

Foundations of Excellence Executive Summary and Recommendations
SUNY Cortland Spring 2007
DRAFT

Over the past two years, SUNY Cortland has conducted a self-study of its campus structure, policies, practices, and programs related to the first year of college using a framework provided by the National Policy Center on the First Year of College. What the research team found is a broad-based understanding of the importance of the first year of college to a student's success overall, significant programming to support students, and a need for greater organizational clarity and communication to improve our support. The goal of this project was to identify the current status of the first year experience and recommend actions to strengthen our organizational and strategic support of first year students. This report will provide the rationale and objectives of the study, its methodology, a discussion of findings, and the Foundation of Excellence Council Recommendations. Many additional resources and report appendixes are available via the Foundations of Excellence webpage accessed through www.cortland.edu/advisement.

Project Rationale and Objectives

A successful transition into the new academic and social environment of college has been identified as one of the leading factors related to student satisfaction, achievement, and persistence. This self-study was an attempt to understand SUNY Cortland and the ways in which we provide support and challenges that encourage and allow students to successfully negotiate this transition and maximize their opportunities. The Foundations of Excellence™ project was designed by the National Policy Center on the First Year (NPCFY) as a process and framework for an institution to conduct a self-study to understand the varied experiences and perceptions regarding a campus' distinct first year strategies, philosophy, and practices. Through a pilot program with a national cohort of institutions, nine dimensions of excellence were identified that provide benchmarks for the self-study process.

Foundations of Excellence Dimensions

This project utilized these nine dimensions as an organizing framework for excellence in the first year. These represent ideal, or aspirational, benchmarks for institutional reflection. There are numerous ways to approach a study of the first year experience, and the dimensions provided the Foundation of Excellence Council with an important organizing structure, rather than dictating the parameters of the study. The following description is adapted from the Policy Center statement on dimensions found in the Foundations webpage.

The Dimensions rest on four assumptions:

- The academic mission of an institution is preeminent;
- The first college year is central to the achievement of an institution's mission and lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built;
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the Dimensions;
- Collectively, the Dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the first college year, but also the entire undergraduate experience.

The nine dimensions are:

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.

Organization

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

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.

Faculty

Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty and create a culture of responsibility and reward for faculty-student interaction.

Transition

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

All Students

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

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.

Role and Purpose

Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society.

Assessment/Evaluation

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

Methodology

This section will describe the way that SUNY Cortland approached this self-study, including: project processes such as the formation of the Foundation of Excellence Council and Steering Committee, collection of data, integration and analysis of information, and construction of recommendations. The Policy Center provided general guidelines, but left the implementation specifics of the project to the institution. Several members of campus participated in an initial meeting with the Policy Center

and other participating institutions at the start of the project. In addition, representatives participated in web conferencing and national conference meetings with Policy and institutional representatives.

Data Collection

A SUNY Cortland Foundations of Excellence Council was established to guide the project and also conduct the work of the project from data collection to report writing. The Council consisted of 25 faculty, professionals, and librarians from across campus. From this larger group, a steering committee of twelve people was designated to provide oversight for the project. A list of council and committee members is available in the FOE web appendix. These groups met to review the study process and conduct the data collection and analysis for reports on the nine dimensions. The project involved major data collection activities that were then augmented by research conducted by each dimension working group. These included the Current Practice Inventory, Survey of Students and Survey of Faculty/Professionals, and descriptive data related to student enrollments, policies, committees, and others.

The Current Practices Inventory (CPI) called for the compilation of all practices relevant to first year students. Chairs, directors, and others from across campus were individually contacted to provide information on current practices. The result was a descriptive inventory of practices that directly or tangentially support first year students throughout their first and second years at SUNY Cortland.

At the same time the CPI was being conducted, we administered two online surveys to faculty/professionals and students respectively regarding the first year. The instrument was provided by the Policy Center and allowed for a measure of perceptions regarding first year philosophy and practices in and out of the classroom. Faculty and professionals yielded a 64 percent response rate and student response rate was 28 percent. Although there are always limitations and we would have preferred to administer the student survey further into students' academic experience (i.e., second semester), the survey provided an excellent snapshot of perceptions during the first semester and across a broad range of constituents. For more information on the survey and the findings, see our website appendix.

