Creating or Revamping a Successful First-Year Experience Course

Whether your university currently offers a first-year experience course or seminar or you are hoping to start one, this section contains suggestions and strategies to make your course the best it can be. In my experience as the course coordinator at UCSB, I have researched and explored many types of first-year experience courses. I have attended several conferences and visited other campuses to see the many possibilities that exist. Creating a course that is appropriate for a research university has been challenging but I believe we have been able to create a course that has the appropriate academic rigor combined with a focus on student development. I hope some of what we have learned can be helpful to your university.

Build a Case for a First-Year Experience Course

I have found that research universities are less likely to have a first-year experience course, one that focuses on transition issues, than other types of college and universities. I believe that this is because research faculty tend to be very versed in the discourse of their own discipline but not that of others. This means that unless your university houses an academic department in education or student development, there are not likely to be faculty on your campus who have knowledge of student development theories or access to the convincing empirical data on the success of first-year programs. As a result, they will not be likely to initiate such an effort either.

Research universities that do have first-year courses usually have faculty or high level administrators who are aware of this data and are able to initiate such an effort. Even in those cases, they still had to garner support from the majority of the faculty in order to move the course through the approval process. This was the case at our campus. The idea to start a first-year course was initiated by our Dean of Students who then called together a discussion group. This informal committee included some tenured professors from our departments in Education and Sociology, as well as staff and students from across the campus. As a group, we had to build a case and write a proposal for our course. I believe that many of the issues we faced in creating our course are typical and can be found on many research university campuses today. Fortunately, there is a lot of empirical evidence that was available to us then and there is much more available to you today. If you need to build a case on your campus, here are some ideas and strategies to consider.

Dr. Joseph Cuseo has created some wonderful documents regarding the case for a first-year course or seminar. He is a Professor of Psychology and Director of Freshman Seminar at Marymount College in Palos Verdes, California. The most
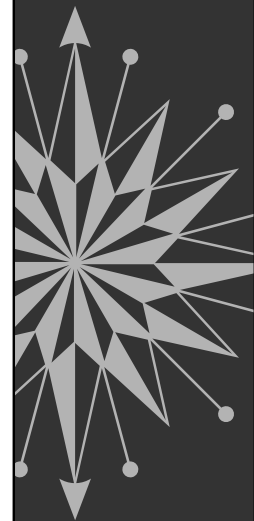
recent editions of these documents can be found at www.brittandreatta.com (generously shared with Dr. Cuseo's permission).

Discover the Current Issues Regarding Undergraduate Education
You have many resources available to you if you need to build a case for a course. Read studies and reports that have looked at undergraduate education on your campus. Some of these will be faculty committee reports (for example, the committee on general education requirements), and others might be reports of task forces convened to address a specific concern. Find out the issues that faculty and high-level administrators are concerned about. Things to consider: decreasing time to degree, dealing with budget cuts, increasing summer enrollment, addressing increases in academic dishonesty, encouraging earlier major declaration, perceived decreases in student engagement in intellectual discourse, alcohol or other drug use among students, retention, etc.

Explore whether retention is a concern on your campus. If so, there are plenty of studies that show that first-year courses increase retention. Also, if your overall retention is high, look at the retention of subgroups of your student body such as students of color, athletes, first-generation students, students with disabilities, transfer students, etc.

Where possible, you will want to frame your course as a solution to the concerns and recommendations raised in those reports. In addition, these reports will give you insights as to who the key people are that you need to either invite to join your process or will have to convince that this idea has merit.

You will also need to decide whether you are going to create first-year experience course for freshmen (students with no prior college experience) or transfer students (students with prior college experience but new to your university) or both. Many of the issues are similar between these two populations and many are different.

Gather Your Own Empirical Data
Another source is to gather national data on the experiences of first-year students as well as information specific to your student body. This information needs to be empirically sound and grounded in an academic discipline. The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html) has wonderful data and your campus may already be a participant in one of their national studies, in which case, you will also have your campus' specific data.

You can also provide empirical data on the success of first-year courses. Particularly useful are the publications from the Policy Center on the First Year of College (http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/) where they have conducted the Research Universities Project. This database features program descriptions and strategies from doctoral/research extensive universities in the United States. The National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (http://www.sc.edu/fye/) has several monographs on various topics including research on first-year seminars.

Additionally, you can explore empirical studies done on college students. I have found journal articles on first-year issues in all of the following scholarly journals and I am sure there are more as well: *Journal of Higher Education, Journal of College Student Development, College and University, Sociology of Education, Research in Higher Education, Review of Educational Research, Journal of the Freshman Year Experience, Research and Teaching in Developmental Education, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Counseling Psychology, Evaluation Review, Journal of Educational Psychology, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Educational Researcher, Journal of College Student Personnel, Journal of the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators, Journal of the National Academic Advising Association, New Directions for Student Services, Journal of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, Improving College and University Teaching, Reading Improvement, Developmental Psychology, Engineering Education, New England Journal of Medicine, The Counseling Psychologist,* to name a few.

Convene the Right People

You absolutely will need support from the faculty at your university, but this may be challenging to find at first. The faculty who are full professors, and in the more powerful positions on a campus, are likely to be advanced in age. Their first-year of college did not include many of the common support services found today including orientation, career advising, and personal counseling. Many had to succeed in a "sink or swim" environment and so may not be able to easily identify the need for such a course or may even view it as "coddling" the students. You will either need to find powerful faculty members who do not hold this sentiment or set out to convince them otherwise. Younger faculty tend to have a different view so you will want to invite them to be part of your process as well.

The hardest political issues to avoid will be the ones that are about "whos" as opposed to "whats." You will be faced with many dilemmas about who to invite to be involved with your course—as planners, as instructors, as speakers, etc. You will want to choose the people who are most in touch with the overall freshman experience or the experience of sub-populations, and the most committed to student success. Sometimes the people who meet these requirements, and they *are* requirements, are not the folks you will be encouraged or pressured to invite. This is when you will need to be creative and committed. Find ways to tactfully manage this issue to advocate for the students while being politically savvy.

If possible, keep your efforts relatively informal and low profile. Your work will be easier if you can quietly convene your planning group through casual conversations and e-mails. You must be rigorous in inviting people based on their knowledge of student life and commitment to students—not necessarily the folks you know in each department. You may need to ask around and include folks with whom you have not worked or do not have a personal relationship. Otherwise, you may surround yourself with friends and colleagues who may share a certain perspective with you (politically, ethnically, economically, etc.), which will unintentionally prevent you from exploring and representing the experience of all students at your campus.

One of the best things to do is to brainstorm who on campus meets the requirements listed above. There are three ways people can be involved in the creation of a first-year experience course:

1. assessing the student experience;
2. planning the course; and
3. implementing the course

This list should then become the base from which you solicit campus participation. In fact, these are the people to ask to participate in assessing current student needs and experiences, since they are most likely the ones who can give you accurate information. The next step is to ask some of these people to be on the planning committee, and finally to implement the course by serving as instructors and guest lecturers.

If you must add a few to this list to satisfy some other criteria, that is okay, as long as the overall involvement is heavily weighted in the direction of the people who really support student success. This way, you can be sure that the majority of decisions will be in integrity with your course objectives and student needs. If you need to sell anyone on the idea, be sure they are in on the assessment phase—hearing the issues directly from those involved can often convert the most out-of-touch administrator of professor. Also, if institutional support will be heavily influenced by certain individuals, be sure to include them in the process. I highly recommend that they participate in either the assessment or planning phases. If they "buy in" early on, they are more likely to support the course later.

As we know, nothing happens at a research university without the buy-in from the faculty so it is imperative to get their involvement from the start. You will definitely need tenured faculty on board and I am confident that you will find many who understand and are committed to the needs of first-year students. You will find them all over campus in a range of departments. The more disciplines you can have represented in this effort, the better. Moreover, be sure to select campus professionals who can speak to issues that are of importance to your student body. If students say that their living experience is a source of stress, you

will want to invite someone from housing. If depression and loneliness were factors, invite a counselor. If questions of faith played a central role in your students' first year, then ask the campus Chaplain to join you.

If a formal committee is formed and people are appointed to it, you will most likely have heads of certain departments and chairs of key committees—not necessarily the folks most in contact with students or aware of student issues and concerns. If this is your situation, you can still make it work by adding other committee members or inviting key people to speak with or present to the committee.

Once your planning group is convened, I highly recommend that you use the "Getting in Touch with Freshmen" exercise that I use in my instructor training (see Appendix C). It helps people, especially if they have been out of college for many years, to remember their own experience in detail. In addition, I find that the discussion afterwards allows your team to get to know each other better and see the range of experiences they had as individuals, which can serve as a topic list for your discussion.

Procedural Considerations

Generally, research universities do not offer academic credit for courses that are not grounded in an academic discipline and part of a degree program. This means that courses that are perceived to be skill building or vocational in nature are not likely candidates to survive the formal course proposal procedure that requires faculty approval. As a result, you will need to create a course that is grounded in one or more academic disciplines found at your campus. Research on first-year students *is* grounded in a wide range of disciplines including math, the physical sciences, English and writing, education, psychology, sociology, theology, and history to name a few. However, it is most strongly identified with education, psychology, and sociology. Identify tenured faculty in those or other departments on your campus who you believe would be supportive of your endeavor.

