Strategic Goal 6: Provide a comprehensive, integrated approach to the First Year Experience that encourages student success.

Year 1: 2006-07

Action Step 1: Communicate academic expectations in every contact with first-year students

1. Meet the goal stated in Action Step 1 for defining expectations in every contact with first-year students.

Creating a challenging educational environment can happen only when faculty, administrators, and staff make an intentional and concerted effort to do so. Intentional strategies help to create and sustain clear expectations for first-year students. Academic expectations for first-year students were identified during a series of Academic Affairs meetings. Then these expectations were communicated through the summer orientation program. These expectations were explained by the presidents, provost, deans, vice presidents, and others. In addition, students were given a bookmark and other printed materials with some of these expectations (Students should be Present and attentive in class; aware of official university communication via email; Prepared for university life; prepared for class; Participating in class and in extra- and co-curricular activities; Polite and respectful to everyone in our academic community) outlined. Explanation of these expectations has continued in Freshman Seminar. The first-year seminar is one of the most powerful predictors of first-year student persistence into the sophomore year. The number of Freshman Seminar sections has increased from four only a few years ago to over twenty; more than thirty sections are projected for fall of 2007. Student expectations have also been communicated through email communications with students, not only during the summer, but throughout the fall and spring semester. These expectations have and will continue to be distributed through fall and spring Campus Visitation Days, early orientation sessions, off-campus orientations. During campus tours, student leaders convey academic expectations by explaining about tutoring, supplemental instruction, and other support services that are available to first-year students. To provide assistance for students, a self-study series of modules, the Intensive Counselor, has been purchased and advisors encourage students to access modules when they are having difficulties. Also, an advisor syllabus has been developed and is being used in the Academic Advising Center as a way to convey expectations for advising sessions to students. This syllabus explains expected student learning outcomes for the advising experience, advisee responsibilities, and advisor responsibilities (Appendix 1-6).

2. Develop a philosophy for the first-year of college.

The first year matters; no single program can provide students with what they need to be successful during the first year; rather, it is a combination of what the entire institution is doing to intentionally connect students to the institution so they will have a successful experience. A philosophy of the first-year of college was discussed extensively during the Foundations of Excellence Project. Even though an official stated philosophy has not yet been developed, Fairmont State has conveyed the importance of the first year to the
entire campus community through the amount of time committed to studying first-year policies and procedures. The extensiveness of this study is evidenced in the report from the Foundations of Excellence Philosophy Dimension group where the Philosophy group reported, “The campus community is increasingly aware of the needs of first year students. Administrators are committed to addressing the issues associated with the first year of study, and many faculty members are directing their efforts toward the improvement of the freshman experience”. The Philosophy Dimension report specifically and all other Foundations reports are included in the appendix of this report (Appendix 74-119).

3. Disseminate this philosophy and expectations to all first-year students.

Expectations are conveyed to students and parents through various presentations during summer and early orientation periods. In addition, bookmarks have been distributed to students with expectations; posters have also been printed and displayed throughout the campus. All Fairmont State publications now include a reference to vision, mission, or goals. As an extension of orientation activities, Freshman Seminars afford the opportunity to communicate with students throughout a semester and guide them through different facets of university life. More parent communications have been initiated so that parents have a better understanding of the expectations for new students, and additional publications are planned for the upcoming year. In the Foundations of Excellence survey, students were asked if the institution accurately communicated academic expectations to them prior to attending the institution; the majority of the students commented that Fairmont State had. On this same survey, students were asked if they understood the institution’s goals for personal development of students during the first year of college and a significant portion indicated that they did.

4. Adopt a set of academic expectations that have been agreed upon by the campus community.

The discussion on academic expectations was initiated through Academic Affairs; discussions have been continuing and adjustments will be made before the next summer programs. Learning outcomes have been stated for the Freshman Seminar. These learning outcomes include that students will: be knowledgeable of policies and procedures; be able to analyze academic preparation for college; gain a better understanding of personality and how it affects life; enlarge pool of resources; narrow major/career choices. A complete list of these outcomes is included in the appendix (Appendix 120-123).

