Introduction

Ten target areas or focus points for institutional development and assessment of a
comprehensive first-year experience program are cited in this manuscript. These target
areas derive from empirical research and scholarly reports published in the higher
education literature which identify college practices that are positively associated with
the following student outcomes: (a) student retention, (b) academic achievement, (c)
satisfaction with the college experience, (d) personal development, (e) educational
attainment, and/or (e) educational advancement. Particular attention was paid to
published studies that were:

1) comprehensive—studies that involved multiple, diverse institutions (e.g., large/small,
   public/private) and sizable, representative samples of students (e.g., national samples);
2) longitudinal—studies that used long-term, follow-up measures of students across
different points in time (e.g. college entry, graduation, post-graduate life);
3) methodologically rigorous—research designs that separated college effects from
   student effects (e.g., studies using multivariate analyses to statistically separate the unique
   effects of the college from effects attributable to the particular characteristics of students
   who happen to attend the college);
4) reviews of the research literature involving narrative or statistical synthesis (meta-
   analysis) of a large number of individual studies;
5) national reports issued by blue-ribbon task forces, higher education associations, and
governmental agencies.

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 Support Services)
#8. Faculty-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 short summary
of supporting research and a set of evaluative questions that is intended to stimulate
institutional awareness of what would comprise a comprehensive, high-quality, first-year
student experience. The manuscript includes two appendices: Appendix A identifies
twelve key properties of effective program delivery, and Appendix B identifies twelve
prime times for supportive program intervention during the first year of college.
TARGET AREA #1.  
PROGRAM MISSION

A number of scholars in American higher education have argued that “mission blur” characterizes the institutional purpose of many universities, i.e., institutional missions lack clarity and consistency. At many higher education institutions, constituents are not sure what their mission is, disagree on what it is, or may say they are one thing in print and do something else in practice. (For example, promotional materials may claim that the college is devoted to providing high-quality teaching, yet faculty are rewarded more for research productivity than for effective teaching.) Research also indicates that colleges with a focused mission that is clearly and consistently communicated in its institutional publications and public announcements are colleges that: (a) more effectively promote student involvement in the college experience, (b) have a stronger sense of college “community,” and (c) have higher rates of student retention—i.e., higher graduation rates.

Criticism has also been directed at institutions claiming multiple missions that may not be compatible or mutually reinforcing (e.g., teaching and research; undergraduate and graduate education). Over the years, some colleges and universities have displayed “mission drift” or “mission gallop,” drifting away from their original mission as teaching institutions and galloping toward an expanded mission that includes more emphasis on research or graduate education. Pursuit of additional missions may suggest that the institution is “spreading itself too thin” and may be trying to be “all things to all people”; consequently, undergraduate education in general, and the education of first-year students in particular, may be compromised by competing institutional interests and priorities.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

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., College Catalogue/Bulletin and recruitment materials) and in person (e.g., admissions representatives)?

1.3 Is the mission that is expressed externally in college publications designed for prospective first-year students (e.g., College Catalogue/Bulletin and recruitment materials) consistent with institutional goals communicated internally to first-year students who have enrolled at the college?

1.4 Does any representative of the college articulate or discuss the program mission with new students after they have been admitted?

1.5 Do all members of the college community (faculty, 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?

TARGET AREA #2.

NEW-STUDENT ORIENTATION

National data continue to reveal that students are most “at risk” for attrition during their first year of college. New-student orientation may be the only opportunity for institutions to reserve and devote all its campus resources and attention to one class—entering first-year students. Consequently, new-student orientation programs have the potential for shaping students’ important “first impression” of the college and have been found to promote the retention of first-year students by (a) enhancing their social integration into the college community, (b) improving their college coping skills, and (c) increasing their knowledge and utilization of campus-support services.

Furthermore, if a convocation or formal induction ceremony is included as part of new-student orientation, a powerful “rite of passage” can be created in which students perceive the beginning of college as an event of developmental significance, and experience a sense of unity or belonging that comes with entry into a new community.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

2.1 Before first-year students begin classes, does the college 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, faculty, 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 college faculty 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 college entry—e.g., a convocation or induction ceremony—at which time the college 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

Research strongly suggests that student involvement in the learning process enhances both academic achievement and student retention, and surveys of both college administrators and college students indicate that satisfaction with faculty and the quality of teaching is the number-one reason why students stay at a college and go on to complete their degree. At the same time, national commissions and blue-ribbon reports on the status of American higher education have consistently criticized the college classroom-learning experience for its failure to involve students actively and collaboratively in the learning process, and have repeatedly called for greater attention to the quality of college teaching and undergraduate education.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

3.1 What percentage of first-year courses are taught by full-time faculty—as opposed to graduate teaching assistants, part-time or adjunct faculty?