In order for a course to be approved, it must have an academic home (i.e., a department in which it is housed) and a tenured professor to propose the course and shepherd it through the formal course approval process. Each of these choices will have consequences and some will serve you better than others will. Your campus may also have requirements about who can serve as the instructor of record once the course is up and running. All of these policies and procedures need to be thought through at some point and their potential benefits and costs considered carefully.

In addition, it is important that you create a course that is academically rigorous. Academic rigor means many different things to different faculty members, even within the same department, let alone across a wide range of disciplines—so this is a tricky area to navigate. You will want a course that teaches and develops critical thinking and analytical writing skills but the other elements will become clear once you have an idea of which faculty are supportive of your efforts and which will present challenges. Nevertheless, you need to create a course that can withstand the course approval process or all your efforts are for naught.

Other Considerations

 Needless to say, you are in for an interesting time. You will learn a lot about the power and political dynamics of your campus as well as the people who really value the quality of the student experience. Depending on the particulars of your campus, you could design and implement a first-year course quickly and easily or find yourself mired down in committee meetings for a few years. This is why it is important to cultivate stamina. Bringing a first-year experience course or seminar to a research university is really about changing the culture of the student experience, and this is no small thing.

Also, be prepared to hit roadblocks. Some people will be adamantly opposed to this idea. Others will embrace it wholeheartedly and then there will be a few folks who, with time and effort on your part, will become supporters. Part of your success will be in knowing when something appears to be a roadblock versus one that truly is going to stop your progress. We learned that a lot of faculty needed to have opinions about our process and needed to be included and consulted. Once that occurred, they either gave us their blessing or had moved on to other issues and did not seem to care much one way or the other. Others truly

presented issues that we had to address or we could not move forward. You will ultimately have to make concessions but you do not want to make any that you really do not have to make.

Some of the concessions we had to make were that the course had to be three credits (most of our courses are four) and could only be offered on a letter-graded basis as opposed to pass/not pass (although recently we have been able to offer both grading options). This addressed concerns that students could "pad" their schedules with four "easy" units. In addition, our course was originally awarded "pilot" status because some faculty were not sure about this idea and wanted time to see the results. Interestingly, when our "pilot" time was ending, the course had established its success and was not even mentioned for review so we quietly moved to full approval status with nary a meeting. Recently, the course was changed to allow students the option of pass/no pass grading.

Remember that your ultimate goal is to get a course through the approval process and up and running. It is natural and inevitable that the course will change over time and that the people on your campus will change over time. Over the years, you will have plenty of opportunities to play with different topics, formats, and priorities so remember that flexibility and stamina are your allies. The course needs first to be viable for your institution and then it can valuable to your students.

I have a couple of specific issues I want to mention here. Resist the temptation to accept a compromise of a one-credit seminar if most of your courses are worth more than that. Drastically reducing the value of this course as compared to others sends a message to students that the institution does not value this course. Students will notice this and will ultimately choose courses that have more overall value for fulfilling their degree requirements. This is especially true for Millennial students who may experience pressure from their families to move quickly through their requirements.

In addition, I recommend against making your course mandatory for all first-year students for several reasons. First, a mandatory course presents quite a few administrative and budgetary challenges. Most research universities have larger enrollments so the freshman class is a few thousand students. Creating a course that can accommodate them all is challenging and expensive. In addition, you will have to monitor how and when all freshmen complete the course and have ways for dealing with students who did not enroll or did not complete the course. Second, a mandatory class is also far less likely to make it through the course approval process because it now must meet the considerations of faculty across all the disciplines and colleges. There are most likely political dynamics occurring between these academic entities and you will find yourself and the course caught in the middle.

Third, young adults just out of high school inherently *have* to dislike anything that is mandatory (I think it is in the hormones or something). By setting up your course amidst typical teenage resistance to authority, you will deny yourself access to the kinds of comments you read on pages 6-7 of this manual. I have personal experience with this. For years, our course has been an elective that satisfied a writing requirement and the students have loved it. The class is always full and students have been excited to get a spot. One year, it was decided by an administrator that the course should be mandatory for all freshmen in our summer start program. I cannot convey to do the dramatic difference this made. The very same class, lectures and assignments that students had enjoyed just three months prior were now disliked and even hated by the students. Needless to say, that changed the whole dynamic for the students and the teaching team. It was the only time the course was ever mandatory and I will not ever let it be mandatory again.

That is not to say that it should not be mandatory for certain students, for example those who are "at risk" or on academic probation. But by and large, I recommend that you allow students who want and need this kind of experience to choose it. They invariably will share what they are learning with their roommates and friends so you are reaching more of the first-year students than you realize.

With that said, these last two comments (on one-unit seminars and mandatory status) are my personal opinion and may not have any relevance for your course or university. So please take them with a grain of salt.

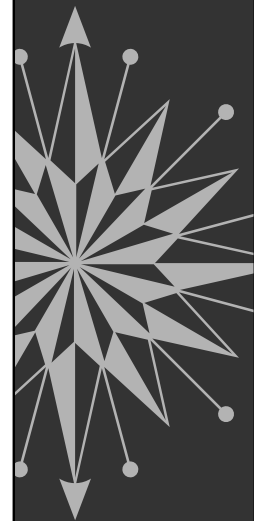# Six Qualities of Successful First-Year Courses

6 QUALITIES

Over the years, I have tried many ideas, some of which succeeded wonderfully, and others that bombed horribly. However, I have always been committed to learning from all the lessons that were presented to me. As a result, both the course and my experiences have evolved. Every institution and group of students will have different needs, thereby making it impossible to construct one perfect course. However, courses that are successful have certain elements that are easy to transfer to any type of college or university and to all types of students.

Let me first define what I mean by "successful." In my experience, a successful course:

- provides students with information and skills necessary to survive and thrive academically, socially, and personally
- encourages cognitive development and intellectual engagement in the academic arena
- assists students in honing their academic performance as well as finding a major and completing their degree requirements on time
- has a positive impact on retention of all types of students, even those labeled "at risk"
- helps students understand their institution and their personal experience within it
- assists students with developing positive relationships with their faculty, administrators, fellow students, their family, and themselves
- creates and role models a learning experience based on respectful discourse
- provides students with skills and information to be successful students and adults
- receives some type of institutional support
- is an experience that students enjoy and recommend to others

In other words, students who enroll in and complete a first-year experience course should learn the knowledge and skills to make the most of their education and to be contributing members of their campus community. In addition, they should be prepared to be successful humans too—someone who, beyond their college career, will contribute to their community and the lives of others as an employee, a supervisor, a consumer, a partner, a parent, a friend, a colleague, and a neighbor.

Through my experiences and observations, I believe that successful first-year experience courses possess six main qualities:

1. It is congruent with the institution, academically and socially.
2. It is student-centered.
3. It is structured yet flexible.
4. It provides a positive learning environment.
5. It is collaborative in nature.
6. It is supported by the institution.

Each of these qualities will be outlined in detail in this section. I recommend that you read them in their entirety, since they are not necessarily linear in nature. Also, they will help you shape many aspects of your course from the learning outcomes to the syllabus and individual assignments.

In order to achieve a course that possesses these qualities, it is vitally important to pay attention to the process by which you create your course. A truly successful course can only come as a result of a three-stage process that includes:

- **assessing** current student experiences and needs in order to learn what the course should address
- **planning** a course that will help your students navigate the academic, social, and personal experiences they will have on your campus
- **implementing** a course that has a positive impact on all who are involved

You will need to think about each phase carefully, invite key individuals to be involved, and keep your goals in mind. Additionally, remember that your first efforts are a work in progress—some things will not work and you will need to make adjustments, some minor and probably, some major ones, too. This is all part of the process, but if you have passion for students and some perseverance, you *will* ultimately design a successful course for your institution and your students.

The three-stage process and the six qualities overlap. As a result, I recommend that you read this section in its entirety to get the complete picture. Afterwards, you should be able to outline your own timeline and process.

Quality #1: The course is congruent with your institution, academically and socially.

The very nature of a first-year experience course is to introduce students to the university environment that they have chosen to attend. While it is easy to teach students about the obvious aspects of the environment such as history, traditions, requirements and resources, it is far more challenging to address the invisible aspects. Yet, these invisible qualities still influence the environment and permeate many levels of the institution, and thus shape the student experience.

In order to design a successful course, you first need to learn about what the faculty value. A certain faculty culture exists on your campus that has shaped many of the changes and developments in the past few years. Discover what these are because they are shaping the student experience too, although it may not be directly visible. Also, by understanding the faculty's values, you can be sure you are designing a course that is in alignment with many of them.

The course also needs to mirror the academic and social reality of your university from your students' perspectives. The assessment strategies discussed in the next section will help you discover what those realities are, and it is imperative that you address them. If students discover that the "first-year experience" course has no relation to their actual first-year experiences, it will quickly cease to be relevant to them. Luckily, there are no shortages of topics that relate to students.

Finally, your course should match the research values of a research institution. This course should be an introduction to, and an example of, the kind of academic inquiry they will be engaged in through all of their classes. First, it should be a meta-analysis of the purpose of learning a discipline's theoretical traditions and research methods. In addition, you can show them the value of research by bringing it to bear on their

understanding of their own experience as a college student. That is what I have attempted to do in *Navigating the Research University*—to show students how research on levels of knowing, student development, the parent/adolescent separation process, teaching and learning styles, ethnic identity development, metabolism of alcohol, leadership behaviors, etc. is related to their daily lives and can help them be more successful as students.

