

**Project Title** Creating a Coherent First-Year Experience at St. Olaf College

**Project Description**

In our June 2003 grant application, St. Olaf College's Committee on First-Year Experience (CoFYE) proposed to develop an innovative model of inquiry for exploring in depth the profile of our incoming students. We proposed to describe the purpose, methods, and desired outcomes of each of the component parts of the first-year experience, as well as to articulate our overall vision, including goals and expectations, of the first year of a liberal arts education at St. Olaf College. We proposed to study the compatibility between the students we enroll and the first-year experience we provide.

**The Self Study: Scope and Methods of Inquiry**

A faculty and staff committee representing student support services and the first-year curriculum studied profiles of and **trends among first-year students at St. Olaf College** as they compare to first-year students nationally. We focused on student engagement, asking to what extent first-year students at St. Olaf engage academically and socially, how **St. Olaf's National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data** compare with national data, and how St. Olaf's curriculum and support services work to engage students. To gauge national trends, we read *Millennials Go to College* by Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Making the Most of Your College Experience* by Richard Light, and *Clueless in Academe* by Gerald Graff, in addition to numerous related articles.

CoFYE systematically studied St. Olaf support services that typically serve first-year students. Representatives from these offices met with our committee, described their support for first-year students, and provided documents available to students through their offices. CoFYE became a central repository for otherwise scattered information about support resources.

After completing an inventory of required courses and courses in which first-year students typically enroll, CoFYE facilitated a series of focus groups with over 100 students and 40 faculty. Focus group questions paralleled selected areas of inquiry found in NSSE, which St. Olaf conducts every other year. **Focus group results** enabled us to read NSSE data with greater insight. More importantly, repeated reference to subtle or weak connections among components of the first-year experience suggested one area for curricular and faculty development.

Four members of our committee, two faculty and two staff, facilitated a roundtable discussion about our self-study at the 2005 Annual National Conference on the First-Year Experience. We attended pre-conference workshops and a number of sessions involving the Foundational Dimensions developed by the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Although we came to these guiding statements fairly late in our self-study, they reinforced our initial impulse to study the first year and to refine our model of inquiry.

## **Outcomes of the St. Olaf First-Year Experience Self-Study**

Our self-study yielded the following outcomes:

- A comprehensive overview of the diverse ways through which students experience their first year at St. Olaf. None is more or less valid than the others; each in its own way offers students ownership in choosing the experience most fitted to their interests and strengths.
- Deeper understanding of the extent to which students experience the general education curriculum as a vital and integral part of their first year of college. Focus group responses suggest that students who view courses that fulfill general education requirements, particularly GE 111 and Religion 121, as discreet from one another and from all of their courses may perpetuate high school attitudes and behaviors of learning as “doing” rather than an ongoing process of thinking and learning. Students benefit from faculty’s explicit connections among courses. A question remains: If students do not engage in general education courses during their first year, to what extent will they realize the purpose of and fully engage in a liberal arts education?
- Preliminary dissemination of results through faculty development forums sponsored by the St. Olaf Center for Innovation in the Liberal Arts. Specifically, CoFYE presented commonalities (e.g., residential with roommate, 18 – 19 years old, governed by current College catalog) and the range of difference (e.g., home commitments, level of coursework, work for pay as necessity) among first-year students. Differences outweigh commonalities, supporting a model that offers more than one kind of first-year experience.
- Redevelopment of faculty orientation for teaching First-Year Seminar. This workshop now includes intentional discussion of the relationship between first-year student engagement, writing, and college success.
- Recommendations for revising the College Admissions web site and for developing an interactive web training guide for new advisors.
- Contributions to a first-year student binder presenting information previously mailed to students from separate offices on different dates. The First-Year Dean's office mailed this binder to incoming students during summer 2005. CoFYE’s emphasis on a coherent first-year experience supported already existing efforts to develop this binder.
- Preliminary development of ongoing orientation activities. Our self-study revealed that during their second semester, first-year students are more confident academically and socially than during the first semester. However, while they may recognize that high school study skills and behaviors are no longer adequate, they may not yet have developed a college support network that will best serve them. In response, CoFYE is working on a model to distribute Week One activities throughout the semester and into a series of Interim seminars. The first Interim Orientation will take place during January 2006.