In addition to the CPI and survey, data were collected to augment the CPI and surveys. Information on course enrollments and student characteristics was provided according to Foundations guidelines and working groups sought out additional information necessary to complete their dimension analyses.

Analysis and Recommendation Formation

In order to complete the substantial work of processing information, there were nine working groups reporting on each of the nine dimensions of excellence. Each working group consisted of a steering committee member and at least one professional and one faculty member and were chosen based on interest and expertise of council members. Groups met on a regular basis and were responsible for responding to a series of questions specific to their dimension and determining an evaluative rating of SUNY Cortland's status towards the ideal of excellence within the respective dimension. Each group completed a formative dimension report and assigned a letter grade for their dimension. The full reports are available via the web appendixes and a brief summary follows in the findings discussion of this report. Once the working group completed its initial report, feedback was provided by the Policy Center. In addition, colleagues on the Council provided feedback to each working group.

The final recommendations presented later in this report were constructed based upon the individual dimension reports. The Steering committee took all recommendations and prioritization of recommendations from the nine dimension reports and created an integrate set of recommendations. This was then reviewed by the council and refined through discussions.

Findings

Based upon the data collected, analysis of information and dialogue among the FOE Council and working groups, there are two sets of findings. The first sets are thematic findings that emerged across dimensions and throughout the process. The second set of findings is specific to each of the nine dimensions is presented in an abbreviated format along with the final assessment. These findings are the foundation for the final recommendations.

Project Wide Themes

Each group worked on an analysis of information relevant to their specific dimension of excellence. As these findings were brought together and discussed, themes emerged that cut across a number of dimensions.

Communication About Mission and Communication Among First Year Initiatives

Regardless of the dimension, there was a consistent emphasis on the importance of communication between constituents regarding our institutional philosophy, programs, and assessment.

Consistent and Effective Assessment

There are many programs that conduct varying levels of assessment and this most often data related to satisfaction and participation. Programs would benefit from assessment training and support to better measure outcomes. This is true on an institutional level as well.

Clarification of Structure to Assist in Coordination and Assessment of Programs

There is a need for a more efficient and formative structure for assessment that fosters meaningful program development and allows for the sharing of data and outcomes among programs.

Student Motivation and Purpose

Several of the groups identified a need to better understand and acknowledge the role that student motivation and sense of purpose plays in success across the collegiate experience. This has emerged as an important factor in national research.

Recognition and Reward for Excellence in First Year Engagement

One of the strongest themes across the nine dimension reports involved the recognition of people who are invested in, and supportive of students in the first year. This includes looking at funding, public recognition, and the role of engagement in merit and tenure processes.

Support for Learning in the Classroom and for Co-Curricular Experiences

Several groups highlighted the importance of support for learning both in and out of the classroom. This included providing support to faculty who teach first year students, providing the training and technology to advance teaching, utilizing appropriate course structures and methods, and acknowledging the learning that takes place via co-curricular activities and experiences.

Addressing Diversity in Diverse Ways

The campus efforts to address diversity were noted in several dimension reports. In addition, reporters encouraged looking at diversity more dimensionally such as socio-economic and religious diversity. The campus needs a more integrated and articulated approach so that efforts are not fragmented and unrelated.

Dimension Specific Findings

Each of the dimension working groups completed a full report on the dimension and generated a finding that reflected the overall status of the college in relevance to the ideal of the dimension. The grade is based on qualitative and quantitative data of the Current Practices Inventory and the Faculty and Student surveys. The reports were peer reviewed (within council) and grades will be adjusted after feedback is processed. The full final reports are available via our web appendix. This section provides a ranking of the findings into three categories and brief summaries of each dimension report.

Each of the dimension findings were discussed and put into a relative framework indicating the status of the campus in meeting the ideal of the dimension and the need for improvement. The Council organized the nine report findings into three areas:

1. Dimension needing immediate and significant attention. The only dimension in this category was the Faculty dimension relating to faculty-student interaction and campus support to faculty regarding first year issues.
2. Dimension is average, with potential for improvement. The majority of dimensions fell into this category including: Organization, Transition, Role and Purpose, Diversity, Philosophy, and Learning.
3. Dimension is good, and can be strengthened. One dimension was placed in this category. The dimension that needs the least institutional attention is Improvement.

