

# Components of a Comprehensive First-Year Experience Program University-Assessment Inventory

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Drawing on this base of research and scholarship, the following ten targets are offered as focus points for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first-year experience program:

- #1. *Program Mission*
- #2. *New-Student Orientation*
- #3. *Classroom Teaching and Learning*
- #4. *Academic Advisement*
- #5. *The Curriculum*
- #6. *Academic Support Services*
- #7. *The Co-Curriculum (Student Life)*
- #8. *Instructor-Student Contact Outside the Classroom*
- #9. *Administrative Leadership, Policies, & Practices*
- #10. *Program Assessment.*

In the following sections, each of these target areas is accompanied by a set of evaluative questions that is intended to stimulate institutional awareness of what would comprise a comprehensive, high-quality, first-year experience program.

## TARGET AREA #1. **PROGRAM MISSION**

- 1.1 Is the stated mission of the program *student*-focused—with an emphasis on teaching and learning, or is it *institution*-focused—with an emphasis on institutional resources, research preeminence, or institutional prestige?
- 1.2 Is the mission *communicated clearly and consistently to prospective* first-year students, both in *print* (e.g., University Catalogue/Bulletin and recruitment materials) and in *person* (e.g., admissions representatives)?
- 1.3 Is the mission that is expressed *externally in* university publications designed for prospective first-year students (e.g., University Catalogue/Bulletin and recruitment materials) *consistent* with institutional goals communicated *internally* to first-year students who have enrolled at the university?
- 1.4 Does any *representative* of the university *articulate or discuss* the program mission with new students after they have been admitted?

- 1.5 Do *all members* of the university community (instructors, administrators, students) have a *similar understanding* of what the program mission is, and can they *articulate* that mission?
- 1.6 What specific first-year policies, practices, and procedures have been implemented that puts the program's *professed* mission (the rhetoric) into *action* (the reality)?
- 1.7 Are the program's first-year policies, practices, and procedures truly *mission-driven*, i.e., are they *derived* from, and *consistent* with the program's stated purpose?
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**TARGET AREA #2.**  
**NEW-STUDENT ORIENTATION**

- 2.1 Before first-year students begin classes, does the university provide a substantive *orientation* program during which time new students are oriented to *people* (not just to buildings or information), and given the opportunity to *interact* meaningfully with peers, instructors, and support staff?
- 2.2 Are new students exposed to experienced and trained *peer orientation-week leaders* as part of the orientation process?
- 2.3 Is new-student orientation *required or optional*? (If optional, what *percentage* of entering students *participate* in it?)
- 2.4 Does new-student orientation include a component designed for students' *parents* and *family* members that involves discussion of the role they can play in supporting first-year student adjustment and success ?
- 2.5 Are university *instructors and academic administrators* involved in the planning and delivery of new-student orientation, ensuring that the program has both an *academic* and *student life* focus?
- 2.6 Do first-year students experience a *celebratory ritual* at *university entry*—e.g., a *convocation* or *induction ceremony*—at which time the university formally welcomes new students (and their family) into its “community”?
- 2.7 Is orientation *extended* into the critical first term by means of a *freshman-orientation course* or *new-student seminar*? (If so, is the course *required or optional*?) (If optional, what *percentage* of full-time and part-time students *enroll* in it?)
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**TARGET AREA #3.**  
**CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- 3.1 What percentage of *first-year courses* are taught by *full-time* instructors—as opposed to graduate teaching assistants, part-time or adjunct instructors?
- 3.2 If *graduate teaching assistants* are employed to teach first-year students, are they carefully *trained and evaluated*, and are they *compensated* equitably?
- 3.3 What percentage of first-term students are enrolled in at least one course with a class size of *15 or less*?
- 3.4 Do instructors provide first-year students with *feedback* on their academic performance that is *prompt, proactive, and personalized* (e.g., early written feedback on individual tests and assignments)?
- 3.5 Do instructors’ *actively involve* first-year students with the subject matter, with the instructor, and with other students?
- 3.6 Do instructors encourage *collaborative learning* among first-year students?
- 3.7 Do instructors know the *names* of students in most of their classes?
- 3.8 Are instructors of first-year students carefully *evaluated* by a variety of *different sources*—such as students, administrators (e.g., department chair), instructor colleagues (i.e., peer evaluation), and self-evaluation?
- 3.9 Are instructors of first-year students systematically introduced to student-centered learning strategies and engaging pedagogy via an intentionally designed *instructor development program*?
- 3.10 Are first-year students *apprised of*, and *prepared for* their role as *evaluators* of university instructors?
- 3.11 What specific *criteria* are used by the university as *indicators* of *effective* first-year instruction?
- 3.12 What is the *average class size* of important, *academic skill-development courses* commonly taken by first-year students—such as writing (composition), oral communication (public speaking), and elementary mathematics?
- 3.13 Does the university “*front load*” its *most experienced* and *most effective* instructors to teach first-year courses?
- 3.14 How much *weight* is given to *teaching effectiveness* (relative to research, publications, and grant procurement) in decisions about instructor *retention, promotion, and tenure*?