### **Recommendations for Institutions Planning a Self-Study of the First-Year Experience**

- Invite several “stakeholders” to participate in the self-study. Stakeholders represent programs and offices who work directly with first-year students and who have enough institutional influence to involve the larger community and, if applicable, to implement change. CoFYE found it crucial to bring together representatives from student life and academic divisions.
- Involve a balance of “thinkers” and “doers.” Gathering information, deepening the inquiry, and disseminating information requires both types of people.
- Before beginning a self-study, read the Foundational Dimensions developed by the Policy Center on the First Year of College. If possible, send several “stakeholders” to the Annual National Conference on the First-Year Experience. Borrowing responsibly from already existing models of inquiry, benchmarks, and objectives can save time and effort.

### **What We Learned About Liberal Arts Education**

Our self-study reveals that the first year at St. Olaf College is not a single, common experience; students choose from an array of models according to their strengths and interests. Given this understanding, CoFYE has come to question assumptions that veterans of liberal arts learning and teaching may make about students’ experience during their first year of college, particularly in terms of general education curriculum. Our self-study clarified a lack of explicit connection among courses in which first-year students typically enroll. We may assume that students will apply content and skills they learn in one course to assignments for another. But for grade-oriented, risk-averse students, as Howe and Strauss characterize some Millennial students, that cognitive leap across course boundaries may not happen without explicit guidance, encouragement, and permission. Likewise, we question if and how students connect academic, support service, residential, and extra-curricular experiences. We are looking to our Conversation Programs, a series of one- and two-year intentional learning communities, as models for building coherence among more loosely structured first-year experiences. Our self-study has highlighted the importance of dialogue among academic and student support professionals at a residential liberal arts college whose philosophy of general education embraces both curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

## **Trends among first-year students at St. Olaf College**

During a two-day retreat in June 2004, CoFYE synthesized information from meetings with student support staff, faculty, and students. In order to foster a coherent first-year experience, we first had to understand common characteristics, behaviors, and experiences, as well as differences, among first-year students.

### **Common Characteristics, Behaviors, and Experiences**

- 18-19 years old
- Full-time student status
- Residential experience
- Common dining
- Week One Orientation
- Common catalog
- Academic advisor
- E-mail and cell phone use
- GE 111, Conversation Programs, Religion 121

### **Range of Difference**

- Advanced Placement Credit
- Athletics
- Extracurricular activities
- Volunteer experiences
- Student work
- Home commitments
- Range of representative, not inclusive, courses that typically enroll first-year students in addition to GE 111, Conversation Programs, and Religion 121:
  - English 107 and 110
  - Foreign languages (100- and 200- level)
  - History seminars
  - Music (100- and 200- level)
  - Math (Gateways and Calculus)
  - Natural sciences: Biology, Chemistry, and Physics (100-level)
  - Sociology/Anthropology (100-level)
  - Psychology (100-level)
  - Economics (100-level)
  - Political science (100-level)

### **18-19 years old**

- Separating from peers/family
- Creating a life plan (academic, personal, career)
- Developing individual identity within groups
- Discovering diversity
- Moving beyond binary thinking to recognize more complex relationships
- Acquiring new tools for college-level work and recognizing that high school behaviors may not enable college success

### **Full-time Student Status**

- Studying, living, and working in a learning community
- Working fewer than 20 hrs per week for pay
- Participating in first-year, on-campus Interim
- Connecting experiences across Semester I, Interim, and Semester II
- Choosing how to use unscheduled time

### **Residential Experience**

- Living with roommate (s) (Many first-year students have never shared a bedroom before coming to campus.)
- Living with a Conversation Program cohort and blending academic/personal conversations
- Being governed and guided by junior counselors and an area coordinator
- Learning to be a residence hall citizen on many levels (room, corridor, floor, residence hall)
- Choosing healthy or unhealthy recreation activities
- Assuming or rejecting responsibility for residence hall property
- Participating in residence hall programs
- Developing wellness habits

### **Common Dining**

- Managing when, what, and how much to eat
- Adjusting to meal schedules
- Socializing at mealtimes as part of campus culture
- Recognizing and forming social groups in the cafeteria
- Eating in Stav Hall, The Cage, or the Pause (Who can and can't afford to pay for food not included in meal program?)
- Negotiating eating disorders and body image issues

### **Week One Orientation**

- Moving in to residence halls
- Socializing
- Meeting academic advisor
- Participating in academic transition workshops
- Choosing courses and planning schedules
- Attending department information sessions
- Being introduced to student support staff and resources
- Learning campus geography
- Choosing extracurricular activities
- Saying intentional “hellos” and “goodbyes” at Welcome Ceremony
- Witnessing academic ritual and culture during faculty processions

### **Common Catalog**

- Planning according to curriculum (e.g., general education, majors/concentrations)
- Understanding and questioning policies (e.g. grading procedures)

