The John Gardner Institute has nine foundational committees that provide a means to evaluate and improve the first-year freshman experience in college. For this particular committee, twelve individuals comprised the “Improvement Committee” at Arizona State University (ASU). In a synopsis, the Improvement Committee’s task was to identify initiatives, assessments, dissemination methods, and institutional planning directives that are used to shape the first-year experience and then to provide recommendations to make these processes more effective and targeted. This document outlines what the Improvement Committee did, provides recommendations for first-year experience assessment/dissemination, and explains how the committee arrived at these recommendations. A chronological presentation is listed below and where appropriate, recommendations are listed in the context that these discussions occurred. Finally, the last section of the document presents a summary of the Improvement Committee recommendations (see Table 1).

The specific charges of the Improvement Committee are listed as follows:

**Summary of The Improvement Committee’s Charges**

1. Identify existing ways in which ASU recognizes the first year as a specific/distinct time period and a set of unique and foundation experiences in the lives of our undergraduates.
2. Identify the key players (faculty/staff roles, offices, units, etc.) involved in first-year experiences for ASU students.
3. Identify existing assessments used at ASU that recognize the first-year experience as distinct. Examine their connection to ASU’s overall assessment efforts.
4. Identify existing dissemination methods to communicate first-year data and outcomes. Identify common recipient groups for this information.
5. Examine how and to what extent assessment data about the first-year experience is incorporated into institutional/planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies.
6. Examine ASU’s level of involvement with internal and external sources of information and expertise about new students (for example, other institutions, professional organizations, publications, conferences, etc.)
7. Provide recommendations as to ways we can make our assessment and information dissemination efforts more targeted and effective.

**Committee Meetings**

The Improvement Committee met on seven occasions, starting on November 3, 2014, and approximately once a month thereafter.

**Meeting 1, November 3, 2014:** The committee members met for the first time as a group. After the introduction to the John Gardner First Year Forward process, the individual committee members introduced themselves to each other, reviewed the charges to ensure common understanding of the issues, and planned the next meeting dates and agenda.
Meeting 2, November 20, 2014: The Improvement Committee focused on the first three of the seven charges, which were to identify existing initiatives, identify key players and identify assessments. The outcome of the Improvement Committee’s session was as follows:

1. Identify existing ways in which ASU recognizes the first-year experience as a specific/distinct time period and a set of unique and foundation experiences in the lives of our undergraduates.
   a. FYS (first-year seminar) (191s/101s)
   b. Programs targeted at students with a Calculated Index (CI) of 93 and below + those targeted at students with a “mid-range” CI score
   c. Early Start programming
   d. Critical Tracking/eAdvisor
   e. Sun Devil Success Programming (with special low-CI option of an on-campus UNI 120)
   f. Residential Colleges/Housing
   g. Peer Mentors and Student Orientation Leaders
   h. First-Year Success (FYS) coaching
   i. Welcome Week
   j. CLAS blocks/Academic clusters (anchor course; 19 students)

2. Identify the key players (faculty/staff roles, offices, units, etc.) involved in first-year experiences for ASU students.
   a. Faculty/Lecturers/Instructors/Academic Professionals
   b. “Residential Assistants” (called Community Mentors or “CM” at ASU) and Residential Life staff
   c. CLAS Office of Student & Academic Programs (OSAP)
   d. Faculty “mentors” (on an individual/dept. basis)
   e. Academic Advisors/Honors Advisors
   f. FYS Instructors; FYS Coaches; Student Orientation Leaders; Peer Mentors
   g. Others, as appropriate for all initiatives listed in #1 above and first-year program inventory
   h. Graduate students/other undergraduate students

3. Identify existing assessments used at ASU that recognize the first-year experience as distinct. Examine their connection to ASU’s overall assessment efforts.
   a. A few were mentioned, but it was decided to assign this task as “homework.” Committee members were assigned topics/pages of the twenty-plus pages of approximately 75 programs from the first-year Current Practices Inventory (CPI). Members were then asked to contact various offices/units to learn more about these programs and initiatives, focusing specifically on any existing assessment methods used to evaluate their effectiveness/success. (please see Appendix A, “Effort to Identify Existing Assessments for CPI Programs_12_31_14”)

