

ACHIEVING and SUSTAINING
**INSTITUTIONAL
EXCELLENCE**

for the FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE



Betsy O. Barefoot

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Marc Cutright

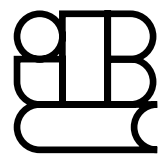
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Foreword

The late Nevitt Sanford told a wonderful anecdote that contains the essence of why this book is so important for college educators who strive to improve the quality and impact of undergraduate education for their students, especially beginning with the first year. The anecdote was about the encounter between a dean at Brown University and a group of prospective parents.

The dean was explaining to the assembled audience the benefits that would result from a Brown University education for the lives of their young men and women if they decided to spend four years as undergraduate students at Brown. Since the institution had chosen carefully which of the deans would speak to audiences of prospective parents, the presentation was eloquent, thoughtful, and extended. At the end of the talk came time for questions. One obviously skeptical mother held up her hand for recognition and asked the truth-in-advertising question: “This sounds just wonderful, but how can we parents be assured that these changes will actually occur?” The dean’s apocryphal reply was both vintage Sanford and why this book is so important: “Madam, we guarantee results or else we’ll refund the child.”

The long-sought-after holy grail of higher education is to bring together entering first-year students and institutions of higher education in a seamless transition toward an undergraduate experience with a lasting impact. The pitfalls along the way, however, are so very numerous: what the student is actually seeking is often not really what the institution can offer; what the institution really excels at teaching is sometimes not what the student can or wants to learn; or the tasks in the process of transformation from high school to upper-division status are neither sufficiently well presented by the institution nor sufficiently well understood by the entering student to make the transformation from high school to

college as meaningful, stimulating, and transformative as it can be. All of these need to go exceedingly well before a college or university can metaphorically assure that it will not have to “refund the child.” In terms of Sanford’s classic anecdote, this book is about what a carefully chosen group of colleges and universities are already doing so that they can “guarantee results” to the very best of their abilities.

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany in the nineteenth century is reputed to have observed that one-third of German university students broke down from overwork, another one-third broke down from dissipation, and the final one-third went on to rule Germany. In the context of this book, two observations are in order. First, this is a terrible waste of human talent and societal resources. Second, at least in the nearly first half of the twentieth century, those who went on to rule Germany did not rule very well.

This book examines vital elements of empowering educational experience to achieve institutional objectives, maximizing the development of human talent, and using institutional resources to the fullest advantage toward goals shared by parents, students, faculty, staff, and administration. Unlike the German universities of Bismarck’s day, there is a shared commitment among authors and participants in achieving and sustaining excellence in the first year of college.

The authors have stated their purpose in embarking on the research that is the foundation for this book: “We sought to identify campuses in which the first year has become a high priority and truly central to the collegiate experience.” Thirteen campuses were selected for intensive case studies based on “their comprehensive attention to first-year students—attention that is embedded in or linked to the curriculum and cocurriculum and is coupled with evaluation and evidence of continuous improvement.”

Steps in the Process: Borrowing from the British Detective Story

It is new and uncharted territory to use an intensive case study design to discern the ingredients of exemplary undergraduate education in the first year of college. Elements of the British procedural detective story will be employed to illuminate the steps the

authors took in realizing the goals of the ambitious project reported in this book. Since the territory investigated by the authors is uncharted, this device will sharpen the methodological choices made that are so important to establishing the validity of the findings:

- *“Round up the usual suspects.”* When actor Claude Rains instructed his policemen to “round up the usual suspects” in the movie *Casablanca* with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman and a wonderful supporting cast, he already knew the identity of the perpetrator of the crime, and he really did not want him caught. But what do you do when there is a universe of nearly 4,000 potentially eligible possible “suspects” and the goal is a credible search for participants in a focused research project with finite participants (in this case, thirteen)? The authors were exceptionally clear about the processes they followed in sample selection. They wanted “to move beyond a random collection of good ideas for first-year programs” or a “rounding up of the usual suspects” to make a more systematic selection of colleges and universities that can serve as exemplars for achieving first-year excellence. While the authors note that there are many good ideas throughout the book on such facets of the first year as orientation, residence life, learning communities, first-year seminars, and advising structures, what they focused on finding were campuses where “the primary focus is on the totality of the first year—how these various components become embodied in a campus’s overall approach to its new students.”

- *Identifying the elements of the crime. How did the perpetrators go about their “nefarious business”?* How would an investigator go about the task of identifying “suspects”—or as the authors more eloquently phrased it, Where would you look for models? What would be your criteria? Would you simply know it when you saw it?

