First-Year Experience in Relation to Student Retention

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This paper explores best practice in first-year experience programs and their connection to student retention through universities within Oregon. First, this paper examines theory surrounding first-year experience and retention in higher education focusing on Astin’s (1984) Involvement Theory and Tinto’s (1993) Model of Retention Theory. In this paper, first-year experience programs at Linn-Benton Community College, Oregon State University, and Reed College are discussed, with a focus on highlights and areas of improvement for each institution. This paper also emphasizes the principles of good practice exemplified by each of these institutions. Lastly, it explores the implications of first-year experience programs and retention on professional practice in student affairs.

Keywords: first-year students, experience, programs

INTRODUCTION TO FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE IN RELATION TO STUDENT RETENTION

Students are most likely to transfer within their first year at a collegiate institution, which makes the first-year experience crucial to retention (Tinto, 1993). Due to the importance of the first-year of college, research on retention and first-year experience programs began to increase in the 1970s, and became a heavy focus area for multiple student affairs researchers in the 1990s. This influx of research highlighted new first-year experience programs that universities began to offer. During our visit to Oregon in our Best Practices in Student Affairs course, we found examples of innovative programs throughout our site visits at Oregon State, Linn-Benton Community College, and Reed College. According to the Policy Center on the First-year of College (2002), 98% of campuses across the U.S. offer orientations and 94% percent offer first-year seminars. The positive implications of research around first-year programs may have caused the mass flux of first-year programming throughout the nation (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2002).

First-year programs are a common occurrence on campuses today, and many well renowned scholars in student affairs have devoted research to understanding and analyzing these programs. Alexander Astin is a leader in the field of research on retention and student attrition, and his research focused on factors for student persistence, and first-year programs. Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement states that the more involved a student is both intellectually and socially, the more likely they are to persist. Astin (1984) also studied the importance of a core curriculum, and how a common curriculum can help students find a sense of belonging.

Vincent Tinto is another researcher who focused his studies on first-year experience and retention. In a 1993 study, Tinto identified three main factors leading to student departure in a 1993 study: academic difficulty, confusion around educational and vocational goals, and failure to get involved or feel involved in the social and intellectual aspects of the institution. Tinto’s
(1993) findings correlate with Astin’s (1984) theory about student involvement because both studies concluded that student involvement is highly important to retention. After reviewing retention studies by Astin and Tinto, it is evident that first-year programs play a significant role in allowing students to become socially and academically connected to their school community. Tinto recognized the importance of academic integration and social integration, which is what many first-year seminars aim towards. The academic and social aspects of the first-year experience build off of each other and impact a student’s ability to thrive at an institution.

Other prominent individuals in this line of research include Ernest Pascarella, Patrick Terenzini and Betsy Barefoot. Pascarella & Terenzini found a positive link between exposure to orientation experiences and persistence in a 1991 study. Taking this 1991 study a step further, Barefoot (2000) evaluated common themes guiding institutions to improve retention. These themes were focused around first-year seminars and orientations similar to those studied by Pascarella & Terenzini. Likewise, Barefoot (2000) also found a positive correlation between retention and first-year seminars. In addition to this positive link, Barefoot (2000) recognized that first-year programming opportunities are typically created to positively impact student retention. These brief descriptions of research convey the positive impact of first-year programming on retention, and are beneficial to understanding first-year experience programs at the three institutions that will be examined.

**Linn-Benton Community College**

Programs at Linn Benton Community College are a reminder that first-year experience is not just about taking a first-year class and moving on. At Linn-Benton, a student’s first-year experience includes academic and student development resources to help them feel like a part of the community, as well as support them through their first year in the college setting.

Linn-Benton’s courses are designed to assist high school students’ transition into college. These courses help students start off their first-year experience with the support and guidance that they may need. The College Now program allows students to take high school classes for college credit while receiving high levels of support in order to transition more effectively. The 5th Year Program is designed for students to take a fifth year of high school as their first year of college on Linn-Benton’s campus. This program offers guidance for students to make sure they do not fall through the cracks during their first year of college. The 5th Year Program promotes access to the first year of college for students as the high school takes on the cost of their first year of college.