Meeting 3, December 15, 2014: By the time of the meeting, not everyone had completed the homework assignment (due to navigating end-of-semester duties), but nonetheless, a sufficiently large response led to the following discussion points with regard to “assessments.” Pertaining to charge #3, “Identify existing assessments used at ASU that recognize the first-year experience as distinct. Examine their connection to ASU’s overall assessment efforts.”

   o People were very helpful.
   o Many units didn’t know some of these initiatives were out there.
o Many of these programs have strategies in place that assess short-term, but no real follow-up; nor dissemination of that information elsewhere (i.e., it’s just not something on their mind).

o Many of these initiatives/programs are indeed being assessed and in some cases those data are used to make decisions about the next year’s programming.

o Some assessment information on programs is sent to university administration and college leadership, but there isn’t a more centralized way for others to utilize those results.

o Some units interpret assessment differently (e.g., to them it may be just one single course grade). There is a lack of long-term measures such as retention or sustainment of academic performance. Assessment seems to be more about a moment in time rather than long-term outcomes.

o For student services programs/initiatives, most assessments were about student satisfaction; an assessment of service (e.g., “Were your needs addressed today?” “Were you seen in a timely manner?”).

o Advising also uses overall retention numbers to assess their work, but we discussed that retention is impacted by many other factors, in addition to advising.

o Across CLAS units, most communications are not sent specifically to freshmen. Meaning, almost all units have communications that go out to their students, but not specifically to freshmen; rather they are sent to all of their students. The distribution pathway, however, does sometimes differ (e.g., using FYS courses to get information to freshmen).

**Possible recommendation:** It is not clear what happens to the information that is collected by all of the programs and units. Who gets the information? Where are the bottlenecks in sharing the information? It seems that the information that is gathered is not shared among all of the individuals who would benefit, which ranges from the unit to the university. Create a seamless process to allow the sharing of assessment information whether from the unit or the upper administration.

**Meeting 4, January 28, 2015:** Shelly Potts, Senior Director of the University Office of Evaluation and Educational Effectiveness (UOEEE) gave a presentation about the university surveys that target the freshman experience. The committee came to the following conclusions during its discussions:

o There is not a consistent way, across CLAS units, that data from evaluations of programs for first-year students is collected and disseminated.

o Key players in the first-year experience include but are not limited to Advisors, Instructors in first-year courses, Residence Life staff, First-year success staff (coaches) (Provost’s office), Orientation staff, those who manage the Academic Status Report (ASR) report process (UOEEE, Provost’s office), AECP disability, Veteran’s center counselors, and the ASU Financial Aid/Scholarship office.

o One university-wide source of academic monitoring data, the Academic Status Report (ASR) system, does not work effectively for large classrooms/lectures. It is not connected to the gradebook which makes it cumbersome (and thus under-utilized) for large first-year (aka “high enrollment”) courses.

o Different units do not come together to share outcomes about programs serving first-year students.

o Data from the surveys conducted by the University Office of Evaluation and Educational Effectiveness (UOEEE) have a great deal of information about the freshman experience in CLAS, but we have no evidence that CLAS units access and review that information regularly.

**Meeting 5, February 25, 2015:** The committee learned about the data collected by ASU’s Office of Institutional Analysis (IA) that is relevant to first-year students, including:
1. The weekly retention reports (located on the Retention Dashboard page, “Related Links” section) illustrate many of the different ways IA captures basic retention stats (by CI, market, college, ethnicity, online vs. on-campus, etc.). Even though most of the tables reflect overall statistics of the university, all can be examined by college or by division as well.

2. The Academic Program Profile (APP) is a website that has the persistence/graduation rates reported by ‘returned to university/returned to college/returned to department.’ Anyone can have access with their chair or dean’s permission.

3. IA’s standard persistence/graduation report captures historical trends, as well as 2-year persistence and 4- and 5-year graduation rates. These reports are prepared by IA on demand/as needed.

The committee also discussed results of the FoE ASU Faculty/Staff Survey questions that relate to assessment. There are essentially three main questions asked to ASU faculty/staff related to the Improvement Dimension:

**Question 1: To what degree are you engaged in the following professional activities focusing on the first year?**
* (Attending conferences or workshops at this institution; Attending national/regional conferences or meetings; Reading professional materials; Presenting at conferences or contributing to publications)

- In general the committee agreed that the responses made sense and confirmed their own expertise and experience in that about a quarter of faculty/staff report participating in these activities. The committee believed that this was fairly impressive, actually, given the severe budget constraints.
- But the committee wanted to know more—what do faculty/staff do with the information once they return/complete these activities? That’s a key area that needs to be investigated further and is addressed in the committee’s recommendations (e.g., “requiring” that information be shared using a variety of platforms).