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 faculty 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), faculty 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 faculty development program?
3.10 Are first-year students apprised of, and prepared for their role as evaluators of college instructors?

3.11 What specific criteria are used by the college 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 college “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 faculty retention, promotion, and tenure?

3.15 How is high-quality teaching recognized and rewarded?

3.16 If faculty are expected to publish, are publications relating to teaching effectiveness, student learning, and student development accepted, encouraged, and rewarded?

3.17 Does the college conduct a new-faculty 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 faculty development program designed to promote instructional quality and to keep first-year college 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 faculty for the college? For example, are students and student development professionals included on faculty-hiring committees? As part of the hiring process, are faculty 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

National survey research indicates that this is the #1 area of student dissatisfaction with the college experience (other than campus parking and cafeteria food). Advising has also been the #1 target area of administrators who are attempting to improve student retention at their college. Moreover, research indicates that college students are very confused about what they should major in and what careers are associated with different college majors. For example, about 50% of all entering college freshmen are “undecided” about their college major and one-half of the remaining 50% who have allegedly
“decided” on a major when they first enter college eventually change their mind. In fact, recent studies suggest that most college students change their mind about their major at least three times before graduation.

Thus, it appears that the vast majority of first-year students need effective, personal academic advising and career counseling because final decisions about majors and related careers are typically made during the college experience, not before it. For any institution claiming to provide a first-year experience that is “high quality,” it must provide students with personalized advisement needed for linking their present academic experiences with their future life plans.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

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 college 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 college engage in **program evaluation** of its academic advising system?

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**TARGET AREA #5.**

**THE CURRICULUM**

The undergraduate curriculum has been criticized repeatedly for being **fragmented**, **disjointed** and **lacking coherence**. In particular, the **general education** component of the college curriculum has been characterized as a dizzying array of “distribution requirements” which are taken “smorgasbord style”—a little of this and a little of that with little sense of connection among general-education courses (**breadth** requirements), or connection between general education courses and specific courses in the student’s major (**depth** requirements). At some colleges and universities, general-education requirements may actually be fulfilled by taking a variety of very narrowly-focused, esoteric courses which represent the specialized research interests of the faculty rather than a true “core” curriculum—i.e., courses that every educated college graduate should experience because of their pervasive relevance for all humans and all careers.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

5.1 Does the college 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 college?

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 college curriculum?

5.4 Have **faculty** 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 faculty from different disciplines?

5.6 Does the college 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 of 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 college (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”?

TARGET AREA #6.
ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

National surveys indicate that “fear of academic failure” and “help with academic skills” are among the most frequently cited concerns of beginning college students. Additional research suggests that students who earn good grades during their first term are far more likely to continue in college and graduate than are first-term students who do not experience initial academic success. Furthermore, decisions to stay or leave have college have been found to correlate more strongly with first-year students’ academic achievement than with their pre-enrollment characteristics.

Additional research demonstrates that (a) students generally *under-utilize* academic support services, particularly those students who are in most need of support, and (b) students who do seek and receive academic assistance experience enhanced *academic performance* and *academic self-efficacy* (i.e., sense of perceived control and expectations for future academic success).

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that first-year students who receive learning assistance from academic support services during the first year of college are more likely to be retained and achieve higher levels of academic performance.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

6.1 Is special *high school-to-college transitional support* provided for *academically at-risk* students *before* they encounter a full load of college courses (e.g., summer bridge or summer transition program)?

6.2 Does the college administer *placement tests* to assess the key academic skills of new students *at college 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 college 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 college 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 college students, faculty, staff, alumni, or community volunteers—e.g., career professionals or retirees?

6.12 Do academic support professionals provide instructional faculty with diagnostic feedback (e.g., via academic-support service newsletters, presentations or workshops for faculty) 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., new-student seminar or introductory English 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.
THE CO-CURRICULUM (STUDENT DEVELOPMENT SERVICES)

Research indicates that student involvement in campus activities and student life outside the classroom contributes significantly to their (a) social integration into the college community, (b) satisfaction with the college experience, (c) persistence to graduation, and (d) leadership qualities after graduation. Furthermore, alumni often report that their most meaningful and memorable college-learning experiences occurred outside the classroom.

Thus, out-of-class student experiences entail much more than “extracurricular activities” and an active “social life.” Quality colleges design their co-curriculum with the clear intention of providing students with powerful experiential-learning opportunities and retention-promoting peer interactions.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

7.1 Are numerous and varied co-curricular opportunities available on campus that are designed to promote student involvement, especially in the following areas: (a) student participation in college 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 explicitly constructed for co-curricular activities, and are these activities delivered with the deliberate intention of promoting learning and development?