### **Academic Advisor**

- Establishing an immediate intentional relationship with a faculty member
- Planning short-term and long-term academic goals and schedules
- Seeking alternate advisors as interests develop

### **E-mail and Cell Phone**

- Using email as a primary means of communicating with faculty
- Assuming faculty and peers are available at any time for immediate response
- Rendering residence hall phones obsolete (Many students do not connect residence hall phone voice mail and do not know their residence hall phone number.)
- Creating a new “umbilical cord” to parents through cell phone use

### **GE 111, Conversation Programs, Religion 121**

- Participating in interdisciplinary introduction to liberal arts education
- Taking ownership through choice of a Conversation Program or thematic sections of GE 111 and Religion 121
- Entering local academic dialogue through small-class discussion
- Entering larger academic discussion through reading, writing, and research
- Becoming a classroom citizen
- Gaining skills, confidence, and living habits during Semester I which impact performance and behaviors during Semester II
- Negotiating questions of purpose and fairness among required first-year courses when faced with disparity among sections
- Seeking helping through the Writing Place
- Experiencing different ways of knowing through variety of reading and writing assignments
- Choosing to respect or not to respect honor code
- Seeking or not seeking connections among required first-year courses

**FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE FOCUS GROUPS, 2004 - 05**  
**Committee on the First-Year Experience**

**SUMMARY**

As part of a larger study of the first-year experience at St. Olaf College, the Committee on the First-Year Experience conducted focus groups with first-year students and faculty to gain a better understanding of how they perceive the first-year experience. The Committee interviewed a total of 90 students and 24 faculty from January 2004 through January 2005. Interview questions were designed according to National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) subject areas of particular interest to our Committee's overall objective to explore the degree of coherence in the first-year experience at St. Olaf. Through focus groups, we hoped to gather qualitative data to complement quantitative trends presented in the NSSE 2003 Institutional Benchmark Report for St. Olaf College and the NSSE 2003 Report Summary.

Student focus groups generated the following common points:

- St. Olaf has an academic focus with rigorous standards.
- Active learning (asking analytical questions, taking notes, practicing problems) is essential to success during the first year.
- St. Olaf students come with varying levels of preparation and identify specific critical thinking and study skills they need to succeed.
- Collaborative learning appears common across the first year. Responses to group work vary according to course, purpose, and dynamics of group. Different levels of student preparation within groups impacts group effectiveness.
- First year students find faculty accessible and supportive. Students both want and expect a high level of interaction with professors and advisors. The purpose of student/faculty interaction ranges from exclusively academic guidance to more personal advising and support.
- Students are generally aware of academic and personal support resources. While help-seeking is accepted at St. Olaf, some students still view asking for help as weakness.
- GE 111 and Religion 121 appear related to one another in that they encourage discussion and self expression. Students do not perceive connection of content and skills among courses in general. Discrepancy in workload, feedback, and evaluation among individual sections of GE 111 and Religion 121 frustrates students.
- Students benefit from explicit faculty emphasis on connections among courses. Connections among courses are strong in the Conversation programs.
- As early as their second semester at St. Olaf, students practice better time management and study skills. Familiarity with campus procedures (e.g., registration) and decreasing homesickness increase confidence and motivation.

Faculty focus groups generated the following main points:

- First-year students generally have difficulty making paradigm shift from high school emphasis on memorization and reporting to college practice of critical reading, thinking, and writing vs. memorization, analysis vs. self-expression and reporting, and application vs. summary of theory.
- Courses across the curriculum incorporate group work to model professional collaboration and to foster learning communities.
- Individual accountability in group work presents a challenge. Because students do not necessarily know how to collaborate, faculty must talk openly about process and responsibility.
- Faculty/student interaction varies, from limited interaction in class to intense one to interaction in labs and conferences to dinner at faculty homes.
- Faculty offer academic help through help sessions, referrals to Academic Support Center and Dean of Students Office, and one to one conferences. Students who need help the most often don't respond to faculty encouragement to get help. Faculty see no clear patterns of who seeks help and who doesn't.
- Faculty do not necessarily know what courses students are taking. Conscious connection among courses in which first-year students may be enrolled ranges from general reference to liberal arts concerns in ethics and moral reasoning to more specific reference to common "texts" such as the Bible, *Origin of Species*, and cultural experiences to even more specific, documented connections made through required attendance at community events such as lectures and book clubs.
- Faculty autonomy and lack of communication among faculty result in disparity among individual sections of a course. Faculty can not assume students have had a common experience in a course with multiple sections.
- Parental involvement is intrusive. Are we enrolling students or parents?