INTRODUCTION

The First Year Experience Task force was charged by Provost Julie Bernier to address a number of issues regarding the first year experience of our students. The task force was requested because it is evident based on our retention rates and graduation rates that we are not doing enough on an institutional level to support our students. The task force decided that the best way to answer Provost Bernier’s charge was to break down each of her areas of inquiry into different categories. Within each category we divided our group into smaller subcommittees to specifically answer these questions. The following report will address the current state of affairs in regards to our situation while also focusing on what we believe based on our research are the best practices to enhance our student experience and therefore success here at PSU. In addition to our research of best practices around the country we also relied on; the New Directions in the First Year Experience report (written by our university community in 2004), faculty day 2013 feedback, an informal student survey on academic expectations and success given to about 45 students in 2014, and a first year seminar survey sent out to all faculty in April of 2014.

SUBCOMMITTEE 1 - DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF A FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE THAT WILL ORIENT STUDENTS TO ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS

To handle this issue, our first approach was to review the “New Directions for the First Year Experience” (forever to referred to as NDFYE) report that was developed by our faculty and student affairs staff back in July of 2004. This report was written as part of the Dimensions of the Foundation of Excellence Project PSU participated in. Based on our review it was clear that many members of the university community were committed to enhancing our first year student experience with wonderful ideas and goals. Unfortunately many of the goals and ideas put forth have not been acted on. It is our belief that many of these goals and ideas are still valid in today’s environment and ought to be implemented as originally suggested (as our report will show). Below are specific areas we believe will enhance academic expectations for our newest PSU students.

Admissions Materials and Department expectations

The NDFYE highly recommended that our admissions material share with our future incoming students our academic expectations. This we believe is still an important recommendation (that incoming students be aware of what is expected of them through admissions materials) that has not been fully implemented. In addition the report recommended that each department at the university should develop a document explaining the expectations of each major for incoming students. We don’t see any consistent evidence of this happening since the initial recommendation but believe it ought to. Further, we believe that our institutional expectations of our students should have a web presence and be shared in the various publications the university puts out each year. These recommendations were made in the NDFYE report as well.

Develop a “Guide to Success” Web and Printable Booklet for our First Year Students and their Parents-

One of the many recommendations provided in the NDFYE report was to develop systemic information for our students and families in regards to our expectations of them and the support we offer to help them meet those expectations, specifically in the first year. One of the tools we propose that could help in this is creating a “Success Guide” guide that would include information about: academic standards, tutoring services, PASS Office, advising, Degree Works, the general education program, grade policies, final exam schedule, registration schedule, textbooks, and FERPA rights to name but a few topics to be covered. It’s apparent that much of the information that we mentioned is available but in different places. A one stop shopping method would help our students in terms of navigating their first year experience and put them in a better position to succeed. It would also support our parents in gaining a clear understanding of the new path their sons and daughters are now beginning.

An Orientation section would form a portion of the First Year Experience website. Ramapo College actually has a “Center for Academic Advisement and First Year Experience” with a stellar example of a website and orientation page: http://www.ramapo.edu/orientation/first-year-student-orientation/
A section of the website would be devoted to a “Guide for Parents” as a help site, how to create success for your students, warning signs, when to follow up, where to find help, etc.

*Expand White Mountain Orientation Trip and build Summer Bridge Programs*

Many schools around the nation have summer bridge programs online and in person that help students connect with professors, student affairs staff, and fellow students before they start regular classes. PSU has made some efforts on this front but these kinds of programs ought to be emphasized and encouraged to a greater level then they are at the current moment.

*Change Orientation and or Expand Orientation to Have First Year Students Come in August for Additional Days*

It’s become clear to us in looking at different schools from around the country that June orientation is not fully successful in orienting our students to greater levels of academic success. Part of the reason that we believe that to be the case is because most students haven’t even graduated from high school yet: meaning their minds are focused on other things that may take precedence over something that will happen almost three months down the road. Therefore we recommend either moving orientation the week before school starts or have our First year students come in June for one day/night orientation to gather the basics and obtain their course schedule and then come back a few days before the University starts classes for further orientation (allowing the First year students time to bond, connect and grow as a cohort with little influence from other students). The June orientation would include some new initiatives, such as meeting their advisor, becoming familiar with technology, and starting their ePortfolio (see descriptions later).