- *Where would you look for models?* The approach of the authors proceeded on several tracks. One track was to send an invitation to all chief academic officers of regionally accredited two- and four-year institutions of higher education in the United States. This invitation was to nominate their institution as an Institution of Excellence in the First College Year. Another track was to write to 2,000 college and university educators whose names appear on two electronic listservs of individuals with interests in the first year of college. This

self-nomination process resulted in 130 potential case studies, which were reduced first to 54 and then to the final thirteen.

For educators wanting a road map for thinking specifically about where to begin improving their own first-year structures and programs, Table 1.2 is a brief but exceptionally important part of the book. This table, as characterized by the authors, “provides a list of the most common first-year initiatives described by the thirteen institutions in the nomination portfolios.” These initiatives were considered to be the most important by both the authors and the campuses that were the object of the case studies.

Table 1.2 identifies twenty initiatives that contribute to excellence in the first year:

- Advising
- Central advising center
- Common reading
- Convocations
- Core curriculum/general education
- Electronic portfolios
- Experiential learning
- Faculty development
- First-year seminars
- Leadership programs
- Learning centers
- Learning communities
- Liberal arts
- Mentoring
- Orientation
- Peer leaders/advisers
- Residence life
- Service initiatives
- Summer academic programs
- Supplemental Instruction

The power of the case study method in this context is that it allows readers and researchers to observe how these program initiatives interact in the context of an exemplary institutional approach to the first year. Each of the thirteen campuses has its own

areas of emphasis within the twenty programmatic areas of emphasis, and no campus has all twenty. For example, only LaGuardia and the University of South Carolina use convocations, and only two (Kalamazoo College and LaGuardia) use electronic portfolios. Many institutions, in contrast, use some version of first-year seminars, learning communities, orientation, and peer advisers.

- *What would be your criteria?* Determining and applying the five criteria to the 130 nominees and fifty-four semifinalists was a procedure undertaken by a panel of thirteen external evaluators and the staff of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. The five criteria, elaborated in Chapter One, were as follows:

Criterion 1: Evidence of an intentional, comprehensive approach to improving the first year that is appropriate to an institution's type of mission

Criterion 2: Evidence of assessment of the various initiatives that constitute this approach

Criterion 3: Broad impact on significant numbers of first-year students, including, but not limited to, special student sub-populations

Criterion 4: Strong administrative support for first-year initiatives, evidence of institutionalization, and durability over time

Criterion 5: Involvement of a wide range of faculty, student affairs professionals, academic administrators, and other constituent groups

- *Would you simply know it when you saw it?* As the authors put it, "We recognized that excellence would have to be identified within the framework of institutional size, type, and mission." With a case study format investigating first-year excellence in context, it was essential to include diverse institutions. Therefore, the authors studied community colleges, private liberal arts colleges, regional comprehensive universities, research universities, and one of the nation's military academies. As a commentary, they pose the question, "Was this selection process simply another ranking system in disguise?" They answered it emphatically, "No!" The research design issues are discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

Insights into Enhancing Quality and Impact

This commentary began with an anecdote of the late Nevitt Sanford, which underscored the importance of an institution's configuring its programs for students in an optimal manner, or as he put it more as a metaphor, so that the institution can "guarantee results." The broader context of the work is the importance of making the first year of college a source of strength for the realization of the broad purposes that unite parents, students, faculty, staff, and administration.

Within the higher education research and policy community, there are a number of quite viable and credible macro approaches to reforming education and improving quality. For example, in the 1970s, the late Frank Newman led a commission whose sharp criticisms of existing higher education practice were followed by systematic advocacy of reform. Another example is the more recent macro policy reform and efforts at transformation of the type undertaken by the National Collaborative for Postsecondary Education Policy, a joint project of the Education Commission of the States, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. This latter approach aims to persuade, at the level of individual states, the adoption of major policy changes.

By contrast, the case study approach taken in this book aims at providing insights based on an approach to micro analysis—an approach in this application that focuses specifically on the interaction of discrete program and policy variables under the control of individual campuses. The broad contribution of this book is that improving the quality and impact of the first year of college goes beyond a collection of good ideas and programs and putting those into practice. Rather, the key to success is in the planned interrelationship and interaction in practice of the twenty plus program initiatives identified in Table 1.2.

And there is a hierarchy of what is catalytic of excellence in first-year programs. The key catalytic elements at the top of the hierarchy are intentionality, comprehensiveness, systematic assessment and feedback, broad impact of programs, strong campus support for comprehensive programs (the location of key campus

support in a system of shared governance may vary from campus to campus, but the commitment of administration seems central across campuses), institutionalization of the broad initiative, and a wide and comprehensive involvement of students, faculty, staff, and administration.