If you do a good job, students will not only see the purpose and value of attending a research university but will be more enthusiastic about the opportunities available to them. They will be more intellectually engaged in their classes, have greater respect for their faculty, will make wiser and more informed choices about their classes and major, and will seek out opportunities to participate in faculty research projects.

Quality #2: The course is student-centered.

"Student-centered" means that every aspect of the course, and I mean every aspect, should be of direct interest or benefit to current first-year students. This is very important and must be a primary commitment of the course planners and instructors—otherwise the course will be mired down in politics and opinions and will eventually lose any chance of truly helping students. This does not mean that students must love everything about this course—sometimes there will be decisions based solely on what is good for them and not necessarily what the students like. For example, it is important that students learn about tenure and academic freedom because it directly shapes so many aspects of their daily college experiences. Yet, very few students would list that as something they hope to learn about in a first-year course. However, it is important that every decision—from class topics to types of assignments, to invited speakers and funding sources—must come from the goal of helping students be successful academically, socially, and personally.

Why not just academically? Many first-year experience courses focus only on academic success as measured by a variety of indicators, such as GPA, selection of a major, faculty contact, retention, etc. All of these qualities are very important, and courses that have this sole focus can be very helpful to students. However, students are whole people and their college experience occurs on three levels—academic, social and personal. These are intertwined and interdependent. To separate out one would be to deny the essence of their very complex lives as students in which they juggle multiple roles and identities as sons/daughters, roommates, employees, club members, athletes, friends, etc. Just as you and I are more than college faculty or professionals—we have other aspects of our lives and identities that affect our experiences and decisions as employees—students are more than just people enrolled in credit-bearing courses. In all of us, this includes roles such as parent, partner, roommate, son/daughter, friend, etc., and identities and experiences such as being African-American, heterosexual, low income, Jewish, physically abled, young, etc.

We all know that a student whose mother has just been diagnosed with cancer might not perform as well on a midterm as a fellow student. But to disconnect her academic performance from her personal life is asking the impossible. She was a daughter long before she become a college student and will be long after she graduates. Both roles, student and daughter, are real, continuous, and affect each other daily. This is supported by the research Vincent Tinto (1993) has done. His model of institutional departure articulates that students' retention is continually influenced by a variety of factors, only some of which are based in the institution (read more about his model on page 35 of the second edition of *Navigating the Research University*).

Although we, as college faculty and professionals, cannot necessarily exert influence on many aspects of our students' lives, we *can* help them develop the knowledge and the skills they need to manage them successfully. In my experience, this issue of juggling multiple roles and identities is the biggest struggle for first-year students and has become even more challenging for the Millennial generation. Independent living and the college experience require students to be responsible for many things in their life—going to class, seeking assistance, living with a stranger, managing long-distance relationships with family and friends, eating nutritiously, sleeping and exercising regularly, balancing their checkbook, completing assignments, doing laundry, paying bills, meeting deadlines, working, maintaining their spirituality, managing conflict, etc. And often, they do not have the experience or skills to manage many of these areas individually, let alone all together. A successful first-year experience course will help students make sense of their experience

and provide them with opportunities to develop life management skills that will, of course, help them be successful scholars, but will also prepare them to be successful people.

How Do You Make Your Course Student-Centered?
There are six processes that, in combination, will insure that your course will be student-centered. These are:
1. Assessment: talk with campus faculty and staff.
2. Assessment: Talk with current students.
3. Make a list and share the information.
4. Choose students over politics.
5. Create goals and objectives.
6. Follow through and do the work.
In addition, these processes may lead your entire campus to be more student-centered, for ***all*** students and not just first-year students. They can be applied to any issue and any population, whether you are designing a course for freshmen or transfer students, or seeking to increase retention among Students of Color, or wanting to help seniors have a smooth transition to the post-college world. This manual will focus on designing a first-year experience course, but the ideas can be extrapolated to address other needs.

1. Assessment: Talk with Campus Faculty and Staff
In order to create a student-centered course, the planners and instructors must be willing to find out what the student experience is ***really*** like (as opposed to what we hope it to be) from a variety of perspectives. This is the assessment phase of the process and to be honest, it is the most important. The quality of your course depends on your assessment effort so make it the best it can be. You will want to assess the experience from the faculty and professional staff perspectives as well as the student perspective. There are benefits to seeking out one before the other—use your best judgment.

First, begin with your planning group. Whether you have convened an informal group or a formal committee has been created, you will want to begin the assessment with them. I suggest that you do the "Getting in Touch with the Freshman Experience" in Appendix C. I use this as the first part of training for all of my instructors and it is quite informative. After the exercise, lead the group in a discussion of what they think the current experience is like for freshmen on your campus. How is it similar or different from the one they had? Be sure to talk about national trends like the increase in serious mental health issues and the change in students' political views.

Then ask them to discuss a set of goals they have for first-year students—competencies they would like students to have developed, progress toward selecting a major or completing requirements, knowledge of campus policies or procedures, understanding of certain societal values, etc. Finally, ask them what they would like students to say ten years from now about their experience at your campus. What goals do they have for your students for when they graduate and beyond?

All of this information will provide you with a broad topic list and will start to shape the values you will have about the first-year experience and learning outcomes that you will incorporate in to the course. However, remember that faculty and professional staff have generated this list so the perspective is skewed through those professional lenses. You will definitely need to compare these views with those of your current students.

As a result, you will want to use student focus groups (discussed next) in your assessment phase, since this will greatly aid your committee in understanding how things ***really*** are for the students at your campus. Finally, invite those people who are committed to students to participate in some way by serving as additional committee members, presenting information to the committee, or playing a role in the implementation phase of the course.

You will also want to talk with campus professionals (faculty and staff) outside of your planning group. You will want to discover what their perceptions are of student issues. Talk to faculty who teach first-year

course, housing personnel, counselors, academic advisors, peer advisors, police officers, doctors in the health center, graduate students who serve as teaching assistants, etc., to get a clear picture of their view of the current student experience and student needs. At UCSB, I send out an informal survey every few years asking, "What are the top five issues you see first-year students struggling with?" I send this out to as many people and departments as possible, and the response rate has always been very high.

The first time I did this, I sat down with the forms and starting creating a comprehensive list of the issues. Surprisingly, there was a lot of overlap from people who interact with students in very different ways—the police officers were listing the same issues as the faculty, and the counselors were listing the same issues as the recreation staff. Once the complete and exhaustive list was created, I sorted them into larger categories of which there were five: academic issues, first generation issues, financial issues, independence/being on own for first time, and fitting in/finding friends. These categories accurately reflect the issues for freshmen at my institution—you will want to discover the ones for yours. This information was also used to create the workshop for parents of new students during summer orientation. See Appendix B for more information.

2. Assessment: Talk with Current Students

After you have gained a sense of the issues from faculty and staff, you will want to seek the student perspective by speaking with actual first-year students. You can certainly use the data available from the Higher Education Research Institute (at UCLA) and the CORE Survey, both of which I reference in *Navigating the Research University*, but you will still need to get current data for your particular campus. Whether you use formal or informal methods, **talk with** your students. Use surveys, interviews, focus groups, etc., but be absolutely sure to include students in your assessment of students' experiences and needs. Otherwise, we (non-students) are making decisions without accurate and current data—not a good idea.

I have found the easiest and most informative method for gaining student input is through informal focus groups. With focus groups, you hear the students' experiences in their own words. I believe that this method is far more useful than surveys and statistics—you can learn a great deal from quantitative data sources but nothing will capture the whole picture of Maria's life like hearing it from Maria herself. Create several questions based on what you learned from the staff and faculty along with more general questions about the academic, social, and personal experiences. Recently at UCSB, we conducted several different focus groups with students about their first-year experience. See Appendix D for list of the questions we utilized.

Invite ten or so students at a time, offer them refreshments, and then ask them the questions. They might be a bit unsure about talking to administrators, so you will want to create a comfortable environment for them. Send only a couple members of your committee, dress casually, encourage them to be completely honest, and establish that the session is confidential. I have found that students easily and eagerly tell you about their experiences. You will want to take good notes or even tape record the sessions.

In finding out what your campuses' student needs are, it is also vitally important that you assess different populations. Students of Color will have a very different experience than the White students (regardless of who represents the majority population). Athletes have different experiences, as do honors students, transfer students, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender students, and re-entry students. It may not be necessary for you to talk with representatives from every possible type of student group, but you should definitely focus on the key ones as defined by you and your colleagues. Ideally, you should be able to generate lists from your campus' main database or registration of all freshmen, and then also of sub-populations, such as all freshman who are older than 24 years, or all freshman who have a GPA of 3.8 or higher, etc. From these lists, select every Nth student to create truly representative groups and invite them to a focus group. It is important to do this process every 4-5 years because student issues and needs change, and you will want your course to remain current. Otherwise, it can become an outdated and irrelevant experience for your students, thereby no longer in their best interest and less desirable to experience. (Note: If you have an existing course already in place and have noticed a decrease in enrollment and/or enthusiasm from the students, you might want to investigate whether or not your course has become outdated. This is especially probable since the needs of Millennial students are so different from previous cohorts).