This program opens up the opportunity for more students in the community to attend college. Lastly, Career Academies, which is a free five-week program for high school students to explore different technical programs each week, allows students to get an idea of what they would be learning and doing in a technical program. The Career Academies program allows students to make a more informed decision in their first year.
about career and major discernment (Linn-Benton, 2014). Linn-Benton’s community partnerships with local high schools establish an early connection to higher education, college access, and future retention and completion.

Linn-Benton also has several programs that enhance students’ first term experience in college to better ensure completion. The first of these programs is the Dual Enrollment program in partnership with Oregon State University. Through this program, a student can be dually enrolled and take classes at both Linn-Benton Community College and Oregon State University. Eighty-five percent of Linn-Benton’s students transfer to Oregon State University (Linn-Benton, 2014). This program creates a way for first-year students to build a relationship with Oregon State University, while also receiving support through small, affordable classes at the community college (Linn-Benton, 2014). Oregon State often refers students to take entry-level classes at Linn-Benton to help with access and cost. This relationship is not seen as competition for students between the two schools; instead, it is viewed as a partnership between the community and the two institutions. Astin’s (1984) involvement theory is represented in this partnership; by allowing increased student involvement during the first year at the university, these students are more likely to persist and continue their college education.

Destination Graduation is Linn-Benton’s traditional first-year experience course that is mandatory for all students with less than 24 credit hours. This course covers traditional first-year experience topics such as locating and utilizing resources on campus, becoming involved in campus activities, or how to apply for federal financial aid. A unique aspect of Linn Benton’s course is that in order to pass this class, a student must meet with an academic adviser and complete an educational plan (Linn-Benton, 2014). This requirement forces students to reflect on their educational experience and set goals for academic and personal achievement.

Tinto (1993) notes that social and academic integration leads to persistence among college students. One suggestion for Linn-Benton to improve its first-year students’ experience would be to include social activities into current programs in order to help students find community within their first year. From the first-year programs previously described, Linn-Benton has demonstrated effective integration of first-year students’ academic experience into the campus community.

**Oregon State University**

Oregon State University’s (OSU) dedication to its students’ first-year experience embodies the importance of attempting to get new students involved and integrated into the community. While the campus visit itself did not necessarily touch on OSU’s first-year experience, additional research on its approach to first-year experience yielded clear, easy to navigate information on what it might look like for students of different backgrounds to attend OSU.

First, it is important to note the accessibility of information around OSU’s first-year experience, which is vital for individuals to gain a clear understanding of opportunities to transition into the university. OSU has a separate first-year
experience website, with information clearly labeled around the New Student and Family Programs office and its relationship to OSU’s mission and goals, the programs in place for new students, schedules of required exams and sessions, and resources available for families (Oregon State University, 2014). With the mission to serve as a campus leader in facilitating the transition process for new students and their parent/family members, “[New Student and Family Outreach] promotes and enhances successful transitions through collaborative programs and outreach” (Oregon State University, 2014). New Student and Family Outreach supports OSU’s goal of providing persistence and success through graduation, and enhanced retention.

One program that OSU implements to help new students transition into college is the START program, a summer program for newly admitted students. The START program is essentially an orientation to the university, with activities ranging from campus tours to dinner with current and new students and academic sessions with advisors. There are variations of the START program to suit different student populations such as “traditional” first-year students, transfer students, international students, and degree partnership students (Oregon State University, 2014). The First-year and International START are overnight programs, granting students the opportunity to meet and engage with other new students over a longer time span. The Transfer START is a tailored, one-day program designed to touch on the more important topics for students who may already be familiar with higher education structures. Additionally, OSU also offers online versions and “On the Road” sessions in San Francisco, Honolulu, and Anchorage for students who will not be in Corvallis at the time of the scheduled START at OSU, making the information widely accessible (Oregon State University, 2014).

OSU’s CONNECT is a compilation of over 75 different activities designed for students to meet peers, find community, and get connected to resources on campus. Events range from exploring Corvallis to gaming nights to college experience sessions. The programs are scheduled over orientation week and into the start of the academic year with a breadth large enough to serve a vast student population. CONNECT exemplifies Astin’s (1984) involvement theory in that OSU is providing extensive opportunities for students to become more involved on campus, in the community, and with students, staff, and faculty. Additionally, OSU offers U-Engage, a first-year course designed to create a small classroom experience for students to intimately engage with a chosen current event and discover new campus resources to facilitate a project (Oregon State University, 2014).