7.3 Are 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, faculty, or student development staff; individual mailings or phone contacts?

7.4 Are incentives or recognition provided for co-curricular 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) student involvement 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 college?)

7.7 Does the college 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 college life (e.g., peer mentors, peer counselors, peer residential advisors)?

7.9 Does the college offer a family weekend for parents and siblings of new students, during which family members may visit the college 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 college 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, faculty 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 college?

7.14 Are roommates assigned strategically to campus residences in a deliberate attempt to maximize student learning and development?

7.15 Does the college have in pace 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 college display sensitivity to first-year commuter students when designing and scheduling co-curricular 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)?

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TARGET AREA #8.

FACULTY-STUDENT CONTACT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Postsecondary research has consistently revealed that college students’ success is influenced by the quality and quantity of student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. Such contact and interaction has been found to correlate positively with (a) student satisfaction with the college experience, (b) student retention, (c) academic achievement, (d) personal and intellectual development, (e) critical thinking, and (f) educational aspirations—such as decisions to pursue advanced (graduate) education. Similar positive correlations between frequency of student-faculty contact and cognitive growth have been reported for first-year transfer students.

Despite these well-documented positive outcomes, the frequency of faculty-student contact outside the classroom is decreasing in higher education because faculty are spending more of their non-teaching time in the pursuit of research and publication, leaving out-of-class contact with undergraduates to student affairs’ staff.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

8.1 How many office hours do faculty make available to students per week? (Does the college have a stated policy about the minimum number of weekly office hours?)

8.2 Are college faculty involved in providing academic advising to first-year students on a one-to-one basis outside the classroom?

8.3 Does the college have intentionally planned programs, structures, or procedures that are explicitly designed to promote student-faculty interaction outside the classroom?

8.4 Does the college offer a faculty-student mentoring program?

8.5 Are there faculty-student research teams or teaching teams at the college, and are qualified first-year students eligible to participate?

8.6 How many faculty-sponsored student clubs and organizations exist at the college?

8.7 Does the college actively encourage, recognize, and reward faculty 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 faculty ratio at the college? (Note: This question is included because research indicates that part-time faculty spend less time on campus than full-time faculty—due to other work commitments—and, as a result, are usually less available to students for out-of-class interaction.)

TARGET AREA #9.
ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP, POLICIES, & PRACTICES

Research strongly suggests that student retention and achievement is promoted at colleges where there is administrative commitment to creating a student-centered and learning-driven environment in which college policies, procedures, and decision-making are driven by their potential for promoting student learning and development—rather than by bureaucratic tradition, administrative convenience, or institutional status-and-prestige seeking motives.

At quality colleges, administrators devote their time and resources to campus initiatives that focus on student development, while adopting administrative procedures that are intentionally designed to promote a “staying environment” and a college community that is educationally purposeful, caring, and celebratory. A quality first-year college experience, in particular, is characterized by the administrative principle of “front loading”—reallocation and redistribution of the institution’s best educational resources to serve the critical needs of first-year students.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

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., college memos, position statements, strategic plans)?

9.2 Do administrators provide the necessary resources (human, fiscal, and physical) to support a viable, high-quality college experience for first-year students?

9.3 Does the administration encourage creative thinking and support initiatives designed to improve the quality of college life for first-year students?

9.4 Are first-year programs “built into” the institutional budget and administrative structure of the college (e.g., organizational blueprint or flowchart), thus enhancing their prospects for long-term survival?

9.5 Do administrators provide incentives for faculty 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 faculty and staff in areas relating to student retention and student success?
9.7 Does administration recognize or reward faculty 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 college rituals designed to build campus community and increase institutional identification among first-year students?

9.9 Has the college 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 college, (b) promote their retention by connecting them to the institution, and (c) enable them to gain real-life work experience?

9.10 Has the college developed a “red-flag” procedure or system for identifying and connecting with students who show signs that they are intending to leave the college (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 college 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 college?

9.12 Has the college 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 college community (e.g., staff member, faculty member, 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 college after the freshman year?
   e) offering a peer or faculty/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 college’s honors program after early demonstration of academic excellence)?
TARGET AREA #10.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Historically, college quality in American higher education has been defined simply in terms of institutional “reputation” and student “selectivity.” Consequently, colleges and universities have not engaged in extensive institutional research on the actual impact they have on student outcomes (learning and development), or how students change as a result of the college experience. For any college to be deemed “high quality,” it should attempt to assess institutional impact on student outcomes, and use the results of this assessment as feedback for improving its programs and services—as part of an ongoing institutional process of continuous quality improvement.

