Strategies for Student Success in Higher Education

Strategies for Student Success in Higher Education:

The First-Year Experience

Edited by

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To my father, Eliezer Gringarten, who taught me
resiliency, character, and the power of a personal brand.
WW2 deprived him of his dream of higher education, but nevertheless,
he became an admired businessman.

—H.G.

To my son, who taught me *more*
about the 'why' of living and learning,
and to all educators, who may teach young people like him,
and who want to make a real difference –
to improve the lives of others.

—R.F.C.

CONTENTS

Part 3—Next Steps – Moving to the Next Stages in Life

Part 4— Best Practices – Case Studies

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

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Strategies for Student Success in Higher Education: The First-Year Experience brings together both leading-edge research and practical insights on the first-year experience in higher education. Written by a large team of experts, the text integrates a variety of multidisciplinary approaches and real-life case studies into an effective pedagogical resource for the higher education scholarly audience of professors as well as administrators to address the needs of first-year students in higher education.

Currently, hundreds of universities and colleges in North America require their students to take first-year experience courses to introduce them to the higher education environment, but few have textbooks that show instructors or student affairs professionals how to teach or facilitate such courses. Professors lack scholarly books that can inform their pedagogical strategies with first-year students themselves. Most first-year experience books offered in the marketplace today target high school graduates, but not professors, advisors, administrators, or other related staff. *Strategies for Student Success in Higher Education: The First-Year Experience* brings together important and thought-provoking research, useful know-how, and timely discussions of relevant and current topics.

Aims of the book include the following:

- provide the reader with cutting-edge insight into the first-year experience from both U.S. and international experts in a wide range of relevant fields;
- help readers reflect upon and integrate a variety of multidisciplinary approaches and real-life case studies into an efficient pedagogical process for the higher education scholarly audience;

- provide both teaching and student services personnel with pioneering research, effective strategies, best practices, thought-provoking discussion questions, and valuable teaching materials for establishing or enhancing first-year experience courses.

The book's scope is a central focus on the first-year experience and coverage of a wide range of specifically related topics including academic success, cyber security, social media, artificial intelligence, personal branding, advisement, alcohol and drugs, campus safety, career readiness, compassion skills, fraternities and sororities, goal setting, homesickness, learning and teaching, major selection, mental health and wellness, self-image, service-learning, workforce readiness, and others. In addition, the book includes case studies focusing on dual enrollment, mentoring, learner agency, and the transition to college.

The "new majority" population of students is likely to be first-generation, adult, transfer, and increasingly people of color, with dependents. With that "new majority" in mind, this book speaks to the "new realities" of today's first-year students…even in a "new normal" (i.e., post-COVID-19 reality). These perspectives make the book's focus and scope unique.

Our approach is to focus on the combination of the various topics, on their relationship, and on how that unified perspective informs a range of areas. Key benefits of the proposed book include insights from both U.S. and international case studies specific to the topic. This book includes material authored by 39 professors and professionals from more than 20 universities, colleges, and higher education organizations from the U.S.A., Canada, Germany, and the Philippines.

Strategies for Student Success in Higher Education: The First-Year Experience is multidisciplinary in approach. It covers the general field of the first-year experience but differently from others in that it addresses timely issues that other works do not – such as enhancing the nontraditional first-year student experience, managing campus safety, choosing a major, smoothing the transition to college, creating a competitive advantage for a successful career trajectory, and the growing presence and use of artificial intelligence (Ai) in higher education.

The book consists of four parts. Part 1 is "A New World – Beginning the Process," and these chapters focus on nontraditional students, mental health and wellness, and campus safety. Part 2 is "Exploring and Experiencing – Academic, Social, and Civic Engagement," and these chapters center on advisement, academic success, major selection, artificial intelligence technologies, personal branding, comparisons and their effects,

fraternities and sororities, alcohol and other drugs, service-learning, and civic and community engagement. Part 3 is "Next Steps – Moving to the Next Stage in Life," and these chapters address workforce readiness and career planning, and creating a successful career trajectory. Part 4 is "Best Practices – Case Studies," and these chapters bring us unique information on specific aspects of dual-enrollment courses, mentoring, a sense of belonging, web-based interactive exercises to increase achievement, community and learner agency, persons with a disability, and the transition to college.

