

# Foundations of Excellence - Final Report

## Salem State College

### Executive Summary

All Salem State College professionals who interact with students are role models and influence students. Students who successfully complete the first 30 credits they attempt at Salem State College are far more likely to continue through to graduation than students who do not successfully complete those first 30 credits.

These two facts are self evident, or should be, and yet the connection between them is not often intentionally made at Salem State College (nor at many other institutions). Faculty and staff who think of themselves as role models and mentors are not always able to leverage their willingness to guide and assist students because the tools they have accessible to them are not aligned with the resources available to students. And too often, the resources that are available to students are neither widely known by students nor particularly aligned with the requirements of first-year students.

Additionally, first-year students enter Salem State College with a set of expectations and an understanding of the college that are neither aligned with the requirements made of them nor with the experiences they will often have.

In short, the experiences of first-year students, of faculty and administrators assisting first-year students (that is, most faculty and almost all administrators), and of other personnel who work with first-year students are neither intentional nor aspirational, so that for too many students the first-year experience at Salem State College is about getting by (or giving up) rather than about living, learning, and leading.

However, this can be rectified.

It will take effort, commitment, honest discussion, and definite action. But it can be done.

The report which follows lays out the steps that need to be taken, that could be taken, and which might be taken if time and money permit. At the very least, those actions that need to be taken must be taken or the first-year experience at Salem State College will remain accidentally, incidental, and haphazard for far too many students.

## Introduction

Salem State College participated in the 2007-2008 national cohort of the Foundations of Excellence®, a project of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. The guiding principle of the center is simply stated, “The First Year Matters,” and as the various members of the Salem State College team working on this report became steadily more familiar with the national data, and with data specific to Salem State College, it became increasingly clear that not only is this principle well founded but Salem State College has failed, for various reasons, to recognize this fact and, consequently, to address the failure.

Too often Salem State College faculty, administrators, and staff have been quick to acknowledge the difficulties facing individual students at the college but there has been little systematic attempt to address those problems. Issues have been identified and addressed on a one-by-one basis with little regard for whether they were symptomatic of more structural needs or whether addressing one issue might, by the law of unintended consequences, create additional complications later on.

In short, Salem State College programs and policies aimed at first-year students, where they exist, have traditionally had more to do with fire fighting than with planning.

The nine dimension reports (reports which were guided by the recommended practices of the staff at the Policy Center on the First Year of College) follow this narrative and speak to current Salem State College practices. The dimension reports were written only after extensive surveys had been completed of faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Members of the various dimension committees met throughout the fall semester and well into the spring. The committee members exhaustively reviewed existing Salem State College policies, sought to identify customs that were reported as based on policies but for which no written statements could be found to exist, and examined a variety of other types of evidence. In many cases, committee members also conducted extensive interviews with various constituencies. The resulting reports provide a rich, detailed, nuanced, and frank appraisal of the current situation at Salem State College as it relates to first-year students.

The dimension reports below have been lightly edited to assist the readers of this report in making sense of the findings without having to have access the evidence library and other resources stored electronically on the FoE web site. Additionally, the recommended action items from each dimension report have been removed as the members of the steering committee of the Salem State College Foundations of Excellence project have prepared a final list of recommendations that organizes the various dimensions’ recommendations into one coherent document.

The recommended action items, which follow the report card synopsis of the dimension reports, have been categorized as “high,” “medium,” and “low.” To a certain extent, of course, these labels indicate the importance of enacting a recommendation. However, it should be noted that some items categorized as “medium” are so categorized either because implementing them requires that other actions have been accomplished first or because the members of the steering committee recognize that not everything can be done at once. There

are, perhaps, relatively few "low" priority items. The primary reason for this is that members of the steering committee recognize that by the time the high and medium priority items have been implemented there will likely have been significant changes in the first-year experience and so currently unidentified action items might be better suited to the situation as it then exists.

The members of the steering committee recommend that as soon as the president of Salem State College has accepted this report, or has identified those parts which she wishes acted upon, the steering committee should convene and identify the individual(s) on campus responsible for ensuring each item is acted upon and also to indicate by when each step should have been completed.

The executive vice president, the provost and vice president of academic affairs, and the associate vice president for enrollment management are the three senior executives with the most operational responsibility for the items listed below.

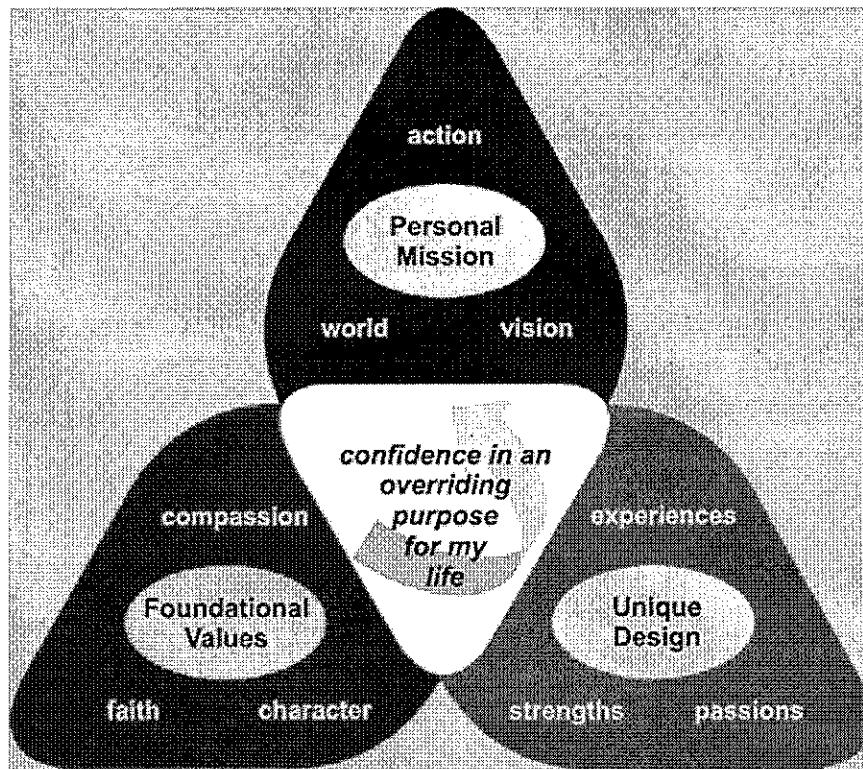
The members of the steering committee are: Elisa Castillo, Mathew Chetnik, Neal DeChillo, Christopher Fauske, Shawn Newton, Michelle Pierce, Karen Sayles, and James Stoll.

It is a fundamental principle of the Policy Center on the First Year of College that institutions approach the first-year experience of their students intentionally and aspirationally.

It is not always easy to understand what such an intentional and aspirational approach means.

One thing it means is that the student comes first in an institution whose primary focus is on teaching rather than research. A student who is not transformed and enabled by college is a student who has not benefited as fully as possible from the experience.

Indiana Wesleyan University defines the role of the student-centered college as enabling the students to graduate with a sense of “confidence in an overriding purpose.” There are three components to assisting / ensuring a student stands an excellent of graduating with this confidence. There are the “foundational values” of the institution, the “personal mission” the student learns to identify and articulate while at college, and the “unique design” of an institution’s practices which give shape to the whole.



<http://tin.indwes.edu/Display.asp?Page=LifePurposeModel>

If Salem State College is to implement its own successful first-year program, the values, design, and mission must themselves be delivered with confidence and purpose.

## The Nine Dimension Reports

### Philosophy Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices. The philosophy/rationale is explicit, clear and easily understood, consistent with the institutional mission, widely disseminated, and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies. The philosophy/rationale is also the basis for first-year organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, department/unit philosophies, and resource allocation.*

The Philosophy Dimension was led by James Stoll, Dean of student life; Neal DeChillo, Dean of the Schools of Human Services; Karen Sayles, Director of Institutional Advancement and Assessment; and Chris Fauske, now Interim Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. James Gubbins of the Interdisciplinary Studies Department was also heavily involved in the initial meeting. Other members of the committee were Hadler Charles, student; Nick Giarratani, Staff Assistant, Music; and Jeff Smith, now a Staff Associate for the Campus Center.

It is the firm sense of all members of the dimension that there is currently NO campus-wide philosophy of the first-year experience. While some departments / areas do have statements that relate to services provided to some or all first-year students (for example, residence life [which has two dorms reserved for first-year students] and Interdisciplinary Studies [first-year seminar courses]) there is no overarching college statement committing Salem State to providing any sort of comprehensive, structured, aspirational first-year experience for its students.

The consensus of the dimension committee is that as a first priority the college must establish a written first-year philosophy that can be in place no later than the end of Fall 2008. This philosophy statement, which will need to be extensively discussed and shaped by consensus-building conversations, should be used to shape the revisions to campus procedures and policies that constitute the college's to the first--year experience going forward.

The challenge and opportunity thus provided the college is that there is no existing philosophy that needs to be addressed in creating a policy from scratch.

