



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

BUILDING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL BONDING AT A TWO-YEAR COMMUTER INSTITUTION: A PROGRAM THAT WORKS

How can a two-year commuter institution encourage its first-semester students to stay in college? A perennial question, without doubt! Entering freshmen sustain their initial college intentions when they feel they belong to or fit in at their particular institutions. This perception of belonging develops when students actively participate in their classes, meet class standards, develop campus friendships, and believe that faculty members genuinely are interested in their success. Research tells us that students' resolve to continue their studies at particular institutions is strengthened as the number of positive academic and social encounters increases. Moreover, we know that positive academic and social encounters between and among students and faculty, both in the classroom and beyond its walls, nurture the students' sense of community, or belonging, and encourage persistence.

At commuter campuses, the type and number of academic and social interactions are limited by the students' time on campus. Institutional programs designed to foster academic and social bonding have to occur in the classroom and during the students' free time between class meetings.

The Program

In 1996, our campus started the Freshman Year Experience (FYE) program. We wanted first-semester students to enjoy their classroom encounters, become accustomed to participating actively in class discussions, learn how to use the library and Internet for research, prepare projects and assignments using computer programs, and develop positive relationships with other students and with their professors. We designed the program around the students' time on campus.

The program includes two sequential components: (1) in-class lectures, student participative discussions, and out-of-class collaborative student projects directed by faculty; and (2) a subsequent trip to various historic, literary, and cultural sites in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. While students are not required to go on the trip, most of them do and look forward to it.

The three first-semester courses at our campus—American Literature, English, and Music (a cultural diversity course)—directly address aspects of our American heritage from 1620 through 1920. During the first six weeks of class, lectures and student projects deal directly with various aspects of history, music, culture, and literature from these 300 years. Groups of three or four students in each class choose a topic of interest from these years, and with faculty help, learn to use the library and Internet for research resources relevant to their topics.

After the research is completed and the information compiled, the students, with faculty help, design the layouts for their projects—brochures and handouts (with pictures and artwork) that highlight aspects of their topics. Students learn how to scan the artwork and pictures into the computer and link them with the written text, again with faculty help. During class meetings, students discuss these materials and give copies to class members and to students in the other two FYE courses. At the course's conclusion (some weeks following the trip), each student group prepares a PowerPoint presentation for their classmates. The presentation melds their class projects with the events they enjoy during the trip.

Research topics have included: the battleships that protected the country during war times; highlights of the lives and works of literary and historic figures; the average citizen's housing and food concerns, modes of transportation, and occupation (during a particular time period); town meetings; religion and its role in society during various time periods; music in schools and churches; life in mining towns; and the history of the Salem witch trials. Students also could trace their family roots to identify ancestors who entered the U.S. on Ellis



Island (New York). (Ellis Island is on the trip's itinerary.)

The Trip

The trip's five-day itinerary includes four days at events, historical reenactments, and sites in Sturbridge, Concord, Salem, Boston, and Plymouth, Massachusetts; and a tour of Ellis Island and the eastside tenements in New York. On the subsequent Saturday, at Eckley Village (PA), students see how coal miners and their families lived and worked during the 1850s. The trip to Massachusetts and New York begins very early on a Thursday morning and ends late Sunday evening. The students miss few classes; faculty or students in those classes graciously provide the missed lecture notes.

Student Reaction to the FYE Program

Students enjoy the program. In 1999 and 2000, their enthusiasm was captured on audiotape and by student survey responses.

In December 1999, during a qualitative assessment of the FYE conducted by non-campus personnel, students stated that the program helped them get to know the FYE faculty better and establish friendships with many FYE students. They felt that the trip's date (toward the end of October) was a great "stress buster" and the "perfect break." Two students claimed that the fall FYE 1999 program convinced them to stay in school. During fall 2000, students completed an anonymous survey of eight open-ended responses to questions dealing with various aspects of the program. Their responses answered the question: Was the trip a valuable educational experience?

- "Seeing the events added so much to what I already knew from class."
- "The professors played a very important part in this whole learning project. They are the ones who opened our eyes to the past. They made the whole learning experience better."
- "This trip is not only educational school-wise but also educational friends-wise. You learn about all different kinds of people and yourself, and it makes friendships that may last a lifetime."

We asked the students about their impressions of the FYE faculty. Responses included:

- "They are teacher figures but at the same time they are our friends."
- "Teachers and everyday people—it was like they dropped their role as teacher and became one of us."
- "I noticed that the teachers can be extremely normal people, just like kids sometimes, but only so we have fun while learning, which I feel is important."

We focused on students' relationships with other students: "Did students get to know their friends and classmates better as a result of the trip?" Responses included:

- "After spending five days together, acquaintances became friends."
- "I made a lot of new friends that I would have never really talked to at school, and that was my favorite part of the trip."
- "Students I had never seen before or talked to are now my friends. We plan to keep in touch and hang out in the future."
- "Some of the students on this trip I never saw before. Then, on the trip, we started talking, eating together, and even sharing the same room. I think that during this trip, we didn't just become friends, we became a family."

Summary

This program works! In-class and out-of-class discussions and projects fit into the students' campus time schedules. The trip's cost per student (\$175-\$200) for the five-day trip is minimal, campus and off-campus donors support the program. Student survey responses indicate that the program increases student academic and social experiences and fosters academic and social interactions between and among students and faculty. The FYE develops research and computer skills, keeps students interested in their first-semester course work, and encourages retention. Institutions that serve the great bulk of college students—namely, the less affluent students in public settings—should develop programs that encourage student involvement and bring new meaning to their college experience. The FYE program at our campus appears to be meeting these goals.

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