

## Initiatives – Foundations of Excellence (FOE)

The Foundations of Excellence (FOE) is a national project designed to encourage colleges and universities to engage in a comprehensive self-study focused on improving the design and implementation of the first year experience to ensure that students get the right start in college. It is a collaborative undertaking of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, researchers at Penn State University, Campus Compact, and more than 200 four-year colleges and universities. The FOE model is comprised of nine standards of institutional excellence (Foundational Dimensions) for the first year of college including: first year philosophy, organizational structure, faculty, the roles of higher education, student learning, student transitions, diversity, serving all students, and assessment/improvement.

### **Foundations of Excellence at Oakland University**

Distinctive undergraduate experience is a key element of Oakland University's Institutional Priorities and a cornerstone of the University's mission. In 2005 Oakland University became a member of a national cohort of twenty-six institutions undergoing the Foundations of Excellence process to examine the first year of college. As a member of the FOE project, OU spent a year exploring effectiveness in recruiting, admitting, orienting, supporting, advising and teaching new students. This assessment led to a First Year Experience Action Plan designed to explore programmatic improvements to increase student learning, success, and persistence to graduation.

### **The Self Study**

The yearlong self-study involved two processes – 1) compiling and examining evidence regarding the current first year experience at OU and 2) identifying current faculty, staff, and student perceptions of OU's first year experience. Over 60 faculty and staff from Academic Affairs and Student Affairs served on the FOE Council and its nine subcommittees.

The subcommittees of the Council gathered evidence on multiple indicators for each of the FOE standards of excellence. General findings of the self-study of first year experience at Oakland University showed that OU has many valuable initiatives in place for undergraduate students (e.g., a new general education program with stated learning outcomes and an active tutoring center). However, many of these initiatives focus on undergraduate students as a whole and are not targeted to just first year students. A second general finding was that initiatives that are targeted to first year students are not coordinated into a comprehensive approach to first year experience. Over 90 specific recommendations for improving the first college year at OU were put forward by the subcommittees.

In addition to the evidence gathered by the nine subcommittees surveys were conducted to gather faculty/staff and student perceptions regarding Oakland University's current first year experience. There were 426 respondents to the faculty/staff survey and 321 respondents to the

student survey (95% of student respondents were freshmen). Overall means of how the respondents view the current first year experience using the nine Foundational Dimensions of excellence appear below. It should be noted that student perceptions are slightly more favorable than those of faculty/staff. However, both groups viewed OU's first year experience as predominantly average.

### **Comparison of Faculty and Student Overall Means of Questions by Dimension**

(Question Responses are on a 5-point scale with 5 being the highest or most positive)

Question	Faculty/Staff Mean	Student Mean
Philosophy	2.97	3.30
Organization	3.27	3.39
Transitions	3.75	3.23
Faculty	3.02	3.60
Serving All Students	3.76	3.86
Learning	3.34	3.55
Diversity	3.37	3.02
Roles of Higher Education	3.13	3.26
Improvement/Assessment	2.52	3.30

### **A Call for Action**

Results of the Foundations of Excellence self-study of Oakland University's first college year suggested several areas for improvement. Based on the findings, a First Year Experience Action Plan was created. The plan is divided into four sections: 1) Collaboration and Communication between Divisions and Programs, 2) Engaging Students, 3) Engaging Faculty, and 4) Ongoing Review and Assessment.

In the area of collaboration the plan describes measures to create a comprehensive approach to the first year and to create an ongoing university-wide council to provide a forum for identifying, discussing, and monitoring issues related to the first year of college.

In the area of engaging students several initiatives are suggested including: creating a university-wide first year philosophy, creating a cohesive set of first year expectations for students including learning and student life goals, redesigning the first year seminar, making

exploration and excitement a common theme in communications with first year students, focusing on student preparedness and support, and redesigning first year advising.