Philosophy

Ideal: 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.

SUNY Cortland: While there is a philosophy that is enacted fairly well, it is not articulated throughout the campus equilaterally. There are numerous initiatives and some are well connected and coordinated, while others are isolated and loosely coupled with other, potentially related, initiatives. Given that the philosophy exists, but is characterized primarily as implicit, the influence of the philosophy is challenging to assess. The importance of the first year experience is exhibited through practice, but is not directly related to a specific philosophy. It may well be that while a philosophy underlies the work on campus; it is not illustrated clearly through mission statements or strategic plans.

Finding: *Philosophy* is average and has potential to improve.

Organization

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

SUNY Cortland: There is no single comprehensive organization, office or department coordinating efforts for first-year students. None-the-less, the majority of students feel they know where to go if they need help (although we are unsure if students maximize use of these resources). Likewise, faculty and staff feel confident directing students for assistance or referral if support is needed. Despite varying levels of confidence, faculty and staff voice strong support for first-year student services. The intent or desired outcomes of most first-year programs are not articulated in the description of the activities and may not be coordinated or assessed accordingly. There is also a significant variance in the amount of, and utilization, of assessment across programs and how these changes or related information is shared with the campus. Professional development includes formal training on current or new information, techniques, technologies, etc. used to improve first-year student experiences. Faculty and staff believe there is a relatively low level of professional development, and of the two groups, faculty perceive a higher level of development than most of the staff.

While there is a perception that first year programs are well resourced, the consistency and amount of support varies depending mainly upon the effort to seek out resources.

Finding: *Organization* is average and has potential to improve.

Learning

Ideal: 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.

SUNY Cortland: Cortland provides a number of curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that relate to the mission and philosophy of the college. The clarity of the connection between programs and mission varies at times. The Cortland Experience, a universal experience for first year freshmen, has a number of common learning goals (study skills, development of social skills, introduction to support services and campus life). Specific learning goals are developed and documentation of learning goals is accomplished annually.

Common first year coursework (CPN 100/101; PSY 101; HIS 200; SOC 100) meets common goals for General Education. Over 40% of the incoming first year students participate in some form of a learning community/coordinated coursework often based within their chosen major. Specific programs such as Honors and Educational Opportunity Program are designed to meet academic outcomes for specific populations of students. Block scheduling is a collaboration between faculty and students to build balanced schedules that meet educational goals. Academic Convocation has been instituted to introduce first year students to the academic environment and emphasize established institutional learning goals. In addition to classroom learning, initiatives such as the Intellectual Theme series, Campus Lecture Series, Multicultural and Gender Council, and Student Affairs add a significant depth to the academic environment of the college. Multiple offices (ASAP, Recreation Sports, EOP, etc.), responds to new students, particularly, but not limited to, out-of-class learning and life. Residence life provides extensive and well-supported programming. It is proactive in addressing anticipated needs and highly-charged topics for new students related to diversity, sexuality, health, etc. Assessment varies across these learning initiatives with strong examples in General Education Assessment and COR 101 assessment. Engagement of students with their academic experience and engagement on a broad level has not been assessed effectively. Areas of

concern include the lack of developmental coursework for students, ability to bridge in and out of class learning, and the need for further resource allocation to enhance learning.

Finding: Learning is average and has potential to improve.

Faculty Roles in First Year

Ideal: 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.

SUNY Cortland: According to the data, the institution lacks a clear philosophy regarding first-year students. SUNY Cortland administration has no expressed mission that promotes "pedagogies of engagement" for first-year students. Currently there are not enough rewards or resources for faculty involvement with first-year students. There is not a clear campus-wide acknowledgement of first year engagement in reward structures such as promotion and tenure and annual salary. At this point, expectations for involvement with first-year students are not clearly communicated to new faculty during the hiring process. The majority of survey respondents indicated that neither their position descriptions nor candidate interviews address responsibilities relating to first-year students. A lack of attention to first-year student considerations during the hiring process detracts from the cohesiveness of SUNY Cortland's approach to first-year student issues. That lack of attention is reflected in poorly communicated expectations, including position descriptions. The cross - tab data suggest the degree of importance placed on faculty to work and interact with first-year students is high. Faculty, Academic Support, Academic Administration, Student Affairs, and Librarians overwhelmingly agree that the institutional leaders place a high priority on faculty work with first-year students. However, rewards for instructing, engaging, and advising first-year students are not fully evident on campus. The expectation of interacting with first-year students out-of-class drops significantly for faculty but remains high or very high for Academic Support, Student Affairs, Librarians, and Academic Administration. Areas of concern include: inadequate number of first year courses; class size needs reduction; advising beyond the first year needs improvement; and lack of administrative flexibility or support for innovative freshman class design (i.e. learning communities, cohort programming, freshman seminars).