## Organization Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year. These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements.*

Committee: Co-Chairs: Michelle Pierce (Education) and Christine Sullivan (Career Services)  
Members: Nisreen Bahran (Business), Emerson Baker (History), Kevin Deruosi (Financial Aid), Ann Marie Gallo (Sports, Fitness and Leisure Studies), Kelly McDermott (student), Gavriel Meirovich (Business), Peter Sablock (Geological Sciences)

### *Organization Dimension 2.1 - Organizational Structures for the First Year*

The committee has determined that discrete structures exist that individually provide oversight for distinct aspects of the first year (orientation, first-year seminars, etc.), but there is limited or no coordination among these structures.

- There is no significant alignment of first-year efforts and no person or unit that oversees the first-year experience. Evidence suggests that there is cooperation among academic affairs and student life areas limited to orientation; no cooperation exists for other endeavors.

Academic affairs noted that there are three faculty members appointed by the MSCA to serve on the orientation committee. The committee is one of the college's standing committees. It is appointed by the president annually and is representative of the functional areas involved in orientation programming for student activities, testing, registration, advising, bursar, facilities, continuing education, and international student programs, etc. However, faculty members who serve on the committee noted that while they offer input, they are not required to go to orientation activities. It seems that areas operate independently for other aspects of the first-year experience. For example, the "Freshmen First" event in September is run exclusively by academic affairs and academic areas. Advising for freshmen is targeted in individual areas and departments. The honors program first-year retreat runs independently through academic affairs.

Survey results show some positive and some problematic elements of the organizational aspect of Salem State College's first-year experience. Students (77.8%) responded favorably regarding their level of understanding of how to obtain assistance with coursework (e.g. tutoring, academic support). The strongest response from students (79.7%) from the six questions asked in the organization dimension was the ability of the faculty to direct them to the appropriate offices to receive assistance. Additionally, 74.7% of the students choose a rating of "moderate, high, or very high," alluding to their awareness of academic support on campus. Thus, faculty seem somewhat knowledgeable in terms of helping students with academic issues. However, the question that the students reported having the least knowledge about included where the students could go if they need help with non-academic matters such as money management or family

## Organization Dimension Report / ctd.

matters. Ninety students (14.9%) choose the rating, "not at all," while 159 students (26.3%) selected, "slight" as their response. A total of 249 students out of the 604 surveyed (42.2%) expressed a limited amount of knowledge regarding how to obtain assistance relevant to non-academic matters. The question asking students if they know where to go if they wanted to be involved with an institution-sponsored organization/event concluded that students have limited knowledge in this area. Seventy-three of the students (12.2%) selected, "not at all," and 137 students (22.8%) choose "slight" as best describing their degree of knowledge in location of institution-sponsored events. Specifically, 210 students (35%) of the 600 that answered the previous question indicated that they had little to no knowledge. All of this suggests that their advisors, who are faculty, may not be as knowledgeable or proactive about directing students to services that operate under student life.

An examination of faculty/staff surveys confirms this to a certain extent. The faculty/staff responses to the question regarding the ability to correctly refer new students to the appropriate place for help with coursework received the highest positive rankings of the entire of the faculty/staff survey. The faculty/staff members selected the descriptors "high" (31.3%) or very high (41%) as their response to their ability to make referrals for students in need of coursework help. Additionally, 18.3% of the faculty/staff chose, "moderate," indicating that 327 of the 361 faculty members participating in the survey (90%) expressed a level of knowledge in this area.

Faculty/staff answered the questions about referring new students to the appropriate location on the topic of academic "rules" and administrative questions with ratings of "high" and very "high" (academic rules 67% and administrative questions 64%). However, their perceived ability to refer students to the appropriate places to become involved with an institution-sponsored organization/event was a bit lower: 54.7% of the faculty replied "high" or "very high." In a related area pertaining to the resources for adequate extracurricular activities available to first-year students, only 133 faculty out of the 275 faculty/staff members (48.4%) survey responded with an answer of "high" or "very high." This information suggests that faculty could become more knowledgeable about certain aspects of student life.

Finally, communication difficulties seem to affect the first-year experience at Salem State College. The committee could find no central area for communication with first-year students nor any specific listing of first-year student resources. A lack of logic and consistency in the labeling of departments and resources may further complicate students' ability to locate people and things they need. For example, if a student wants "health services," s/he would find that not under "H" in the phone directory or website, but under "C" for "Counseling and Health Services." Similarly, if a student is looking for the "education department," s/he must know to search under "S" for "school of education." While such labeling may be familiar to veteran staff and students, such a system is assuredly not easy for first-year students to navigate.

## **Organization Dimension Report / ctd.**

### *Organization Dimension 2.2 - Integration*

The organizational structure indicated in 2.1 results in a very limited degree of integration among the areas of academic affairs and student life. The college seems to operate in silos (within academic departments, within student life, within academic affairs) without much integration. Governance structure does have committees (orientation, enrollment services, all-college) that address some aspects of first-year experience, but no one person or office advocates for the whole experience or specifically for first-year students. Most efforts that are made in the name of first-year students seem to depend on individuals' motivation; the structure is not built in. There is a need to move toward a unified philosophy and to implement a college-wide strategy for emphasis on the first-year experience.

### *Organization Dimension 2.3 - Evaluation*

The organizational structure indicated in 2.1 has used evaluation in very limited ways to improve its performance. Evaluation seems to be limited to the orientation provided for first-year students. Results of this evaluation are quite positive, indicating overall satisfaction of students and families. The majority of respondents rated aspects of orientation as "important" or "satisfied," at the very least. However, faculty and staff who work at orientation are not surveyed about the experience. Discussion with some of those people revealed dissatisfaction with the number of students able to get into courses they need. No evidence of evaluations for other first-year programs within departments or within academic affairs could be found. Moreover, it appears that department/school accreditation processes do not specifically address issues related to first-year students.

### *Organization Dimension 2.4 - Faculty/Staff Development*

The role of the organizational structure noted in 2.1 in providing faculty/staff development to increase understanding of first-year issues is very limited. The new faculty orientation agenda includes presentations from various areas of student life, but further investigation reveals that this is an overview of services provided to students at the college; it is not aimed at understanding issues specific to first-years students or their development and needs. At the academic department level, there are pockets of professional development for faculty who might affect first-year students' academic coursework, but not for programs aimed at first-year students' overall experience. Chairs note that such development focuses on unifying content of the introductory course curriculum/syllabus across instructors and the development of common assessments. It should also be noted that these introductory courses in the core curriculum are not exclusively for first-year students. Chairs noted that it would be easier to focus more on first-year student issues in these courses if the college managed enrollment so that upperclassmen had completed them earlier (the catalog flow sheets state that certain courses should be completed within 30 and 60 credits, but this policy is not enforced).



## Organization Dimension Report / ctd.

### *Organization Dimension 2.5 - Financial Resources*

Financial resources for the organizational structure indicated in 2.1 have been deemed inadequate, in part because the structure itself is limited. Pools of funds exist for specific activities that serve first-year students, such as the learning center and honors program retreat, but there is no coordination, or anything that looks at the bigger picture. Part of the funding problem relates to a lack of enough class sections running for first-year core courses. This problem will continue and negatively affect first-year student satisfaction without effective enrollment management. Budget lines must be large enough to offer the needed number of sections of a reasonable size so that students get the attention they deserve in the first year.

## Learning Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution's philosophy and mission. Whether in or out of the classroom, learning also promotes increased competence in critical thinking, ethical development, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge.*

The Learning Dimension was led by Gwen Scottgale, Associate Professor of Biology, and Rebecca Jimenez, Associate Director of the Campus Center. Members of the committee were Jayanti Banyopadhyay, Assistant Professor of Business; Patricia Buchanan, Professor of English; Andrew Darien, Assistant Professor of History; Nick Giarratani, Staff Assistant of Music; Brad Hubeny, Assistant Professor of Geological Sciences; Christine MacTaylor, Associate Professor of Chemistry and Physics; Michele Sweeney, Associate Professor of Sport, Fitness and Leisure Studies; Tyreak Thompson, EDP Entry Operator IV, Registrar's Office; and Barbara Tierney, Instructor for Interdisciplinary Studies.

Members of this committee believe that learning goals are not unified across first-year courses. It is believed that individual departments have goals for specific courses but there is nothing unified. At this time, the course catalog has the philosophy of the undergraduate core curriculum including learning goals, but this is not seen by everyone.

One major concern is that students are not yet meeting learning goals in one prerequisite before they move on to the next course. If students are taking courses that require a prerequisite and they haven't successfully completed that prerequisite, then they aren't pulled out of these courses and forced to take the prerequisite.

There are some departments on campus that are trying to have similar objectives and goals for high-enrollment courses within their departments. Other departments are trying other initiatives; the Psychology department is trying to conduct an assessment that measures student outcomes, the History department is creating a common grading rubric, and the English department has successfully assessed a subset of sections that statistically represents all sections of composition.