5. Communicate these expectations to all faculty and staff.

Foundations of Excellence discussions provided the opportunity for faculty, staff, and students to discuss the first-year experience and what would be expected of students. These expectations are posted on the web and in all the Foundations of Excellence reports. Open forums also have given faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to
discuss expectations. In addition, the Advising Council has had numerous discussions about the advising syllabus where these expectations are clearly outlined; all Freshman Seminar instructors have been involved in establishing learning outcomes for the course.

6. Conduct faculty/staff surveys about students' knowledge of expectations.

Qualitative surveys have been initiated as a pilot to this action step to assess whether students understand what Fairmont State expects of them; thirty people have been surveyed. Generally, faculty and staff comment that students seem to be more aware of the expectations that are required of them than during previous years. Faculty members comment that students are being more diligent about attending classes and about notifying faculty when they are going to be absent. Staff members comment that students are becoming more aware of using email as official communication; a statement about email communication will be included in the upcoming college catalog. Developing a standard survey to continue this assessment will be initiated through the Director of Institutional Research’s office within the next month.

7. Implement financial aid counseling to all freshmen.

Financial aid is becoming an increasingly important component of the college experience as students and parents face growing challenges of paying for higher education. Consequently, financial aid officers need to work with students to provide opportunities for students to defray some of the cost of attendance and not incur too much debt. Financial aid counseling started during the summer programs both on campus and at off-campus locations, and this counseling has been continuing through Freshman Seminars and in the residence halls during the fall and spring semesters. Additional information sessions have been conducted throughout the fall and spring semesters. Financial aid counselors have gone to the Caperton Center and to off-campus locations to help explain financial aid rules and to encourage students to file financial aid papers early in the semester to have funding in place for the next semester; financial aid will attempt to maximize both work study and regular employment opportunities for students to help manage cost of college attendance. As a new initiative, financial aid has developed a newsletter that will be sent electronically to students once a month; the first issue was sent in March. Also, the financial aid office is changing their website to include: a checklist for success; a financial aid calendar; and, outside scholarship announcements.

8. Stress the importance of liberal studies in Freshman Seminar classes.

In an effort to provide students experiences that will lead to higher levels of intellectual, interpersonal, and practical competence than when they enrolled, students are encouraged to participate in a wide variety of experiences, including liberal studies courses as well as courses related to majors. Learning outcomes for the Freshman Seminar class have been identified that promote the growth of the whole student; these are included in the appendix of this document (Appendix 120-123). Learning communities are intentionally developed communities that promote and maximize learning. Based on this, learning communities have been established to link Freshman Seminars to developmental classes.
and/or to other liberal studies courses. There were a total of ten learning communities during the fall of 2006; fifteen learning communities have been organized for fall of 2007. These learning communities involve linked classes, specialized advisement, and personal counseling. Fairmont State learning communities vary from Freshman Seminar/developmental math or English to Freshman Seminar/Introduction to Speech to Freshman Seminar/English 1104 to Freshman Seminar/Introduction to Sociology to other combinations of liberal studies required courses. A team from Fairmont State has been selected from a national application process to participate in the Evergreen Summer Institute in Washington this upcoming summer for additional training on making learning communities more effective. The team includes: Kit Conner, Barbara Fallon, Laurie Johnston, Nancy McClure, Blair Montgomery, and Nancy Parks.

Action Step 2: Improve the availability of student services

1. Conduct open forums to gather student, faculty, and staff input on the first-year.

One general open forum about the first-year experience was conducted. Results from that forum are included in the appendix of this report (Appendix 124-130). In response to information gathered in this forum, services to students have been expanded. More services are available online and expanded hours of operation have been implemented. In addition, additional orientation sessions were implemented last summer, including weekend, evening, and off-campus sessions. Weekly Foundations of Excellence meetings last year also afforded the opportunity to discuss the needs of first-year students in great depth by identifying a team to study, evaluate, and report on a specific area of the first year experience and then focusing discussions on a specific topic, such as diversity, each meeting time. A forum to explore problems with financial aid was also conducted. As a result of this forum, there has been some realigning of the financial aid office in an attempt to provide better services; additional personnel has been hired and the phone system has been redesigned to provide a calling que to inform the caller of wait time before the call will be answered and provide financial aid information while the caller waits. Plus, additional information has been placed on the web site to attempt to answer student questions on financial aid. In an effort to provide better services to students, a forum to discuss scholarship concerns was conducted. As a result of a suggestion gathered at this forum, a searchable database of scholarships has been added to the Fairmont State website. Now students can indicate a grade point average, a county, a specific interest, and other categories to determine which Fairmont State scholarship fits the criteria. Also, as a result of student input, the scholarship information on the financial aid publications has been repositioned for better effectiveness. Additional forums are planned for next semester. A Current Practices Inventory was conducted in order to identify services for first-year students. The Current Practices Inventory is included in the appendix (Appendix 64-73).