During this orientation in August students should have extended time with their advisors (not just the 45 minutes before Convocation). Students should also have more time with professors in the department than the allotted time for the “Welcome to the Major” sessions geared towards ensuring they are in the right classes. During this extended time students should become intimately acquainted with their major and general education program. The first class experience during orientation started by Dr. Zehr does a great job of giving our students an excellent idea of what to expect and how to be successful. We would recommend that this experience be moved to August to make the lessons learned more fresh in their minds. Some schools even go so far during orientation in August to have the First Year students attend all their classes that they are scheduled for in the fall so that they can get an idea of how class will be and whether they want to take it or not. This allows the student to get comfortable and also not get behind if they would rather switch into another course. This extended period in August for orientation will allow our First Year students to build bonds with other students and staff, thereby feeling more at ease in their new environment.

*Change our Advising Model for First Year Students to a Professional Advising Model*

The NDFYE report made clear that our advising model at the time allowed for an uneven level of advising across the board based on a number of contributing factors such as number of advisees, teaching load, level of interest in advising, and personality match between advisor and advisee assigned. This situation hasn’t changed or been rectified. It’s clear in studying different programs around the country that there has been a movement towards a more professional advising model. Meaning that our advising center could be staffed by people whose responsibility it is to intensely guide our First year students. These advisors would meet with the students regularly checking their progress in and out of the classroom.

Part of the orientation section of the First Year Experience website would be used introduce advisors with whom students would meet at their first summer orientation. A conversation would continue between advisors and advisees throughout the summer with virtual meetings, either individually or as a group. This would allow students to get acquainted with their advisor and form an early relationship with a mentor. In addition, students would be gaining familiarity using a learning technology.

*Develop a Peer Mentoring Program*
Many First year Programs around the country utilize peer mentoring programs as a tool to help support 1st year students as they make their way through the various ups and downs of their academic and social experiences here at the institution. Having a peer who has been through the experience of surviving has been shown to be a vital tool in supporting student success. A peer mentoring program should be developed that will ensure that every single incoming student to the University has a mentor. These peer mentors ought to have thorough and diverse training from the professional advisors on how best to support their mentees and would be required to meet with their mentees regularly. The Peer mentors would also have the opportunity to meet with their mentees either in person at June orientation or virtually over the pre-college summer, adding another connection prior to arriving for fall classes.

*Develop a mandatory workshop series devoted to “surviving college.”*

In reviewing the feedback from the faculty survey on the First Year Seminar many faculty members recommended that our students would benefit from significant training on how to handle the college experience. These recommendations are in tune with many of the First year programs around the nation. It is hereby recommended the university develop a weekly series of timely workshops focused on important skills delivered at the time in the semester they are needed most, such as: how to write a paper, how to take a test (just prior to midterms), how to take notes, how to manage your time, how to handle your social environments, to name but a few. It is further recommended that we build this into First Year Seminar class experience where students must attend and participate in these programs to receive proper credit for the class. Alternatively, these could be workshops for which students earn badges (see more below in step 9).

*Reinstate the position of the Dean of the First Year Experience, and create a Center for Advising and the First Year Experience Office.*

The NDFYE report highly recommended a Dean level coordinator for the first year experience which we do not have at the moment. In reviewing best practices from schools around the nation many schools support a similar model. Part of the Provost’s charge was to seek ways to integrate student affairs and academic affairs and we believe this would be an excellent step to help seal that integration. The Dean would be responsible for working with academic departments to help develop a first year philosophy, develop training for the professional advisors, encouraging and supporting coordinated programming between Academic and Student affairs, and monitoring and assessing for effectiveness of strategies at improving student success, retention, and graduation rates... The NDFYE report considered the need urgent to have a Dean of the First Year Experience who could coordinate all first year activities and influence teaching assignments, syllabi, and set goals for academic and student affairs as it relates to First Year students. We believe that the evidence points to an even greater level of urgency considering our issues involving retention, graduation rates, and falling admission numbers.

*Technology Integration*

Research has shown that student use of E-Portfolios has increased retention, GPA’s, and overall student comprehension of their learning. More can be found at [http://c2l.mcnrc.org/](http://c2l.mcnrc.org/). It is recommended we use the first summer orientation to orient students to technology and start their First Year E-Portfolio. Incoming students first log-on to Moodle and Mahara during their first orientation in June, along with some initial technology training, sending the message that frequent use of their Moodle and Mahara pages will be expected while at PSU. They leave orientation with an assignment that must be completed over the summer in their E-Portfolio. This assignment would directly relate to their First Year Seminar. Once they start in the fall, they will already have some familiarity with these learning tools, lightening their overall load of introductions to new “things” come September.