### **Learning Dimension Report / ctd.**

Most incoming first-year students are required to take placement exams/writing samples to determine which courses they should register for. Our transfer students do not take these placement exams. Because of this, transfer students do not always register for the appropriate courses. Even if appropriate placement is determined students are shut out of full courses because there are not enough sections of courses offered. This is a problem for nearly all first-year courses including honors courses.

A large majority of faculty who teach high-enrollment first year courses are adjunct faculty (56% in History and 87% in English). For the Psychology 101 course the department offers 15 sections each semester, most taught by adjuncts. This causes a problem with consistency among these courses and these adjunct faculty may not be available for training sessions or for departmental meetings. This also makes it difficult for students to meet with their instructors outside of class time. If there were clear and consistent objectives and goals across the board, this might not cause as much of a problem since every faculty member would have the same objectives and goals on their syllabus.

The five high-enrollment courses that our first-year students are taking are English Composition 101/102, World History 101/102, and General Psychology 101. These five courses have similar (23-29%) DFWI Rates. The institution needs to find out how many of these are the same students. Departments aren't aware of the DFWI rates for these courses so they do not address this issue. However, departments are continually trying to improve their courses. The History Department along with other departments are offering supplemental instruction (SI) in first-year courses.

Salem State College offers a variety of out-of-class activities linked to programs. It is much easier to measure learning outcomes of these activities when they are linked to courses. The campus center surveys the student population to see if they believe that there are enough programs on campus. The athletics department also conducts a survey of their first year students to see what their needs are and how athletics can meet those needs. Many academic departments offer seminars or field trips/outings to students in their departments. Student learning outcomes aren't measured from these, with the exception of writing assignments required for the Darwin Festival.

## Faculty Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty. These institutions are characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institutions' reward systems.*

The Faculty Dimension was led by Gina Vega, Associate Professor in the Management Department, and by Bill Coyle, Staff Assistant to the English Department. Other members of the committee were Marc Boots-Ebenfield; Leisa DeJesus, Staff Assistant, Bertolon School of Business; Anurag Jain, Assistant Professor; Business, Doug Larson, Professor, Bertolon School of Business; Shannon Mokoro, Assistant Professor, Social Work; Nancy Schultz, Professor of English; and Dorothy Siden, Professor of Economics.

*Staffing of Introductory Courses:* Based on interviews with faculty and department heads, we have concluded that far too many of the introductory classes that first-year students take are taught by part-time faculty. This is a problem for a variety of reasons:

1. It might give the impression that these courses are not a priority for the institution.
2. It limits initial exposure that first-year students have to faculty who are teaching the most advanced courses in a given department. There is therefore less opportunity to build on-going relationships among faculty and students that will last the durations of the students' college careers.
3. First-year students interact disproportionately with instructors who are less able to attend—and in some cases are not permitted to attend—department meetings. These faculty members are therefore less likely to be aware of curricular changes, departmental student policies, and similar areas of advising importance to students. They may also be less likely to convey student concerns to their colleagues.

We suspect that similar concerns are at the heart of the faculty response to a similar survey questions [To what degree are resources—personnel and fiscal—adequate for courses that enroll first-year students], where only 26.3% responded with “high” or “very high.”

We suggest the following actions:

1. The college should hire enough fulltime faculty for each department to ensure that the majority of intro courses can be staffed by full time instructors.
2. All part-time faculty should be encouraged to attend department meetings, and those who do attend should be rewarded in some tangible way for doing so.
3. Full-time faculty in the departments should be encouraged to teach at least occasional introductory level courses. In some departments a willingness to do so is already a precondition for hiring. We could consider rotating full time faculty in a given department through the entry level courses. However, we would advise against rotating out full time faculty who are already happily teaching such courses.

## Faculty Dimension Report / ctd.

4. An award for work with first-year students should be established and given each academic year.

In addition to addressing the problems noted above, increased involvement of full time faculty in introductory courses might help to ameliorate the sense that faculty have little influence on issues related to first-year students.

*Advising:* While the majority of students surveyed seem to be satisfied with the advising process, this is by no means an overwhelming majority. Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that students are generally far happier with the guidance they receive from academic advising than with that they receive from faculty advisers. While faculty overwhelmingly felt that they were doing an effective job of advising students, a lower percentage (59.9%) felt they had sufficient training.

*Professional Development:* The provost and deans indicated during our interviews that they provide financial support to faculty who attend national and regional conferences. They also fund department and school retreats and guest lecturers. To judge from the faculty and staff survey, however, it seems that relatively few of these events are focused primarily on the needs of first year students.

## Transitions Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.* Beginning with recruitment and admissions and continuing through the first year, institutions communicate clear curricular and co-curricular expectations and provide appropriate support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students' responsibilities to themselves and the institution. They create and maintain curricular alignments with secondary schools and linkages with secondary school personnel, families, and other sources of support, as appropriate.

Committee leaders: Elisa Castillo, Training Director, Counseling and Health Services; J. D. Scrimgeour, Associate Professor, English. Committee Members: Raquel Andrade, Customer Service Specialist, Registrar's Office; Nikki Dingle, student; Peg Gasperoni, Staff Associate, user support; Jonathan Keyes, student; Carlos Nunez, student; Dina Struss, Clerk, Finance and Administration; Ed Worthy, Staff Assistant, Admissions; Tatsuya Aoyagi, Assistant Professor, Theatre and Speech Communication; Cheryl Vincent, Assistant Professor, Nursing; Sanjay Kudrimoti, Assistant. Professor, Business; Joseph Fox, Assistant. Professor, Mathematics

Currently, incoming students have access to the basic information they need to enroll at Salem State College. High school guidance counselors, families, and new students interact with admissions programming and orientation to prepare students for college. Students report being satisfied with the information they receive before and during orientation, and in general feel

## Transitions Dimension Report / ctd.

prepared to start classes. However, once new students begin their college career and need help adjusting to their new environment, they often find themselves on their own. While some students benefit from the support the college offers to adjust and succeed, a majority do not. After examining our students' transition to college, what stood out for this committee was the lack of accessible, consistent, and reliable support once the school year begins. Stronger, more coordinated support during the first year will facilitate student success and connect students with college life. In particular, it seems that while students are given a fair amount of practical information, they are not being engaged to think about the purposes of a liberal arts education or their own long-term goals.

After the initial orientation session at the beginning of the school year, most first-year students do not receive any official assistance to help them process college's many expectations, regulations and resources. First-year students often struggle to grasp the many aspects of college life, be it financial responsibilities, academic expectations, or community engagement. For some students, the programming and mentoring available in areas such as residence life, the learning center or the honors program (and in individual departments) help to guide them and connect them to the college. However, a majority of students at this predominantly commuter school do not have a go-to place or person to answer their questions, refer them to the correct office, give them moral support, or connect them with other students.

Many first-year students still look to their parents to assist them in navigating their educational experience. We find that many parents want to help with their child's adjustment and success, but that they do not understand their new role, or how best to assist their student. Conversations with faculty and staff across the college revealed that parents may hold unrealistic expectations and inappropriately try to advocate for their student or gain access to private, personal, and educational information. Staff across the college find themselves setting limits with parents and trying to educate them about their new role and about the privacy rights and regulations that restrict access to their student's educational, financial, and personal records.

Although we do not want parents making decisions for their child, we do want parents to be involved in their college life. However, at least half of our students feel that the college does not engage their families in their college experience. Given that many of our students are first generation, some discussion of expectations about college and family support would be useful to parents. This is somewhat different than "selling" the college to parents, rather, it is telling them what they should expect and how they can best support their child.

Even when students reach out appropriately to faculty and staff or student leaders, they may not get reliable or up-to-date information. There is no central or user-friendly way of accessing up-to-date, comprehensive resource information. Faculty and staff often report being unfamiliar with all the resources available on campus, and feel ill-equipped to guide students. Student leaders, faculty, and staff do not receive consistent training on how to orient students to campus. Another concern arises in a breakdown of communication among specific areas or departments in the college. For example, a department may change requirements but may not update relevant

## Transitions Dimension Report / ctd.

offices who advise new students. Even the college website and telephone operator do not necessarily connect students to where they need to go.

First-year students could also connect much better and more often with members of the college community outside the classroom. A crucial component of college success is the engagement with other members of the community to bolster social, academic and personal development. Yet at Salem State College, first-year students do not feel connected with upper-level students and faculty. A handful of programs exist that facilitate mentoring relationships with student leaders or faculty. Few students take advantage of extracurricular opportunities. Commuter students continue to be less likely to have access to mentors or to engage with campus activities outside of their departmental requirements. Faculty and staff agree that this is an area in which the college can improve.