How to Use this Book (Teaching Notes)

The four parts of this book, together, offer insights for disciplines including business administration and management, communications, counseling, education, law and governance, mental health and psychology, sociology, and others.

The book is intended for both scholars and practitioners in Higher Education, Student Affairs graduate preparation programs, and others interested in the structure, purpose, and pedagogical strategies for undergraduate first-year experience courses. Others in a variety of higher education areas also can benefit: academic success, advising, campus safety, career services, dual enrollment programs, emergency management, higher education, mathematics education, service learning, and student well-being.

The book could be used as a textbook for First-Year Experience (FYE) courses, first-year seminars, UNI 101 courses, summer bridge programs, and other similar activities.

The book includes several outstanding features to enhance both access and comprehension. First, each chapter includes *accessibility* features such as Abstracts, Keywords, Cite-Ready References, Digital Object Identifier (DOI) Numbers, Links, and Indexes – all of which make the work immediately useful to students, teachers, researchers, and other readers by making information and data easy to find, use, and reference. Second, each chapter contains *pedagogical* features such as Discussion Questions that contribute to reflection, evaluation, and dialogue about the relevant themes and topics, and can help to develop critical thinking skills.

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PART 1

A NEW WORLD:
BEGINNINGS AND TRANSITIONS

CHAPTER 1

BREAKING MOLDS AND BREAKING GROUND: EXPLORING THE NONTRADITIONAL FIRST-YEAR STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

To increase retention, many educators concentrate on the success of traditional first-year students; however, these students are anything but traditional. With the rise of dual enrollment, community college partnerships, commuter students, international programs, and online students, the first-year experience looks vastly different than it once did. During this time of change and necessity, educators need a fresh perspective that includes this multifaceted group. The authors share innovative components to add, subtract, multiply, and divide to achieve success in college. Together with an enhanced approach to reading and science, learners and educators can surge to unprecedented achievement.

Keywords: academic success, retention, non-traditional students, student experience

Introduction

In higher education today, universities are focusing on practical advice for graduating high school seniors to enhance the First-Year Experience (FYE) and potential retention (Cianfrani et al., 2020; Kahu et al., 2020; McNallie et al., 2020), but many educators have overlooked a growing population, the nontraditional students (Bohl et al., 2017; Ulriksen et al., 2017). Many incoming students represent an underserved group who are international, transfer, delayed entry, online, and dual enrollment students. With these nontraditional students come nontraditional situations, like fully online programs, language immersion, and COVID-19 adjustments (Sample, 2020; Woods & Frogge, 2017). To meet the needs of these students, an innovative approach to basic math, reading, and science concepts provides guidance to a successful college experience.

Gilbert (2021) defines nontraditional student as a student over the age of 25 who often holds a full-time job and has a family of his or her own, perhaps with children who themselves are students. For the purpose of this discussion, nontraditional students also include fully online as well as international learners. The rise of the nontraditional student has justified the charge to provide for their educational needs as higher learning facilitators. According to the United States Department of Education (2020), almost 75% of the near 20 million higher education students enrolled are nontraditional. According to school administrators participating in a survey on traditional learners, attendance by nontraditional students has risen 25% over the 2020–2021 academic year. An increasing variety of demographic categories in past years also has contributed to these numbers. In 2017, female student enrollment was at 57%, which is a 7% increase over a 10-year span (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Furthermore, most ethnic groups experienced positive rises in post-secondary attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These trends merit future exploration into the needs of this growing nontraditional group of students.

For any incoming student to succeed, math will play a definite role, but maybe not the way one might suppose. If nontraditional students consider basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, they will find strategies for a better FYE.

First, students should consider the addition of opportunities to grow at college, such as service-learning projects, fraternities and sororities, and other interesting student organizations (Evenbeck, 2006; Hunter, 2006). By adding these opportunities, students expand their horizons to include communities that might provide lifetime connections and meaningful life lessons. Online students, in particular, need to be intentional about pursuing

virtual meetings for these organizations in order to connect beyond their coursework, and service-learning opportunities may need to occur in local communities where students reside (Bohl et al., 2017).