The E-Portfolio would continue to be a learning tool, record of learning, repository and requirement included in the First Year Seminar and beyond.

An example of an assignment would be to create a “pre-college journal”, starting with a list of summer goals made during June orientation. Students then use their e-portfolio to document their experiences with text, images, video etc. This would serve as a rich snapshot for students to look back upon toward the end of their first year, and the end
of their four years to view their growth over time. This is an opportunity to introduce “badges”, as this assignment may not be graded, but they could earn badges based on the number of entries.

Electronic Badges are incorporated to create simple, attainable opportunities for student success. Badges can be earned by attending events, such as study groups, workshops, or visiting lecturers, or by attaining personal goals. Badges can be “cashed in” for discounts on food, special privileges, etc.

**SUBCOMMITTEE 2—** _HOW DO WE ENHANCE WELLNESS, SERVICE, AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT?_

The recommendations in this area can be divided into three general categories: Academic, pertaining to courses or graduation requirements, Physical, pertaining to the campus physical environment, and Community, pertaining to building and sustaining a thriving community for all members.

**Academic:**

- Integrate into every FYS a wellness section focused on how to become a healthier person/being. We do not believe this is done in every FYS course and believe it should be added as a part of a critical thinking exercise.
- Add to the general education 1 credit fitness/PE/Health/Wellness classes and require 2 credits for graduation and that both credits must be completed in the first 30 hours. We use to have a program similar to this and it was cut in a Gen Ed revision. We believe this course, at no additional cost to the student, would reinforce our brand and our mission.
- Create a new program for first-year undergraduate research experiences
- Create a new one-credit leadership course.
- Integrate PSU Motto: Ut Prosim into action through new first-year, one credit required experiences on different topics.
- Create “PSU Experience” where advisors work with students in their first year to select which “PSU Experience” they will participate in. Some ideas could include: studying abroad, leading student organizations, doing internships, volunteer service, community service with a local agency, or undergraduate research. This sets and supports an expectation that students in their first year would define their PSU experience to a greater level of detail than merely which courses to take during which semester.

**Physical:**

- PSU should become a tobacco-free campus, which would benefit the health of all members of the community.
- Extend Fitness Center hours until 1 a.m. The current hours end at 11 p.m. or 9 p.m. on weekends, so this would add 2-4 hours a day for recreational fitness activity.

**Community:**

- Become a work – study campus requiring all students to hold a job in their first and second year on-campus and ensure 20% of those jobs support the community. Currently less than 10% of first-year students who receive work-study get an on-campus job. We believe this is a huge issue both financially as well as advertising to students that they are eligible for jobs only to find out that there are no jobs to be had upon
arrival.

- Create a new program that uses the new ID system to implement a reward system for healthy eating and attendance in athletic programs, fitness programs, usage of the fitness room, courtroom, intramural or rec sports or athletic teams.
- Redefine the roles and responsibilities of the community each year through a first-year experience forum that focuses on character development. This forum would establish the expectations that all first-year students are expected to live by for their first year at PSU.
- Define PSU Character Traits and then have all faculty and staff sign. All new hires would be asked to describe how they live the traits or tenets of the PSU Character statement and how they will hold students to live within these traits. We do not believe there is anything outlined that describes the character traits we expect of our faculty or staff and believe this credo could be used in the hiring process and renewal process of contract faculty and staff as well as be integrated into the tenure and promotion process.
- Expand types of White Mountain Orientation (WMO) Programs. This type of program can be very helpful in building bonds in the new student community. We currently have this program but it is poorly attended. We believe that more attention needs to be provided to this program to garner more support and attendance.

**SUBCOMMITTEE 3- RITUALS AND TRADITIONS AT PSU**

Any college with good long-standing traditions has been shown to have more pride and more engagement by students. When students have something to look forward to, and particularly when first years hear that ‘this is the thing to attend or be a part of in order to be truly PSU’, they are more likely to take part. According to New Directions for the First Year Experience document, there is verbiage that states that PSU students who reside in our residential halls and participate in our athletics programs are expected to participate in civic responsibility and engage in the campus community. Just the mere fact that our university motto states “Ut Prosim: That I May Serve” supports our desire to move forward with more opportunities for civic engagement through traditions across the campus.