Finding: Faculty related dimension is in need of immediate and significant attention.

Transition

Ideal: 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 responsibilities and provide appropriate support for educational success.

SUNY Cortland: Communication to Students:

Since the survey was offered in the fall students never experienced a full semester of processes and

this should be considered in reviewing the student survey responses. Students responded highly to knowledge of available majors prior to attendance but the question on entry requirements to specific majors is not part of the acceptance process. The mission is listed in several campus publications (College Catalog, Admissions Recruitment Information, Student Planner, Residential Services publications etc.) and on the campus web site.

With regard to entry requirements for specific majors, students are accepted into the college and given a major at the time of acceptance. Some majors (e.g., Speech Pathology, Childhood Education, Inclusive Special Education, Athletic Training, and Physical Education) have certain GPA and internship hour requirements before graduation. This information is provided to students during their first year through open house, orientation, COR101, advising appointments, and major specific classes. Financial Advisement presents during Open Houses, Orientation, COR101 classes, Campus presentations, e-mail reminders about FAFSA deadlines and scholarships. A significant question is the level of student focus and participation in these outreach efforts.

Communication to Others

The following is a review of the communication to additional members of the community:

- Online family newsletter, but it is not clear how families know how to access it
- Monthly calendar for family (given out at family orientation) to assist parents with discussion on current issues with students during appropriate time of the year
- Orientation packets for families include resources from many campus offices
- FERPA Regulations available to families, students, faculty and staff through Registrar's website
- College Fairs/High School visits to update guidance counselors
- Liberty Partnership, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce
- College currently expanding support for community service office and developing connection in Cortland City through the renovation of office space on Main Street and offering programs in that space
- College publications forwarded to most high schools in New York and Northern New Jersey
- College open houses and recruitment events inform prospective students and families
- ACE (Access to College Education) program

Establishing Connections

Faculty are encouraging students to use academic support services while only 55% (very high and high) of the students indicate that they felt the institution connected them with academic support outside of the classroom. It is common now for students to use Facebook and other mediums to connect online prior to and during their time at the college. In the qualitative data students regularly mentioned the Academic Support and Achievement Program (ASAP) as a support service. The residence hall staff includes an Academic Peer Mentor for each hall which provides workshops in the residential environment. The campus offers learning communities for first year students (including residential options). Each COR101 section and each residence hall floor has at least one upper-class academic peer mentor. In the qualitative data, the following is a ranking based on the number of occurrences that assisted students in connecting to the College – 1 – General activities, 2 – COR101 class, 3 – Residence Hall Programs, 4 – Caring Teachers, 5 – Friendly-helpful campus, 6 – Orientation Program, 7 – Resident Assistants, 8 – ASAP and classes.

Academic Advising

Faculty rated the academic advising experience much higher than the students but they also may have considered the entire first year – where the students were only familiar with the advisor from orientation. Generally students rated their academic advising experience in the 50% (high or very high range) and faculty rated it in the 80% (high or very high range) range.

There is a faculty based academic advising model for all majors except pre-majors (undecided) and the <30 credit student in the school of education. Those students are advised by professional staff until they declare a major or meet school of education program requirements.

There is no campus wide advisement assessment, although some departments assess advising within their departments. Some faculty are not clear as to how advising first year students affects their performance appraisal or promotion and this is different in each department/school. Similarly, advising loads often vary by department or even within departments. Online registration system and Banner Web information system has been in campus wide use for less than five years.

Finding: Transition is average and has potential to improve.

All Students

Ideal: 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.