3. Make a List and Share the Information

Based on the information you gather from both colleagues and students, you will want to generate a complete list of issues and topics relevant to current first-year students. The goal here is to brainstorm everything possible to be sure that nothing is left out. Then you might want to organize the information by large themes or categories. Ideally, you will want to address as many of the issues as possible in your course. Use as many modes as possible such as lectures, readings, activities, assignments, etc. If there is an issue or issues that you are not able to incorporate in the course but which you believe deserve attention, communicate this need to others on your campus and request their assistance. In general, I highly recommend that you share the results of your exploration of the student experience with others on your campus. Other offices and departments could gain valuable information about needs that can be served that they might be willing to address, and everyone will benefit from getting a current and complete picture of the student experience. I strongly believe that seeking student feedback is the cornerstone of designing a campus that is truly committed to student success and should become a long-standing tradition at every educational institution in this country.

4. Create Goals and Objectives

Once you have a good sense of the student experience, you can begin to design a course that will be the most effective in addressing the needs of your students and that will maximize their academic success. This is when you enter the planning phase, because you will start to outline the framework for your course. Working with the list of issues you created, begin to prioritize them so you have a clearer sense of the most important issues to address. To help you organize the material, you may want to focus on the most troublesome issues academically, socially, and personally from both the student and institutional perspectives.

Based on your assessment, you will want to generate some overall course goals (which are general concepts or ideas you will want to focus on) and specific learning objectives (which are measurable outcomes that students will achieve as a result of the course). After investigating aspects of other courses, examining various student development theories (I have found Chickering, Perry, Tinto, and Kohlberg to be the most useful—read more about them in Chapter 2 of the second edition of *Navigating the Research University*), and studying the current available research, we decided our course at UCSB should focus on five goals:

1. help students become more academically integrated into the university
2. increase opportunities for student-faculty interaction and intellectual development
3. help students become more socially integrated into the university
4. increase opportunities for student-peer interaction and personal development
5. increase students awareness and utilization of campus resources

Research indicated that these elements had been proven to have an impact on retention when included as part of freshman students' first year experience. In addition to the five general goals, we have developed the following three learning objectives:

a) Through course content, students will engage in exploration and critical thinking of the following three main areas: the structure and purpose of a research university, the nature of peer interactions in a campus environment, and the process of individual personal development in terms of values and success skills.
b) Through course content and guest lecturers, students will gain an understanding of the roles of faculty, students, administrators, and the community in the formation of the political, social and educational culture of the campus. The course will also provide students with an overview of various campus departments and resources.
c) The course offers students the opportunity to participate in a cooperative learning experience that involves small group discussions and projects that focus on the university experience with both freshmen and upper division peers.

You will want to use the results of your assessment to help you determine the goals and objectives appropriate for your campus and students. If you are fortunate enough to be engaged in a dialogue about how to improve the overall first-year experience, of which the course is one effort, then you can have even more goals and objectives that can be satisfied in a variety of ways. Read more in the earlier section of this manual titled Constructing Your Syllabus.

5. Choose Students Over Politics
In order to design and offer the best course for your students, you will continue to need to put the student experience *first* as the main criteria for making decisions. This is more difficult to do than it sounds—but trust me, it will become a vital role that you play. Many people on your campus will want to use the course for their agenda—you will be asked to cover certain topics, invite certain speakers, have the students do certain assignments, use the students for various surveys, etc. Some of these suggestions will be great and worth listening to—but many will not. It will be up to you to run interference on behalf of your students. This is where the results of your assessment process will come in handy, because it will give you concrete reasons for your decision-making process.

6. Follow Through and Do the Work
Your assessment efforts may give you some good news and some bad news about how well your institution is doing in meeting student needs. No matter what you learn, it is important that you make a commitment to respond to *all* the issues and not just choosing the ones that are easy or affordable to address. You may discover that aspects of your campus, including certain departments, policies, programs, etc., are not helping and could be possibly hindering students in getting the most out of their college experience. Ideally, you will have the support on your campus to tackle these issues head on and make changes. Some issues may be time consuming and costly to resolve, but if your campus is student-centered and committed to student success, people will be willing to make changes.

You may, however, also have to face the fact that not all aspects of your campus share the goal of helping students. They may not have the resources or motivation to change, or they may have goals that are antithetical to student success. On our campus, we learned from our students that they were having overwhelmingly negative experiences in certain courses required for science majors. Many instructors did not have good teaching skills, the department did not provide tutoring or support services, and there was a general attitude from the instructors that students had to "sink or swim." Students felt that their performance was hindered because they were unable to get the assistance they needed. As a result, students did poorly in these courses and were unable to pursue certain majors. This negatively affected their freshman year experience as they felt that the institution was not trying to help them meet their own educational goals. When we brought this to the attention of the department, the chair essentially said that the students were right. He stated that many of the science majors did not have enough space to accommodate all interested students—in essence, they could not handle it if all the students were successful, so that was not a goal they were trying to accomplish. Instead, they were trying to identify the strongest students and weed out the others.

Needless to say, this situation was a bit disheartening, and unfortunately, you may face similar situations on your campus. However, this does not mean that you cannot still help students—in fact, this is exactly the type of situation in which new students need guidance. At our campus, we chose to address the issue in our course. We tell students about the budget situation, the nature of impacted majors, faculty duties and responsibilities. We communicate that certain courses are set to be very difficult and that many students will not perform well. We then let students know that it is their responsibility to step up and use all of the resources available to them. We also talk to the students about how to seek assistance when the instructor is not helpful, what kinds of support services are available to them, and how to make major and career decisions based on their interests and skills.

In other words, take your assessment process to heart and help the students deal with the problems they are experiencing in any way you can. Whether it is by fixing the source of the problem or helping students be successful in spite of the problem, do everything you can. To me, this is the true meaning of a student-centered course.

Quality #3: The Course is Collaborative in Nature

I believe this particular quality is addressed in some of the other qualities I have described, especially in the section on creating a student-centered course. I will add that there will be some challenges in working with a diverse group of people—not everyone will see things the same way. You may find yourself doing more work than if you just did it on your own. You may even find yourself in the midst of some tension or conflict that may require some time and energy to resolve. However, it is in the students' best interest that you work collaboratively and across divisional lines.

Although we, as institutions, organize ourselves into certain departments and divisions, students do not experience the campus that way. When a student sprains an ankle playing intramural sports, visits the medical facility to get it wrapped, and then needs to tell his professor why he missed his midterm, he is just experiencing a bad day as a college student. He does not care, nor should he, that he has just traversed three different divisions, each with different policies, staff, and funding resources. In order to truly serve students, we must learn to see and experience the campus the way they do—which means we must become familiar with how we each operate and more importantly, how we can operate differently and better so that the students' experiences are seamless.

In addition, working collaboratively will help you be sure to respond to all student needs and not just the ones you are most familiar with. In my work, I am quite familiar with the needs of students of color and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender students because I actively mentor these communities. I am not as well informed about other student populations on my campus, such as athletes, re-entry students, and students with disabilities. If your goal is to create a course that will help all students succeed, you must be willing to seek the information and expertise you lack. I personally invite experts in areas that I am unfamiliar with and ask them to teach and guide me so that I can make the best decisions.

Finally, you will have a better understanding of the current student experience and a better chance of serving students if you pool your resources. I have no doubt that every college campus possesses the expertise, resources, and determination to insure that all students are successful. It is a matter of bringing all those elements to the same time and place to work toward a shared goal. Not necessarily easy, but definitely worth the effort.

Quality #4: The Course is Structured, Yet Flexible

It is important to design a basic structure that works well for your students and campus yet includes a great deal of flexibility to allow for easy changes. The reason this flexibility is so important is so that the course can change each year as needed to stay current with student and institutional needs. It will also give you the freedom to try new ideas knowing that if they do not work, you can do something different next time. As I stated earlier, at our campus we have discovered things that succeeded wonderfully and bombed horribly over the years. All fifteen years I have taught our course, it has been different every single year. From year to year, some topics have remained constant, although we have attempted different ways to address them, while others have been perfect and have become staples in our course. The assignments have changed over time and the teaching team is different every single term. I think this flexibility is one of our course's strongest assets. The material in a first-year course is quite unique in that it is dynamic and constantly changing. You must be prepared to reinvent your lectures at least every two-three years—it's more work than some other courses where lectures or readings do not have to be changed for years, if ever.

How Do You Make Your Course Structured Yet Flexible?
You can design structure with flexibility in many ways. These include:
1. Time and place.
2. Mirror the campus community.
3. Utilize the interdisciplinary nature.
4. Cover different topics and utilize a range of formats.
5. Allow for and encourage uniqueness.
6. Give your teams a range of tools.
7. Utilize a range of readings and assignments.
8. Solicit feedback and respond to it.
9. Take risks.

1. Time and Place
Our course's basic structure is a seminar that meets from 6:30-9:30pm once per week. We chose this format because we wanted to present information to students and then allow them to respond to it immediately in their discussion section. We felt that having the lecture and discussion on different days might risk losing any enthusiasm or controversy generated by the lecture by the time the students met again (one year, we tested this and discovered that our concerns were founded and we have returned to the three-hour seminar format). We chose a lecture hall that has discussion rooms within five minutes walking distance (we take over two floors of one building) and book all the rooms for the entire three hours. This has allowed us the option, depending on the class topic, to hold discussion first followed by lecture. In addition, we hold some lectures in other venues, such as a residence hall lounge, when necessary or appropriate. There are many options—be sure to explore a wide range of possibilities and be creative.