- 3.15** How is high-quality teaching *recognized and rewarded*?
- 3.16** If instructors are expected to publish, are *publications* relating to *teaching effectiveness, student learning, and student development* accepted, encouraged, and rewarded?
- 3.17** Does the university conduct a *new-instructor orientation* program that includes *instructional* development and dissemination of current information on the *characteristics and needs* of first-year students?
- 3.18** Is there an ongoing *instructor development* program designed to promote instructional quality and to keep first-year university teaching at a state-of-the-art level?
- 3.19** Is effective teaching assessed rigorously and weighed heavily during the process of *recruiting and selecting* instructors for the university? For example, are students and student development professionals included on instructors-hiring committees? As part of the hiring process, are instructors asked to (a) share course syllabi or instructional materials, (b) provide a teaching demonstration, and/or (c) engage in a simulated interaction with students?

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**TARGET AREA #4.**  
***ACADEMIC ADVISEMENT***

- 4.1** Is each first-year student *paired or matched* with a *personally-assigned* academic advisor?
- 4.2** When *registering, adding, or dropping* courses, are first-year students require to *confer* with, and obtain a *signature* from an academic advisor?
- 4.3** Do academic advisors only engage in course scheduling, or do they provide comprehensive *developmental academic advising*—i.e., personalized advising that relates students’ present academic experiences to their future life plans, and connects students with key campus-support professionals who can most effectively address their present needs and facilitate realization of their future plans?
- 4.4** Is special academic advising support provided for *undecided* first-year students?
- 4.5** What is the average *student/advisor ratio* for first-year students?
- 4.6** Does the university engage in any practices or procedures that are *intentionally designed* to increase the *frequency* of *student-advisor contact*?

- 4.7 Are *group advising* sessions offered periodically, whereby students with similar academic or career interests (e.g., sociology majors) are advised together in order to promote *peer support and collaboration* with respect to academic and career planning?
- 4.8 Are trained *peer advisors* available to support and facilitate the academic advising process?
- 4.9 How are academic advisors *recruited and selected* to ensure that they have the competence and commitment needed to effectively advise first-year students?
- 4.10 Is a substantive advisor *orientation, training, and development* program provided for academic advisors of first-year students?
- 4.11 Are advisors *evaluated* and provided with individual *feedback* on the quality of their advising?
- 4.12 Are advisors individually *recognized and rewarded* for high-quality academic advising?
- 4.13 Does the university engage in *program evaluation* of its academic advising *system*?
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**TARGET AREA #5.**  
**THE CURRICULUM**

- 5.1 Does the university curriculum include a *first-year seminar* designed to provide new students with a meaningful beginning course which gives a *preview* or *overview* of, and *introduction* to the *general education* curriculum, along with the *rationale* for its requirements?
- 5.2 Is a first-year seminar required of *all* new students so that it has systemic impact on all students new to the university?
- 5.3 Does the design and delivery of the first-year *general education* curriculum reflect a *coherent* plan for learning, whereby first-year courses are purposefully *connected and sequenced* in relation to subsequent courses, thus providing a meaningful *beginning or introduction* to the university curriculum?
- 5.4 Have *instructors* from different academic disciplines *collaborated* to develop a shared view of the general education curriculum that is *focused and thematic*?
- 5.5 Does the first-year curriculum contain any *interdisciplinary* general-education courses that are designed to *integrate* different academic disciplines, or which are *team-taught* by instructors from different disciplines?

- 5.6** Does the university offer a true “*core*” curriculum for first-year students—i.e., a set of specific courses that all new students take regardless of their particular academic major or field of interest, thus ensuring a common or shared learning experience for all entering students?
- 5.7** Do entering students have a *common learning experience* during their first year of university (e.g., a common reading or a common film experience)?
- 5.8** Are groups of first-year students given the opportunity to *co-register for the same block of courses* during the same academic term so that they can develop “*learning communities?*”

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**TARGET AREA #6.**  
**ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES**