2. Conduct Student Engagement Surveys.

Research shows that first-year students who are satisfied with their collegiate experience are more likely to persist than those who are dissatisfied. Thus, student satisfaction
surveys play an important role in student retention. The Foundations of Excellence project surveyed students, faculty, and staff. In this survey, students were asked about their reasons for enrollment, connections that they had made at the institution, out-of-class activities, academic advising, classroom and out of classroom focus on diversity, interactions, standards of behavior, and about the campus environment. The results of these surveys are included in the appendix of this report. Another survey instrument, developed by NCAA was administered not only to student athletes, but also to the general student population; this survey was intended to determine differences between student athletes and all other students. Surveys on the effectiveness of learning communities were also conducted on students who had participated in learning communities during the fall semester to determine whether students enjoyed this learning experience and whether they felt as though it had benefited them; overwhelmingly, students commented that the learning community environment had given them the opportunity to make connections both in learning and with individuals that they did not believe that they would have made without the learning community structure. Not wanting to overwhelm students with surveys, Bill Finley, Director of Institutional Research, is going to be making recommendation on additional surveys to be conducted in the near future.

3. Conduct programming through Residence Life.

Residential environments and the experiences and support systems within these environments influence first-year students’ learning and academic success. Linking students to the various systems, resources, and services of the institution requires collaboration across the campus. Study skills, major selection, and career choices presentations have been conducted in the residence halls during the fall and spring semesters. In addition, tutoring services are being offered in the residence halls; additional supplemental instruction sessions have been established to meet the needs of residence hall students. The Tutoring Director, faculty from the Academic Development Center, advisors from the Advising Center, and faculty and staff from other areas have participated in the programming. Additional tutoring has been established for athletes as well. The tutoring schedule is available online at http://www.fairmontstate.edu/academics/CTC_AcademicDevCnt/TutorSched.asp. The Intensive Counselor software is available to provide additional study skills information to all students; this is available on WebCT/Vista. Where students live affects the likelihood that they can make the transition into the campus environment succeed academically, matriculate through to graduation, and have a fulfilling educational experience; thus, residence life programming can have a huge impact on the first year.


Quality advising is imperative to enhance students’ academic progress, improve students’ emotional state, guide toward long-term plans, and avoid problems; however, this cannot be accomplished if advisors focus only on the mechanics of advisement and neglect student relationships. Betsy Barefoot from the National Center on the First Year Experience recommended an instrument from the National Association of Advising to
evaluate advising; Roxann Humbert configured the survey for WebCT, and the survey was administered during the fall semester. The complete survey is available in the appendix (Appendix 11-14). The survey determined activities that are taking place during advising sessions, time spent with an advisor, and who provided advising services. Generally, students stated that they felt as though advisors are interested in helping them learn and often discuss more than scheduling issues with them; however, overwhelmingly, most of the advising time is spent on the scheduling aspect. The results are included in the appendix to this document (Appendix 15-24). As processes and policies change, it is anticipated that advisors will have more opportunities for developmental advising. Once the online degree audit is in place, students will be better equipped to monitor their own progress and as students are able to schedule themselves, advisors will have more time to discuss academic, career, and personal advice with advisees. Follow up surveys are being planned either with this instrument or with another instrument that will tie student responses directly to an assigned advisor. In addition, the Advising Center gathered data on students being served in the Advising Center. According to data collected, the Advising Center is serving not only undecided students, but students with many other declared majors, specifically many students from areas such as general business and criminal justice that have large numbers of majors. A more comprehensive presentation of these statistics is included in the appendix (Appendix 7-10). A small section of the Foundations of Excellence survey focused on advising as well. In this survey, the majority of the students reported that they had been informed about courses outside of their academic major, that faculty/staff helped them select courses, faculty/staff discussed how college can help achieve life goals, about what is necessary to be academically successful, and future enrollment plans. AdvisorTrac is being purchased to assist students with scheduling with an advisor and to track even more advising functions during the upcoming years. With AdvisorTrac, students will have 24-hour scheduling access to an invaluable support service, thus helping them to secure their academic success. A more comprehensive description of this software program is available in the appendix (Appendix 25-27).