Currently, there are over 100 clubs and organizations. In a first year students’ beginning year at college, they should experience, at the very least, a sense of school spirit through the institution’s rituals and traditions including Panther Days, Convocation, First Year Fridays, PSU Jumpstart, Homecoming & Family Celebration, Winter Carnival, and Spring Fling Weekend.

**Panther Days**

We would like to recommend the introduction of a new First Year experience similar to that which occurs at many other institutions, such as UNH (they call it “Wildcat Days” and it is a mandatory attendance program). We are suggesting a name of “**Panther Days**”. This experience would be constructed such that our new first year students would move onto campus one or two days before the rest of our students (except for fall student athletes, orientation leaders, etc.). It is hoped that during this time the new students can start to build a bit of group identity, become familiar with the campus, and through various activities develop a sense of belonging to Plymouth State University.

It is hoped that during this experience there would be many well planned activities that all students would be expected to be involved in. Some of these activities might include:

- A campus “hike”
- Signing up for volunteering experience
- Class picture
- Talent Show
- Pep Rally
• Juke Box Night
• Convocation
• Picnic
• “Bucket List” T-Shirt with year of graduation
• Workshops of do’s and do not’s
• Activities Fair

**Convocation**

We would like to recommend alterations to Convocation. These alterations to convocation will put the emphasis of the ceremony on the students’ experience and move away from awards and accolades. This experience would be constructed such that our new first year students would participate in Convocation as part of a larger first week experience in place of an isolated event. It is hoped that during this time the new students can start to build a bit of group identity, become familiar with the campus, and through various activities and take-aways develop a sense of belonging to Plymouth State University. It is important that all Faculty and Staff are encouraged to attend Convocation and celebrate the start of a new academic year with the incoming class of students. Faculty days provided us with insight to include a specific targeted event that symbolizes the new class of students “entering into a learning community”. Convocation should impart a sense of welcoming the new students from all faculty and staff but also providing them guidance on what they should do next to feel more a part of PSU and develop their own sense of self and sense of place.

**Recommendations**

• Communicate to all faculty, staff and students the importance of attending convocation, to help build pride in PSU and provide a sense of a community beyond just the new students.
• Make Convocation an event which is student centered and marries well with “Panther Days”
  o Picnic/BBQ
  o Motivational speech from student(s) which passes tradition and pride
  o School Cheer/Song/Motto
  o Keep timeframe to one hour
    • Limit addresses, awards, and long speeches
    • Have clear beginning and end to convocation
      • Use clock tower bell to signal beginning and (music?) to signal the end.
• Provide take-aways
  o “Bucket List” t-shirt (Top ten things to do as a student at PSU)
  o Photo opportunities with President/Cabinet and Pemi the Panther

**First Year Fridays at Plymouth State University**

Although ‘First Year Fridays’ sounds nice, it doesn’t mean we only offer programs on Fridays for First Years. Plymouth State University should offer a variety of options for the students to get involved within their first year at Plymouth State on any day of the week. Plymouth State University currently provides opportunities for involvement through PAW (Plymouth’s Awesome Weekends) events, Intramural sports, Student Organizations, and Athletic Events.

The following list provides some suggestions that can be used to create new programs or make our current programs even better and to get students more involved in their first year on campus:

• Advertise the program so that it is highly publicized – Facebook, twitter, campus text, HUB, word of mouth, communicate about the program to faculty and staff so that students will hear about it from all different areas.
• Offer the same thing week-to-week or month-to-month (e.g. movies on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings. UNH offers two different movies on those four nights at 9:15. They charge $4.00 for a ticket to their movies.
• Do a gaming night one night a week that could turn into a gaming competition
• I know we do programs within the Residence Halls. Expand that so that Student Organizations and Athletics are involved.
• Each week or on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays get a different Student Organization to sponsor a program that is offered at the University (perhaps through the PAW events) All of the Programs do not need to always be in the HUB. Move the locations around so that the student is getting more comfortable with their surroundings (e.g. PE Center, Ice Arena, Mary Lyon Green, Alumni Green, Centre Lodge, Green between Hyde & Geneva Smith). Keene State College does: 1st Friday of the month, 2nd Saturdays of the month and 3rd Thursdays of the Month for example.
• Collaborate with the PAW program so that there is not a lot of overlapping. This way if they provide a program on a Thursday night have a program offered on a Friday or Saturday night so that students will not feel that it is all crammed in one day.
• Tea with the Dean, Faculty/Staff Showcase
• Events should start LATER. ‘Late Night’ events shouldn’t be 9-11; events should be 10-1 or 11-2. If events get out at 11, students will still participate in the party scene.
• Events should be fun, inclusive, and promote PSU PRIDE!