Academic advising might also be improved to aid students' transition to college. Currently, advisors are able to cover basic matriculation requirements and, perhaps, course selection, before signing off on student registration, but are lacking the time and the training to provide more in-depth advising. Our student population at Salem State College does not necessarily graduate within four years, or even five years. This, perhaps, points to a lack of direction in students' approach to the academic year and in their course selection; it also might indicate that many students struggle with decision making and meeting academic requirements, particularly given the complexity of their lives outside of school. Academic advising could play a crucial role in helping students not only plot their path to graduation, but also in helping students access support earlier in their education, enabling students to streamline their efforts. By exploring their goals and their struggles, and then directing them to various supports (career services, counseling services, academic supports, tutoring, etc) we may be able to reduce the time it takes students to graduate. We would also be creating a closer relationship between students and faculty advisors.

## All Students Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions serve all first-year students according to their varied needs. The process of anticipating, diagnosing, and addressing needs is ongoing and is subject to assessment and adjustment throughout the first year. Institutions provide services with respect for the students' abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Institutions also ensure a campus environment that is inclusive and safe for all students.*

Committee Leaders: Nancy Dennis, Librarian; Helen Glikman, Assistant Professor, Social Work; Shawn Newton, Assistant Director, student life. Committee Members: Stephanie Ball, Assistant Professor, Nursing; Lucy Corchado, Kathleen Hess, Assistant Professor, Business; Donna Hills, Assistant Professor, Nursing; Jeannette Lindholm, Associate Professor, English; Megan Myers, student; Anne Noonan, Assistant Professor, Psychology; Kelly Quinn, student; Keith Ratner, Associate Professor, Geography; Stephen Turcotte, Campus Police Lieutenant

**All Students Dimension Report / ctd.**

*Current Situation:* With regards to academics, the college identifies/anticipate needs by providing designated services, e.g. the learning center summer program, student support services, academic advising, the writing center, business school advising seminar, first-year seminar, and academic committees.

The basic competency tests are administered to all incoming students unless exempted by other criteria, such as high SAT scores. We did find that some students are able to get to their senior year without satisfying all of their basic competencies.

*Undeclared Students:* Interdisciplinary Studies hosts the first-year seminar program for undeclared students. This is a two-semester course in which students develop academic and personal skills, in addition to an appreciation of diversity issues, career possibilities, and resources of Salem State College. All students receive intensive academic advising. Interdisciplinary Studies faculty have compiled the first-year seminar lab manual that changes in response to student and faculty needs. Since students enter as a cohort, they form friendships that last throughout their time at Salem State College.

*Commuters:* Jeff Smith in the campus center is the coordinator of commuter student programs. The student life student commuter association sponsors commuter appreciation days in September. It also provides an extensive web site that covers class cancellations, groups and clubs, college offices, and other items of interest to commuters. A help line is available for questions. The Ellison Campus Center has a commuter lounge with seats, computers, and a television.

*International Students:* The center for international students on south campus provides the following programs: a new student orientation; assistance with housing (on and off campus); a shuttle to/from Logan Airport; academic advising (Nellie Wadsworth); open houses; and a host family program. There are special ESL programs. There is a web site that provides news.

The Interdisciplinary Studies department sponsors LIIP—the Language Intensive Interdisciplinary Studies Program. Limited to 20 students, this program provides social and academic support. Students enroll as a cohort in English, speech, history, computer literacy, and math courses.

*Honors Students:* The honors program sponsors a community-building retreat for new students at the end of August each year.

The following are comments that resulted from the questionnaire given to students. The majority of the students felt that both academic and social/personal needs were less than fully addressed by Salem State College. Basic writing skills got the highest rating (mostly medium and high), but all others got mostly medium to low ratings.

## All Students Dimension Report / ctd.

*Business School:* First-year students who have already declared business as their major are assigned to an advisor in the business school who focuses on first-year advisees. Also, these students are brought together as a group with faculty from all concentrations early in their first semester to welcome them, answer questions, and tell them what to expect.

*Students with disabilities:* Lisa Bibeau reports that the office for students with disabilities provides much support for incoming students, from a “check-in” program to individual meetings with OSD staff. OSD also provides training for computer-assisted technologies, proctoring exams, coordinating interpreters, etc. OSD has goals for incoming students and creates programs to meet these goals.

*ESL Students:* The English department has an excellent composition sequence in place for ESL students. These courses prepare students well for their other academic courses and provide students with a cohort of peers, as well as additional academic advising from their ESL instructors. Interdisciplinary Studies’s Language Intensive Interdisciplinary Program (LIIP) coordinated by Elizabeth Maciejewicz is also a valuable program for our resident and international ESL students alike.

The center for international education provides our international students with a broad range of support services and offers them a strong, positive social network.

*Composition Students (English department):* As part of their general education requirements at the college, first-year students (except those eligible for exemption) are expected to complete a two-semester composition sequence. Class sizes are limited to fifteen students. Instructors get to know their students well and are encouraged to meet with students individually about their writing. The department has a composition committee. In addition to the informal advising that may occur when composition instructors meet individually with students, first-year English majors receive formal advising from full-time English faculty who take their roles as advisors very seriously. Each year the department sponsors a first-year writing competition that celebrates the work of the college’s first-year writers. The department chair is committed to student retention and has made continuing efforts to increase the number of full-time faculty teaching composition, to move more composition classrooms to north campus (thus allowing students to be in closer proximity to the English department/faculty), and to offer more sections during times that are most convenient for students.

*First-year Composition Students and English Majors, Additional Support:* The college’s writing center (which focuses on addressing the writing needs of any member of the Salem State College community) and writing across the curriculum program (which focuses on faculty development) are both coordinated by English faculty members. First-year English majors receive formal advising from full-time English faculty who take their roles as advisors very seriously. The department also participates in the freshmen first program (designed to connect first year students with their advisors early in the fall semester) and participated this year in the “Meet the Major” program. The department has a listserv for English majors and also publishes a newsletter. The English department has numerous opportunities for students to get involved in-- or sponsors events students can attend.



**All Students Dimension Report / ctd.**

*Academic Advising:* Several programs support first year students: supplemental instruction (SI), summer orientation, freshman first, and early alert. SI provides peer support for students enrolled in documented difficult courses. During the months of May, June, and July, incoming first-year students come to campus to take placement tests and register for courses. This two-day program introduces students to the college, connects them with other first year students, and introduces them to outstanding peer mentors. Freshman first is a relatively new initiative that asks departments to set aside a special meeting in the fall semester for department faculty to get together, as a group, with their new first-year majors. With the early alert initiative, Don Cote's office sends out notices to faculty and asks them to identify any at-risk students. Academic advising checks in on these students.

*Students with Writing Assignments:* The writing center provides individualized writing tutorials and access to computers. The close relationship between the writing center and the English department reinforces goals of composition faculty. Typically, each semester about 40% of the students who come in for tutorials come from the first-year composition courses.

*Student Athletes:* The registrar allows student athletes to register with the seniors (early) so they are more likely to get the classes they need. This isn't a real big issue for first-year students since they are completing core courses and usually have a lot of options (times/days). However, for upper classmen, this makes a huge difference to allow them to continue with the required courses. In order to make practice and the games, the student athlete needs classes to finish before 3 p.m.. In the event of away games, sometimes they need to leave earlier to allow travel time as well. In addition, having a day without classes is ideal to allow students to catch up and make up for time missed by playing the sport.

*Performance Indicator 6.3:* It seems that a literal interpretation of this indicator (to what extent do we "assure" that all students experience these things) would yield a less favorable score than a more liberal interpretation. For example, to what extent do we attempt to provide access to these things?. We don't "assure" (i.e., make certain) that students experience many of these things (an important exception being the requirement that all students meet with their advisors before they are allowed to register for courses). We can conduct outreach, provide access, and assess the extent to which students feel they are experiencing things (e.g., via the FoE student survey and other surveys), but it's not clear we can ever assure that they experience certain things.

Based on information obtained from the evidence library, one could draw the conclusion that there are many opportunities for students to take advantage of outside of the classroom. However, the number of students who take advantage of these opportunities vary. Also, there did not seem to be much evidence on student/faculty relationships. Salem State College seems to be enriched with academic supports, but it was hard to identify that given the information provided. For example, when trying to analyze the question regarding individualized attention given to students from faculty, we were only able to find one document that discussed this (2007 College Senior Survey).

**All Students Dimension Report / ctd.**

*Individualized Attention:* One important policy that ensures individualized attention from faculty is the requirement that first-year students (and all other students) meet with faculty advisors before they are allowed to register for the next semester's classes. While the actual extent of individualized attention might vary from faculty to faculty, this policy does ensure that there is a conversation between faculty and students. Further, faculty are required by contract to maintain three posted office hours per week on two separate days and this (as well as additional non-posted office hours and advising hours) is tracked at the end of each semester via a faculty information sheet that faculty are required to file with the provost and vice president for academic affairs. The academic advising center offers advising workshops for faculty, and this was a focus of new faculty orientation. There are also meet your major days on which first-year students are invited to meet with faculty. The Interdisciplinary Studies major offers a two-course first-year seminar.