In the area of engaging faculty, initiatives include providing incentives and a reward structure for faculty involvement in first year activities, and creating a teaching and learning center that focuses on providing faculty development opportunities. Finally, the plan recommends identifying a small set of important indicators that show that Oakland University is succeeding in providing an effective first year experience and monitoring these factors on an ongoing basis.

### **Implementation to Date**

The Action Plan was presented to the University Senate and implementation has begun. A First Year Council (FYC) has been established to begin refinement of the Action Plan. The First Year Council is intended to be an ongoing body that monitors and assesses the impact and effectiveness of the first year experience.

Once implementation of the action plan is well under way, the First Year Council is intended to become a standing committee or subcommittee of the University Senate. The FYC has developed a first year philosophy, staffed subcommittees and examined questions related to the special focus on distinctive undergraduate experience for the 2009 NCA comprehensive review of the University. In January of 2007 each subcommittee was given a charge to 1) create a pilot for its implementation area by the fall 2008 and 2) to create a detailed plan including timeline and budget for full implementation in the area of its charge. Subcommittee will continue work on their charges during the 2007-2008 academic year. Improving the first year experience at Oakland University can help to ensure a firm foundation for OU's freshmen students and a distinctive undergraduate experience.

### **Action Plan**

Research has shown that campuses that focus on the first year experience and make it a priority can increase the success rate of their students. The first year experience is not the job of any one division or office of the institution but a commitment of the entire community – faculty, staff, and students. Although the following action plan indicates responsibilities for implementation, it is important to recognize that the President, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, Vice President for Student Affairs and the Deans of the college and professional schools will play a key role in the success of improving the first year experience at Oakland University. Success of the initiative will require their active, visible support in the form of planning, communications, and resources. Success and retention of first year students underlie the success of the University's mission and concern about the success of Oakland University's first year students is concern about the future of OU and society.

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## **Action Plan**

### **I. Collaboration and Communications Between Divisions and Programs**

#### **A. Create a Comprehensive Approach and Plan for First Year that Includes both Academic and Student Affairs**

Purpose: Organize in ways that will

- improve the first year experience of Oakland University students
- increase the success and persistence of first year students encourage collaboration between Oakland University faculty, administrators, staff, and students to address the needs of first year students

Process: Create a First Year Experience Action Plan based on the recommendations from the year long self-study conducted by the Foundations of Excellence Task Force and FOE Council (the nine dimension of excellence subcommittees)

Responsibility: The Foundations of Excellence Task Force is charged with completing the First Year Experience Action Plan

#### **B. Create a Campus-wide First Year Council Purpose:**

Create an ongoing university-wide body to oversee the implementation and assessment of the First Year Experience Action Plan and to act as a forum for discussing issues and opportunities related to the first college year

Process: The Foundations of Excellence Task Force will act as the initial First Year Council drawing on members of the FOE Council for support to assist in implementing the Action Plan. Once the plan is in place, an ongoing First Year Council will be developed and a request made to the University Senate for the Council becomes a standing committee to review and assess progress in the first year

Responsibility: Foundations of Excellence Task Force

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## **II. Engaging Students**

### **A. Create a University-Wide First Year Philosophy**

Purposes:

Give focus to the first college year and make it a priority.

Create awareness among students and parents of what Oakland University views as important in the first college year.

Create a philosophy that is conveyed to students in multiple ways and actively implemented

Process:

Examine the first year philosophy of other universities that are successful in supporting and retaining first year students

Secure broad input from the campus on what is important in the first college year including input from:

1. Student focus groups
2. Faculty focus groups
3. Academic department chairs and directors
4. Academic Council
5. Student Affairs assembly/cabinet
6. President's Cabinet

Seek broad approval and recognition of the draft philosophy from:

1. University Senate
2. President's Cabinet
3. Academic Council
4. Student Affairs assembly
5. Student Congress
6. Professional Advising Council
7. Relevant Senate Committees
8. Residence Hall Council

Incorporate input and disseminate first year philosophy

Responsibility: First Year Council will coordinate process

## **B. First Year Student Research**

Purposes: To engage students in research during their first year at Oakland University to:

