further, the action steps are not exclusive to first-year student programming. Readers may find them informative for strategic planning to craft other initiatives.

Rationale for Developing First-Year Programs

Student Benefits

The motives behind a summer first-year transition program can vary, depending on the institution; however, they are typically rooted in benefits for students and the institution. Some students may benefit from the program, given the resources laid out for them in a cohort-based environment. Resources such as peer mentors and programming / activities are singular to their experience. Other resources such as advising, tutoring, recreation, and counseling usually run year round and are also available to them.

Other students may find the opportunity to enroll in credit-bearing courses appealing because it gives them a head start on degree completion ahead of the rest of the first-year entering class that will arrive in the fall. Still others may be attracted to early move-in, small classes, and more relaxed surroundings due to absence of the full campus student population.

Institutional Benefits

Aside from student benefits, the institution itself has the potential for great outcomes from offering a first-year transition program. First, it can instill a sense of institutional pride early in the undergraduate experience. According to the Gallup-Purdue Index Report (2014), involvement in these types of first-year programs may engender emotional attachment to the institution, which holds the promise of fostering institutional loyalty, student involvement, and greater alumni engagement.

Second, institutions may benefit from first-year summer programs by opening doors of diversity. First-year transition programs prove time and time again to have robust enrollment among first-generation and underrepresented minorities. The presence of these students furthers the institution's goal of accessibility, which in turn diversifies the demographic landscape. This diversity can also be viewed as mutually beneficial for the institution and students in a cohort-based model.

Year-One Planning

Start discussions early. As the summer sessions expert on your campus, take the lead by starting conversations at least a year in advance. Share your vision by identifying and meeting with potential stakeholders. Find early adopters who will most likely support launching a first-year program at your institution. Develop a one-year plan and adhere to it.

Institutional Commitment

Secure a strong commitment from and collaboration with the offices that manage enrollment and admissions. To enhance success, invite members from undergraduate admissions and enrollment management to be a part of the planning process. Get a firm commitment of support for the program from these stakeholders. Ask to have the program included and highlighted in the yearly admissions recruitment and marketing cycle. Work with these professionals to determine realistic recruitment goals. How many students should be recruited in the first year? Is the program open only to students admitted for the fall and who voluntarily plan to enroll early in the summer? Should conditionally admitted students also be considered? These and many other questions should be resolved before moving forward with the implementation of your plan.

Courses and Student Registration

Determine term (or session) length and dates. Early in this planning phase, decide when the program will be offered. Will it coordinate with the fall orientation and registration schedule? If so, what other parties on campus should be enlisted (e.g., academic advisers, the division of student affairs, etc.)?

Select courses and the number of credit hours, and gain faculty buy-in early. Consider how students will be placed in summer courses. Will first-year students be enrolled in courses along with continuing students? Are there institutional funds available to offer sections of courses exclusively to freshmen? Decide on the credit load for students. Introductory level, general education courses are typically appealing for students. Recruit faculty willing to work with freshmen in the summer.

Housing

Work with housing to secure space. Lock in residence hall space for the program, as there may be competing availability with summer conferences, sports camps, and space for currently enrolled students. If your institution decides to run the session up to the beginning of the fall semester, then work with your housing professionals to give summer students the option of staying in their assigned room from summer to fall in order to avoid having to move.

Student Success Programming

Develop an academic support plan. Recruit, select, and train peer mentors or resident assistants. The mentors and assistants should exhibit exemplary academic and social behaviors, serving as role models for incoming summer students. In addition to classroom faculty, consider faculty and mentors who may be accessible to provide coaching for academic success.

Consider extra- and co-curricular programming. With faculty, staff, and peer mentors, develop activities that will take place outside the classroom. Since most institutions charge an activity fee

each term, partner with staff in the student union to provide specific events for this special student population. For example, set aside funds for off-campus excursions that allow students to soak up the culture and history of your region.

Financial Aid Considerations

Address financial and need- and merit-based institutional aid. Encourage applicants to complete the current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for the academic year following high school completion. Applicants may qualify for assistance that will support summer session enrollment prior to the fall. Students will need to complete this form, as well as the FAFSA application for the upcoming academic year. Explore the availability of institutional funds to assist need- and merit-based applicants. Work with your financial aid office to identify a staff member assigned to applicants in your program. This step may expedite summer financial aid packaging— if possible this process should take place alongside the incoming fall students.

Communication

Create a student–staff broad-range communication plan that has deadlines and runs congruently with the academic calendar. Be sure to involve the support of and feedback from persons associated with large-scale communications, in order to promote consistent institutional branding and messaging. This type of summer program, or session, is different from other programming the incoming students have seen in marketing materials from other universities, so you must be in constant communication with students and their families. Some of the methods of communication the directors at Virginia Tech and Purdue have found most effective are personalized mailings, email, videos (for both marketing and program explanations), social media groups, and simple, easy-to-understand websites.

Year-Two Planning

Summer Curriculum

Determine if the curriculum will be disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, or thematic in nature. After conversations with faculty in year one, revisit the nature of curricular offerings. Will there be course offerings that are disciplinary in scope for new students? For instance, with appropriate funding, certain course offerings may be earmarked for entering business, engineering, or liberal arts majors.