Results from the FoE student survey indicate that only 51.2% of first-year students surveyed rated as "very high" or "high" the extent to which they felt their academic needs were met, and this item might somewhat tap perception of individualized attention. Regarding the perception that they are treated fairly in classes regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, 79.9% provided an "always" or "often" rating about their instructors. We include this item here because it might tap facets of the experience of individualized attention.

According to the 2007 college student survey given to potential graduates, while obviously not a direct measure of first-year experiences, 66% of students reported that they had asked a professor for advice outside of the classroom, but only 29.3% reported that professors frequently provided an opportunity to discuss course work outside.

What about the staff side of this question? What are the obvious contact points between students and staff, e.g., residence life, areas within student life, your office, health and counseling, financial aid, the registrar, etc? By and large, for these areas there is insufficient data available to make any valid observations about students' first-year experiences at Salem State College.

*Academic Support Outside of Classroom:* Salem State College provides several service points for students seeking academic support outside of the classroom, but we could find no evidence of policies or practices to ensure that first-year students experience those opportunities. Examples include: the office for students with disabilities, the writing center, and the learning center. For resident students, the response pattern is instructive here in that only 51.2% of students surveyed rated as "very high" or "high" the extent to which their academic needs were met. It is likely that some of that item taps the perception of met need.

*Opportunities for Campus Involvement:* There are numerous examples of opportunities for students to become involved in campus and community life, yet we uncovered no policy or practice that ensures that first-year students experience those opportunities.

## All Students Dimension Report / ctd.

Responding to the questions about the degree to which social needs are met, only 45.9% of students reported “very high” or “high.” To the extent that being involved in campus life is related to students’ sense of belonging, the responses are also instructive, in that only 52.5% of students rated this as “very high” or “high.”

According to the 2007 college student survey of potential graduates, while obviously not a direct measure of first-year experiences, 43% indicated they had experienced opportunities for community service, and 47.2% indicated they had experienced an opportunity for leadership opportunities. Further, according to the quality of life survey (again not a direct measure of first-year experiences), 63% benefited from activities taking place in their residence halls, 58% participated in residence hall programs, 56% of students benefited from activities during community time, and 37% participated in a variety of weekend activities.

*Inclusive Campus Environment:* Four of the all student dimension FoE items tap aspects of students’ experience of an inclusive campus environment. Regarding the perception that they are treated fairly in selected classes regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, 79.9% provided an “always” or “often” rating. With regard to the degree to which they perceived being respected by others, 61.7% responded “very high” or “high.” In terms of the extent to which they felt comfortable expressing beliefs 54.6% said “very high” or “high.” Finally, the responses are also instructive, in that only 52.5% of students rated their sense of belonging this as “very high” or “high.”

*Physical Safety:* We are very pleased with the relatively high percentage of residential students (84%) who feel safe on both campus and in residence halls. However, general student survey results do not report such a positive picture. Student survey results show that 65% report feeling safe/very safe on campus, 62% report feeling respected by others, 56% feel they can express their beliefs without concern about how others will react, and 52% feel a sense of belonging. These results, while generally positive when interpreted one way, can also be seen as concerning if we note that 35% do not feel particularly safe on campus, 38% do not feel they particularly belong, and close to one half feel they cannot safely express beliefs etc.

We wonder about commuter students. We also are pleased with the relatively high percentage (69%) who feel good about their interactions with the campus police. Given that most interactions with police are by nature of definition unplanned, this strikes us as a rather high percentage of satisfaction that should be commended.

It was noted dean of students’ office sends out a letter at the start of the year referencing threats of violence on campus and the zero tolerance for this. Although we endorse the spirit of this letter, we feel that it may have exacerbated anxiety among students and parents—and perhaps made them feel more unsafe than they needed to. Although student life was clearly trying to be proactive here in light of recent events in other college campus, it is not clear this is the best avenue to use.

## All Students Dimension Report / ctd.

We also talked about recent losses of students on campus—through overdose, suicide—and losses of students this year to urban violence. We feel this influences feelings of safety overall, and hence add this here.

*Psychological Safety:* We are concerned about issues of racism. A significant percentage of students feel there is racism in the residence halls. This is only part of the story. We also note that although there has been an increase in numbers of students of color on campus, this does not seem to be reflected in the composition of the faculty/staff, which remain primarily white. This is bound to lead to racial tension on campus. This, in turn, leads to profound feelings of psychological unsafety. It would be interesting to access data on drop-out rates of students of color.

It should be noted that even though we are focusing our discussion on race—given that this was a question that was in the survey—we are also concerned about how safe other subgroups of the student population feel. For example, how safe (both physically and psychologically) do students with disabilities feel on campus? Or GBLT students?

As for institutional response in general to psychological safety, we feel counseling services are readily available to students. The counseling and health services office is visible and is well-staffed.

In summary, while the campus may feel physically/psychologically safe enough, the numbers are concerning and there is still work to be done.

## Diversity Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities. Whatever their demographic composition, institutions structure experiences in which students interact in an open and civil community with people from backgrounds and cultures different from their own, reflect on ideas and values different from those they currently hold, and explore their own cultures and the cultures of others.*

Committee Leaders: Mathew Chetnik, Associate Director, Residence Life; Ellen Rintell, Associate Professor, Education. Committee Members: Robert Brown, Professor, Communications; Annette Chapman-Adisho, Assistant Professor, History; Patricia Connolly, Associate Professor, Social Work; Ellen Golub, Professor, Communications; Severin Kitanov, Assistant Professor, Philosophy; Mimosa Long, student; Sheila Shea, Associate Professor, Computer Science.

## Diversity Dimension Report / ctd.

Before discussing the committee's summary feedback and thoughts regarding the college's diversity efforts, as they relate to first-year students, it is important to recognize the challenges associated with discussing this topic area. The committee struggled to have focused conversations around diversity without having a common working definition, framework, and clarity regarding what we are talking about. Each person comes to a discussion on diversity with his / her own biases, views, awareness, and experiences. Further, diversity encompasses a wide range of identities, values, beliefs, and "categories," many of which were not highlighted or addressed within the survey questions. Those factors, combined with an increasingly complex student body and culture, made conversations challenging. In addition, it is apparent that the lack of a common understanding, and one's individual identity, influence the manner in which a student or faculty/staff/administrators respond to survey questions. As a result, the focus of this report can not address every individual aspect of diversity, nor can it adequately meet the needs of very specific populations. Instead, we have attempted to offer general recommendations supported by specific examples which we believe most likely transcend the identities and backgrounds. What also became apparent in this process is that much of the suggested action items relate to all students, not just first-year students. A "culture of commitment to diversity" however must occur from the very start of the student's experience, even before they first set foot on campus in order to shape their entire collegiate career.

Salem State College is a fairly diverse institution for this geographical area of the country. The north shore of Massachusetts is not very diverse, but, students come here from various urban areas as well as from the north shore. With very unique residential and commuter populations each with different needs, a more racially diverse student body than other state colleges, a high adult learner community, an active GLBT population, and numerous initiatives, programs, and activities designed to educate and create awareness around diversity, the institution possesses all the elements one might expect when discussing diverse communities. A new president for the institution, combined with wide-sweeping changes in administration, academic leadership, institutional mission, focus, and identity all provide for opportunities to create positive change. A committed and talented staff, faculty, and student body are ready to be utilized in creating that change but require support (financial and time) and direction (stronger sense of purpose and vision). The student body is one that is thirsty for knowledge.

While there are many opportunities, various challenges inhibit the level of awareness, learning, education, and celebration that would provide for maximum impact on first year students. There is a wide-spread acknowledgment of the need on campus for focusing on diversity, and a consistent "message" of that need; however, that message often comes across as a generic, intangible focus without an institution-wide commitment or plan in place which would then demonstrate the ways in which the message successfully communicates how specific goals can be accomplished. In addition, the awareness of what efforts are occurring on campus is relatively low. For example, few administrators or faculty have a deep understanding of how certain courses are assigned a "V" status (diversity requirement) or what the institution's commitment is. Verbally, the commitment is communicated yet there are no written documents easily accessible to support or clarify it. Within the stated mission and objectives of the institution, which are

## Diversity Dimension Report / ctd.

published in the college catalog, diversity is buried within a variety of other priorities and does not stand out.

The survey results were both surprising and predictable at the same time, and are somewhat limited by the survey which focused on racial and gender diversity and did not provide clear information regarding other aspects (sexual orientation, religion, political views, socio-economic status, language). Students report that the institution is doing fairly average in regards to exposing them to diversity, with students of color and white students answering relatively similarly (differences of 3-5 percentage points.) This could be attributed to the fact that students on campus may not understand how the institution could be doing better, or lack an awareness of what is happening on other campuses which would heighten their experience here. Overall, responses from the student survey appear to be evenly distributed between high/very high, moderate, and slight/not at all. The areas with the lower mean scores were the institution's efforts in providing exposure to different world religions, political perspectives, and various economic status levels and the efforts to connect students with diverse individuals from *outside* the institution. This may in part be a result of the institution's overall political leanings, and the nature of being located within a politically and socially liberal commonwealth. A more in-depth exploration of what students mean by desiring additional focus in providing exposure would be needed to help frame what initiatives might be incorporated into various efforts.