- Introduce students to the process of inquiry
- Expand course content by linking it to experiences beyond the classroom
- Engage students in meaningful ways in research projects
- Connect students to faculty members/mentors
- Encourage ongoing interest in research that carries into upper division courses and beyond

Process: Consistent with an ongoing and successful Provost Undergraduate Research Scholar Program, resources and opportunities will be provided by the Provost to continue and expand the faculty-mentored undergraduate research program with a special emphasis on first year experience. The program will be open to undergraduates in all disciplines as well as to targeted interdisciplinary research programs. To encourage participation of students at local, regional, and national research conferences, the Provost will provide the support recommended by a proposal review committee.

Responsibility: The Provost will work closely with the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Vice Provost for Research and the academic Deans to promote and support the First Year Research Initiative consistent with the Provost's Undergraduate Research Scholar Program. A faculty-based research committee will review submitted research proposals and make recommendations for funding of First Year student research projects.

## **C. Create a Cohesive Set of First Year Expectations for Students**

### **1. Learning Goals and Personal Life Goals**

- i. Identify and assess academic learning goals specific to first year students

ii. Identify and assess personal life goals specific to first year students

Purposes:

- Create and communicate expectations to students. (Universities that have clear expectations secure greater student success.)
- Provide guidelines for academic and student affairs units regarding first year expectations and priorities

Process:

- Start with learning outcomes for Foundations courses in OU general education as the academic learning goals for first year students  
Responsibility: General Education Committee, Office of Undergraduate Education
- Determine the feasibility of requiring FTIAC students to take both general education Foundations courses (Writing and Formal Reasoning) in the first year  
Responsibility: College of Arts and Sciences and Office of Registrar
- Identify the support services that can enhance student success in Foundations courses (e.g., The Tutoring Center, Writing Center)  
Responsibility: Student and Academic Affairs
- Identify student personal goals that enhance and support Foundations courses  
Responsibility: Student Affairs Assembly
- Assess student success in meeting academic and student personal goals  
Responsibility: Faculty teaching Foundations courses, Student Affairs staff, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment

**2. First Year Seminar/Experience**

i. Make first year seminar mandatory and enhance the scope and diversity of faculty involvement in first year seminar

ii. Create a common theme for first year students

Purposes:

- Promote student success and persistence
- Build community among students
- Create sense of belonging to OU

Process:

- Examine successful models for first year seminars at other institutions  
Responsibility: First Year Council
- Create a subcommittee from Academic and Student Affairs to explore successful alternative models of a one- or two-credit first year seminar  
Responsibility: First Year Council will coordinate
- Create subcommittee to explore and identify impediments to a mandatory first year seminar  
Responsibility: First Year Council will coordinate
- Design and implement mandatory first year seminar  
Responsibility: First Year Council, Student Affairs, Current Com 101 Staff, College of Arts and Sciences. Office of Undergraduate Education
- Explore how to expand common book and theme year across campus  
Responsibility: College of Arts and Sciences, Office of Undergraduate Education

- Have author or knowledgeable expert speak at New Student Convocation  
Responsibility: Student Affairs and Academic Affairs
- Have author or expert on book topic in residence for a week housed in Honors College with sessions for all FTIAC students  
Responsibility: Honors College

### **3. E-Learning and Information Literacy in the First College Year**

#### **Purposes:**

- Encourage development of the technological skills that will enhance the students' educational experience throughout their careers at Oakland University and will contribute to their success after graduation.
- Encourage development of the cross-cutting general education capacity of Information Literacy

#### **Process:**

- Information Literacy: Enhance the information literacy module that students receive from Kresge Library staff during their first year at OU
- Electronic Portfolios: Create a process for the use of electronic portfolios for all first year students that can store students' work for assessment during college and can be used as a career portfolio of their best work upon graduation
- E-learning: Increase number of 100 and 200 level general education courses using E-learning
- Group Projects: Create options for students to complete at least one group electronic project
  1. During one of their three cohort courses or
  2. As part of a faculty/student research project
- Presentations: Present group electronic projects at such forums as
  1. New Student Convocation
  2. Meeting of the Minds
  3. State or National Disciplinary Conferences
  4. Student Research Days at OU