**PSU JUMPSTART Tradition – First Six Weeks**

The first six weeks of college are considered the most critical in helping students to transition from high school to college and adjust to the challenges of college life. The proposed PSU JUMPSTART tradition is a sequence of six weeks offering theme-based events, activities, resources, information, and guides intended to help new students successfully transition into Plymouth State University within the first six weeks of the semester. While PSU currently offers a variety of student support services, the PSU JUMPSTART would provide coordinated and targeted support for first year students leading to early adjustment to academic and student life at PSU.

One of the most comprehensive early adjustment experiences for first year students is the “First Seven Weeks” initiative at the University of Limerick (http://www3.ul.ie/ctl/first-7-weeks). The building of the PSU JUMPSTART tradition could be successfully modeled after the University of Limerick’s best practices (http://www.edin.ie/pubs/ei3-chapters/ei3-ch13.pdf).

The following are key features of the proposed First Six Weeks for the PSU JUMPSTART tradition based on the experiences of Limerick:

• **Designated theme weeks**

  **Week 1:** Welcoming and connecting new students to the university (settling in, dealing with homesickness, meeting new people, finding your way around, establishing good habits, and getting involved)

  **Week 2:** Study skills, time management, and critical thinking (attending class, study strategies, balancing academic/social life, developing and applying critical thinking skills)

  **Week 3:** Health and wellness (fitness; alcohol, drugs, sex and health-related habits, stress management; relaxation and recreation)

  **Week 4:** Academic and career advising (encouraging interaction between students and advisors, exposing students to career planning, and focusing on the development of professional skills)

  **Week 5:** Student support services – making connections to social and academic resources throughout the campus

  **Week 6:** Community Service and Experiential Learning – encouraging early participation in community service and experiential learning

• **Trained student guides with online and physical presence on campus**
• Workshops, events, community builders, social gatherings, videos, and information resources to support themed weeks
• Communication via Facebook ([https://www.facebook.com/first7weeks](https://www.facebook.com/first7weeks)) and mobile phone app to announce and support the first six weeks of activities and resources for first year students.

### Homecoming and Family Celebration
Homecoming and Family Weekend merged in 2007. This deterred students from partying too much because parents and loved ones would be attending, and would be easier to have Alumni, Parent, and Student programs staff work together to make the event happen. Homecoming has served as a ‘young alumni’ event, and the weeklong activities have involved primarily student organizations in the past five years. Our recommendations for future Homecoming and Family Celebration events are as followed:

• Homecoming should be a celebration for first year families – a chance for first years to showcase what they have done and learned in their first six weeks of classes.
• At Keene, they do a ‘Res Hall Rumble’ on the Saturday afternoon of Homecoming. If we added this to PSU, we could do a ‘Res Hall Block Party’ and include family activities and competitions, and a chance for First Years to engage in field-day type activities, win prizes, and build a sense of community.
• Include Faculty & Staff in events - perhaps showcase student work, faculty, staff, and student teams in competitions throughout the week.
• PSC used to do a community service day – ‘PSC Day’. Bring this tradition back and do a community clean up and/or plant flowers/trees. ‘Keep PSU Beautiful’ Campaign of some sorts. Similar to the current “Harvest Festival” and “Pickup Palooza” started by Professor Jeremiah Duncan

### Winter Carnival
Winter Carnival is currently held the first or second week of February. Winter Carnival is a long-standing tradition amongst many colleges, with the longest standing Winter Carnival at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH. Over the years, this has turned into less of a ‘Winter Carnival Week’ into ‘the week we have Wednesday off from classes so that students can ski all day.’ We want first years to feel involved and a part of the tradition, so let’s intentionally include first years in those traditions. Out recommendations for future Winter Carnival weeks are as followed:

• Include Faculty, Staff, and Students in current PSU traditions such as the Snow Sculpture competition and Chilly-Chili Cook-Off.
• Many schools including Dartmouth College and Bates College do some type of ‘Winter Plunge’ sponsored by the outdoor center. This could be done downtown by the courthouse in the Pemi River.
• Make it more of an event – opening ceremony with inclusion the President or VP, more all-campus events
• Communicate events to faculty Student Life.