OSU’s efforts to facilitate students’ transition into school inevitably impact retention given that the first-year experience is vital for a student to feel welcomed, engaged, and supported. OSU’s first-year experience website also posts a transparent document of OSU’s First-Year Experience Task Force findings, which lays out recommendations for the university to improve upon (Brubaker-Cole & Hoffman, 2012). The task force clearly outlines the need to improve
residential education programs, first-year experience courses, and provide more opportunities for academic exploration (Brubaker-Cole, 2012). One suggestion for OSU would be to clearly identify its first-year experience programs’ impact on retention rates on their first-year experience website. Students and families should have access to the impact that OSU’s efforts have on student success and retention.

**Reed College**

Many first-year courses are foundational in nature and help students with the transition to college, while others are more academic based, preparing students for the rigors of collegiate study. Reed College is a liberal arts institution that provides an academic based first-year experience, rather than traditional college readiness courses. Reed College offers a variety of courses that are discussion based or take place in a lab setting; Reed tailors their first-year experience course to match this style of learning. Reed College requires all freshmen to take a Humanities 110 course that is highly academically focused and covers the topic of ancient civilization. This discussion-based course includes 10 to 12 faculty members from diverse disciplines who provide an array of lectures and guidance each week. Although the content remains the same each year, how the professor chooses to present the material may change. In addition, allowing a different professor to teach each week is unique and helps students acclimate to various teaching styles (Reed College, 2014).

The Humanities 110 course corresponds with the principle of best practice related to setting the bar high to promote student learning (Kuh, 1999). During the final year of study at Reed College, all students are required to submit a formal written thesis in order to graduate. Beginning with this Humanities 110 course is a way for students to understand what will be expected of them academically during their time at Reed. One drawback to this type of first-year experience course is that it offers minimal space for students to learn about campus resources, and explore career goals and major interest or areas of involvement and leadership opportunities.

Aside from the Humanities course, Reed College recognizes the need to provide social support as well by offering an opportunity for students to be welcomed into the community through a mentorship program. The Peer Mentor Program “strives to create spaces, through relationships, programs, and other educational opportunities, for students from a diversity of backgrounds to engage in conversations about the educational experience at Reed” (Reed College, 2014). This Peer Mentor Program is open to all first-year students, but students who come from marginalized backgrounds are the target population for this program. The focus on diversity mentioned in the peer mentor program mission is key. The Office for Inclusive Community recognizes the importance of supporting students and provides programs for first-year students to accept and challenge their identities. The Peer Mentor Program pairs incoming students with a current student during the Peer Mentor Program Odyssey. The Odyssey is a four-day retreat that takes place before the regular freshman summer orientation. Those who
have enrolled in the program will attend the retreat, and are allowed to bring a family member or friend with them. This retreat offers a chance for students to bond with their mentors and learn about the campus, academics, student life, and the surrounding Portland area. The ability for parents and friends to attend the retreat is what sets this orientation apart from others. Since students are able to learn about Reed alongside people whom are close to them, students grow comfortable with the transition before they officially become a Reed student.

These two programs at Reed College show how valuable it can be to alter programs for your institution. A highly academic based first-year program may not work for all institutions, but at an academically rigorous institution like Reed it seems to fit well. One area for improvement is offering students a space to learn more about career opportunities and resources on campus through an introduction course, since this is not offered in the current first-year experience course. Another area for improvement is assessment; during the site visit, assessment regarding the Peer Mentor Program and Humanities course was not mentioned. Assessment for the Peer Mentor Program could be highly valuable in order to understand if this program is benefiting freshmen, or if areas of this program need to be improved. Overall, Reed offers programs for first-year students that have been tailored to their needs and the academic nature of the institution.

**PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE**

The first-year experience programs at the three institutions mentioned above- Oregon State University, Linn-Benton Community College, and Reed College- all exemplify three of the principles of good practice that Blimling and Witt outline in their work *Good Practice in Student Affairs: Principals to Foster Student Learning* (1999). The first is Principle #1: Engaging Students in Active Learning (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). This principle is shown through each institution’s ability to create programs that require students to be actively engaged in their first-year experience. Whether that engagement is through a class, an immersion experience, involvement in the community, or engagement with another institution, all of these institutions help their first-year students to actively learn and engage in their experiences. This engagement in active learning makes students responsible for being prepared and ready for their educational experiences and begins the process of students taking responsibility for their own educational journeys.

The second is Principle #6: Forging Educational Partnerships that Advance Student Learning (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). Linn-Benton and Oregon State University’s relationship exemplifies educational partnerships that are working to advance their students’ learning. By not seeing the other school as competition for students, but instead as a partner who can help to retain and keep students in school, these two institutions have created a relationship that is all about how they can best support their students, even if that means going to a different institution to get that support. First-year experience courses also offer a way for student affairs professionals to partner with those in academics to create relationships that show students how to navigate
the university in a more holistic manner. These courses can help students to understand what their resources are within student services as well as what to expect from a college level course academically. Strong partnerships between student affairs professionals and academic professionals allow institutions of higher education to create stronger foundations for their first-year students.

The last is Principle #7: Building Supportive and Inclusive Communities (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). All three of these institutions are working to create first-year experiences for their students that will bring them into a community where they feel welcomed and supported. The first-year experience programs discussed bring students into institutions that actively show them support and care in their educational journeys. This integration into the community is key to students feeling connected enough to want to stay and be a productive member of the community.

Each of the programs mentioned above also work to build more inclusive communities through their first-year experience programs. Each institutional type serves a different type of student body that may attract different types of students. The affordability and flexibility of Linn-Benton Community College may bring more low-income, first generation, and/or adult learners to their institution. The research and land/space/sea/sun grant aspects of Oregon State may bring in more students who are interested in research or the science, technology, and engineering fields. The liberal arts focus of Reed College may bring in more students who are interested in a very academic experience with more personal attention. The first-year experience programs at each institution takes these things into account and work to help students find their place within the institution instead of just leaving students to figure this out on their own.

Implications for the Student Affairs Profession

Through the first-year programs Linn-Benton Community College, Oregon State University, and Reed College implement, it can be seen that there is often a strong link between a positive first-year experience and retention within a particular institution. If a student feels well connected, prepared, and welcomed, they are more likely to remain enrolled (Astin, 1984). With that being said, it will be vital for student affairs professionals to support and continue to develop the first-year experience for students at any institution.

By considering and utilizing Tinto’s (1993) theory and Astin’s (1984) involvement theory, student affairs practitioners can work to tailor and implement programs that reflect some of the struggles students may face in their first year of college. While the theories certainly do not provide an outline of what needs to be done in order to retain students, they do provide some flexible guidelines that may help to inform program development for students to be successful not only during their first year but through graduation. For instance, Linn-Benton Community College needs to consider Astin’s (1984) involvement theory and attempt to implement more social programs into the first-year experience, a change that may allow students...
to discover community with individuals they may not have the opportunity to connect with otherwise.

Additionally, by creating intentional task force committees that serve to take a critical look at existing programs, assess student engagement, and make recommendations for improved practice, institutions may alter the first-year experience drastically. By being humble and transparent around existing programs, universities have the opportunity to develop and grow the first-year experience to better engage students in areas of the institution that they may not otherwise engage in.

CONCLUSION

The Linn-Benton Community College, Oregon State University, and Reed College campus visits provided a diverse view into varying styles of first-year engagement. All institutions function around different missions and goals, yet all articulate the importance of students’ first-year experience. By facilitating transition into college, institutions are in a unique opportunity to implement, tailor, and expand on historic theories in order to appropriately serve changing student demographics and their accompanying needs. Ultimately, first-year experiences have the weight to drastically influence student retention and success, however success might be defined. Identifying the importance of first-year programs, and consistently striving to better new and existing programs will allow institutions to remain on the forefront of accommodating changing student demographics and enhancing the student experience. It will be necessary for institutions to adopt a culture of inquiry; one that does not simply rest on existing structures and programs, but works to transform the current field to engage students fully in their education from the very beginning of their first-year experience.

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