SUNY Cortland: The College is very committed to meeting the academic, social/personal and safety needs of all students. The academic needs of students are met through the Academic Support and Achievement Program, the Advisement and Transition office, the Student Disabilities office and the Educational Opportunities Program. The social/personal needs of students are met through the Multicultural Life Office, the Career Services office and the Counseling Center. The safety needs of students are met through the Student Health Service, the Substance Abuse Prevention Service, the University Police Department and the Office of Judicial Affairs.

The College provides a number of opportunities for subpopulations of first year students. The Educational Opportunity Program is geared to helping the academic and social/personal needs of disadvantaged students. The Office of Student Disability Services focuses on the academic needs of students with learning and physical disabilities. The Office of Multicultural Life addresses the social/personal needs of students from various subpopulations.

Presently, the faculty and staff do an outstanding job of working with students outside of the classroom. Academic support is certainly present and those who know about it appear to use it routinely. There is also an emphasis from the college to become involved in some campus involvement and its correlated to participation. The campus environment is one where students are accepted for their beliefs, values, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Areas of Concern:

The two major areas of concern are that students are not aware of the services available to them or they are hesitant to utilize the services that are available. Although some faculty members recommend to students that they take advantage of the academic services on campus, others do not

suggest that these services be used.

A major area of concern is the difference in perception between students and faculty/staff based on results from the surveys of both groups. Students are more likely than faculty/staff to feel that the College addresses the academic, social/personal, and safety needs of students from various subpopulations.

Finding: All Students is average and has potential to improve.

Diversity

Ideal: 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 must/should 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.

SUNY Cortland: In the area of diverse ideas, faculty and staff gave diversity in the curriculum a higher rating than the students but both groups felt that an adequate job was being done in this area. In terms of the co-curriculum, the rating difference between f/s (faculty/staff) and students was more dramatic with f/s giving a much higher rating than students. Keeping in mind that "perception is reality," students do not perceive much attention to this area although the CPI and the committee members' knowledge of campus events shows much evidence to the contrary. The campus is providing many co-curricular opportunities for students to experience diversity in many forms. During this school year many national political speakers of diverse views came to campus. These seemed well attended, perhaps because they were required by some of the faculty. Poor perception of many of the other campus events is probably the result of two factors. One is the institution's failure to communicate these opportunities in an effective and appealing way to students "where they live" (marketing). The other has to do with the homogeneity of the campus population. When diversity of population is not being experienced on every level of the campus, diversity does not draw our attention or pique our interest. As the campus becomes more diverse in the future, we foresee an increasing interest in this area. Off campus, in the greater Cortland community, there is little opportunity to experience diverse populations. Faculty, staff and students all seemed to feel that the institution does an adequate job of connecting and promoting interaction "between students and faculty/staff" from different cultures and backgrounds. However, most of this interaction appears to be through the classroom experience or mandatory meetings/events. The opportunities available for "student-to-student" interaction focusing on diversity varied slightly between faculty/staff and students. Faculty and staff responded that the institution did an adequate job while the students had a more positive perception of the opportunities available.

There were several comments made in the open-ended questions with regards to "meeting new people, socializing and making new friends." With regards to first-year students interacting with individuals from different cultures and backgrounds from "outside" the institution, it appears that both student and faculty/staff agree that limited opportunities exist. What exactly "outside" means is unclear. Are there opportunities to interact with exchange students from outside the institution? Or is there occasion to travel to a group outside the campus or bring other students to campus? Either way, everyone seemed to feel these opportunities are lacking. It is apparent from the survey results that the majority of students and faculty/staff at the institution feel that the institution conveys the

expected standard of behavior quite effectively. Considering that the survey is given so early in the student's first semester, the fact that such a large percentage of students agree that the college does a good job of communicating its standards of behavior is a good indicator that early campus programming and policies are being effectively communicated right from the start.

Finding: Philosophy is average and has potential to improve.

Role and Purpose

Ideal: 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. 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).