### Spring Fling
Spring Fling currently takes place the first weekend in May. Friday evening there are inflatables, a mechanical bull, food vendors, and battle of the bands. On Saturday, nothing ‘planned’ goes on during the day and at night is the big concert down behind the PE Center in Holderness. Our recommendations for future Spring Fling Weekends are:

• Carnival-Like celebration during the day on Saturday
• Community Service Learning Center, Academics, & Athletics could showcase events on Saturday during the day.
• Friendly 5K – Promotion of health, wellness, and healthy, safe celebrations
• First Year focused events to showcase works

Overall, the rituals and traditions that we use to build Panther Pride not only affect our students, but also affect our faculty and staff. Investing time and energy in our first year initiatives will contribute to improved retention, student engagement, and success at PSU beyond the first year experience. Panther pride can take many forms including
academics, student life, and athletics, and therefore will require engagement of the entire PSU Community. Moving forward, all events and experiences should intentionally include the entire campus community. Modeling participation and inspiring involvement amongst our first year students is something we all strive for.

SUBCOMMITTEE 4 – FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

Our task force reviewed a number of documents on Best Standards for First Year Seminars. The University of Wyoming, in their “Report on First Year Seminar Best Practices” done in Fall 2012 noted that 87-97% of four year institutions have some form of such programs now, with classes ranging in size from 16-24 students, for credit with a grade. About 50% of such institutions require the courses for all entering first year students. The national trend has moved away from extended orientation types of classes to more academic courses with specific academic goals. At the same time these courses have gained in popularity as an expectation for First Year Students, over time faculty support fades; they emphasized the need for such faculty support, for strong leadership, meaningful assessment, and “encouraging faculty members to exercise their creativity in developing, organizing, and teaching First Year Seminars.” One very interesting fact reported by Wyoming was that after they dropped their First Year Seminar in 2003 the number of first year students on probation went from 16% to 22%. The document essentially was an extensive argument for a return to having a First Year Seminar taught by regular faculty. The document has samples of a number of institutions goals and guidelines for the course, recommended assessment approaches (interestingly, most of the discussion targets the need for online course evaluation for the course, apparently something new to them), guidelines for who should teach the course (with the prevailing view being experienced full-time faculty and experienced lecturers), training for instructors, and the need for establishing a culture of understanding first year students.

The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience & Students in Transition did a presentation at NASPA 2011 on “Innovations in the First Year Seminar” (this was the group we consulted with on the Foundations of Excellence Project leading to the report done here in 2004 on New Directions for the First Year Experience). We reviewed their PowerPoint slides. They define First Year Seminars as small discussion based classes using engaging pedagogy to create community and assist in the transition to the college experience. As Wyoming noted, there are a variety of types, with movement toward more academic seminars. Similar to Wyoming, they report 87.3% of institutions have some kind of first year seminar experience. 91.3% carry academic credit, 80.5% are letter graded, and 67.8% were a semester in length (the rest scattered across half semester, quarter, and full year in length). Courses are taught by tenure-track faculty, part-time and non-tenure track faculty, student affairs professionals, and other campus professionals, with a small number of graduate students and undergraduate students involved in the teaching. Some are team-taught and some are taught by the students’ academic advisors. 76.1% offer training for the instructors. They reported a variety of course practices, including online components (52.9%), service-learning components (40.3%), linkage to other courses (35.7%), and common reading components (31.0%). The most common form of quantitative assessment is the course evaluation (94.9%). Other quantitative survey instruments have been used (75.3%). Qualitative assessment is less common, and included focus groups for instructors (51.3%) and students (42.6%), and interviews with instructors (45.6%) and students (30.2%). Academic skills and connection to the institution were the most important course objectives.