2. Mirror the Campus Community.
You have a unique opportunity in this class to bring together all members of the community of scholars from the first-year student to the Chancellor or President. Doing so demonstrates the nature of shared governance and the interconnectedness of the university environment. In our course, we utilize faculty and administrators as the lecturers, professional staff and graduate students serve as the discussion leaders or teaching assistants (they do the same duties under these two separate titles), and undergraduate students serve as peer mentors. This not only allows students to see the various levels and organizational divisions of the institution at work but it allows them to see the similarities and differences between and within these communities as we discuss various concepts.

3. Interdisciplinary in Nature
Academically, this course can be very interdisciplinary in nature because the issue of student success is explored from a variety of disciplines. Structurally, this course can be interdisciplinary as well. One way to structure this is to have one course that students from all colleges and majors can enroll in and then be sure to address the issues across those entities. You can also invite faculty from across the disciplines to speak in the class, allowing students to meet a range of faculty. Another option is to have several offerings of the course but each is tailored to a specific college or academic discipline. Some of the themes and topics will be identical across these versions but others will be drastically different. Explore the options that would work best for your particular university.

4. Cover Different Topics and Utilize a Range of Formats
Our course follows the format of a lecture series that includes weekly guest speakers, discussion sections led by faculty and staff, and out-of-class learning experiences involving campus resources. The course covers

a different topic each week for 10 weeks (we are on the quarter system). The first 1.5 hours of each class is spent with all students in a large lecture hall. We felt strongly that weekly topic presentations should take a wide range of forms depending on the format that best suits the topic—this allows the course to feel fresh and different each week, thus keeping students interested and not expecting "the same old thing." In the past, we have utilized lectures, interactive workshops, films, panels, and debates. For some topics, we even meet in discussion first and then move to the large group lecture.

5. Allow for and Encourage Uniqueness

Students spend half of the class in their discussion sections of about 18-22 students. Each section has a Discussion Leader (a professional staff member whom holds either a master's degree or at least two years experience working with students) and an upper-division student who serves as a peer mentor known as a Co-leader. I only select people who are committed to students and are good at interacting with students—once that is in place, I believe strongly that each section is unique and I intentionally give the teaching teams the autonomy to decide what is best for their students each evening. Each teaching team conducts their own set of activities, usually choosing from a wide range of options available in a teaching manual but they are also free to design their own. Although we may be addressing the same general topic in each of the classrooms, the section will be unique to each teaching team and group of students. However, you do want to insure that all students have an equal and positive learning experience, so all members of the teaching team are trained in a variety of teaching and grading skills. Make sure you include the expectation that no one can dismiss their section early, so as not to undermine the rest of the sections. The teaching team goes through training, described later in this section.

6. Give Your Teams a Range of Tools

It is important to give your teaching teams many tools to choose from—I have compiled a wide range of activities and discussion questions for each week that are presented to them in the form of a teaching manual. You will find some of them in this Instructor's Manual that also contains discussion questions and a test bank for the second edition *Navigating the Research University;* visit www.brittandreatta.com to see the most recent list of activities. In addition, each year the teams come up with new ideas, which are then incorporated into the manual, thus creating an ever-growing set of resources. The manual includes (in order):
- names and phone numbers of everyone on the teaching teams
- complete syllabus with assignments
- grading criteria for each of the assignments
- grading sheets on which to record their students' assignments
- handouts from training on facilitation skills, data on first-year students, etc.
- business items to be attended to each week (announcements, reminders, etc.)
- several discussion questions suitable for each week's topic
- several activities and exercises suitable for each week's topic (burned on a CD)

7. Utilize a Range of Readings and Assignments

For years, before I wrote *Navigating the Research University*, we used a 400-page reader of articles that I compiled on various topics related to the first-year experience (I have listed my favorites as "recommended readings" in the chapter section of this manual) and I lectured on the topics you will find in the chapters. The content of the reader has changed annually to reflect each specific year's topics and to keep current with articles and research. Every year, graduating seniors tell me that they kept their reader, and used it several times throughout their college experience—I believe this is a strong testament to the usefulness of both the course and the readings. Now, students will read *Navigating the Research University* and I will continue to use a much smaller reader to augment their understanding of the issues.

In terms of assignments, we have tried various forms over the years (see Appendix A for details). You have a range of options available to you from writing assignments, exam formats, creative projects, attendance at campus events, workshops, or trainings, etc. You will find the combination that works best for your students and university.

8. Solicit Feedback and Respond to It

At the end of every course, we ask students for their honest feedback about all aspects of the course—the weekly topics, the speakers, the assignments, discussion activities, teaching teams, etc. Each year, these are carefully reviewed and we take the feedback to heart. We keep what is working, and we delete what is not and try something else. Sometimes, something which has worked for years stops being effective. It is important to not become too attached to certain elements or it might prevent you from responding to student feedback. Also, be careful not to confuse form with content—students may dislike a particular lecture, but you will need to discern if the topic was not of interest or if it was the way it was addressed. In addition, there are some topics the majority of our students do not think we need to cover, but we do because they are important in ways they do not yet understand. For example, our campus population is majority White and upper income. As a whole, students do not think they need any more discussions about diversity, but we spend two-three weeks exploring the issues because we want them to become educated about all types of experiences and views if they hope to be successful adults in our multicultural world.

In addition, we do something pretty unique and conduct mid-term evaluations. Halfway through the term, we ask students to evaluate the course and their teaching team, and to let us know if they want the course to cover something that they do not see on the syllabus. We started doing this the second year after we saw that the end-of-class evaluations gave us some really important feedback about some issues that needed correcting. We realized that although we could fix them for the next year, it was too late for the students who had just finished the course. Therefore, we decided to ask students for their feedback *during* the term in order to make any corrections before it is too late.

I cannot tell you how much students love this idea because it really makes them feel empowered. They believe their experience matters because we ask them for their feedback and we respond to it. It also helps your teaching team grow, as students will be honest about the quality of the classroom experience. This allows you to meet with them and strategize ways to improve their performance. Note: For this to truly work, you must respond to any problems that are brought to your attention, even if it means acknowledging that you heard but cannot make the requested change, and then explain why. Of course, if you can make the changes, do so.

9. Take Risks

As the years have progressed, we have gotten even bolder in our flexibility and started responding to current events in the class. I can think of two specific examples. Several years ago, when Los Angeles experienced riots as a result of the Rodney King trial, our course was scheduled for that specific evening. The topic was career planning. Many of our students are from Southern California and we knew the news would be affecting them. We called the scheduled speaker and let him know that we wanted to respond to the situation. He agreed and chose to join us anyway as we conducted an open mic forum for the students to express themselves. Things got heated at times, but we spent the entire three hours in lecture as freshmen, Co-leaders, Discussion Leaders, and faculty shared their thoughts and feelings about what they had seen on the news that day. It was the highest rated lecture that year and the source of many students' papers. I still get chills recalling the event, because it was a magical evening where learning and living truly blended in a jointly created experience.

More recently, we responded to a different situation. We had planned on two weeks focused on diversity issues. In the second week, our focus was building bridges and the importance of becoming an ally to various communities. During the preceding week, there had been an incident on campus where two Resident

Assistants (one African American and one gay) had been the victims of hate crimes in one of the residence halls—in the middle of the night, someone had carved hateful words on their doors. The guest lecturer (who was a former Discussion Leader for the class) decided to alter her planned lecture and invite the two RAs to speak to the class. As they both stood in front of the students (who either lived in that same hall or one next door) and told their stories, you could hear a pin drop. After sharing their feelings of anger, disbelief, pain, and fear, one of the RAs asked the students if they lived in a residence hall and they all raised their hands. She then asked them:

> *"Why didn't you do something? You are all my neighbors and someone in our community hurt one of us. You live with me, you eat with me, and you attend class with me. Where were you? Where are you now? No one has come to me to give me a hug. No one has told me that they don't feel the same way. Why are you all just sitting back and doing nothing? I don't understand."*

I don't think anyone could have touched those students the way she did that night. Many students learned more about respect, civility, caring, and community in that 15 minutes than in their entire lives up until that point. It was extremely powerful.

What I like about our course is that it utilizes a variety of options in everything we do—from topics to lecture formats to teaching teams to assignments. No matter what types of students enroll in our course, they will find some elements in the course that really work for them. Do not be intimidated by too much flexibility. If it is planned for, you can still have a very organized and structured course. The key is to design the flexibility from the beginning. During your first year, try some different lecture formats, give your teaching teams some choices, and tinker with different types of assignments. Then solicit feedback and learn as you go.

Quality #5: The Course Provides a Positive Learning Environment

Up until now, all of the elements have focused on your pre-classroom planning. This particular element directly deals with creating a positive learning environment in order to maximize the students' experience. I believe a positive learning environment is one which:

- is dynamic and exciting
- is inclusive of all types of students
- raises the level of intellectual engagement
- encourages student input and participation
- fosters respectful discussion
- promotes student involvement in the education process
- allows for different views, beliefs, opinions, and values
- is multicultural in nature
- represents a team approach to learning
- utilizes peer leaders
- has variety and provides different activities to allow for different types of learning

How Do You Create a Positive Learning Environment?