**Question 2: To what degree has the following information directly influenced your work with first-year students?**
* (Demographic information from this institution’s databases; Measures of pre-enrollment academic skills from this institution’s databases; Academic skills measured after one semester/quarter or more; Measures of student time spent studying; Current practices at other institutions; Professional/published research; Student evaluations, assessments, or feedback).

- The committee noted that it would have been nice to know in what way specifically this information influenced respondents’ work (e.g., pedagogically?) because this could be different for different people. Did it generate something new? Or use of something that has already been well-established?
- “Student evaluations, assessments, or feedback” was rated the highest in terms of the degree it influences CLAS faculty/staff work with first-year students. If respondents were referencing ASU student/course evaluations (which would be the most common/familiar kind of “student evaluations, assessments, feedback” to them), there is very little way of separating out first-year students from others since the results are aggregated.
- This discussion also prompted the suggestion of modifying one of our existing ASU student surveys to include more specific information about how students distribute their time, in thinking through the book Academically Adrift. This is reflected in the committee recommendations.

**Question 3: Overall, please rate this institution’s assessment capabilities relevant to the first year of college**
* (Assessing what’s relevant; Disseminating results in a timely manner; Using results for improvement)

- The committee posed the question, if faculty report that they do not get assessment-related information, what is the best way to communicate assessment-related information with faculty? The
committee’s suggestions included not using email, but rather existing communication structures such as faculty meetings and/or making this part of an actual agenda for a department. Other suggestions included using the Undergraduate curriculum point person for that department to disseminate information (though not all departments have this position or use in the same way). This discussion led to one of the committee’s recommendations in “requiring” discussion of first-year experience assessment and related activities.

Overall, discussion around the FoE ASU Faculty/Staff survey led to the following specific recommendations:

- **Possible Recommendation:** “Require” to some extent the sharing of information that staff and faculty members gain when they attend conferences focused on the first-year experience and retention issues; use platforms like webinars or online training, low budget/easy access options, for all faculty/staff to share in the knowledge obtained through these first-year student focused activities.

- **Possible Recommendation:** Amend question(s) on existing survey(s) currently administered to first-year students to obtain more data of interest to CLAS (e.g., understanding of students’ time distribution, including social media).

- **Possible Recommendation:** Require CLAS units to discuss relevant issues/information related to the first-year student experience at least once a year at a faculty/staff meeting.

Lastly, the committee worked through three questions posed by the Gardner Institute (on the Foundations of Excellence Website) related to the Improvement Dimension:

**Question 1:** To what degree does your institution routinely disseminate to faculty and staff the following first-year data? *(Demographic characteristics; Academic profile of entering students; Intended majors; Retention and graduation rates)*

- This distribution of information is often done at the “highest” levels of a department (deans) but it seems that the information does not get to the people who are teaching or advising/serving first-year students (which in some cases may be faculty, but also may be TAs, FAs, adjunct faculty, etc.).
- Because it may be different across CLAS units as to who has the highest touch points with instruction of and/or service to first-year students, the information to support these students’ experiences needs to be packaged in a way that is relevant to everyone, regardless of whether or not they are the ones teaching and/or serving the first-year students.

**Question 2:** To what degree have recent assessment activities improved campus understanding of the way that the following factors impact student success? *(Student allocation of their time; Student/faculty connections; Student use of campus services; Student class attendance patterns; Patterns of student involvement)*

- Data are collected on at least some aspects of all of these (via surveys by UOEEE, e.g., Connections Survey, First-Year Student Survey); there are a lot of reports online/SharePoint, ways to drill down further into the results to look at particular groups.
- Perhaps data are just not making their way “down” to everyone who can use it.

**Question 3:** To what degree have the following strategies been used by your campus to improve the first-year? *(Attendance at higher education meetings; Participation in multi-campus initiatives focused on the first year; Broad campus exposure to external experts; Broad exposure to campus-based knowledge/expertise about the first year)*
We believe that specific development activities like those listed could be happening in pockets (e.g., residential life), and working well for those particular areas. But in academic units, it’s probably spotty. One reason is that there are a lot of competing demands on time within academic units.