Our First Year Seminar replaced the course An Introduction to the Academic Community (IAC), which was a one credit Pass/No Pass offering the focused on study skills and becoming a part of the Plymouth State community. When the new General Education program task force created the First Year Seminar they were actually moving the way other institutions moved, away from study skills and to a more academic skills model with an emphasis on critical thinking and reading/research skills. The library was engaged with increasing library skills, including using the advanced databases and learning how to evaluate the many kinds of sources available online. Every section has a designated librarian who teaches one or two sessions of the class. Use of Moodle (and its predecessor, Blackboard) is a part of all sections, used to a greater or lesser degree by the instructors. Instructors received training, and are assisted in finding topics that would engage entering students. In the beginning more than half the instructors were fulltime tenure track faculty. Over time that has slipped dramatically, as faculty retired, moved on to other projects, and had changes in their teaching load. This has increased the number of part-time faculty teaching the course, many of whom are excellent. The emphasis on the academic community that was a key to IAC slipped to a single day for most sections. The original goal was to have sections of 20-25 students, all taking the course in their first semester here at Plymouth. Given in the fall we usually have around 1000 students that need the course, which would mean 40-50 sections. In the very beginning that level of staffing was possible, but as fulltime
faculty moved away from the course section size grew as the number of instructors shrank, so section size now is 25-27. Last year there was a crisis, when the contracts of teaching lecturers limited more the number of credits they could teach, so not all first semester students got the class; about a third had to take it in the spring. That problem has been resolved, so for next fall we do have 40 sections. The problem of declining fulltime faculty engagement is still an issue.

New ideas have emerged in the course of the task force discussions. The possibility of other linked courses like the linked FYS and Composition sections should be explored. Some schools noted in the Best Practices reports have link basic math courses with FYS; other courses could be looked at. The original design did not emphasize cohort groups, looking to mingle many different kinds of students in all sections, but we already have an Honors section and the Limerick section. Perhaps other cohorts could be explored.

We have tried a critical thinking assessment, but getting it scored gave us such a limited sample that the results were not a good measure of what students were getting. The campus has returned to a broader assessment of the skills, measuring incoming students and graduating seniors to find change over time. The assessment issue needs to continue to be examined.

One very exciting idea emerged at the end of our work, one that could even be piloted in the upcoming semester. As noted above, the old IAC had a strong component on the Academic Community, linking students to Plymouth State. That component has shriveled. The new idea is to link that much more strongly to the course, with the suggestion that just as the library teaches the library skills, so staff from student affairs could be link to each section, and participate in an expanded Academic Community content. That could be a strong tool for retention, one of the primary issues in our examination of the entire First Year Experience. The possibility of adding upper level students to each section as a peer instructor of some sort could also be a part of that community component.

Implementing some or all of these ideas could work well to tie First Year Seminar to the Plymouth State experience for all first year students. More specifically here are some additional ideas moving in the direction we just described……

- Continue to encourage full time faculty to teach the seminar course both in load and overload. Evaluate fully why faculty choose not to teach the seminar, departmental support/lack thereof, impact on departmental offerings, remuneration, etc., to develop appropriate encouragements, expectations and rewards
- Look at new models for the course in light of any future conversation regarding moving to a 4 credit course system
- Continue to review best practices and research to insure that the seminar evolves appropriately
- Continue to refine and apply all assessment opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of the course
- Continue to integrate/support in a collaborative fashion other retention/success activities/strategies on the campus
- Look at cohort models of course assignment that do not overly homogenize the first year populations: Ex.:  
  - Residential Based cohort potentially using upper class CAs as mentors
  - Class linking cohorts (math, composition, possibly some major association)
- Develop a Student Affairs/Academic Affairs collaboration, adding an Academic Community/Student Success component to each section taught or co-taught with the student affairs representative
- Develop an upper class mentor/teaching assistant model that would incorporate students leaders, Community Advisors, Orientation Leaders, etc who would assist the instructor and facilitate outside of class experience such as involvement/engagement, service, activities, peer counseling/advising, referral to support networks
- Consider using recent texts that focus on critical thinking as it relates to success in college in some pilot sections and assess variance between other sections over time against accepted retention and success best practices
- Work to insure that class size remains as low as practical, but no more than 20.
Incorporate use of an ePortfolio to engage students in their own learning experience and to follow and record student learning.

Consider reinstituting a common first year reading (books or articles).