Returning to the Major Theme

Another way to think about the broad purposes of this book was provided by that notable cultural philosopher Gary Trudeau in a memorable commencement ceremony where the commencement speaker endeavors to speak directly to a graduating class that he considers “prematurely professionalized” and “chillingly competitive.” His poignant lament concerned the students’ “obsessive concern for the future,” an approach that has been “the salient shaping influence on your attitudes during a very critical four years.” He then went on to state eloquently: “It could have been more than that. This college offered you a sanctuary, a place to experience PROCESS, to FEEL the present as you moved through it, to EMBRACE both the joys and sorrows of moral and intellectual maturation! It needn’t have been just another way-station” (Trudeau, May 16, 1976).

Insights from all the case studies and the important variables identified in Table 1.2 offer ingredients for a college and university to use in constructing its own road map to make the college experience a genuine opportunity to experience educational process and, as Trudeau had his commencement speaker say so memorably, to “embrace both the joys and sorrows of moral and intellectual maturation.”

University of California, Irvine

John M. Whiteley

In Memoriam
Omri Kenneth (O.K.) Webb (1926–2004)
Appalachian State University
and
Stephen Hanscom Good (1943–2004)
Drury University

We gratefully and respectfully acknowledge these two campus leaders. Their enormous contributions to and influence on their institutions' first-year experience helped make possible this achievement as Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year. We are also deeply appreciative of these campus leaders' personal participation in our research project and this resulting work.

Preface

If, in the 1970s, anyone had set out to discover and study colleges and universities in the United States at which the first year was a high priority, the journey would have been difficult. The campuses with any special focus on the first year were few and far between. Even as late as 1987, a survey conducted by the American Council on Education found that only 37 percent of institutions acknowledged taking steps to improve the first year (El-Khawas, 1987). Since that time, interest in the first year within U.S. colleges and universities has grown exponentially. Many campuses have joined the national conversation about the first year in an effort to improve student learning, personal development, and persistence to graduation. Faculty, administrators, and staff on campuses around the nation routinely develop and share highly innovative and effective educational practices through conference presentations, publishing, and other means. Nevertheless, through the years, we have observed that many, if not most, first-year efforts occur at the margins of campus life and have yet to be experienced as central to the core academic experience.

As we conceptualized the research study that is the foundation for this book, we sought to identify campuses in which the first year has become a high priority and truly central to the collegiate experience. Therefore, this book, while it provides many excellent examples of programs or activities, does something much more. It describes in detail thirteen campuses in the United States selected for their comprehensive attention to first-year students—attention that is embedded in or linked to the curriculum and cocurriculum and is coupled with evaluation and evidence of continuous improvement.

Chapter One provides study background and rationale as well as information in tabular form about the most common first-year

programs and structures at these thirteen institutions. Chapter Two describes in detail the research methodology. But at the heart of this book are the thirteen case studies (Chapters Three through Fifteen) that detail what campuses of discrete types and sizes are doing, why they have selected their various first-year approaches, and how institutional history and leadership have inevitably affected commitment to first-year students. Finally, in Chapter Sixteen, we highlight themes common to all or most of the thirteen institutions and offer our recommendations based upon the findings.

We acknowledge our indebtedness to George Kuh, John Schuh, Elizabeth Whitt, and their colleagues who, in 1991, undertook a somewhat similar study to identify “involving colleges”—institutions that model involvement at all levels of campus life. The book *Involving Colleges* was the inspiration for our research design in its focus on individual campuses that illustrate certain core principles of excellence. Kuh and colleagues’ portrayal of unique campus cultures led us to wish to do the same in capturing selected, but representative, examples of excellence in the first year of higher education.

The Policy Center on the First Year of College

Six of the eight authors of this book were or are staff members of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, a national higher education research center located in Brevard, North Carolina. Since its establishment in October 1999, the work of the Policy Center has been focused on first-year assessment. Funded initially by The Pew Charitable Trusts and later by The Atlantic Philanthropies and Lumina Foundation for Education, the Policy Center has encouraged and collaborated in the development of new assessment tools and methodologies and has conducted a number of national surveys to determine current curricular and cocurricular practices in the first year. This study was the natural outgrowth of our prior work, but it also set the stage for a subsequent Policy Center initiative—a project described in the Epilogue entitled Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year. The Foundations of Excellence Project is designed to develop and measure achievement of first-year standards of excellence.