Institutions offering cross-disciplinary choices may have the luxury of intentionally providing opportunities for students to examine one discipline in light of another. Investigating the physics of music and the psychology of religion are two examples. Such explorations may "jump start" students' critical-thinking skills in sophisticated ways. Other course options may offer a thematic

approach. Courses in the global economy, communicating in a complex world, and the war on cancer are illustrations in this category.

Once the curricular offerings have been proposed and finalized, secure endorsements from your provost, vice presidents, and department heads. This approval will pave the way for others on your campus to embrace the vision. It will also neutralize the influence of naysayers.

Enrollment and Marketing Goals

Determine your target goal for recruiting and selecting incoming students. Revisit the realistic capacity of the program. Budget parameters, staff-to-student ratios, the quality and frequency of contact, residence hall availability, and other factors should be considered in settling on the specifics of your target goal.

Develop a marketing campaign. Will you use a mix of videos, postcards, websites, social media, and personalized letters? Regardless of marketing strategies, be sure to remain professional, but use language that would appeal to an 18-year-old demographic. Be open to creating additional marketing methods that will reach family members of this student-applicant pool.

Recruit and select students. Implement the first-year program. Determine the optimum time to open the application process for students. After this process, notify students of class assignments. Be sure to include vital information they will need prior to their arrival to campus. For example, students and their families will need information on orientation, meal plans, textbooks, computer requirements, directions for finding the campus by car, and parking.

Faculty and Peer Mentor Development

Create faculty and departmental incentives for participation. In addition to faculty receiving their summer teaching salary, think about ways to reward this group for taking part in the program. For instance, providing faculty professional development grants is a way to acknowledge their contribution in meaningful ways.

Develop faculty-development workshops. Enlist the support of the office on your campus that fosters pedagogy. Bring faculty together to address their critical role in the success of students' experiences. Possible conversation topics may include, but are not limited to,

- collaborative teaching methods,
- teaching in first-year experience programs, and development of syllabi, and
- exploring ways in which their approach might be different when teaching all first-year students.

Create peer-mentor workshops. Gather peer mentors and convey the integral role they play in promoting student success. In these training workshops, address subjects such as

- academic coaching outside the classroom
- co-curricular programming development
- ethical issues and student boundaries
- Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)
- diversity issues
- knowledge of campus resources.

All these topics have proven beneficial for these paraprofessionals.

Data Collection

Before the end of the summer term, construct three separate surveys to solicit feedback from faculty, student, and peer mentor groups.

Construct an identifier to track students' academic progress. Also, reach out to the information technology staff at your institution and seek their assistance to follow students' progress toward their degree. Using an aggregate identifier may facilitate the collection of longitudinal data, comparing and contrasting the academic performance of participants versus non-participants on a variety of scales, and charting graduation rates.

Lastly, constantly examine the effectiveness of the program. Develop an assessment plan, and provide opportunities for graduate students to conduct research studies related to your first-year program. Never remain stagnant—always look for areas of improvement.

Year-Three Planning and Beyond

Program Refinement

Use collected data to refine the next iteration—it may inform adjustments in the delivery of future versions of your program. For example, consider the use of student learning diagnostic and prescriptive inventories. These tools may predict the depth and frequency of academic support services needed for students.

Weave in faculty, student, and family testimonials in marketing campaigns. As a critical cadre is being developed over time, be intentional about getting key constituents involved in advancing the vision. Make videos of students willing to share their experiences, and give those highly motivated parents an opportunity to write about what the program meant to them and their son or daughter. New applicants will focus on messages from former participants in ways that they would not focus on messages from institutional officials.

Create Traditions

Begin traditions that are unique to the program. For example, coordinate an ice cream social or pizza night for your students, allowing them to meet the president and provost of your university. And as cohorts of students start graduating from your institution, plan a special graduation recognition ceremony each year.

Establish an institutional foundation account for future giving. As alumni are produced each year, provide opportunities for them to earmark financial contributions to your program, which may be beneficial for scholarships, student programming, or assisting future students in crises.

Again, this list of recommendations to start a first-year summer program is not exhaustive. It may vary by campus and specific academic challenges. For example, while both Virginia Tech and Purdue set a goal of around 150 students on campus in year one, each decided on different paths. Virginia Tech began on a volunteer-only basis and later gave conditional admissions offers, while Purdue began with conditional admissions but they now roll in fall admission marketing into year two. Both universities' administrations have nothing short of rapid-growth goals for both programs.

Conclusion

The approaches mentioned in this paper will work for other institutions considering a first-year summer transition program. Furthermore, the principles of cross-university collaboration and interdepartmental strategizing are applicable to a wide array of new initiatives a college or university may want to explore. Whether it is the adoption of a new business-services model or the creation of a new sexual harassment prevention program, higher education professionals can use these suggestions as a guide to a process in successful collaboration.

By providing readers with insights to build and sustain a program through collaborative efforts, we encourage you to reach out to (and even visit) our institutions. We would be happy to host you and show you our different programs.

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Biographies

Michael K. Herndon serves as the director of summer and winter sessions at Virginia Tech. In this role he works with department heads to plan robust enrollments during these terms. Michael is the editor of one book and the author of several scholarly journal articles. He also completed a PhD in higher education administration at Virginia Tech.

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