You can create a positive learning environment in many ways. The essential elements are:

1. Ground your course is specific goals and learning outcomes.
2. Select enthusiastic discussion leaders and peer mentors.
3. Create diverse and dynamic teaching teams.
4. Provide teams with thorough training.
5. Invite dynamic and enthusiastic speakers.
6. Set up your classroom to reflect course values.

1. Ground Your Course is Specific Goals and Learning Outcomes

A positive learning environment comes from having a clear sense of what it is you are trying to accomplish. If your course does not have specific goals and learning outcomes, the students will feel this lack of direction and it can impair the learning environment. The assessment process should help you determine your goals and learning outcomes and then you need to tie them directly to every aspect of the class. This way, each experience the student has is woven into a comprehensive experience that builds over the term.

Our course is grounded in three specific student development theories: Chickering's Seven Vectors of College Student Development, Perry's Nine Stages of Cognitive Development, and Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure. If you look at my syllabus, you will see that every lecture is directly connected to one of the seven vectors. We are intentionally helping students look at themselves through the lenses of each vector. Cognitively, the course is pushing the students to develop along Perry's nine positions. Each topic is considered from multiple perspectives, and in discussion, we encourage multiple opinions and experiences. My teaching team and I resist requests to tell them what we think is "right" but rather encourage them to explore the possibilities. In addition, each element of the course is designed to increase students' academic and social integration, as described by Tinto. We have created a discussion environment that is both social and intellectual, and the course content and assignments have the students gaining information or experiences that increase their integration.

I believe that this grounding creates a positive learning environment because the students can see and experience congruence in the course, even if they are not quite sure what it is. The course feels like it is building toward something the entire term, and even beyond. This translates to very high attendance rates and engagement in the course. In addition, my teaching team has something to guide their choices so they can select activities or build their discussion agenda with a specific purpose in mind. This has worked very well for us and I recommend a similar strategy for your course.

2. Select Enthusiastic Discussion Leaders and Peer Mentors

The best way to ensure a positive learning environment is to hand pick your teaching teams by selecting good people to serve as discussion leaders (staff) or teaching assistants (graduate students) and peer mentors (undergraduate students). You will want to choose people who are fun and dynamic, and whom you can envision creating a positive learning experience. I usually choose people whom I know students both like and connect with—usually the people I have already discussed who are committed to student success. They tend to have innate people skills and already value students, and therefore naturally validate their experiences, thoughts, and opinions.

When forming teaching teams, I usually pick a wide variety of staff members from all divisions (academics, housing, student affairs, etc.) and from all levels ranging from administrative assistants to vice chancellors. I feel that this benefits both the students and the staff as everyone gets more exposure to different people and ideas. Many of the people who have served as discussion leaders over the years have found that the experience really benefited their department because they had their "fingers on the pulse" (so to speak) of the freshman experience. As a result, many departments that have a lot of contact with students have made a long-term commitment to having someone from their office serve as a discussion leader. If you will be utilizing faculty, try to incorporate a wide range of disciplines from the sciences and engineering to the arts and humanities. Also, try to include all levels from new lecturers to full professors.

Interestingly, the first year, many of those on the planning committee wanted to serve as discussion leaders in order to see their efforts come to fruition. This was wonderful because we could all see first-hand how things we had planned in a conference room worked, or sometimes didn't, in the classroom. As a result, we were all on the same page when it came time to review the course and make changes. If possible, I would recommend that some members of your planning committee serve as instructors the first year.

In addition to discussion leaders and/or teaching assistants, we also believe in using peer mentors. This is extremely effective and I believe is a central element in a positive learning environment. Research has shown that relationships with older, more experienced students are essential to the retention of freshman students, so

we chose to include undergraduate Co-leaders as part of our teaching teams. There is one Co-leader assigned to each section and they aid in the running of the section. However, their most important function is simply to serve as role models: students who have succeeded, academically and/or personally. Throughout the class, they share their own viewpoints and reveal how the issues that are discussed in class have affected them. They also lead one section to give them an opportunity to develop their own teaching skills. In addition, they assist in the grading of some assignments (journals and experiential activities) and conduct evaluative research on the impact of the course on the freshmen. Our Co-leaders receive 4.0 units of upper-division credit from the Education department as compensation for their work.

Many students have commented that this interaction was very positive because they felt that the Co-leaders could best understand their needs as fellow undergraduates. The students also commented that they were able to learn from the experiences of the Co-leaders and, in many cases, were subsequently motivated to become involved in leadership positions on campus.
The following quotes come from anonymous final course evaluations:

> *"Our Co-leaders were really cool. It was neat to hear about what a junior or senior thought of some of the topics. And they gave us some good advice based on their experiences."*

> *"My Co-leader really opened my eyes. He has led a very different life than mine. He is from East L.A. and was in a gang in high school. I always thought guys like that were into drugs and didn't care about life. But here he is graduating with a college degree and he is applying to graduate school! It made me realize how much I assume about people."*

The Co-leaders also expressed that they received many benefits from their involvement.

> *"I learned so much as a student by co-leading this class because of the content. I had no knowledge about some of the topics covered, like the Master Plan and affirmative action policies. But I'm a senior now—I wish I'd had this course as a freshman."*

> *"I'm so glad I was chosen to be a Co-leader. I'm planning on getting my teaching credential and this really opened my ideas to what teaching is really like. The training also really helped me understand the importance of supporting a student's self-esteem in the classroom."*

> *"It was nice to share my knowledge with someone new and to pass on the information I have gained during my education here. I am glad that my experiences, good and bad, were a benefit to someone other than myself."*

3. Create Diverse and Dynamic Teaching Teams

It is important to select people who are in touch with a wide variety of student issues and needs. Your instructors need to be willing to hear other views and believe that students can be a source of learning for them as well. It will also be vitally important that your teaching team is diverse in the ways that are most important for your student population. I have found that students are more open and trusting when they believe that their experience will be heard and understood. Seeing someone on the teaching team with whom they connect helps create a sense of safety for them. I intentionally arrange our teaching teams to represent gender and ethnic diversity as much as possible. A team of all White instructors, although competent and caring, may not give Students of Color confidence that their experience will be understood, just as an all female team might make male students feel a bit unsure if they could be truly honest about their thoughts and opinions. Obviously, possessing or lacking certain physical qualities does not determine a person's competence in addressing related issues, but it is important to realize that perceptions ***do*** matter and are integral to creating a positive learning environment.

For example, I am a White, able-bodied woman, with a Ph.D., in my early forties. I have worked very hard to become conscious and competent in the issues and experiences relevant to students who are different

from me in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, etc. However, I also know that students cannot tell that by looking at me. It would be very easy for them to assume that I would not know what their experience is like, or that their experience is vastly different from mine on a daily basis. That assumption may be accurate for the majority of people they will encounter. I know that over time, students will learn more about me, but I am more concerned with their initial impressions and concerns. I would prefer to have students see the teaching teams the first night and feel as if they will have a voice, rather than wonder if they will or not. I don't want to risk them possibly leaving the course because they assume that they won't. Creating a positive learning environment begins the first second they walk in the door.

4. Provide Teams with Thorough Training
The best way to insure a positive learning environment is to provide your teaching teams with the information and skills they will need to be successful through a comprehensive training process. Since some or all of the members of your teaching team will not have had teaching experience at all, or at least not with first-year students, it will be important to provide them with comprehensive training. I attended a two day workshop on designing instructor training led
by Dr. John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (visit www.sc.edu/fye) for more information).These workshops are offered at various times throughout the year in locations across the country, and it was very helpful in me design our instructor training.
I modeled our training after theirs, making adjustments as necessary. Our training occurs the term before the team teaches and usually takes place in standard two-hour meetings. In addition, we provide our Co-leaders with similar training over the course of two evening sessions just prior to the beginning of the course. They receive all of the same information with the exception of the session on grading papers and exams since they do not participate in that process. Our training covers the following topics:

- Understand the First-Year Experience
    - "Getting in Touch with Freshmen" exercise (see Appendix C)
    - Overview of data on first-year students (nationally and institutionally)
    - Overview of student development theories (Chickering, Perry, Tinto, and Kohlberg)

- Course Structure
    - Overview of syllabus and assignments
    - Explanation of Discussion Leader and Co-leader responsibilities

- Leading & Facilitation Discussion Sections
    - Discussion of Bloom's Hierarchy of Knowing
    - Training on important facilitation skills required for leading discussion
    - Discussion of difficult situations and how to handle them

- Grading Journals and Reading Critiques
    - Overview of criteria for grading weekly journals
    - Discussion of how to provide appropriate and constructive feedback
    - Information on how to identify crisis situations that students share in journals
    - Information on how to make appropriate referrals
    - Practice grading session with journals from previous year

- Grading Papers and Final Exams
    - Overview of criteria for grading paper and take-home final exam paper

     o Discussion of how to provide appropriate and constructive feedback
     o Practice grading session using detailed grading rubric

   ■ Lesson Planning
     o Review of instructor's manual, discussion questions, and possible activities
     o Presentation by "experienced" discussion leaders on their tips and suggestions
     o Troubleshooting and addressing needs not previously covered

5. *Invite Dynamic and Engaging Speakers*

Any student can tell you that the instructor makes or breaks a classroom experience—if she or he is enthusiastic, it permeates the entire room, including the students. One of your priorities should be to bring in the most dynamic and engaging speakers possible. This may be a difficult task, especially if there is pressure to include certain staff or faculty because of their positions or titles. If these people are not engaging speakers, you will be confronted with choosing between what is best for the students and possibly, what is best for you or the course politically.