It is interesting to note that there is a marked difference between faculty/staff of color and white faculty/staff. The 36 faculty/staff of color report that the institution is "not at all/slightly" exposing students to diverse ideas (40%) versus their white counterparts (14%). Similar differences are seen in the other answers to the survey as well, which highlights a need for further education and awareness. One can hypothesize similar responses that individuals from other under-represented groups may provide regarding the institution's efforts. Again, a more in-depth exploration of specific issues and concerns may reveal that there is a significantly less than average focus on diversity than the survey initially demonstrates due to respondents having less awareness of issues outside their own identity.

The low number of faculty/staff from under-represented groups has a tremendous impact on the experiences of first-year students. While this may be the first time that many majority students encounter a faculty member from a different racial background, the fact that they may interact with only one such person does not provide the level and depth of awareness that would be preferred. The same can be applied to other aspects of diversity as well— religion, sexual orientation, language, political views, class, etc. Students from under-represented populations often struggle in finding mentors and role models of a similar "identity" whom they can identify with. Nationally, the competition for qualified staff, faculty, and administrators who bring something unique is extremely high, and there are many challenges which prevent Salem State College from being viewed as a prime opportunity (high housing costs, average salaries, fragmented campus, etc.) In a time of economic downturn, the institutional resources are stretched to their maximum and the opportunities to invest significant funding in addressing this aspect of diversity are minimal. In addition, while there is significant change occurring at all levels, there is also resistance to change. Many at the institution have been here for a long period of time and are entrenched, as in any organization, in the "this is the way it has always been

### Diversity Dimension Report / ctd.

done." A broader perspective of what "could be done" is needed in the form of outside ideas, methods, and initiatives.

While it is every individual's responsibility to be a part of diversity efforts, there needs to be some individual or group of individuals (an office even) who will help provide the impetus for conversations, coordinate training and awareness efforts for all levels, and serve as a resource for anyone needing support and guidance in incorporating diversity into their specific area or job responsibility. The acknowledgement of "need" has not translated into "action" to the extent desired, and this may be due to a lack of someone moving things forward. While there is an "Office of Multicultural Affairs," the current physical set-up of the office, the number of staff, and the funding available does not allow for the focus needed.

Overall, there are multiple opportunities for the institution to create and support change, but it will require a tremendous amount of research, dialogue, planning, and action.

### Roles & Purposes Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society. These roles and purposes include knowledge acquisition for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Institutions encourage first-year students to examine systematically their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college/university. Students are exposed to the value of general education as well as to the value of more focused, in-depth study of a field or fields of knowledge (i.e., the major).*

Committee Leaders: Steve Matchak, Professor, Geography; James Gubbins, Assistant Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies; Jay Eaton, Staff Assistant, Wellness Center. Committee Members: Keja Valens, Assistant Professor, English; Christian Peura, student; Janice Magno, Associate Professor, Education; Raul Jusino, student; James Fallon, Professor, Theatre and Speech Communication; Michael Deere, Assistant Professor, Philosophy; Jon Aske, Associate Professor, Foreign Languages; Kenneth Ardon, Assistant Professor, Economics; Ashleyne Alexis, Assistant Coordinator, Student Development.

Essentially, the total first-year experience is a new topic to Salem State College. We have many of the pieces, but critically need to discuss, clarify, and organize our vision of the roles and purposes of education at Salem State College. The low grades we are giving ourselves in this and other dimensions are well deserved. There is no evidence of our addressing the first year in a united way because Salem State College lacks a consistent universal vision, and thus lacks implementation of such a vision and lacks any measures of the effectiveness of what is being done regarding roles and purposes. The faculty do not know of, and so cannot agree upon or communicate to first-year students, such a unified vision or consistent rationale.

## Roles & Purposes Dimension Report / ctd.

We find the following:

- The role of liberal arts and general education needs clarification. Foundations of Excellence places high value on humanistic knowledge, which is traditionally the central focus of college core courses and general education requirements, however looking at Salem State's curriculum, much of the core does not focus on these goals in a coherent way. We feel that roles and purposes should be reflected to a greater degree in a core curriculum, which has shared goals that have measurable learning outcomes.
- We believe there should be a universal First-year seminar course that introduces ALL first year students to the rigors of their academic career as well as their responsibilities in the institution and community. The best type of course is a 3-credit, 1-semester intensive seminar that focuses on a multidisciplinary topic that involves academic research and decision-making, and has room for commitment. For example, courses on social development and inequality could be studied from sociological, historical, political, geographical, and economic perspective. They would involve a degree of ethical decision-making as well as open the possibility for community service. There are many similar kinds of issues that could be addressed throughout the liberal arts within the humanities and the sciences, so there could be several different syllabi that would be able to engage the Salem State community in the roles and purposes of higher education. An even stronger model would link the Seminar to a thematically integrated learning community of two or three additional courses with faculty working as a team for shared goals and learning outcomes.
- We should promote the development of high-impact educational experiences including outdoor training, study abroad, short-term study travel trips, internships, service learning, student research projects, faculty-student research, and student-peer mentoring. There are a variety of options.
- We feel the college should have a single source of contact where students can access the various offices and programs engaged in high-impact learning experiences. Salem State has a number of programs for students, but students have a difficult time learning about the opportunities that exist and also finding where to go to begin their involvement.

In conclusion, Salem State College, the faculty, and the students need to see themselves in a new light. Faculty have a broader responsibility than individual research and projecting course content in the classroom. Foundations of Excellence challenges faculty to contribute to the personal and academic growth of our students through significant learning experiences. The administration has to award credit and resources for faculty to engage in these activities as well as to provide support services. Both the administration and the faculty have to develop a curriculum in which these new activities can take place. Students need to understand and experience college as more than the stepping stone to a job and have to participate in a new spectrum of activities. We feel that the first place to start is with an open, frank, and extended discussion to first year students engaged in civic engagement.



## Improvement Dimension Report

*Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.*

This assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis—a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institutions' overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year.

The improvement dimension was led by Kevin Borgeson, Assistant Professor, Criminal Justice; Pamela Shaw-George, Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies. Greg Carroll, Associate Professor, Education. L. Pedro Poitevin, Assistant Professor, Mathematics; and Shelley Steenrod, Assistant Professor, Social Work. Other members of the committee were Sarah Amaral, student; Hadler Charles, student; Theresa DeFrancis, Assistant Professor, English; Tony DiNuzzo, Assistant Director, Residence Life; Steve Dion, Assistant Professor, Sport, Fitness and Leisure Studies; Parker Jones, student; Paul Kelly, Associate Professor, Biology; Jacqueline Landau, Assistant Professor, Bertolon School of Business.

The committee believes that we need to get a better understanding of the total experience of the first-year student. We need to get a better understanding of why students are leaving Salem State College during their first year to adequately assess this cohort. An assessment of their reasons will help us be proactive in improving the quality of the first year experience. We recognize there is a great deal of difference between a first year student and a newly admitted transfer student. A profile and needs assessment of both of these groups needs to be constructed and disseminated to appropriate parties so that the college can make appropriate sanctions for enhancement of the first year population.

One suggestion is to institute exit interviews with Salem State College students who leave before graduation. This might be a hard cohort to administer surveys to, maybe focus groups need to be created to look at the experience of those students who did stay, in comparison with those that have left. The results will help develop an action plan for retention of those in their first year, as well as transfers, allowing the college to focus on the quality of the education and experience of these groups; this is something that a survey will not pick up.

The committee suggests that departments and faculty have access and input into the surveys given at the end of Accepted student day. Giving faculty greater awareness of who our students are coming in is a proactive way of helping them adjust to college rather than learning what we did or didn't do and hope to improve for the next cohort.

Overall, student survey results were positive. One problem with interpreting these results is that these students have only been on campus for a few weeks and a majority of the surveys were done in a class environment. The committee recommends focus groups for sophomores to better understand the complexities of this experience.

## The Foundations of Excellence® Report Card

This report card represents the culmination of a nine-month effort of analysis and planning focused on the experience of new students. Based on an aspirational model of the first year produced in 2003 by the Policy Center on the First Year of College and its research partners, the report examines nine Foundational Dimensions® that together constitute excellence in the new student experience. These dimension reports are the collective judgment of the many members of each dimension committee.

### Foundational Dimensions

Grade

**PHILOSOPHY: Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices.**

The philosophy/rationale is explicit, clear and easily understood, consistent with the institutional mission, widely disseminated, and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies. The philosophy/rationale is also the basis for first-year organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, department/unit philosophies, and resource allocation.

D-

**ORGANIZATION: Foundations Institutions create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.**

These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements.

D

**LEARNING: Foundations Institutions deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution's philosophy and mission.**

C-

Whether in or out of the classroom, learning also promotes increased competence in critical thinking, ethical development, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

**FACULTY: Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty.**

These institutions are characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institution's reward systems.