#### **Responsibility:**

- Information Literacy: A joint committee from Kresge Library faculty/administration and from Rhetoric will develop a plan for enhancing the information literacy experience for first year students.
- Electronic Portfolios:
  1. The Assistant Vice President for E-Learning, Assistant Vice President for IT, and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education will develop a plan for implementing a portfolio system
  2. Office of E-learning will create a brief module for the First Year Seminar that instructs students in how to use the system
  3. The College of Arts and Sciences and General Education Committee will help plan the processes for faculty selection and submission of student work to be placed in the portfolio from general education courses
- Increase E-learning in beginning general education courses: The Assistant Vice President for E-Learning will promote the use of E-learning in beginning general education courses

in conjunction with the College of Arts and Sciences and will provide training and development

- Group Electronic Projects/Presentations: Faculty teaching the three required freshmen courses will identify potential electronic group with assistance by the relevant department chairs and deans office.
- Research Proposals: Faculty writing proposals for student/faculty research projects will identify how the projects can incorporate electronic presentation of results and how more than one student might work on a joint research presentation

## **D. Make Exploration and Excitement a Common Theme**

### **1. Communication**

- i. Streamline communications to first year students and use clear, enthusiastic language about roles of higher education
- ii. Institute incentive plans and policies to encourage first year students to make University education their primary focus
- iii. Establish a user-friendly Web page for first year students

Purposes:

- Clear enthusiastic communication will create positive learning environment
- Communications that reinforce each other will send consistent message

Process:

- Examine literature and policies to identify communications that send messages that are not consistent with new first year philosophy  
Responsibility: First Year Council
- Tie communications to the first year philosophy  
Responsibility: Communications and Marketing
- Use clear, enthusiastic language that identifies the advantages of attending Oakland University  
Responsibility: Communications and Marketing
- Establish a user friendly Web page  
Responsibility: Communications and Marketing with a joint Academic Affairs and Student Affairs planning committee
- Promote a welcoming message for a diverse student body  
Responsibility: First Year Council, Faculty, Staff

### **2. Promotion**

- i. Encourage first year student participation in multi-cultural events
- ii. Emphasize exploration and personal growth in General Education promotional materials
- iii. Focus on Kresge Library as a broad resource and community space

Purpose: Create enthusiasm and excitement about student's new adventure in higher education and broaden student expectations for growth

Process:

- Encourage faculty to incorporate diversity activities into courses with high first year enrollments  
Responsibility: Deans, Department Chairs and Directors

- Focus on advantages of general education for personal development as well as career  
Responsibility: College of Arts and Sciences, Office of Undergraduate Education, General Education Committee
- Use enthusiastic language to describe general education  
Responsibility: Academic Advisers, Faculty, Office of Undergraduate Education
- Promote the use of Kresge Library through websites, majors, displays in Lobby that identify multiple roles of the library in learning  
Responsibility: Kresge Library Dean and Staff, Faculty
- Promote the Writing Center  
Responsibility: Department Chairs and Directors, Faculty, Writing Center Director and Staff

## **E. Focus on Student Preparedness and Support**

### **1. Student Readiness**

Develop student readiness indicators and use them as part of the admissions/placement process and identify first year students in the classroom

Purposes:

- Develop consensus on what knowledge, skills and abilities Oakland University expects of its incoming FTIAC students and convey that information to the students
- Help primary feeder high schools to create realistic expectations for students planning to attend Oakland University
- Enlist teacher preparation programs in conveying the importance of the knowledge and skills students need to be ready for college

Process:

- Identify readiness indicators for incoming students for writing and mathematics and use indicators as part of admissions process  
Responsibility: Department Chairs and Directors, First Year Council, Faculty teaching Foundations courses, Admissions
- Review how students are placed into OU Foundations courses – what are our processes  
Responsibility: First Year Council, College of Arts and Sciences
- Determine whether OU's processes for placing students are effective – Validation studies of success of placements in math and rhetoric  
Responsibility: Office of Institutional Research and Assessment
- Consider benefits of having centralized placement testing  
Responsibility: First Year Council, Academic Affairs
- Provide information on identity of first year students to instructors of high first year enrollment courses  
Responsibility: Registrar

### **2. First Year Advising**

Improve the first year advising process at Oakland University

Purpose: Provide focused, targeted first year advising to promote student success

Process:

- Identify and gather information about institutions that have exemplary first year advising programs  
Responsibility: First Year Council
- Identify academic advising services most important for first year success  
Responsibility: Faculty focus groups, Professional Advisers Council and Office of Institutional Research
- Secure an external consultant to assist in creating an effective and efficient model of first year advising at OU  
Responsibility: Office of Undergraduate Education
- Identify/hire first year advisers  
Responsibility: Academic Affairs, Deans, and Student Affairs
- Make first year advising mandatory during students' first and second semesters  
Responsibility: Academic Affairs and Office of Registrar
- Create comprehensive student advising database in Banner  
Responsibility: Professional Advisers Council and Office of Registrar

### **3. Follow-up to New Student Orientation**

Follow-up with first year students at the end of their first semester

Purpose: Reinforce messages from new student orientation and gather feedback on what could be improved to enhance student success

Process: Hold small group discussions about student progress and gather feedback at end of first semester as part of First Year Seminar

Responsibility: Instructors of First Year Seminar and Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (compiles report)

### **4. Special Needs and Logistics**

i. Focus on improving DFWI rate for first year students (D & F grades, withdrawals, incompletes)

ii. Create coordinated plan for assisting high-risk students

iii. Explore block registration for first semester freshmen

iv. Develop adequate/effective classroom space for first year courses

Purpose: Create an environment for success for all first year students

Process:

- Research high DFWI courses with high first year student enrollments to determine the causes for high numbers of students not succeeding  
Responsibility: Graduate student interested in higher education, Office of Undergraduate Education
- Enhance coordination between programs targeted to at-risk students and explore possibility of plans using a variety of services tailored to a student's needs  
Responsibility: Committee of Academic and Student Affairs staff responsible for programs for at-risk students
- Use block registration in General Education Foundations courses to create learning cohorts and enhance connection  
Responsibility: Office of Registrar
- Develop adequate classroom space to allow courses with large first year enrollments to be offered during prime daytime hours  
Responsibility: Facilities Planning

## 5. Cohort Scheduling and Pre-Registration

Purposes:

- The objective of a cohort of students taking three of their first year courses together is to create a learning community environment that enhances connections to other students and to faculty and staff.
- The purpose of students pre-registering for a full year of courses is to provide continuity in their educational process and to plan student schedules to provide the best learning experience based on the student's background and placement testing

Process:

- **Cohorts**
  1. Register FTIACs in cohorts of 20-25 students and place cohort members in the same section of the two general education Foundations courses and a section of the First Year Seminar together
  2. Reserve sections of Rhetoric and Formal Reasoning courses for first year students only and develop a plan for block registering cohorts of students into these sections. (Note that Formal Reasoning sections may contain more than one cohort, i.e., if a section is 40 students it could contain two cohorts.)
- **Pre-Registration:** All first year students would be able to pre-register for their complete schedules for the first two semesters at OU during their summer orientation.

Responsibility: A joint committee comprised of

- Representatives of the Registrar's Office
- College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office
- Academic Advisers
- Appropriate department chairs/directors
- New Student Orientation staff

will create a plan for cohort, block registration of first year students into three of their first year courses and for pre-registration for their first two semesters during summer orientation.

Members of the committee will research methods used at other institutions for cohort and pre-registration of first year students in preparation for completing the plan.

