

# HELPING SOPHOMORES SUCCEED

*Understanding and  
Improving the  
Second-Year  
Experience*

MARY STUART HUNTER  
BARBARA F. TOBOLOWSKY  
JOHN N. GARDNER

SCOTT E. EVENBECK, JERRY A. PATTENGALE,  
MOLLY A. SCHALLER, LAURIE A. SCHREINER, AND ASSOCIATES



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Laurie A. Schreiner, and Associates

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**The University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition** was established in 1986 with a small grant from the South Carolina State Commission on Higher Education and has grown into a multi-faceted center providing professional development, research, and practitioner-focused publications for an international community of higher educators. The Center's scholarship and advocacy on behalf of college students in transition has garnered significant world-wide attention and impacted student success initiatives across the globe.

The Center's stated mission is to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education. The Center achieves this mission by providing opportunities for the exchange of practical and theory-based information and ideas through the convening of conferences, institutes, workshops and other professional development events; publishing monographs, a peer-reviewed journal, an electronic newsletter, guides, and books; generating and supporting research and scholarship; hosting visiting scholars; and administering a robust Web site and numerous electronic listservs.

Although the Center is perhaps best known for its leadership in the first-year experience movement, other significant student transitions are central to the center's efforts and advocacy. National attention on the sophomore, or second-year, experience has been facilitated by the Center through information sharing at its annual National Conference on Students in Transition, the publication of two monographs on the sophomore year, the administration of two national surveys on sophomore programming, and national dialogue via an electronic listserv. This volume, *Helping Sophomores Succeed: Understanding and Improving the Second-Year Experience*, will provide an even wider audience of higher educators with resources and ideas to assist them as they strive to improve the second-year experience for students at institutions far and wide.



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Like the beginning of a new growing season, starting a new project is always a time for excitement and anticipation. That was certainly the case with this project. What we didn't anticipate at the beginning was how much we would learn as a result of planting the seed of an idea and then cultivating the development of the project. As we now approach the harvest, it is with grateful appreciation to David Brightman at Jossey-Bass for accepting our proposal to undertake the venture in the first place. We have been skillfully guided and gently pushed by his colleague, Erin Null, through each step of the manuscript development process. She pruned where necessary, fertilized when needed, and helped us see the potential when we felt wilted. Her guidance, flexibility, patience, and professionalism are much appreciated.

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And finally, we also acknowledge the thousands of higher educators who share our interest in the undergraduate experience and who are planting new and cultivating existing programs for second-year students on college and university campuses everywhere. As a result of your attention and interest, may sophomore students thrive for years to come!

Mary Stuart Hunter  
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## **HELPING SOPHOMORES SUCCEED**

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## INTRODUCTION

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John N. Gardner, Jerry A. Pattengale,  
Barbara F. Tobolowsky, and Mary Stuart Hunter,

As higher educators, even though we may have differing educational philosophies and find ourselves in different types of institutions in terms of mission and student characteristics, our collective overreaching goal is student success. Although we may quibble over definitions of student success (such as GPA, timely graduation, and so forth), our hopes are for students to attend the best institution for them to accomplish their personal goals, whether that is earning a bachelor's or associate's degree or acquiring needed job skills to help them in their future lives or both. To that end, we offer initiatives, programs, and supports along the way to help students achieve their goals. For the past three decades, efforts in the first year have received renewed attention, because one of the first leaks in the higher education pipeline comes when students begin their first year of study. Those first-year efforts (for example, first-year seminars) have often led to many students making better grades, persisting to graduation, being more satisfied with their collegiate experiences, and a host of other positive outcomes (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005).

Although there is now extensive scholarship on the first-year and senior-year transitions, fewer scholars and practitioners have turned their attention to year two even though there is strong evidence that there is another serious pipeline leak during this crucial time (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007a). Students in the second year too often feel invisible on their campuses (as highlighted in the titles of two

publications from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition dedicated to looking at the sophomore experience: *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students: Helping Sophomores Succeed* (Schreiner & Pattengale, 2000) and *Shedding Light on Sophomores: Explorations into the Second College Year* (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007a). Too often these students no longer qualify for the supports offered to first-year students and they have not yet found comfort in a disciplinary home. Feeling lost, at the very least, can lead to frustration, and at its worst, to dropping out. Research suggests that students do experience these negative reactions, with the second-highest attrition occurring in the sophomore year (Almanac Issue, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2007–2008). This book hopes to shine a light on this too often neglected population to provide strategies for educators to help reverse this trend.

