

ACHIEVING and SUSTAINING
**INSTITUTIONAL
EXCELLENCE**

for the FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE



Betsy O. Barefoot

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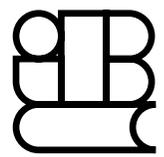
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Contents

	Foreword	xiii
	Preface	xxi
	Acknowledgments	xxv
	About the Authors	xxvii
1	On Being Named an Institution of Excellence in the First College Year: The Process and the Places	1
2	Research Methods	19
	Part One: Case Studies of Two-Year Institutions	33
3	The Community College of Denver: A Second Family for the First-Year Student Marc Cutright, Randy L. Swing	35
4	LaGuardia Community College: A Window on the World Betsy O. Barefoot, Michael J. Siegel	59
	Part Two: Case Studies of Four-Year Institutions with Fewer Than 2,000 Students	85
5	The First Year at Eckerd College: Responsible Innovation Stephen W. Schwartz, Michael J. Siegel	87
6	Kalamazoo College: No Stone Left Unturned Stephen W. Schwartz, Randy L. Swing	113

Part Three: Case Studies of Four-Year Institutions with 2,000 to 5,000 Students	143
7 Drury University: Balancing Intellectual Rigor with Intrusive Personal Support in the First Year	145
Charles C. Schroeder, Randy L. Swing	
8 Elon University: Transforming Education Through a Community of Inquiry and Engagement	166
Libby V. Morris, Randy L. Swing	
9 West Point and the Plebe-Year Experience: The Long Gray Line	191
Michael J. Siegel, John N. Gardner	
Part Four: Case Studies of Four-Year Institutions with 5,000 to 10,000 Students	217
10 Lehman College of the City University of New York: Excellence in the Bronx	219
John N. Gardner, Betsy O. Barefoot	
11 The First Year at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi: Starting with a Clean Slate	243
Michael J. Siegel, Marc Cutright	
Part Five: Case Studies of Four-Year Institutions with 10,000 to 20,000 Students	271
12 Appalachian State University: High Standards for the First Year in North Carolina’s High Country	273
John N. Gardner, Betsy O. Barefoot	
13 The Story of Ball State University: “Everything Students Need”	299
Randy L. Swing, Marc Cutright	

Part Six: Case Studies of Four-Year Institutions with More Than 20,000 Students	323
14 Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis: Success and the City	325
Marc Cutright, Michael J. Siegel	
15 University of South Carolina: Creator and Standard-Bearer for the First-Year Experience	349
Libby V. Morris, Marc Cutright	
Part Seven: Conclusion	377
16 Findings and Recommendations	379
Epilogue: Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year	397
Appendix A: All Participants in the Institutions of Excellence Study (<i>N</i> = 130)	403
Appendix B: Initial Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Institutions of Excellence Project	409
Appendix C: Semifinalists	415
Appendix D: Letter to Semifinalists	419
Appendix E: Announcement Letter to Thirteen Institutions of Excellence	423
Appendix F: Research Subject Information and Consent Form	427
References	431
Index	433

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 untaken 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