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## III. Engage Faculty

### A. Provide Incentives for Faculty Involvement in First Year Initiatives and Teaching

Purpose:

- Generate interest, and enthusiasm for teaching first year students
- Encourage participation by faculty in out-of-class activities for first year students
- Institutionalize recognition of participation in first year initiatives

Process:

- Provide incentive funding for revision of courses to enhance student engagement  
Responsibility: Office of Undergraduate Education
- Include participation in first year initiatives as part of annual faculty reporting  
Responsibility: Deans and Department Chairs and Directors

- Discuss how first year initiative participation is recognized as part of promotion and tenure process  
Responsibility: AAUP, Senate
- Provide funding opportunities for faculty and staff to travel to conferences on first year experience and student engagement  
Responsibility: Office of Undergraduate Education and Student Affairs
- Encourage professional schools to develop activities that engage first year students and introduce them to the professional disciplines  
Responsibility: Deans, Department Chairs and Directors
- Explore possibility of other incentives for faculty to participate in first year initiatives.  
Responsibility: First Year Council, Academic Affairs, and Deans

## **B. Create a Teaching and Learning Center for Faculty Development**

Purpose:

- Provide professional development for faculty to enhance undergraduate and first year teaching and learning
- Mentor new faculty in teaching at OU
- Provide a forum for discussion of teaching and learning at OU Process:
- Review existing information on development of a teaching and learning center
  1. Information from other universities
  2. Prior survey of OU faculty

Responsibility: Teaching and Learning Committee, Office of Undergraduate Education

- Explore best model for providing professional development. Secure panel of teaching center directors from other institutions to discuss options and advantages with campus community

Responsibility: Teaching and Learning Committee

- Develop plan for staffing and space requirements for Teaching and Learning Center

Responsibility: Teaching and Learning Committee, Office of Undergraduate Education

## **C. Increase Percentage of Full-Time Tenure Track and Exemplary Teachers Providing Instruction to First Year Students**

Purpose: Enhance opportunities for student interaction with full-time faculty and experienced exemplary teachers and for career mentoring of students by faculty

Process:

- Each department chair whose department teaches 100 and 200 level will suggest a plan for how current staffing could be used to enhance the amount of experienced exemplary teaching at the first year level
- The Dean of Arts and Sciences will create a plan for how consideration of experienced exemplary teaching at the first year level will be incorporated into faculty hiring processes, position allocations/requests, and allocation of funding for part-time faculty
- The Provost will create criteria for how priority of the exemplary teaching at the first year level will be incorporated into allocation of new faculty positions and provision of funding for part-time faculty

Responsibility:

- Department Chairs
  - Dean of Arts and Sciences
  - Provost
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#### **IV. Conduct On-Going Review and Assessment of First Year Progress**

Purpose: Ensure that the First Year Action Plan is being implemented and is having a positive impact on Oakland University's first year students

Process:

- Develop a feedback mechanism to institute and track changes in first year
  1. Decide on a small set of criteria that will be tracked (e.g., student retention to sophomore year, student success rates in Foundations courses, DFWI rates for first year students)  
Responsibility: First Year Council and faculty/staff focus groups
  2. Create or secure instruments for obtaining data that are not already available  
Responsibility: Office of Institutional Research and Assessment
- Use information to improve action plan and first year experience  
Responsibility: First Year Council, Deans, Department Chairs and Directors, Faculty teaching high first year enrollment courses, Student Affairs Staff
- Align structure for improvement with a coherent philosophy of the first year  
Responsibility: First Year Council Review existing policies to determine how they support or create barriers to improving the first year experience

#### **First Year Council Members**

- Susan Awbrey
- Catherine Breidenbach
- Christopher Clason
- Andrea Eis
- Jennifer Gilroy
- Madelyn Kissock
- Glenn McIntosh
- Michelle Piskulich
- Nancy Schmitz
- Rob Slater
- Mary Beth Snyder
- Vijay Sugumaran
- Sara Webb
- Tricia Westergaard