As authors, we can immediately anticipate a variety of possible reactions to this new work including

1. Why a book on another college “transition”? Is there sufficient substance to this transition to require this sort of attention?
2. How interesting. I am curious to see why this is a significant transition for students.
3. At last, someone has focused on the second year, because it confirms my long-held belief that something unique happens to students in the second year . . . and it isn’t good.

Our hope is that by the end of the book, any doubters will agree that the second-year experience is unique and challenging for many students, and those with curiosity or an innate belief about the sophomore experience will have evidence to support those attitudes.

As we shall present, this work follows a long body of research, innovation, and applied practice to identify and improve student success in other critical college student “transitions.” Those works provided insight and inspiration as we tackled this less understood transition. In addition to those models, the following questions guided the development of this book.

1. What is the second year of college?
2. Does the second year differ substantially from the first year of college? If so, how?
3. What are some of the lessons learned from successful first-year and senior programs that could be applied to second-year improvement efforts?
4. Is the second year of undergraduate study a distinct period of personal and academic growth and learning for a significant number of students?

5. Is there empirical support for the archetypal notion of the “sophomore slump”? Is retention an issue in the second year?
6. What kind of a literature base is there to justify this work?
7. What are the central challenges to student learning and success in the second year?
8. What are the components for an academic rationale for such interventions?
9. If a campus wanted to intentionally improve its efforts to promote success in the second year, what might be academic and programmatic options for consideration? What can be learned from campuses already engaged in efforts aimed at the second year?
10. How might this experience and period in college be different for students in two-year institutions compared to four-year institutions? How might each sector respond accordingly?

We hope these are questions our readers will also consider and, after reflection, lead them to appropriate action.

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## History and Context Underlying Current Work on the Sophomore-Year Experience

The efforts to improve the first year are well documented in the literature. But the particular efforts to focus on the first year, it is generally agreed, began with the efforts of the University of South Carolina with its first-year seminar course, University 101, in the mid-1970s. This course provided the foundation for a series of conferences on (what is now known as) the first-year experience, where higher educators gather annually to share their experiences, insights, and research on new student support efforts. Accompanying these conference activities has been the creation and growth of a literature base, which now permeates many academic journals, launched by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. The center’s expanded mission to advocate for a broader focus on “students in transition” led to a call for attention to efforts to improve the senior year, transfer transitions, and the second or sophomore year. In 2000, the center’s publication of *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students*, edited by Laurie Schreiner and Jerry Pattengale, marked the first book-length treatment of the second college year in America.

Both the senior-year and the sophomore-year conversations and campus efforts are outgrowths of the earlier focus on the first year. On many campuses

the same faculty and academic and student affairs administrators that initiated attention to the first year are also driving this second-year focus. In fact, there is direct carry-over and convergence of these lines of work. Thus, although distinct, nevertheless, the efforts are interconnected. All evidence suggests that the more educators learned from the first-year student focus, the more they were inspired to reach out to address the needs of other students in transition.

Many educators (and organizations) have contributed to efforts to improve student success throughout the undergraduate experience. Especially influential have been campus-based practitioners who have adopted, replicated, altered, refined, and institutionalized these lines of work on hundreds of campuses. This volume is a direct result all of these efforts.

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## Lessons from the First-Year and Senior-Year Movements

An obvious place to begin this exploration is with a brief look at other student transitions. Although the first-year transition is much more established in both the practice and literature of higher education than the senior year, enough is known about both for meaningful comparisons to other transition improvement efforts. A recapitulation of that literature belongs in other books. Suffice it to say here that, though distinct, the first-, senior-, and now sophomore-year efforts are interconnected. These connections become apparent when comparing these three primary transition efforts.

### Retention as the Primary Driver

Although we wish we could report that the overwhelming reasoning behind why colleges and universities ought to pay more attention to second-year students was the prized educational outcomes that might thereby be enhanced, alas, both the first-year and the sophomore-year foci seem to be driven by “retention,” and hence a revenue and business model. There are some elite institutions where this may not be the case, but these would be the exceptions. Most certainly, proponents of more attention for this transition do offer educational and humanistic arguments. However, in terms of winning necessary support from resource allocators, the case still is being driven by the search for the fiscal Holy Grail: increased revenue by means of enhanced retention and graduation rates.

On the surface, retention does not play the same role in our focus on senior students. There the arguments appear primarily to be educational and humanistic in nature, such as providing intellectual capstone experiences;