C-

**TRANSITIONS: Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.**

Beginning with recruitment and admissions and continuing through the first year, institutions communicate clear curricular and co-curricular expectations and provide appropriate support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students' responsibilities to themselves and the institution. They create and maintain curricular alignments with secondary schools and linkages with secondary school personnel, families, and other sources of support, as appropriate.

C

**ALL STUDENTS: Foundations Institutions serve all first-year students according to their varied needs.**

The process of anticipating, diagnosing, and addressing needs is ongoing and is subject to assessment and adjustment throughout the first year. Institutions provide services with respect for the students' abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Institutions also ensure a campus environment that is inclusive and safe for all students.

C+

**DIVERSITY: Foundations Institutions ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.**

Whatever their demographic composition, institutions structure experiences in which students interact in an open and civil community with people from backgrounds and cultures different from their own, reflect on ideas and values different from those they currently hold, and explore their own cultures and the cultures of others.

D

**ROLES AND PURPOSES: Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society.**

These roles and purposes include knowledge acquisition for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Institutions encourage first-year students to examine systematically their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college/university. Students are exposed to the value of general education as well as to the value of more focused, in-depth study of a field or fields of knowledge (i.e., the major).

F

**IMPROVEMENT: Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.**

This assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis over a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institution's overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year.

D-

**Recommended Action Items**  
**Prepared by the Salem State College**  
**Foundations of Excellence Steering Committee**

**High Priority Items**

**Create an institutional philosophy of the first-year experience in order to ensure consensus and communication about roles and purposes**

Ensure a campus-wide shared understanding of the purposes and expected outcomes of a student's first year at Salem State College.

Dialogues and discussions across the campus should result in a clear, consensual statement identifying Salem State College's first-year philosophy.

The orientation programs for new faculty, librarians, academic staff, and administrators, as well as on-going pedagogical and professional development opportunities, need to include encouragement and training in communicating to first-year students and upper-class students

- the purposes of higher education as it relates to personal growth, preparation for enriching future employment, engaged citizenship, and serving the public good
- the institution's rationale for its general education requirements and core competencies.

All entering students and transfers with fewer than 30 credits should receive a copy of the first-year philosophy at orientation. This philosophy should be specifically discussed during orientation.

Salem State College needs to arrive at a clear, near-consensus view regarding the major purposes of higher education (that is, the college's particular version of those purposes), which includes the content of the core curriculum and basic competencies. All Salem State professionals who interact with students need to know the consensus view regarding the institution's educational purposes and the curriculum, and to communicate these to students through their word and deed.

The college must ensure a major presence of its first-year philosophy on the college web site and in all appropriate college publications. Admissions, orientation, student programming, advising, and other activities common to the first-year college experience must demonstrate an understanding of the philosophy. Distribute the written first-year philosophy statement to all first-year students.

Where a presidential statement concerning undergraduate education is published, it should underline the commitment to the first-year experience.

### **Expand student orientation**

New-student orientation for first-time college students and for transfer students with fewer than 30 credits needs to include greater discussion of the purposes of a college education, and Salem State College's particular view of these purposes and the institution's rationale for its general education requirements and core competencies.

Prior to orientation, parents should have received a booklet (in English or Spanish as appropriate) a guide to what their son / daughter should expect during his / her first year at Salem State College, including information about academic, co-curricular, athletic, financial, and social expectations and opportunities. Parents should be encouraged through this publication to assist their son / daughter in understanding what helps shape a successful first year of college.

New-student orientation needs to promote connections between students and the cohesion of student groups within majors, by interests, by various commonalities, etc.

New-student orientation needs to have upper-class students advising new students generally and helping students identify majors, groups, and interests. Among other things, the presence of upper-classmen would help students clarify their goals and motivations for attending Salem State College and participating in what the college offers.

Orientation should include specific discussion of the core and, if at all possible, a written guide to the college's core curriculum should be included in all orientation packets in addition to discussion of the core.

Create a service learning requirement for all attendees at orientation. This will help reinforce the college's commitment to experiential and service learning and prepare new students for the opportunities that will be available to them during their time at Salem State College.

### **Create a web site for first-year resources**

Create a site for first-year students detailing orientation, activities, resources, policies. The page should allow for peer-to-peer networking and for broader social networking.

The web site should prominently display all activities related to the first-year theme, the First-year Reading Experience, and passion courses. It should also highlight approaching deadlines for such events as registration, bill payment, housing applications, etc.

### **Resurrect and expand the Supplemental Instruction program**

In addition to fully supporting the current SI program, these resources should be offered to students in first-year courses identified as having DFWI rates.

### **Audit key processes with the intention of aligning practices**

Within six months after the articulation of a philosophy have identified key processes that effect first-year students and determine steps that have to be taken to ensure those practices result in students' first-year experiences matching the college's commitment.

### **Introduce common academic components to the first-year experience**

Establish a theme for each entering class and require that in each of the first two semesters first-year students register for at least one course tied to the theme. Theme courses will have enrolment limited to 15 students and will be redesigned regularly offered courses and so count toward graduation requirements. These courses should be writing and reading intensive or math-intensive or emphasize critical thinking.

Residence hall programming should seek to link to the theme when and as possible.

Explore the possibility of creating "learning clusters" around the theme, such as a History, an English, and a language course linked by common enrolment and a focus on the theme. These courses should be writing and reading intensive or math-intensive or emphasize critical thinking.

Seek to create mini learning communities by encouraging registration in clusters so that, for example, the same students are enrolled in the same sections of Math, English, and Geological Sciences. Where possible, these mini learning communities should also involve faculty sharing certain learning outcomes and assignments.

These courses should be writing and reading intensive or math-intensive or emphasize critical thinking. Such clusters can be enabled by seeking students who wish to join learning communities by advertising / recruitment prior to orientation and then offering earl registration to students enrolling in learning communitues.

### **Introduce passion courses**

Offer a limited number of passion courses each year, through both Interdisciplinary Studies and English composition. These will have an enrolment cap of 15 and be open to all members of the Salem State College faculty to teach. Administrators should also be encouraged to teach in these courses if interested and where possible.

These courses should be writing and reading intensive or math-intensive or emphasize critical thinking.

Passion courses may or may not also be "theme courses."

**Designate a senior college official to be responsible for implementation and assessment of the first-year initiatives**

This recommendation comes with a caveat. Serious thought should be given to whether a new position needs to be created, whether one existing senior college official should have this responsibility added to his/her job description, or whether a small team of senior executives should be charged with overseeing the implementation of first-year programs.

**Train enrollment specialists**

Identify individuals from Admissions, Advising, Bursar's Office, Financial Aid, and Registrar's trained to assist students in all the above areas. Have at least one such person on duty at all times (two or more during peak periods) so that students can get help in one place at one time. It will be necessary to identify the appropriate location for these specialists to work. Perhaps at the office of first-year advocacy site?

**Create a web-based early warning system**

This system would allow students to self-report academic or personal concerns affecting success at Salem State College and allow faculty, staff, and administrators to report concerns about a student's academic or personal progress. Reports to the web site would be followed up by timely, prompt, and appropriate intervention.

**Infuse diversity throughout F-Y experiences**

Emphasize support that is given to students who have had limited opportunities so that all students are supported and encouraged to expand their perspectives and experiences. It will be vital to ensure that activities, events, mentoring, advising, and other assistance all feature a diverse implementation team.

Expand program offerings from the national thematic weeks or months to providing them throughout the year. For example, we currently emphasize LGBT Awareness Week by sponsoring a specific program at that time, but not necessarily at other times.

Such programming might be connected to the class theme or FYRE as appropriate.

**Create early registration options for students on track**

Students who have successfully completed at least 12 credits in their first semester with a GPA of 3.0 or higher and who plan to register for 15 credits in their second semester should receive

- Priority registration each semester that they continue in the program
- Guaranteed availability of required courses or suitable substitutes as determined by the major department
- One on one advisement with a designated registration advisor during the pre-registration period to help plan their programs
- Special internship opportunities
- Special workshops on career and pre-professional planning



**Note:** This program should be available to all students making on-time progress each semester and who plan on continuing to do so.

**Ensure an online degree audit system accessible by students is available through Navigator.**

**Require all Salem State College faculty, staff, and students to use an Salem State College e-mail address for all college-related business**

This will allow the college to ensure that announcements, bulletins, etc. sent to Salem State College e-mail accounts are sent to active accounts. Announcements of deadlines for administrative actions, registration, bill payments, etc. should be delivered automatically rather than by paper. Important announcements can be supported by web alerts notifying people that they should look for an e-mail concerning the matter at hand.

**Inform departments of DFWI rates**

Alert departments to first-year courses with high DFWI rates and require them to develop an action plan to enhance student success in these courses. Such steps might include a combination of actions such as changing the faculty make-up for instruction of those courses, recruiting seniors to serve as mentors / per tutors / requiring study groups, etc.