Action Step 3: Align efforts of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs in support of first-year students

1. Establish a process to include faculty in new student orientation.

According to research, two of the most important influences on student learning and development are interacting in purposeful ways with faculty, staff, and peers and directing a high degree of effort to academic tasks. Collaborative partnerships are essential for student success and this first line effort begins with orientation. The process to include more faculty and staff in student orientation was initiated last summer. Erica Harvey, Dwight Harris, Linda King, Jim Goodwin, Don Tobin, Donna Long, Robert Baker, Angela Schwer, Jean Bolyard, Nancy Parks, Rick Harvey, Brian Floyd, Anna Romano, Leslie Lovett, Rose Romesburg, Bob Andrews, Tracey Corbin, Vickie Findley, Sherry Grudi, Valarie Huffman, Steve Roof, Matt Scanlon, Susan Goodwin assisted with advising or participated in a faculty panel to relay information to parents about college.
The faculty panel was one of the most highly rated events during the orientation process. In addition, many people from all areas of the campus participated in these orientation activities. This effort will be expanded for activities this upcoming spring and summer by involving more faculty and staff in the process. In addition, many faculty members participated in the fall Campus Visitation Day and are scheduled to participate in the spring Campus Visitation Day and upcoming early orientation days this spring. Many faculty presented information during the Majors Fair to provide students with valuable information on specific majors and career choices that was held in the Falcon Center during the fall semester. Orientation can be a defining moment in the transitions to college for the student and family – a time when basic habits are formed. Orientation and similar programs are the best time to introduce a strong learning environment, build the foundations for academic success, build relationships with faculty and staff, and convey the values and traditions of the institution. It is important to have people from across campus involved.

2. Communicate changes to the entire campus community.

Academic Affairs has served as a forum for communicating changes in procedures. Email distribution lists and the web site have helped to increase communication among different areas of the campus. Many more communications about Campus Visitation Days, orientation sessions, and other events have occurred than in past years. The communication plan for the institution is growing quickly; a letter from all the school deans has just been added to communication with new students; this has been a huge collaborative effort between admissions and the schools. Also, a list of ways for faculty to participate in the strategic planning process is being provided to Faculty Senate and Faculty assembly.

Action Step 4: Create a campus environment that fosters student development during the first year

1. Promote increased competence in critical thinking, ethical development, and lifelong pursuit of knowledge by implementing the Council for Advancement of Students in Higher Education guidelines.

Fairmont State is firmly fixed on educating the whole person and on student learning goals. The Council for Advancement of Students in Higher Education helps focus on the fact that education involves much more than the acquisition of academic knowledge. The CAS standards require that the student be considered as a whole person in the context of a diverse population, that outcomes of education be comprehensive, and that the total environment be structured to create opportunities for student involvement and learning. Additional information on these standards is available in the appendix (Appendix 28-63). This sub-action step correlates very closely with the efforts of the Teaching and Learning Goal. The reports from Foundations of Excellence project emphasize these standards even more. As a part of this action item, a committee has started crafting a statement on diversity for possible inclusion in syllabi; a draft of the statement reads: Academic Inclusiveness: As the critical thinking skills required for high levels of student learning
often depend upon diverse perspectives, this class aims to establish a supportive environment through multiple methods of presentation along with various assessments. This draft will continue to be improved and ultimately submitted to Faculty Senate and Faculty Assembly for approval.