- 6.1** Is special *high school-to-university transitional support* provided for *academically at-risk* students *before* they encounter a full load of university courses (e.g., summer bridge or summer transition program)?
- 6.2** Does the university administer *placement tests* to assess the key academic skills of new students *at university entry* to diagnose their academic preparedness and to *place* them in courses or programs that are commensurate with their entering levels of skill development? (Does the university provide entering students provided with a *sample of items* from its placement tests so that they may practice skills or review previously acquired knowledge to improve their test performance and course placement?)
- 6.3** Are support services made *highly visible* to first-year students (e.g., pictures and campus phone numbers of support professionals advertised in campus flyers, posters, newsletters, or the university newspaper)?
- 6.4** Is *institution-initiated* action taken to deliver support services *intrusively* to first-year students through such practices as: (a) bringing support services to students on their “turf” (e.g., providing workshops in student residences or the student union), (b) integrating support services into the classroom (e.g., student-service professionals as guest speakers in class; peer tutors invited to class), and (c) requiring, or providing students with strong incentives to take advantage of support services (e.g., as a course assignment or as a condition for registration or graduation)?
- 6.5** Is there an effective *communication and referral* system in place whereby classroom instructors routinely refer students in need of academic assistance to support service professionals and classroom instructors who, in turn, receive feedback about whether referred students actually act on the referral—and, if so, what type of support they received?

- 6.6** Is there an *early-warning* or *early-alert* system in place whereby first-term students receive feedback about their progress (grades) at midterm—so corrective action can be taken before final course grades are determined?
- 6.7** Is *peer tutoring* readily available to first-year students, in which experienced and trained students provide them with academic assistance?
- 6.8** Is *supplemental instruction (SI)* available for “high-risk courses” (i.e., classes with historically high attrition rates and/or low grades), whereby a student who has completed the course and done exceptionally well—re-attends the class—and helps novice learners during additional (supplemental) class sessions that are regularly scheduled outside of class time?
- 6.9** Are *prerequisite* or “*stepping-stone*” courses available to prepare first-year students for courses in which there are repeatedly and unusually high rates of failure or withdrawal?
- 6.10** Are adequate academic-support services available to meet the special needs of students with *learning disabilities* and *physical challenges*?
- 6.11** Is an academic *mentoring* program available to first-year students whereby they are mentored by more experienced university students, instructors, staff, alumni, or community volunteers—e.g., career professionals or retirees?
- 6.12** Do academic support professionals provide instructors with *diagnostic feedback* (e.g., via academic-support service newsletters, presentations or workshops for instructors) about the types of academic assistance that first-year students typically *need or seek*, and *common errors* in new students’ approach to learning that are witnessed in academic support settings?
- 6.13** Are all first-year students introduced to the *library* during their *first term*, either as part of new-student orientation or during a first-term course (e.g., first-year experience course or an introductory writing course)?
- 6.14** Does *course-integrated* library instruction take place in the first year, whereby students learn information search, retrieval, and evaluation skills within the *context of specific course content* or *course assignments* (e.g., research paper or group project)?

**TARGET AREA #7.**  
**EXTRACURRICULAR (CO-CURRICULAR) EXPERIENCES**

- 7.1** Are *numerous* and *varied* extracurricular *opportunities* available on campus that are designed to promote student involvement, especially in the following areas: (a) student participation in *university governance*, (b) *campus employment*—e.g., work-

study, (c) *internships*—on and off campus, (d) *volunteerism (service learning)*, and (e) *student clubs or organizations*—including opportunities for students to initiate and create new ones of their own choosing?

- 7.2 Are *educational objectives* (student learning outcomes) explicitly constructed for extracurricular activities, and are these activities *delivered* with the deliberate intention of promoting *learning and development*?
- 7.3 Are extracurricular (co-curricular) opportunities *visibly* and “*intrusively*” promoted on campus and are students *aggressively recruited* to participate—e.g., “activities periods” designated and reserved at times when no classes are scheduled; personal invitations from peer leaders, academic advisors, instructors, or student development staff; individual mailings or phone contacts?
- 7.4 Are *incentives* or *recognition* provided for extracurricular involvement, such as (a) free food, prizes, or privileges for participants—e.g., priority parking or priority registration, (b) participation required as course assignments or designated as extra-credit opportunities, (c) awards events or ceremonies recognizing student contributions to the co-curriculum, and/or (d) extracurricular learning experiences documented on an official *co-curricular* or *student development “transcript”*?
- 7.5 Are there meaningful *connections* forged between students’ *in-class* and *out-of-class* learning experiences—i.e., Is the planning and delivery of the curriculum and co-curriculum designed and coordinated to produce *mutually reinforcing* or *synergistic* effects on student development?
- 7.6 Is there a campus-based program in place that provides meaningful *service-learning (volunteer)* experiences for students that is *integrated into the curriculum*? (If yes, what percentage of the student body has some service-learning experience by the conclusion of their first year of university?)
- 7.7 Does the university provide varied and meaningful *internship* opportunities or *cooperative education* experiences that are *linked to* the students’ intended or declared *academic major*? If yes, do first-year students have the opportunity to participate in or observe (shadow) these programs—either to gain real-world experience relating to their intended major, or to explore their interest in different careers?
- 7.8 Does the co-curriculum include *peer networking* and *peer support* programs in which more experienced *student paraprofessionals* are specifically *trained* to facilitate new students’ social and emotional development during their critical first year of university life (e.g., peer mentors, peer counselors, peer residential advisors)?
- 7.9 Does the university offer a *family weekend* for parents and siblings of new students, during which family members may visit the university and meet with the students’ instructors, academic advisors, and other student support professionals?