Suggestions related to these committee discussions were subsequently included in the final set of committee recommendations.

Meeting 6, March 23, 2015: Prior to this meeting, committee members were asked to provide one or more recommendations regarding CLAS first-year students and “Improvement,” as well as the source or basis for the recommendation(s). During the meeting, the committee had further discussion on charges 2 and 6, specifically.

Charge 2: Identify the key players (faculty/staff roles, offices, units, etc.) involved in first-year experiences for ASU students.
- Academic advisors
- Faculty
- Residential Life (everything from Community Mentors to janitorial staff, anyone who interacts with students)
- First-Year Success coaches
- CLAS Office of Student and Academic Programs (OSAP) staff
- Devil’s Advocates
- Staff/Student staff in university tutoring (writing center, math tutoring, academic success programs)
- First-Year Success instructors/support staff (including peer/student facilitators)
- Student employment
- Financial Aid
- Office of Student Life
- Health and Wellness
- Counseling Services
- Recreation Services (Sun Devil Fitness Complex, intramural sports, etc.)
- Undergraduate curriculum committees/councils within each CLAS unit

Charge 6: Examine ASU’s level of involvement with internal and external sources of information and expertise about new students (for example, other institutions, professional organizations, publications, conferences, etc.).

The committee noted the following sources:
- Data from Gardner Faculty/Staff survey
- Academic advisors’ involvement in The Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA)
- Department-specific participation in professional organizations
- Pedagogy conference participation

The committee discussed whether or not these sources are first-year specific and if they are simply one-time visits for specific program development (e.g., success coaching). The committee questioned whether or not these were truly considered sustained involvement and noted that one of the difficulties is not knowing who is participating in these sources.

Possible Recommendation: We need a clearinghouse that faculty/staff can access to obtain this type of information. This would allow for faculty/staff to both better understand what knowledge and resources are “out there” and subsequently use it to positively support first-year students’ navigation of ASU.
At this meeting, the committee also focused on discussing the compiled set of recommendations submitted by the committee members. The committee members combined similar recommendations and edited based on committee feedback.

Meeting 7, April 16, 2015: Juliann Vitullo and Cheryl Conrad developed a draft document and sent it to the committee members to edit and comment two weeks before this meeting. Six members of the committee were able to attend and those who could not meet sent in their edits to the draft. The discussion focused on prioritizing and refining the recommendations.

FYF Improvement Committee Recommendations
Overall, the committee is impressed by the number and the range of program offerings for first-year students, and the effort devoted to the assessments of these programs. The committee recognizes that these programs and activities help our first-year students transition to ASU. The committee also identifies seven areas for further improvement. Table 1 presents the Improvement Committee’s final set of recommendations in order of the highest to lowest prioritization.