Study Parameters

This study focuses on a particular time period—the year 2002. Although each case study details historical antecedents to the efforts that are described, chapters do not consider changes beyond 2002 in each campus’s approach to the first year. The study is limited to investigation of regionally accredited two- and four-year institutions in the United States and its territories, and it focuses on the first thirty semester hours (or the equivalent) of a student’s experience in higher education, realizing that a “first-year student,” especially at the nation’s community colleges, may be so characterized for two, three, or even more years. The study does not include investigation of initiatives designed specifically for transfer students.

Audience

This book is intended for all educators who have an interest in the first year of college: faculty, administrators, those involved in directing first-year programs, institutional research or assessment personnel, trustees or state coordinating or governing officials, and members of other constituent groups. We have written this book so that it will be accessible to practitioners as well as researchers. We have done our best to identify terms, avoid the unnecessary use of educational jargon, and make the case studies engaging and interesting for readers of any disciplinary background. One of the distinguishing features of this book is that the case studies were written by a diverse group: an English professor, a former public relations official, professors of higher education, a historian, and an assessment professional. Although each chapter addresses central questions and themes as outlined in Chapter Two, each tells the institutional story in a distinctive way.

A Final Word to Readers

Although these case studies are descriptive of many institutional types, we strongly urge you to pay equal attention to those campuses outside, as well as inside, your own institutional sector. Many of the illustrations provided and lessons learned have broad

potential application beyond the particular institutional type being represented in each case study.

And finally, we urge you to remember that the study on which this book is based is a snapshot, albeit we hope and trust a very in-depth snapshot, of thirteen institutions taken in the year 2002. These are dynamic places, and what they are now is not exactly what they were when we visited and wrote about them. Thus, we encourage you to determine how these campuses have evolved in their approach to the first year since the time period reflected in this research by visiting their Web sites, reviewing their catalogues, and communicating directly with those responsible for the first year in these respective settings.

Betsy O. Barefoot
John N. Gardner
Marc Cutright
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Charles C. Schroeder
Stephen W. Schwartz
Michael J. Siegel
Randy L. Swing

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About the Authors

Betsy O. Barefoot serves as codirector and senior scholar at the Policy Center on the First Year of College, funded by grants from the Lumina Foundation for Education and The Atlantic Philanthropies and located in Brevard, North Carolina. Prior to assuming this position in October 1999, Barefoot spent eleven years as codirector for research and publications at the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience, where she conducted ongoing research on the first-year seminar in American higher education and edited a variety of publications on the first-year experience. She holds degrees from Duke University (B.A.) and the College of William and Mary (M.Ed. and Ed.D.). In her role with the Policy Center, she continues research and publishing on issues related to student retention and the design and delivery of first-year initiatives. She also consults with college campuses around the nation and rest of the world on the structure and assessment of first-year programs.

John N. Gardner is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Science, Senior Fellow of the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. As a higher education change agent, his principal interest is calling more attention to the importance of the first year of college. Toward this end, he has led a twenty-year international reform movement to persuade colleges to change their approaches to working with their first-year students. He is the founder of two national centers, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina

and the Policy Center on the First Year of College based in Brevard, North Carolina. His second and related professional passion is improving the student transition process out of college, what he has coined “the senior-year experience.” Gardner holds a B.A. from Marietta College in Ohio, an M.A. from Purdue University, and seven honorary doctoral degrees from institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Marc Cutright is an assistant professor of higher education at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, and a research fellow of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. From 2000 to 2002, Cutright was a staff member of the Policy Center, where his work included the compilation and analysis of an extensive database of first-year-support programs at large research universities. A veteran of more than twenty years in the field of college and university public affairs, he was also associated with a research center at Johns Hopkins University. His research, teaching, and university service largely focus on engaged learning and institutional support of engaged learning. Cutright holds a B.A. in American studies from Lindenwood College, an M.Ed. from North Georgia College, and an Ed.D. from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He was also a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Calgary, where he undertook a general study of Canadian higher education and engaged in research on strategic planning.

Libby V. Morris is associate professor and graduate coordinator in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Morris holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her teaching and research interests include evaluation and assessment, academic programs, and distance education. She is currently the principal investigator for a multiyear grant to investigate teaching and learning on-line in collaboration with the Advanced Learning Technologies unit of the University System of Georgia Board of Regents. She is editor of *Innovative Higher Education*, a peer-reviewed, international journal focusing on innovations in postsecondary education. She has presented research or conducted workshops, or both, at meetings of the European Association for Institutional Research, American Association for Higher Education, Association for Institutional Research, Educause,