SUNY Cortland: SUNY Cortland is communicating to its students its vision for the role of higher education in knowledge acquisition for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning for engaged citizenship, and learning for serving the public good to a high degree. In studying population data collected from the Foundations of Excellence Student Survey and the Foundations of Excellence Faculty/Staff Assessment, please note that students consistently rated the degree to which the campus effectively communicates its vision of higher education higher than did faculty/staff, although the trends were consistent and did not present contradictory findings. This may be explained because faculty/staff with more knowledge, life experience and high expectations are more critical of the institutional delivery of information to first-year students than students are in their perceptions of information and assistance they have received. SUNY Cortland students seem to have an understanding of how college, in general, has an effect on the "big picture" of society, however, they fail to see or understand their role or necessity in that picture. Most students strictly view the necessity of a college degree as a means to further their employment opportunities. In addition to survey data there are further indications of Cortland's success in the inventory of first-year programs. Summer orientation programs attended by the vast majority of first-year students address required courses and competencies. Each orientation session includes a small group of major-specific students working with Orientation Assistants and a faculty member from the major--this workgroup develops part of the student's schedule of classes for the fall semester. Discussion of required competencies is often an aspect of Academic Convocation, while major requirements are the focus of numerous department-specific advising events held throughout the year. Despite the large majority of students and slightly smaller majority of faculty/staff rating SUNY Cortland as communicating to a high or very high degree its vision for the purposes of higher education, there were still percentages of these populations who rated the colleges as only slightly or in some cases not at all communicating its vision.

Lastly, and perhaps most significant, is that nearly 21% of faculty/staff respondents reported that they feel the college only slightly helps students understand their motivation for getting a college education in terms of "contributions to the betterment of society," and nearly 4% feel that this is not done at all. Meanwhile, 5.9% of student respondents reported that the institution helps them understand how attending college helps prepare them to contribute to society, and approximately 2% feel that the institution does not help them at all in this dimension. It is clear that the campus needs to try to reach those who are not being reached, and better communicate the various purposes of higher education. The data suggest that the College has room to improve these measures, and

with increased efforts to better articulate the campus vision for the purposes of higher education, perhaps the overall campus ratings would move from a "high" degree of communication on each indicator to a "very high" degree of communication, and decrease the number of respondents in the "very low/none" and "slight" categories.

Finding: Role and Purpose is average and has potential to improve.

Improvement

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

SUNY Cortland: SUNY Cortland currently offers well over 100 distinct initiatives aimed at enhancing the experience of first-year students. Systematic assessment occurs in many of these initiatives albeit most has been for summative reports and minimal information has been used for formative improvement of offerings. Impact on retention has not been directly measured. There have been numerous assessments that have taken place across the initiatives affecting first-year students, assessments that often have been ongoing for multiple years. These assessments have primarily been for students' self appraisal or for summative data collection efforts required as part of annual reports or service unit assessment plans.

First-year students take the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory to identify needs, strengths, attitudes, motivational patterns, resources, coping mechanisms, and receptivity to intervention. This information is supplemented with tri-annual data collected on a comprehensive student opinion survey (which is used across the SUNY System to provide comparison information), a sister student opinion survey (developed in-house to address Cortland specific service and academic related information needs), attendance reporting, and several other smaller-reaching assessments (e.g., faculty appraisals). Each of these instruments has provided valuable information for better understanding student allocation of time, faculty connections, use of campus services, and class attendance patterns. The college has an Assessment Committee, structures for program evaluation and key stakeholders across campus have participated (on a regular basis) in conferences and meetings aimed at better understanding the first-year experience of students. Local expertise has been used to develop and implement a wide-range of initiative, both academic and non-academic, aimed at enhancing the experience and ultimately the retention of first-year students. There has been less use of bringing external experts to broadly expose the campus community to pertinent issues. There could be more integration of efforts to achieve commonly articulated goals/objectives, overall planning, and there could also be an overarching assessment of impact. There needs to be more advanced planning and articulation of overarching goals and objectives affecting an integrated program of initiatives to impact first-year student connectivity and need. As it stands services are more fragmented and an examination of across program impact is not possible. Each of these assessment initiatives have provided valuable information to enhance key stakeholder understandings. The only area of concern is to tie these areas together to provide a more cogent and integrated perspective.

Finding: Improvement is good, but could be strengthened.

Recommendations

Based upon the dimension reports and recommendations within each individual report, the FOE council has established the following set of recommendations that encompass the highest priorities expressed through this self-study. The dimensions are interrelated and improvements in one area of our first year programs will inevitably result in improvement in other areas. The following is a coordinated set of recommendations and indicate elements of an overall plan for enhancing first year college experiences and building upon the current structure and strengths of SUNY Cortland.