Another excellent addition for nontraditional students is an established time to connect with friends and family back home. Often, students focus too heavily on either their on-campus or their at-home activities, but striking a balance often can be difficult (Kahu et al., 2020). By establishing a weekly time to connect with home, students can schedule their class times, study groups, and other social opportunities around this appointed time. This grounding helps students to have the confidence to build other relationships on campus. For online students, the focus must involve purposeful extensions to individuals and organizations beyond their home atmosphere to develop further meaningful connections.

To achieve further balance, incoming students need to subtract what they thought they knew, whether it was in high school, another college, another generation, or even another country. When students approach their FYE with a clean slate, they experience a new normal and a new routine (Hunter, 2006). This release of a former mindset brings opportunity to progress as a successful college student. Often, online students struggle with this release because the change in their learning format means a change in their approach to accessing resources and demonstrating learning. For them, a fresh perspective provides the key to success.

Another necessary improvement is the subtraction of traditional expectations of incoming students. Students are now entering college at a variety of ages, backgrounds, experiences, and orientations. By opening their minds to new populations, students can grow in their acceptance of nontraditional students and extend understanding of different populations (Ulriksen et al., 2017). This mindset change also would assist faculty, staff, and administrators to broaden their perspectives of typical incoming students and boost enrollment to include nontraditional students (Kearney et al., 2018). Online students have a golden opportunity to break these barriers because technology often levels the field for many learners and allows their voice to be heard in discussion boards as well as virtual meetings.

To achieve ultimate success as a first-year student, one must embrace a new identity as a college student. Students must lay aside their previous mindset of what was once traditional to them and add the current expectations and culture of their new environment with all of its demands and possibilities. This metamorphosis requires focus as well as action to become an integrated segment of the university's program of study as well as an active member of its society (Ulriksen et al., 2017). Nontraditional

online students have to work harder to achieve this transformation because physically the environment appears the same. They may make changes by simply adding their college-emblemed shirts to their wardrobe or adding a pennant to their wall. They could add their university's mascot to their social media page and comment on fine arts and sports achievements. For their virtual meetings, they could create a background displaying an aspect of the university culture or pride.

Next, nontraditional students need to consider division to become more efficient and successful in college. They should consider tasks they must complete for their courses as well as tasks they must fulfill as part of the university's requirements. As students consider deadlines, completion times, and milestones, they can maximize their schedules by dividing their time and focusing accordingly. For example, many universities require an alcohol awareness course completion for all incoming students, which must be completed within the first four to eight weeks of the semester. When students divide their time for course assignments and class schedules, they also should set aside time for this additional requirement each week. Time management is crucial for online learners because of their need to balance their course assignments and the discipline to set aside study time (Becker, 2017).

In addition, as nontraditional students consider the division of their time, they must consider the division of their space. To achieve maximum balance and efficiency, it is important to establish a clear space to study, socialize, and sleep (Becker, 2017). Many students struggle when these spaces are not divided clearly. Finding an effective place to study can provide a solid support for students, as they develop strong routines to complete course assignments. The body and brain recognize the space for the intended purpose, which then allows the student to settle into healthy study habits. Likewise, it is important to establish a separate space for sleep. When students study, watch TV, and eat in bed, it can blur the space, so that when it is time to sleep, they cannot calm their minds from the day's events. This division of space can provide a healthy focus for nontraditional students. Online students may need to be even more creative in their space because their options may be quite limited.

Equally, students also should consider multiplication for success in their college experience. They should multiply their conversations for help by reaching out to professors in person and by e-mail, and students should note their professors' office hours to receive additional assistance (Becker, 2017). It is also important to consider study groups in this equation in order to multiply opportunities to learn from classmates and more experienced students. Most universities offer tutoring services and programs, and often

they are free to students. Online students need to leverage their options by considering virtual office hours and virtual tutoring sessions, which are also an innovative way to connect with other university learners.

Nontraditional students should take advantage of campus counseling services to help with the adjustment to a new university (Kearney et al., 2018). These counseling professionals offer meaningful strategies and confidential listening, specific to college students at a reasonable rate. For some nontraditional students, seeking help for mental health reasons may carry a stigma in their hometowns or countries. It is important to break down barriers in order to get the help they may need to succeed in college (Hunter, 2006). Many counseling centers offer virtual sessions that may prove helpful for online students.