- 7.10 Are *leadership* opportunities available to first-year students—as part of an *intentionally designed* and *cumulatively sequenced* leadership development program?
- 7.11 Are the *leadership accomplishments* of first-year students formally *recognized* or *rewarded* by the university at an end-of-year awards ceremony?
- 7.12 Are first-year *residential programs* intentionally designed to create an educational, *living-learning*” environment in which there is meaningful student development programming and where *academic* experiences are *integrated* with residential life? (For example, are any or all of the following available in student residences: computer access, peer tutoring, academic advisement, instructor office hours, seminars, colloquia, classes, test-review sessions?)
- 7.13 Are *on-campus residential opportunities* maximized for “*at-risk*” students, and are these students *strategically assigned* to particular residences, residential floors, or residential advisors in an attempt to enhance their retention, academic achievement, and personal development during their first year of university?
- 7.14 Are *roommates* assigned *strategically* to campus residences in a deliberate attempt to maximize student learning and development?
- 7.15 Does the university have in place a carefully constructed set of policies regarding first-year student *membership* in campus *fraternities and sororities*, and first-year student *participation* in fraternity or sorority-sponsored events?
- 7.16 Does the university display sensitivity to first-year *commuter* students when designing and scheduling extracurricular experiences, such as (a) *scheduling* activities at times that are conducive to commuter participation—e.g., early morning or early evening, (b) *communication* strategies for keeping commuters in the loop—e.g., commuter message boards, newsletters, hot lines, or web pages), (c) campus *place or space* for commuters to socialize and network—e.g., commuter lounge, and (d) special *activities* targeted specifically for commuters (e.g., commuter appreciation day)?

#### **TARGET AREA #8.**

#### **INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT CONTACT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

- 8.1 How many *office hours* do instructors make available to students per week? (Does the university have a *stated policy* about the minimum number of weekly office hours?)
- 8.2 Are university instructors involved in providing *academic advising* to first-year students on a one-to-one basis outside the classroom?

- 8.3** Does the university have *intentionally planned* programs, structures, or procedures that are *explicitly designed* to promote student-instructor interaction outside the classroom?
- 8.4** Does the university offer an instructor-student *mentoring* program?
- 8.5** Are there instructor-student *research teams* or *teaching teams* at the university, and are qualified first-year students eligible to participate?
- 8.6** How many *instructor-sponsored student clubs and organizations* exist at the university?
- 8.7** Does the university actively *encourage, recognize, and reward* instructors for out-of-class involvement with students in general, and first-year students in particular?
- 8.8** What is the *full-time to part-time instructors ratio* at the university? (Note: This question is included because research indicates that part-time instructors spend less time on campus than full-time instructors—due to other work commitments—and, as a result, are usually less available to students for out-of-class interaction.)
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**TARGET AREA #9.**  
**ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP, POLICIES, & PRACTICES**

- 9.1** Do high-level administrators *demonstrate visible support* for first-year programs by their *presence* at first-year programming events, by *comments* made during formal addresses, and in *written* statements or documents (e.g., university memos, position statements, strategic plans)?
- 9.2** Do administrators provide the necessary *resources* (human, fiscal, and physical) to support a viable, high-quality university experience for first-year students?
- 9.3** Does the administration *encourage creative thinking* and *support initiatives* designed to improve the quality of university life for first-year students?
- 9.4** Are first-year programs “*built into*” the *institutional budget* and *administrative structure* of the university (e.g., organizational blueprint or flowchart), thus enhancing their prospects for long-term survival?
- 9.5** Do administrators provide *incentives* for instructors and staff to promote their involvement in first-year programs and initiatives (e.g., stipends, mini-grants, release time, travel and professional development funding, administrative or student assistance)?
- 9.6** Does administration support *professional development* of instructors and staff in areas relating to *student retention and student success*?