1. Creation of a Transition Council to facilitate recommendation implementation

- a. Develop strategic plan that includes existing programs and emergent plans and assessment
- b. Assess the fiscal implications and needs and strategies for funding
- c. Create a universal mission statement or philosophy statement for transition
- d. Communicate mission and initiatives to campus and among programs
- e. Facilitate implementation of following recommendations
- f. Support use of student outcomes in annual reports, strategic plans, etc.

2. Faculty Involvement and Recognition

- a. Recognition of faculty work with first year students
 - i. Integration of first year philosophy into hiring/promotion/tenure/DSI
 - ii. Provide campus first year mission statement to share with candidates during hiring process
 - iii. Identify if appropriate for human resource hiring templates
 - iv. Explore First Year Advocate award on campus
- b. On-going audit and communication of first year initiatives
- c. Increase involvement of faculty with first year issues and initiatives (in/out class)
 - i. Identify ways to strengthen connection of in and out of class activities
 - ii. Continue new faculty outreach and development regarding first year students
 - iii. Support active learning strategies
- d. Identify ways for chairs to support and encourage faculty involvement
- e. Increase faculty promotion of events and integration with classes
- f. Provide more accessible information on campus events and improve campus calendar

3. Survey of academic department transition initiatives and share best practices

4. Student Learning

- a. Full analysis of first year classes in relation to content, enrollment, achievement in relation to cost effectiveness
- b. Provide support to faculty, expand tutoring
- c. Support programs on motivation and encourage student participation
- d. Expand goal setting initiatives in Orientation/COR and other programs

5. Establish a Stronger Early Intervention System

- a. Assessment of current intervention systems, formal and informal
- b. Assessment of Mid Semester report system
- c. Explore earlier first year assessments in classes
- d. Early Intervention Referral System: case management between points of contact for student

6. Integrated plan to increase awareness of services and participation in activities

- a. Create a much clearer and accessible calendar of events each week
- b. Provide encouragement and support to integrate activities with classes
- c. Assess use of electronic communication
- d. Explore social norming and increase expectations of involvement
- e. Increase office/initiative visibility and program outcomes

7. Assessment

- a. Establish baseline information on first year indicators such as retention, GPA and utilize in program development when appropriate
- b. Support use of student outcomes in annual reports, strategic plans, etc.

Endorsements of Current and On-Going Initiatives with Suggestions

In addition to the recommendations listed above, the committee wishes to recognize existing efforts (either in planning or in implementation phases), endorse these practices as relevant to excellence in the first year, and encourage sustained support for these projects.

- Establish Strategic Plan and resources for Learning Community initiatives
 - develop assessment program
- Restructuring of multicultural and diversity support systems
 - increase interaction of Cortland students with peers at local institutions
- Explore scholarship connected to service learning, faculty research
- Strengthen upper-class mentoring of first year students
 - transfer club and non-traditional student support are starting exploration of this
- Increase alumni connection with first year students
- Increase media coverage of Cortland events and initiatives
- Financial Advisement outreach to first year students

Appendixes

Participant list (council and steering committee)

Weblinks to the National Policy center

Survey summaries

CPI

Individual reports

Foundational Dimensions[®] for Four-Year Institutions

Preamble

Foundational Dimensions[®] statements constitute a model that provides institutions with a means to evaluate and improve the first year of college. As an evaluation tool, the model enables institutions both to confirm their strengths and to recognize the need for improvement. As an aspirational model, the Dimensions provide general guidelines for an intentional design of the first year. The Dimensions rest on four assumptions: The academic mission of an institution is preeminent;

- The academic mission of an institution is preeminent;
- The first college year is central to the achievement of an institution's mission and lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built;
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the Dimensions;
- Collectively, the Dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the first college year, but also the entire undergraduate experience.

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. (Philosophy)

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. (Organization)

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

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 institutions' reward systems. (Faculty)

Transition

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. (Transitions)

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. (All Students)

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. (Diversity)

Role and Purpose

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). (Roles and Purposes)

Assessment/Evaluation

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. (Improvement)