Perhaps the most critical component in this equation is the multiplication of friends. The university environment offers a vast source of individuals who may share similar interests and passions (Hunter, 2006). Likewise, these individuals may be extremely different, which also allows a great opportunity to grow. Too often, nontraditional students tend to cling to other students who speak the same language or share a common culture, but branching out to include others who are different provides experiences that are unique to college. This exposure also allows students to practice their language and social skills, even when fully online.

While math is essential to college students, reading also opens necessary doors to learning and the first-year experience. Of course, students receive encouragement to manage their assigned readings for class, but this college experience exposes students to vast resources that appeal directly to their majors, their passions, and their future careers. The campus library provides not only books and texts, but also articles and other scholarly works (Sample, 2020). Student organizations also may provide opportunities to meet authors and explore works that are more modern. Virtual librarians stand ready to assist even fully online learners.

Reading to be successful goes beyond scholarly reading; it also means reading for practical and essential progress. For instance, many students miss opportunities because they fail to read instructions regarding financial aid and scholarships. Some students experience problems because they neglect to read university rules and regulations. For great success in class, carefully reading the syllabus provides further understanding of the professor's goals for the course. It also may help to ensure that they submit assignments on time and that large projects receive the appropriate attention. An often-overlooked healthy habit is to read and review class notes at the end of each day to solidify the new information and check understanding of other concepts (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Another essential reading for all college students is their university e-mail messages. General information about deadlines and requirements often are communicated there, and many professors reach out to students through e-mail regarding course changes and opportunities. Universities usually e-mail newsletters and resources to communicate prospects for students to explore and grow. When students develop a regular routine of checking their university e-mail account, they become more successful in understanding the inner workings of the college (Becker, 2017). For online students, the university e-mail is crucial to connecting to campus events and resources.

Finally, the science of exploration is a critical component in the success of first-year students, especially in the realm of technology. In today's university, technology tools allow students and their professors to achieve more than ever believed possible. As students embrace these tools and software, they establish themselves as resourceful and innovative as they break ground for future nontraditional students. They can affect their course rooms with helpful ideas and creative projects and presentations. If nontraditional students embrace their nontraditional status, they can remain cutting-edge in the technology that enhances their programs of study.

One of the areas of success that the instructor can affect for the FYE is the setup of the course itself. The instructor should properly implement into the learning management system all the items he or she discusses a student should use, especially when this is the student's first online course. The goal of the instructor should be to balance the student's perception of the ease to navigate the course with the student's perception of the usefulness of the information the instructor provides (Ghazal, Al-Samarraie, & Aldowah, 2018). The FYE should encompass an easy flow for the student while providing him or her with necessary and pertinent information within the course. The instructor making sure he or she properly displays and disseminates the elements throughout for those in attendance is vital to a successful online experience (Brikerhoff & Koroghlanian, 2007).

Conclusion

As higher education focuses on enhancing the first-year experience, many educators concentrate on the success of traditional incoming freshmen; however, first-year students are anything but traditional. With the rise of dual enrollment, community college partnerships, international programs, and online students, the first-year experience looks vastly different than it once did. Educators need a fresh perspective on student success that includes this multifaceted group. For most students to succeed, it is simply a matter of focusing on the core academic subjects of math, reading, and

science, only not in the traditional sense. By considering components that students need to achieve success in college and with an untraditional grasp of reading and science, learners and educators can surge to an unprecedented achievement for first-year students (Upcraft et al., 2005).

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Discussion Questions

1. Given the relatively new nature of online learning experiences, how would educators mitigate some of the possible anxiety and trepidation nontraditional and first year students would have in a course on the very first day?

2. Share some examples of techniques that work well in traditional classroom settings that could be performed with equal success in the online environment and why.

3. Kinesthetic activities can be a definite challenge in the online learning environment. Discuss ways to deliver hands-on assignments to online students.

4. When speaking with a colleague who feels that certain subjects cannot be delivered online, what talking points or concepts could you share to convince that person otherwise?

About the Authors

At the University of Miami, Dr. Beth Teagarden Bair is the Assistant Director of Programs, and is responsible for the continued improvement of the first-year experience, UMX 100, as an engaging and meaningful orientation to university life for all incoming students. As an innovative instructor, presenter, and author, Dr. Bair designs and delivers instruction with student engagement and interactive tech tools in mind.

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To Cite this Chapter

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