

## **Lincoln University's First Year Experience Committee Executive Summary of the Committee's Initial Report**

In the summer of 2005 Lincoln University president, Dr. Carolyn R. Mahoney charged the First Year Experience committee with the following:

- The development of a three-to-five year plan for the projected growth of the Freshman Year Experience at Lincoln University
- The development of a mission statement and objectives
- An agreement on specific outcomes
- An assessment plan
- Consideration of appropriate faculty development opportunities
- The development of a budget suitable for the program's expansion

The initial efforts of this cross-campus team centered around the evaluation of current practices that affect how first-time freshmen experience their first year at Lincoln University. Our findings indicate that across campus we are currently engaging in many worthwhile efforts to best serve our incoming students, yet most of those efforts are highly disjointed. This leads to duplication, misuse of resources, frustration for all involved, and ultimately lack of retention and low staff/faculty morale. In the last five years, our retention rates between the freshman and sophomore year have oscillated between 46% and 54%. According to CBHE data, only 34% of Lincoln University freshmen completed their first year with 24 credit hours and a 2.0 GPA, and only 55% of freshmen had met the CBHE Missouri core high school curriculum (Latest available data is from Fall 2003).

Given these figures, the FYE team set out to examine our relationship with freshmen from the time they first express interest in Lincoln, to the time when they complete 24 credit hours with a 2.0 GPA. Our explorations and multifaceted conversations have led us to present Dr. Mahoney with the following suggestions. Please bear in mind that these are initial suggestions and constitute merely a frame for the development of an extraordinary freshman experience that will be informed by the voices and wisdom of our own university community and the best practices of other colleges and universities.

Our first and most emphatic recommendation is for all policy implementers at Lincoln University to become strict enforcers of the policies intended to guide their practices and the deadlines associated to them. It is the feeling of the team that without this type of shift in our organizational culture, any efforts to create an extraordinary freshman experience would be in vain.

To facilitate evaluation and redesign, the team divided the freshman experience into three distinct yet inextricably intertwined periods of the first year: (a) pre-arrival, which includes everything from the time a student becomes aware of Lincoln University to the first day of class; (b) during-academic, which includes the decisions, behaviors, skills, programs, and needs related to a student's academic success; and (c) during-social, which focuses on the adaptation or "re-acculturation" (Bruffee, 1999, p.7) of the student to the Lincoln University campus and the surrounding community. The FYE team also recognized the importance of studying the transition between the freshman and sophomore year, but felt it would be best addressed once the First Year experience had been defined. The following is an overview of our initial vision:

### **Freshman Experience - Pre-arrival**

#### *Recruitment*

Recruitment is managed to insure that incoming freshmen have indeed met all enrollment pre-requisites and have an understanding of what Lincoln University offers to students and expects from them. A conscious effort is made to highlight the many positive aspects of the university and not merely its open-enrollment status. Efforts are also made from the start to let students know we are serious about academics. The website reflects our enthusiasm for new students with welcoming, easy to navigate pages.

#### *Mentoring*

Once a student is successfully recruited, an immediate line of communication is established. The FYE team is currently studying multiple models of mentoring:

- Trained upperclassmen could send e-mails or place phone calls to incoming freshmen.
- Other models establish a link with an academic advisor/mentor, "adventor" (Shultz, Colton & Colton, 2001, p. 208) who begins to "care" for the student even before he/she arrives on campus.

- Students would be tutored and encouraged to complete financial aid applications during a campus visit or during orientation.

#### *Application Confirmation*

Some consideration has been given to establishing an acceptance confirmation fee to facilitate forecasting what students will show up at the beginning of the semester. In fall 05, 1967 students applied, 1387 students were admitted and 632 students enrolled.

#### *Ongoing Orientation*

Students who will be attending LU are **REQUIRED** to participate in summer orientation and Welcome Week.

- The FYE team is currently studying various orientation programs as well as welcome week models to find/create one that best suits the goals of the LU First Year Experience initiative. Alternate formats would be created for non-traditional students.

#### *Student Preparedness*

Students are fully prepared to focus on their academic performance on the first day of school, having completed all financial arrangements, purchased their books, and situated themselves in an appropriate living arrangement. Students not academically prepared (shown by completion of Missouri's Core Curriculum or the equivalent, with a 2.0 G.P.A.) could be conditionally admitted.

### **Freshman Experience - During-academic**

#### *Advising*

Currently, freshmen are advised by freshman advisors in each academic department and two additional advisors for undeclared majors. Because registration periods are short in the summer, fall, and spring, most freshmen see their advisors during hectic times and advising becomes primarily a registration function. To solve the crowding and consequent disorganization that results, the FYE envisions:

- An increase in the number of freshman advisors in departments based on an accurate count of majors in each area.
- Assignment of students to one advisor for the duration of their freshman year
- An increase in the number of regular registration periods
- More training opportunities specific to advisors

- Development of advising strategies for purposes other than registration
- Development of a system of advisor evaluation
- Compensation for duties related to freshmen advising

#### *Faculty Development/Evaluation*

Faculty who teach freshman courses receive appropriate training in the development of student-centered classrooms and are evaluated according to those guidelines.

#### *Other Academic Issues during the Freshman Year*

- Learning Communities
- Academic Support
- Developmental Courses
- Bridge Program
- GE 101
- Core Courses

#### *Housing*

A re-examination of the housing available is to be conducted in order to decide how to provide each group of students with the best possible setting. The FYE team has discussed the possibility of refurbishing Dawson as an all-suite, upperclassmen, coed residence to provide freshmen and sophomores with smaller, more manageable living environments in other residence halls.

#### **Freshman Experience - During-Social**

The social needs of freshmen are addressed through on-campus and community events that facilitate and promote the students' integration to their new environment. Social events include those planned for the purpose of pure enjoyment and those planned for the purpose of fostering intellectual growth and exchanges on campus.

#### *Coordination*

All things freshman are coordinated by a central position, First Year Experience Coordinator, preferably at the cabinet level, which communicates with all whose positions include freshman functions; this position is endowed with enough power to ensure that required aspects of the freshman experience are properly staffed, conducted, and evaluated.