These courses are candidates for Supplemental Instruction status. And this program needs to be significantly revised and revitalized so that it can offer assistance to many more students in many more courses.

**Design and implement an electronic six-week reporting system whereby all faculty submit notice of students they believe likely to earn a grade of C- or lower**

Academic advisors and members of the advising centre would initiate intensive intervention at this stage to connect students with appropriate resources to assist them in improving their standing in the class(es) concerned.

**Design and implement a common First-year Reading Experience (FYRE)**

Prior to / at orientation students should receive a common reading. Opening day would include a scheduled time for discussion of the reading, which would also be linked to convocation (ideally, the book author would be the convocation speaker).

Residence hall programming should seek to link to the reading when and as possible.

Departments should be encouraged to identify courses for first-year students that would be linked to the reading and students would register for at least one reading-linked course in both of their first two semesters. [Note, these reading-linked courses could also be theme and / or passion courses as described above.]

At the end of the year, there might be a juried event highlighting the best work done that year by students.

[If this is successful, it might be feasible to expand the idea so that students have at least one theme course a semester throughout their first four years at Salem State College. The

theme would not change for the class so that students would have the same theme for all four years.]

### **Initiate an on-going series of informal faculty-student discussions in the first-year residence halls**

These discussions, which should be held perhaps every two weeks should be coordinated by the FYRE committee, residence hall directors, RAs, resident councils, and other interested parties to provide informal conversations hosted in the residence halls that permit faculty and students to meet in small, informal settings to explore ideas and share experiences.

### **Create an office of first-year advocacy**

This office should serve as first point of contact that can refer students to the appropriate office for assistance. The office should also serve as an advocate for students, following up with campus offices to ensure appropriate assistance is offered. It should be staffed from before classes open until late. The staff in this office should also be regularly monitoring, and responding to, e-mails, IMs, face book questions, chat groups, etc.

## **Medium Priority Items**

### **Mentoring and advising**

There needs to be a concerted effort to increase and improve mentoring and advising of students with a special focus on first-year students. Mentoring and advising of students needs to be on-going and varied so that it is part of the fabric of college life: faculty to student, staff to student, and student to student.

Separate advising from registration activities. Faculty advisors should be expected to meet with their advisees two or three times per semester, either in person or virtually. This will require realigning advising loads. It is important to consider ways in which administrators might be brought into the "advising" arena while respecting the MSCA contract.

- Faculty, librarians, and academic staff and administrators need to be given substantial professional credit for their advising and mentoring of students when it comes to hiring, promotion, raises, tenure, and post-tenure review.
- Faculty, librarians, academic staff, and administrators need to be given appropriate release time, development opportunities, and job descriptions that support extensive and intensive advising and mentoring of students.
- There needs to be on-going development and support of student mentors, possibly a mentoring course or practicum within each department for upper-class student with demonstrated leadership potential.
- Those advising and mentoring students need departmental spaces and other spaces deliberately designated for advising.
- The development and training for mentoring and advising needs to highlight advising students on the purposes of higher education as seen by Salem State,

Salem State's core curriculum and basic competencies, and students' personal motivations and goals for pursuing higher education.

Consider re-tooling the advising center so that advising center assist students with course scheduling while faculty advisors engage in discussions of why students are studying what they are studying, what they might wish to consider as alternatives, how to select a minor, etc.

**Create a campus diversity officer**

Salem State College should designate someone to provide leadership for all efforts to ensure that first-year students—and all students—encounter diverse ideas and experiences to meet the institutional goals around diversity. This initiative should support and be supported by efforts to provide for additional support, personnel, and budget to support both broad and specific initiatives.

**Create a peer mentoring program for entry-level courses within a major**

Employ junior / senior students in high-enrollment first-year major courses as peer mentors.

This program would develop as a complement to a resurrected Supplemental Instruction program and make available to as many departments as possible peer mentoring possibilities for students enrolling in courses that are the academic foundation of a particular course of study. Departments should be charged with identifying the courses they wish to be considered for such support.

**Centralize available academic and student life resources to increase use**

Reorganizing and regrouping resources—whether on the web or in physical space—would reduce confusion and increase access to resources.

Possible restructuring might include clustering Writing Center / Math Lab / Accounting Lab operations around a central location (or offering satellite services of these centers in strategically located clusters around campus). It might also be worth exploring, for example, putting a parking services annex office in proximity to financial aid, bursar's office, and the clipper card office so that all services can be purchased at once.

**Improve placement/registration procedures for our ESL students who are U.S. residents**

Many students who would benefit from taking the ESL sections of composition, for example, are not enrolling in those sections because of advising / registration oversight.

It might be instructive to seek to quantify if there are other courses U.S.-resident ESL students consistently have trouble with at rates higher than their English-speaking peers and see if specific sections might be created for them.

### **Create quiet, comfortable, and safe places on campus for students to study**

This is particularly important for commuter students. Re-configure existing spaces. Plan for this in new residence halls. There has been a proliferation of TV screen son campus and these cannot be turned off or muted locally. This disrupts potential study spaces. Additionally, potential study spaces also serve as gathering spots for students, further disrupting studying potential.

Study spaces should be created in areas that can be monitored by staff, to assist students who wish to study to keep noise and other interference to a minimum, should be clearly designated as study spaces, and should be well lit and designed to ensure safety of those using the spaces late at night or early in the morning and at other quiet times.

### **Develop structures to ensure implementation of first-year programs**

Establish steering committee to oversee implementation of first-year initiatives and to design appropriate assessment tools.

The steering committee should be a consultative body that

- identifies needed faculty, staff, and student resources on an on-going basis
- initiates and designs training for newly hired college personnel
- develops professional development for existing faculty, staff, and administrators
- encourage and initiate cross division collaborations
- oversees assessment of first-year initiatives and disseminates results of those assessments
- seeks to maintain familiarity with first-year practices outside of Salem State College and to share with the community practices that seem applicable to Salem State College.

### **Offer more sections of heavily subscribed first-year courses**

Students are placed in the “wrong” courses sometimes because the correct class sequence that the students need to follow are already full. If more sections are offered then students should be able to take their correct courses. These courses should be taught by full-time faculty.

### **Timely transfer credit evaluation**

There should be an admissions deadline for admitting transfer students into the college and it should be calculated to ensure that prior to attending orientation / registration all admitted transfer students know what Salem State College courses their transfer credits are / are not equivalent to.

The admissions office and registrar’s office need to work with chairs to reduce the number of courses that are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. A system should be created so that once a course from a particular institution has been evaluated on a case-by-case basis a set number of times it is henceforward automatically accepted as an equivalency. College materials and orientation announcements need to stress the difference between credits accepted as direct equivalencies and those that are accepted without equivalencies.

As soon as practicable, a web page should be published that allows prospective and current students to learn which courses taken at other institutions are equivalent to which Salem State College courses.

[This is not specifically first-year experience related, but Salem State College needs to find a way to ensure that: a./ students who have fulfilled their writing and / or literature requirements at another regionally accredited institution receive a waiver for meeting Salem State College writing / literature sequences where the requirements differ from the sending institution(s) and Salem State College; and b./ where a student transfers in from another regionally accredited institution and has completed all of that institution's general education / core requirements Salem State College accepts the in-comings core requirements as fulfilling the general education requirements to graduate from Salem State College.]

## **Low Priority Items**

### **First-year seminar courses**

Revise the first-year seminar course into a 3-credit seminar offered in the Fall, with a few Spring sections for new arrivals. The course should be reserved for, but not required of, pre-decision students and should be designed to satisfy at least the W and, ideally, also the V requirements of the core. The course should have "transition to college" material *built* in to the academic work that is expected throughout the semester, rather than teaching it as a separate set of assignments.

The seminar should focus on

- the purposes of higher education as both an ethical and a practical course of study
- what it means to think critically
- the value of a general education
- the value civic engagement and serving the public good

Faculty from across the institution should be invited propose course designs with topics that play to their strengths and interests. Faculty should receive training in how to incorporate academic advising and enabling civic engagement activities into the semester of study .

The college should examine the possibility of creating a faculty position to coordinate the first-year seminar which would include teaching and half-time administering the seminar program, training faculty in advising, aiding in designing seminar courses, overseeing assessment of all seminar courses, etc.

### **Non-ENG faculty teach Comp I sections**

Identify ways for non-English Department faculty at Salem State College who have received appropriate training teach Comp I sections if they wish.

**Faculty boot camp**

Consider designing a boot camp for faculty and administrative staff to learn more about how housing / financial aid / the bursar's office / the registrar, etc. make decisions, implement policies, etc.

**First-year service learning community**

Consider implementing a program similar to Villanova University's Sophomore Service Learning Community for third-semester students at Salem State College ('though applications would be taken during the Spring semester and so during the first-year of potential applicants). Students would be housed together in a designated area and participate in an intentional community in which students think and discuss in the residence hall, classroom, and in the reflection groups on issues concerning poor and underserved communities. (Language adapted from <http://www.villanova.edu/artsci/college/servicelearning/community/about/> .)