2. Provide assistance with "academic challenges" in the college catalog, web pages, program brochures, etc.

Intensive Counselor software is a stand-alone product that is intended to provide first-year students with resources that they might need to face academic challenges. All first-time, full-time freshmen with failing grades in one or more courses have been contacted either by phone or email over the course of the semester; these students have been encouraged to secure tutoring, supplemental instruction, or other methods of assistance. Students who have been placed on probation have also been contacted and strategies for being taken off academic probation and the consequences of academic suspension have been discussed. Students who were suspended at the end of the spring semester have been contacted and encouraged to return to college; strategies for improving academic performance have been discussed with these students. The Title III personnel are also calling students with low grade point averages and are meeting with them to develop a plan of study. The Freshman Seminar now has a wilderness component where students explore college survival techniques in a natural setting; the Freshman Seminar now has an online component as well to attempt to reach students not only with different learning styles, but also students with time, family, and job restrictions. We are closely monitoring athletes’ and dorm residents’ grade point averages in an effort to provide assistance where needed. An early alert module is being purchased as a part of AdvisorTrac to automate notification of students in academic difficulty. Currently, students who miss multiple classes are called and/or emailed in an attempt to detect possible problems and encourage class attendance.

Action Step 5: Implement these action steps via a first year team

1. Gather retention and graduation rates.

**Fall 2005 First-Time, Full-Time Cohorts.** First to second year retention rates of the first-time, full-time 2005 cohort have been gathered as a baseline measure. For the university, this cohort size was 692 students; of these students 620 (89.6%) of the original fall 2005 cohort was enrolled in the spring semester. At the end of the spring semester, 76 of these students had been placed on academic probation; 42 had been suspended; 104 had a grade point average below 2.0. The average number of hours earned during the academic year was 23.5 compared to the average attempted of 29.7; the average grade point average was 2.72. 478 of the original fall 2005 cohort enrolled in the fall 2006 semester (69.1%). For the community college, the cohort size was 433 students; of these students 372 (85.9%) of the original fall 2005 cohort was enrolled in the spring semester. At the end of the spring semester, 66 of these students had been placed on academic probation; 48 had been suspended; 114 had a grade point average below 2.0. The average number of hours earned during the academic year was 19.9 compared to the
average attempted of 28.7; the average grade point average for this group was 2.37. Of the original fall 2005 cohort, 245 students enrolled in the fall 2006 semester (56.6%).

**Fall 2006 First-Time, Full-Time Cohorts.** For the university, the 2006 FT/FT cohort size was 645; of these students 583 of the original fall 2006 cohort was enrolled in the spring semester (90.4%). For the community college, the 2006 FT/FT cohort size was 507; of these students 424 of the original fall 2006 FT/FT cohort was enrolled in the spring semester (83.6%). Additional data on these two cohorts is supplied in the appendix (Appendix 131-136).

2. Develop the first-year team as described in Action Step 5.

The first-year team consists of members from student affairs, academic affairs, Title III, admissions, registrar, housing, advising, publications, learning communities, and upper level administration. The first-year team includes: Michael Belmear, Dan Bradley, Evie Brantmayer, Barbara Fallon, Dan Gockley, Sarah Hensley, Chris Lavorata, Steve Leadman, Blair Montgomery, Anne Patterson, Pamela Stephens, and Maria Rose. Others are asked to join the meetings as issues warrant.

3. Conduct monthly meetings of the first-year team.

Meetings of this first-year team are scheduled for 7:30 every other Tuesday morning. During these meetings, Fairmont State policies, procedures, and problems are discussed in an effort to improve retention and recruitment of Fairmont State students. Additional measures and new initiatives are also explored during these meetings to improve recruitment and retention of first year students. Progress on goals and objectives are closely monitored during these meetings.

4. Conduct yearly evaluation of this strategic goal.

As the student population continues to change, the action steps of this goal will need to be evaluated and modified. Teams of faculty and staff continue to research best practices and we continue to work with experts such as John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot to make certain that we are keeping with current trends. In addition, we are continuing to expand our knowledge base about the first year by attending conferences, reading literature, and participating in discussions with others. The members working on this goal need to continually ask, “What needs to be done next to help our students be successful?”