**SUBCOMMITTEE 5-COLLaboration BETWEEN ACADeM ic AND STUDENT AFFAIRS**

Building a successful first-year experience for students depends on strengthening the collaboration between academic and student affairs. Both units of the university share the same goal of fostering the success of students entering PSU. By working together faculty and student affairs professionals can contribute to student learning and personal growth that depends on greater integration of academic and social life starting in the first year. The value of collaboration has already been demonstrated by the work of the First Year Task Force, which has been better able to identify the issues and challenges of our first year students by sharing knowledge and experiences from related perspectives. The ideas for strengthening collaboration between academic and student affairs to have a positive impact on the first-year experience include the following activities and initiatives:

- Greater academic message in new student orientation that communicates expectations and strategies for student success
- Extended orientation planned and implemented by student affairs and academic affairs that builds on PSU traditions and rituals
- First-Year Fridays program that integrates transition to college life and starting career process—delivered by our academic and student affairs experts
- Interaction of faculty and students in residential hall programs planned and implemented jointly particularly during the first six weeks of the semester
- Greater formalization of the CARE program and increased involvement of faculty in the process of supporting student success
- Improved communication to promote co-curricular events with the goal of increasing participation of students and faculty including a calendar similar to the academic calendar
- Involve student affairs staff in academic classroom events
- Increased participation of faculty in out-of-class experiences and incentive or recognition for those who make significant contributions
- Summer bridge program developed by academic and student affairs to facilitate transition from high school to college
- Themed-based residential life integrating educational programs and student organizations
- Service learning and civic engagement involving both academic and student affairs
- Programming developed by faculty and student affairs professionals to develop student leaders, mentors, and university scholars
- Greater involvement of student affairs in delivering components of the First Year Seminar
- Organizational structure that promotes collaboration between academic and student affairs including joint planning and implementation of first-year activities and initiatives

A strong partnership between academic and student affairs can help support our efforts to meet the issues and challenges of first-year student success. By collaborating with student affairs, faculty can better understand the needs of our first year students including adjustment to university life and help promote their personal growth. By collaborating with faculty, student affairs professionals can better understand the academic expectations and help promote the educational goals of our first year students. Overall, collaboration between academic and student affairs can help to strengthen the connection between in-class and out-of-class experiences for our first year students with increased participation and engagement from both parties in supporting first-year

**CONCLUSION**

It was requested at the conclusion of our report to give the administration five areas that could be immediately tackled by the university committee. With that in mind here are our recommendations:
1. Convocation needs to be changed to become a more student centered experience. We cannot afford another disconnected event for our incoming students as we set the stage for their PSU career. We understand there will be awards given this year (and hope based on our recommendations that this is not continued next year) but we believe there are still opportunities to have more student involvement with new traditions to be built.

2. First Year Seminar has the opportunity to develop partnerships with Student Affairs in the academic community segment of the class. Teachers can utilize the expertise of student affairs staff to speak about pertinent college survival skills. In addition we propose an experimental course that would allow upper class students (potentially orientation leaders to continue the relationship already built) to gain academic credit for being a peer mentor for a specific First Year Seminar class. In addition, we can begin the conversation of how we can integrate an ePortfolio into the FYE and pilot with a section or two of FYS to develop it. Perhaps there are a couple of FYS faculty who would be willing to explore this with Marylena Sevigny who will be attending the AAEEBL conference in late July and will have much food for thought on the issue.

3. Community Advisors in each residence hall could meet with their residence members who are struggling in their courses based on the Six week grade reports received. Community advisors can model and encourage the skill sets necessary to succeed (perseverance, grit, etc.). In addition we would suggest that the Provost send a note to all advisors requesting that they meet at least once one on one with their first year advisees during the first six weeks of the semester (not including the meeting on the day of convocation).

4. PSU needs to create a one stop web resource for our students modeled on the “Student Success Guide “ at Western Michigan University https://wmich.edu/registrar/pdf/studentsuccessguide-current.pdf. This will help support our students and parents as they transition into the expectations of university life.

5. PSU should hold an event in the fall modeled on the old “PSC day” where students, faculty, staff and alumni do service for the community, take a hike up a mountain, and then a barbecue at the end of the day. This could become an annual event.

The committee wants to be clear that these five recommendations in no way preclude the full body of recommendations that have been made by the task force. We believe that if many of the above ideas are implemented we will be putting ourselves in a better position to retain our students and graduate them in a timely manner. It is also our belief that we will become a more connected campus, therefore making our educational experience a more comprehensive one in the process.

First Year Task Force:

Chair: Mark J. Fischler
Jim Hundrieser, David Zehr, Timothy Keefe, Wendy Palmquist, Pamela Anneser, Bonnie Bechard, Jong-Yoon Kim, Roger Blake, Leslie Castonia, Ladd Raine, Sara Grady, Amanda Hutchins, Karen Deighan, Marylena Sevigny, Joyce Larson, Jamilia Almonte, Evan Gaudette