Institutional self-assessment questions relevant to this focus point include the following:

10.1 Do recruitment publications and practices accurately portray the characteristics of the college to prospective first-year students and explicitly encourage campus visits?

10.2 Are data gathered periodically from first-year students at college 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 college 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 college?

10.4 Does the college 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 college 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 college 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 college 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 college and at what time during the first year these withdrawals take place?

10.10 Are withdrawing students who are eligible to return to the college 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 college 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 college’s first-year program facilitated their transition from high school to higher education and prepared them for their second year of college?
Appendix

Successful First-Year Student Programming:
12 Potent Properties/Principles of Effective Program Delivery

1. INTENTIONAL (PURPOSEFUL): Effective programs are intentionally designed with the idea of implementing research-based principles of effective student learning and development, for example:

* **Meaningfulness (Personal Meaning):** deep and long-lasting learning is more probable when students find meaning or purpose in their learning experience—i.e., when they perceive relevant connections between what they are learning and their current life or future goals.

* **Self-Efficacy:** students are more likely to be successful when they believe that their personal effort matters—i.e., if they think they can exert significant influence or control over their personal success.

* **Active Involvement:** depth of learning is proportional to the level of student engagement in the learning process, i.e., the amount of time and energy that students invest in the learning experience—both inside and outside the classroom.

* **Social Integration:** learning and persistence are enhanced through human interaction, collaboration, and the formation of interpersonal relationships between students and other members of the college community (peers, faculty, and support staff).

* **Personal Reflection:** learning is deepened when students reflect on what they are learning and elaborate on it—i.e., transform it into a form that relates it to what they already know or have previously experienced.

* **Self-Awareness:** learning is strengthened when students gain greater awareness of their own learning styles, learning habits, and thinking patterns, i.e., when students engage in:
  (a) *meta-cognition*—think about how effectively they are thinking;
  (b) *self-monitoring*—periodically check to assess whether are learning and learning deeply (vs. superficially); and
  (c) *self-regulation*—regulate or accommodate their learning strategies to meet the distinctive demands of the subject matter they are attempting to learn.

* **Personal Validation:** college success is more likely to be experienced when students feel personally significant—i.e., when they are recognized as individuals and believe that they matter to the institution.

2. MISSION-DRIVEN: Effective programs connect with the college mission and are driven by a well-articulated statement program mission.

3. STUDENT-CENTERED: Effective programs are grounded in and center on the needs and welfare of students—rather than driven by institutional habit and convenience, or the needs and preferences of faculty, staff, or administrators.

4. INTRUSIVE: Effective programs initiate supportive action by reaching out to students and bringing or delivering programming to students—rather than passively waiting and hoping that students will take advantage of it, which increases the likelihood that the program reaches all (or the vast majority of) students who should profit from it.

5. PROACTIVE: Effective programs take early, preventative action to address students’ needs and adjustment issues in an anticipatory fashion—before they eventuate in problems that require reactive (after-the-fact) intervention.
6. DIVERSIFIED: Effective programs are *tailored or customized* to meet the *distinctive* needs of different student *subpopulations*.

7. COMPREHENSIVE (HOLISTIC): Effective programs focus on the student as a "whole person," addressing all key dimensions the self that affect student success.

8. DEVELOPMENTAL: Effective programs are delivered in a *timely, longitudinal sequence* that helps students meet the educational challenges that emerge at different *stages* of their college experience, and they do so in a way that promotes students' sense of self-efficacy by balancing *challenge* with *support*.

9. COLLABORATIVE: Effective programs encourage cooperative *alliances or partnerships* among different organizational units of the college, allowing them to work in a *complementary, interdependent* fashion, and in so doing, enables different programs to acquire the collective capacity to exert synergistic (multiplicative) effects on student success.

10. SYSTEMIC: Effective programs are *centrally* situated within the institution's organizational *system or structure*, which increases their potential for exerting *extensive and recursive* influence on the student's college experience, as well as their potential for producing a reformatory and transformative effect on the college itself.

11. DURABLE: Effective programs are *institutionalized* by being "built into" the institution's organizational structure and annual budget, thus ensuring that the program has *longevity* and is experienced *perennially* by successive cohorts of students.

12. EMPIRICAL (EVIDENTIARY): Effective programs are supported and driven by *assessment data* (both quantitative and qualitative) that are used *summatively*—to “sum up” and *prove* the program's overall impact or value, and *formatively* to “shape up” and continually *improve* program quality.