- 9.7** Does administration *recognize or reward* instructors and staff contributions to first-year students (e.g., meritorious performance awards; letters of commendation; credit toward retention, promotion, or advancement)?
- 9.8** Is their administrative encouragement and support for university *rituals* designed to build *campus community* and increase *institutional identification* among first-year students?
- 9.9** Has the university made a commitment to offer *multiple and meaningful work-study* (on-campus employment) opportunities to *economically disadvantaged* students that are designed to (a) help them afford university, (b) promote their retention by connecting them to the institution, and (c) enable them to gain real-life work experience?
- 9.10** Has the university developed a “*red-flag*” procedure or system for identifying and connecting with students who show signs that they are *intending to leave* the university (e.g., failure to pre-register for next term’s classes; failure to reapply for financial aid; failure to renew residential life agreement)?
- 9.11** Does the university acknowledge first-year student achievement by means of an end-of-the-year *congratulatory letter or ceremony* for students who persisted to *completion of the first year* in good academic standing, with *special recognition* for those students who achieved *academic excellence* or made significant contributions to *student life* during their first year at university?
- 9.12** Has the university made a commitment to promoting the adjustment and success of first-year *transfer* students by adopting policies and procedures that facilitate their transition, such as:
- a) offering a *transfer-student orientation* program or *transfer-student convocation* to welcome new transfer students and integrate them with native students;
  - b) allowing *junior transfers* the opportunity to live *on campus* in student residences with *juniors and seniors*—versus limiting their options to freshman dorms or off-campus housing;
  - c) providing transfer students with the opportunity to apply for campus housing and to register for classes *at the same time as native students*—as opposed to automatically placing them last on the list;
  - d) *designating* a particular member or group within the university community (e.g., staff member, instructor, or cross-functional committee) to be in charge of coordinating orientation and transitional support programs for first-year transfer students—as opposed to letting this responsibility “fall through the cracks” of an administrative structure that is not explicitly designed to meet the needs of new students who enter the university after the freshman year?
  - e) offering a peer or instructor/staff *mentoring program* for transfer students?
  - f) acknowledging transfer students who enter with outstanding records of academic achievement (e.g., honors at entry, or eligibility to enter the university’s honors program after early demonstration of academic excellence)?
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**TARGET AREA #10.**  
**PROGRAM ASSESSMENT**

- 10.1** Do *recruitment* publications and practices *accurately* portray the characteristics of the university to prospective first-year students and explicitly encourage *campus visits*?
- 10.2** Are data gathered periodically from first-year students at *university entry* in order to serve as a basis for subsequent *student tracking*, and as a *baseline for comparison* with data collected from students at later points in their university experience—thus providing a *longitudinal* data base for use in *value-added* or *talent-development* assessment?
- 10.3** Are first-year programs evaluated to assess the degree to which their *actual* operations are consistent with their *stated objectives* and with the *stated mission* of the university?
- 10.4** Does the university engage in ongoing, systematic, quantitative and qualitative assessment of campus *offices and services* that are used frequently by first-year students?
- 10.5** Are assessment data gathered on university *personnel* who interact regularly with first-year students, and are these data used to provide personnel with specific and timely *feedback* that is designed to promote *professional development* and *continuous quality improvement*?
- 10.6** Is assessment information obtained from students actually *used* as *feedback* to promote continuous *program* improvement? (If yes, what changes in first-year programming has the university made in response to assessment-driven feedback?)
- 10.7** Are *student satisfaction* or *student engagement* surveys of first-year students conducted to assess their perceptions of the quality of specific university programs and offices, and are *comparisons* made between the responses of first-year students who *return* for the sophomore year—versus those who *depart*?
- 10.8** Is *qualitative* research conducted with first-year students to assess their *needs* and their *feelings* about the quality of the first-year experience (e.g., freshman focus groups)?
- 10.9** Is assessment routinely conducted to determine what *percentage* of first-year students *withdraw* from the university and at what *time* during the first year these withdrawals take place?
- 10.10** Are withdrawing students who are *eligible to return* to the university apprised of their *option* to do so and what *procedures* they are to follow for *re-admission*?

- 10.11** Are *surveys* sent to students who have *withdrawn* from the university in order to assess their reasons for departing?
- 10.12** Is assessment of student satisfaction and student retention conducted with respect to different *student subpopulations* (e.g., commuters, ethnic and racial minorities) and students enrolled in different *academic programs* (e.g., math, science, humanities)?
- 10.13** Are *sophomores* surveyed or interviewed to assess their *retrospective* perceptions of how well the university's first-year program facilitated their transition from high school to higher education and prepared them for their second year at the university?

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