If and when possible, choose the students. They will be much more likely to be engaged in, and therefore get the most from, the class if the speaker is able to draw them in and inspire them.
You can take can a terrific course and render it ineffective by having it delivered in ways that students don't connect with. I cannot emphasize this enough—delivery is 90% of the experience.

However, please don't confuse engagement with entertainment. I am not advocating that class should always be fun and that students need to be entertained. Engaging speakers are able to connect the material they are teaching to the experiences of the audience, in this case, first-year students. I have seen quiet-spoken faculty be so engaging that you could hear a pin drop in the lecture hall. I have also seen speakers who had the students so engaged that hands were flying up all over the room as students wanted to participate. The material in a first-year experience course is ultimately ***about*** the students so they have some experience on the subjects you will be discussing. Engaging speakers will realize this and combine the experience of the students with their own expertise to create a richer education for all.

When selecting speakers, you should first brainstorm a list of the faculty and staff who are great presenters. The question is how to find these people. One way is to review winners of various teaching awards your campus presents, especially if they are based on student nominations. Another way is to talk to students and ask them who their favorite faculty are—even an informal survey with student peers and employees can yield an extensive list. In addition, explore which staff members have a gift for presenting. Many staff conduct workshops, present at conferences, provide training, etc. Your committee should be able to generate a list just by reviewing any good presentations they have seen by staff in recent years.

Ideally, you will want to invite people to speak in their areas of expertise. If you have a professor who teaches a course on human sexuality, he or she might be the perfect person to invite to lecture on relationships. If you have a staff member who is skilled at facilitating diversity workshops, she or he could present on diversity issues. However, sometimes you might want to capitalize on someone's skill as a presenter even though his or her expertise might not be represented in your syllabus. I suggest contacting these people and asking if they would be comfortable speaking on another topic. Let them know that you value their skill as an instructor and tell them the options of topics you need to find people to address. I have found that good speakers can present on just about any topic if given time to prepare, and often they are excited about the opportunity to do something different.

If you find yourself in the position of being required to work with certain speakers whom you know to be less than exciting presenters, there are still ways to make this work for the students. First, see if you can determine if they are more skilled or comfortable in certain contexts. Some people are great at presenting pre-written structured lectures but become ineffective when having to facilitate an open discussion. While for others, the reverse is true. Some people are engaging when presenting material they are passionate about but become monotone when presenting something that is boring or unchallenging to them. When possible, play to the person's strengths by structuring your request accordingly.

Second, utilize a variety of elements within that lecture. Perhaps you can have the speaker give a mini-lecture followed by a film that illustrates the topic. Alternatively, have the person present and then moderate a panel of other staff and faculty debating the topic. Or even combine two topics within one week, allotting a certain amount of time to each speaker. It is even possible to follow a lecture with a presentation by peer mentors about how that topic influenced their college experience in different ways. The point is to be creative and find ways to meet your students' needs while utilizing the people you are compelled to invite.

Third, turn the situation into a learning experience. Have a discussion with your students about teaching and learning styles. Have students learn how they can separate content from style and still gain valuable information from any class. Discuss the nature of faculty rewards on your campus and how good teaching is defined and measured. Help them learn to identify various strengths that faculty possess and how they can proactively seek out the types of instructors who best meet their needs.

Finally, be sure to give your speakers clear instruction about your expectations for their presentation. You should be able to articulate 2-3 outcomes you would like for your students to have as a result of the lecture. Also, be sure you communicate about the time and place, audio-visual needs, the number of students who will be present, if or how handouts can be distributed, and if a question and answer session is expected. Furthermore, you will want to send each speaker a thank you note at the end of the course along with any appropriate feedback from student evaluations.

6. Set up Your Classroom to Reflect Course Values

I have listed the course values we hold on my campus at the beginning of this section. It is important that you have clearly defined course values that are closely connected to your course goals and objectives. This means that the course structure and instructors' behavior must role model the course goals and objectives. Young people are very adept at sensing hypocrisy, so "walking your talk" is an integral part of creating a successful course.

Some of our values are reflected in the topics we choose, the speakers we invite, the assignments we require, and the teaching teams we select. However, many of them are carried out in the every day workings of the classroom. It will be important to create a learning environment that is comfortable, engaging, and safe. There are several ways to do this—you will want to consider the following ideas:

Seating Arrangements

In the large lecture format, we are forced to use traditional assembly seating because the halls that are available to us do not have movable seats. However, we do use a rather small lecture hall with a low stage so that speakers are not "above" students. In addition, we utilize wireless mics when possible in order to allow the speakers to walk up and down the aisles, since many of our lecturers use interactive teaching techniques.

In discussion section, we always arrange the seats in a circle. This is done for several reasons. It allows everyone to see each other, which fosters eye contact and therefore connection to each other. It also allows the members of the teaching team to be on the same level as the students, thereby eliminating a feeling of hierarchy. In addition, the teaching team usually sits at different parts of the circle, as opposed to next to each other, which allows them to have a better sense of the whole room as they can easily monitor different groups of students. This format facilitates discussion as it is easy for everyone to see and hear each other, and it creates a feeling of a conversation. It also promotes a sense of accountability for participation, because it is more difficult for a person to hide or tune out during the discussion.

Groundrules

Establishing groundrules is a cornerstone of our class, and it occurs the first night of section.
I usually begin by telling the students that this class is about them and their experience. As a result, section will only be really beneficial if students feel comfortable talking about their real experiences, opinions, and concerns. I then explain the concept of groundrules—an agreement by everyone in the class to interact according to certain guidelines. Then I ask students what they would each personally need in order to feel

open and comfortable in class. I let them brainstorm while I write their ideas on the board. Once they are done, I see if there are any that they missed and ask the students about them. After the list is complete, I ask the students if they will be willing to agree to the groundrules. Before the next class, I type up the groundrules and bring a copy for each student, which we review once more the following week. The following is a list of the typical groundrules that students create each term:

- Be on time and prepared for class.
- Let people finish speaking (no interrupting).
- Separate the person from the content (e.g., "I don't like what you said;" instead of "You're wrong.")
- Use "I" statements to take ownership for thoughts, feelings, and opinions instead of general statements (e.g., "I think students drink a lot" as opposed to "Students drink a lot.")
- Be respectful and attentive.
- Be willing to take risks and move out of your comfort zone.
- People have the right to participate at their comfort level but need to be attentive and engaged.
- Use direct communication, and avoid non-verbal reactions (e.g., gasping, rolling eyes, etc.).
- Validate someone's feelings or emotions as being real for him/her.
- Maintain confidentiality (need to decide if no comments leave the room at all or that content can be discussed, but the identity of the speaker must be protected).

When appropriate, I will review the ground rules at various times during the quarter if something has begun to be an issue or if we are tackling a sensitive subject.

Student-run Discussion

Because we want the course to be for and about students, it is important to keep the discussion as student-centered as possible. This is not only regarding content but process as well. I always establish the expectation that students will manage their own discussion and I encourage them to talk to each other directly—as opposed to me calling on people and having their comments directed at me. We usually determine a process for doing this that allows the students to raise their hands and do their best to talk when it is their turn. The Co-leaders and I only manage traffic if things get busy or if the discussion gets tense or heated. If this is the case, we keep a running written list of students who have raised their hand and we go through it in order. This can help prevent you from unintentionally favoring certain students over others.

There is another benefit of the student-run approach, which is that the students become more empowered in their education when they must take an active role in creating it. One of our course values is that students will become active participants in their education. Asking them to manage their own discussion role models this value beautifully. They cannot sit and wait for the instructor to tell them what to do, but rather they must work together to create the experience for themselves.

Lesson Plans

Because we allow the discussion to flow based on the students' needs and experiences, lesson plans must be fluid and flexible. I provide each of the Discussion Leaders and Co-leaders with an extensive manual that has a variety of exercises and discussion questions. In addition, we utilize a wide range of ice breakers and exercises that serve a variety of purposes depending on the topic we are addressing. We utilize the resources we have on our campus for ideas. The staffs of most residential life programs, student activity centers, leadership programs, and diversity education programs often have libraries of films, workshops, articles, and activities that are appropriate for use in the classroom. When necessary, we also create our own.

In this manual, you will find discussion questions and exams questions appropriate for each chapter of *Navigating the Research University* (second edition) beginning on page 19. In addition, you will find many of the activities we use at www.brittandreatta.com.

In order to prepare for section, each teaching team creates an agenda for that week, which usually consists of both discussion questions and activities. Because each week's topic has multiple aspects to it, each teaching team can go many directions. As a result, no two sections are alike as each team creates the plan they feel is best suited for their group of students. I encourage each of the teams to have a "Plan B"

in case the discussion topic or activity is not having the desired effect. There is nothing worse than forcing students to continue on a path that is not interesting or beneficial to them. Being able to respond by easily moving to another topic or activity keeps the students engaged.

It is also important to have a variety of options so that all students will be able to connect to something. Some students feel more comfortable in small groups or dyads, while others thrive in the large group settings. Some students like talking while others prefer the "hands on" approach with exercises. In addition, there should be some variety in the level of risk that different activities require of students. For example, some topics are difficult for students to discuss, so plans that allow for anonymous participation can be appropriate. One example would be to have students write a question or comment on an index card and then collect and redistribute the cards for students to read. This way, each viewpoint is heard without a student having to risk embarrassment. On the other hand, it is also important to have other activities should push your students a little out of their comfort zones. Your team should intentionally choose a variety of activities that require different skills so that every student will find something suited to them in the day's plans. This also allows your teaching team to role model the importance of meeting the needs of people with diverse backgrounds by utilizing a range of approaches.

Ice Breakers

The level of comfort your students feel in the classroom will be directly correlated to how comfortable they feel with their peers. One aspect of this comfort will be addressed by establishing ground rules, as they will help create a safe environment free from judgment and that protects their privacy. In addition, sitting in a circle will allow students to see and engage with each other. However, they will still be hesitant early in the term for a few reasons. First, this will most likely be their first academic experience that creates this kind of open environment, so they will be a little unsure how to act. Their tendency will be to lay low until they see how things are going to be. Co-leaders can be very instrumental in helping students warm up by participating often and sharing their personal experiences and opinions. They will most likely have to role model this behavior early in the course and then decrease as students begin to engage.

In addition, your students will most likely not know each other, so they will tend to be a bit reserved until they are more connected and feel comfortable. One way to foster and accelerate this process is to conduct ice breakers every discussion for the first 2-3 weeks. We automatically build ice breakers into the first three sections (each teaching team choosing their favorites) and we purposely encourage students to interact in different ways. Again, you will want to choose a wide variety of options in order to provide an opportunity for all students to feel comfortable, from the shy and introverted to the outgoing and confident. There are many books available on ice breakers as well as several websites. Be sure, however, to review them to discern if there is any possibility of creating discomfort for your students. Some activities are easier for students with certain personality types, ages, skills, backgrounds, and even physical abilities. Be sure to scrutinize your choices so that you are inclusive for all students in your class—the point of an ice breaker is to build unity, not exclusion. This is true for all exercises and activities you choose—scrutinize them before you use them. A special note: make sure you do not use an activity that puts lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender students in the position of having to come out to the class or lie about their sexual orientation. Many common ice breakers ask questions about dating experiences (e.g., describe your favorite date) so be aware of those and similar questions.

Names

Another way to encourage comfort in section is to be sure that all participants know each other's names. One way to accomplish this is to utilize nametags or nameplates. On the first day of class, I have students create nameplates by taking a sheet of notebook paper, folding it in half, writing their name in large letters on the bottom half, and hanging it over their edge of their desk. Each week, my students know that their first task is to arrange their chairs in a circle and put out their nameplates. However, there are more creative ideas you can use and most ice breaker resources have "name games" to choose from.

As the instructor, it is very important for you to learn your students' names as soon as possible. Even if you are bad at remembering names, use whatever tricks you need to in order to learn your students' names. Many freshmen can have the experience of not having any instructors who know them by name—so learning their names is part of how you create the kind of student-centered experience they thrive best in. I have had students actually thank me for bothering to learn their names, and they have told me that it contributing to their feelings that they mattered. In addition, I strongly believe that it is the responsibility of all instructors to learn how to correctly pronounce someone's name. Nothing represents our individual identity more than our name—to hear your name as it is meant to be said can be a validating experience. I realize that some names can be very difficult for us to pronounce, but I believe it is our responsibility to go the extra mile and do so. Ask students to teach you how to (even if you have to write it phonetically). And never give a student a nickname just because it is easier for you—if a student's name is Alejandro, only he can give you permission to call him Alex. Even then, I would still ask him which name he prefers, not just the name that is easiest for me.

This issue came up when I was consulting with a university that is located in a large, urban area. The student body was quite diverse with many students from families that had recently immigrated. Because of our discussions, the staff created a wonderful resource on name pronunciation.

Refreshments

I recommend that you consider allowing refreshments in class because doing so contributes to a more casual and conversational atmosphere. Keep in mind that our class occurs over three hours on one evening per week so refreshments were a good idea for many reasons. However, I was surprised at how much "breaking bread together" significantly shifts the culture of the classroom. Of course, you will want to ask your students their preferences as well. Each term, our teaching team brings snacks the first night and then allows the students to vote on whether they want to take turns bringing snacks the remaining classes. Some years, my students choose to bring their own food and beverages if they wanted to. Other years, students have voted to take turns bringing snacks to share with the group (if this is the case, create a sign up sheet and make copies so people don't forget which day they are assigned to). One year, the students even decided to have a potluck every week with folks bringing complete entrees! This was actually a wonderful experience because the students made their favorite dishes, many of which were connected to their cultural heritage. Each class would begin with an explanation of the food, its meaning, and its connection to the student who made it. It turned out to be a wonderful tool through which to teach diversity. No matter which option your students choose, you will reap the benefits of a comfortable and homey atmosphere in the quality and depth of your students' discussion.

Multicultural in Nature

If you review our course values, you will realize that we place an emphasis on addressing diversity issues in our class. We have learned that many freshmen are dealing with interacting with people who are different than themselves, and not just in terms of ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, but also in terms of world views, philosophies, and paradigms. We seek to address this in the course by talking about a wide range of student experiences, and not just those of the majority. We address the issue of privilege (I highly recommend the writings of Peggy McIntosh on this subject) and how it plays itself out on a college campus with regards to gender, economic class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, etc.

Because of this commitment to explore and respect diversity, we must also role model it in our classroom. This is more challenging than it sounds, because the very nature of educational institutions are based on value systems which find their roots in western, white, and male cultures. For example, the value of punctuality and deadlines is a cultural expression, as is disseminating information in a linear and chronological fashion. Even sitting quietly when listening to a speaker is a culturally bound value. Clearly, there is no way to eliminate many of these values from our educational institutions, for reasons of both history and functionality, but it is important to acknowledge these values and incorporate this discussion into a learning experience on diversity and culture. In addition, when possible, it is important to explore the ways

in which we set up our classrooms and how this may benefit certain kinds of students over others. It would be hypocritical of us to ask the students to explore their own beliefs and behaviors concerning diversity if we, as the instructors, are unwilling to do the same.

With this in mind, you will want to create a classroom that is multicultural in nature and allows for different types of expression and behavior to be discussed and explored. You will want to be sure your class practices and activities are not culturally biased or ones which disadvantage certain students. Obviously, this particular concept could be a book by itself, and there is not room to expound on the details, so I will stop by just encouraging you to be attentive to it. If you are unsure about how to identify things that are culturally biased, I highly recommend that you find out who on your campus provides diversity education and ask for their assistance and expertise. In addition, the following books have helped me learn more about how to create a multicultural classroom and to work with diverse populations:

- *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin.
- *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* by Louise Derman-Sparks
- *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis
- *Counseling Diverse Populations* by Donald Atkinson and Gail Hackett
- *Counseling American Minorities* by Donald Atkinson, George Morten, and Derald Sue

Quality #6: The Course is Supported by the Institution

This last quality is optional—ideally, you will want the support, and especially funding, from your institution, but I have seen wonderful courses created and sustained on the passion of a few instructors. There are different kinds of support you will need which you may or may not be aware of. Below is a list of questions that may help you identify areas to explore. It is also important to address the duration of the support—is this temporary or is it permanently available?

- Who will be coordinating the assessment, planning, and implementation phases?
- Will this person be compensated for his/her time and effort?
- Will his/her normal duties be adjusted to allow for the time and energy this project will take?
- Who will cover administrative costs, such as copying, meeting locations, refreshments, etc.?
- Will the instructors (lecturers and discussion leaders) for the course receive any compensation for their efforts? Who will fund this?
- Who will provide funds for the course coordinator to attend conferences, visit other campuses, etc. initially and periodically?
- Who will provide funds for training instructors annually?
- Who will provide funds to purchase course materials, such as films, books, manuals, etc.?
- Will the course be required or elective?
- What will motivate students to enroll in the course? Will it fulfill any requirements?
- If the course is a pilot project, are there plans for funding and support to grow as the course grows?
- How will the success of the course be evaluated? How often?
- Will the course need to meet certain requirements to be expanded? Funded?
- Is the course permanently attached to a sponsoring department? What happens if key people leave their positions?

One mistake we made at our campus was that, in our excitement to be given permission (after a long battle) to be a pilot course, we never asked about what would happen after the pilot period ended. When that time came two years later, the University was beginning what would be many years of deep budget cuts, so there was no opportunity to ask for more support. We continued to operate the course through the support of the Division of Students Affairs and the grace of our Discussion Leaders who volunteered their time. However, we had no hope of expanding the course. In the meantime, however, we continued to find other ways to keep the course established. For example, we applied for and received the ability for students to count the course as one of six writing requirements they must fulfill as part of their general education.

Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in expanding the course. Many students who have taken the course are actively seeking the support of our Chancellor and faculty to make the course available to all freshmen. In addition, our selection into the *Templeton Guide: Colleges that Encourage Character Development* has generated some publicity, as has our 10-year reaccredidation process that focused on the Freshman Year Experience. In almost every report our campus generates on the quality of undergraduate education, this course is listed as a best practice. I am hopeful that as the budget continues to improve, the course will receive more financial support.

Of course, institutional support can take many forms and can come from many areas. Explore all of the options available to you to establish and support your course from the beginning or know how you will support your course if the resources you need are not forthcoming. Over time, students who take the course will speak highly of it and will be vocal in their support.