Table 1. Summary of FYF Improvement Committee Recommendations

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Culture of CLAS</td>
<td>Process for gathering data for the CPI Survey; Committee discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within CLAS, establish a culture of:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1. assessment</td>
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<td>2. caring and emphasis on the first-year experience</td>
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<td>This ties into President Crow’s goals for the university and should be established from the start as an expectation of employment and a part of goals/service at faculty orientation and equivalent indoctrination activities appropriate for new staff (e.g., academic advisors, OSAP, student support areas) and instructors (e.g., Teaching Assistants). Incorporate data and use this as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of using data to explore successes/challenges/areas for improvement as they relate to the first-year experience. Promote the idea that ownership of the first-year experience and related assessment is everyone’s responsibility.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Data Availability/Accessibility</td>
<td>Committee expertise/experience; Committee discussion; Process for gathering data for the CPI survey; Gardner Faculty/Staff survey; CPI Survey; UOEEE/IA information</td>
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<td>Develop and implement organized strategies for effective dissemination of data related to CLAS students’ first-year experience, ensuring that data reaches upper leadership as well as all who directly or indirectly work with first-year students.</td>
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<td>Specific data for which the committee recommends better dissemination include:</td>
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<td>• Results/responses from University and college surveys of first-year students.</td>
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<td>• Research findings related to the first year that are completed by CLAS faculty/research staff.</td>
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<td>• University retention/graduation reports (by college, by division, by unit).</td>
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<td>• Academic Program Profile information.</td>
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<td>• General information on current/ongoing programs and activities targeted at first-year students (e.g., many of those listed in the CPI).</td>
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| **3** Dissemination of Data      | Data related to the first-year experience (e.g., suggestions listed in the above recommendation) should not simply be “sent out” (e.g., via email); but rather presented in a way that is meaningful for the particular audience. Specific dissemination recommendations include:  
  • Presented by those who are most familiar with it, perhaps utilizing the brown-bag or webinar concept.  
  • Located in a central repository or clearinghouse.  
  • Presented as part of a standing agenda item within already established communication structures, such as annual faculty/staff meetings.  
  • Compiled into a “State of the College” first-year student report.  
  • Presented with the expectation of a feedback loop, so that the audience is provided opportunities to share how they will use the data, what impact they expect it to have, what other data would be useful, etc. | Committee expertise/experience; Committee discussion; Process for gathering data for the CPI survey; Gardner Faculty/Staff Survey; CPI Survey; UOESEE/IA information |
| **4** Dissemination of Best Practices | CLAS should facilitate the sharing of best practices related to first-year students by promoting organized and purposeful ways for this to happen. Some examples include:  
  • Establish a working group of individuals representing different CLAS units and college leadership that meet regularly to: (1) discuss ways to centrally assess/evaluate CLAS first-year student experiences; (2) identify and alleviate data distribution bottlenecks; and (3) share best practices across units.  
  • Facilitate the building of community among CLAS faculty/staff who engage in similar types of work with first-year students (e.g., FYS instructors, high enrolling first-year general education courses, Orientation-related activities).  
  • For faculty/staff who attend professional conferences or other professional development opportunities related to first-year students, “require” the sharing of this information with other faculty/staff (via low-budget/easy access platforms such as webinars, online training, newsletters, retreats, existing department/college meetings). | Committee discussion; Committee expertise/experience; Gardner Faculty/Staff Survey; CPI Survey; Process for gathering data for the CPI Survey; |
| **5** Improve Amount/Type of Data Collected | Upon review of existing data-collection activities related to first-year students, the committee recommends the following amendments to current instruments:  
  • Add (CLAS) college-specific questions to the First-Year Student Survey.  
  • Add questions to the Orientation survey that are college and/or CLAS unit specific.  
  
  Further, the committee recommends an overall investment in coordination of data-gathering efforts that involve first-year students. ASU colleges and CLAS units should suggest items of significant interest for inclusion in institution-level surveys so that there is (1) a reduced need for separate and often redundant college-focused surveys, (2) a decreased survey burden for first-year students, and (3) comparison data on survey items among students in other ASU college/schools. | UOESEE/IA information; Committee discussion; Committee expertise/experience; Gardner Faculty/Staff Survey; CPI Survey |
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| 6 Investment, Data Collection and Sharing | CLAS should establish an ongoing investment in information gathering and sharing related to the first-year experience. Specifically, the college should find ways to incentivize key players in the college, as well as those with a special interest in this population to share their experiences and expertise. This is particularly important for those who interact with first-year students but who are not fully integrated into the university environment (e.g., adjunct faculty, Teaching Assistants). Suggestions include:  
  • Separate funding (i.e., separate from general professional development or faculty research budgets) allocated to the first-year experience, with a requirement for those receiving funding to formally share what they learn.  
  • Course release for faculty engaging in research activities related to the first year.  
  • Student workers to assist in first-year research.  
  • Funding for first-year community projects. | Committee expertise/experience; Committee discussion; Process for gathering data for the CPI |
| 7 First-year courses/Student data | Improve the process by which first-year students are informed of poor progress in classrooms:  
  • The Academic Status Report (ASR) system aims to help identify those students who are performing poorly. However, the system is not well-integrated into the course Blackboard System. From a faculty perspective, the ASR system as it is currently designed is not feasible with a course of several hundred students. Based on our discussion, we learned that the ASR is inconsistently used by faculty (some used it but others did not). As a result, it may lead some failing students to have the misperception that they are doing fine because they did not receive such a report.  
  • We propose to integrate the ASR into the course gradebook, so that more faculty use it (instead of sending emails—that are difficult to track—to students).  
  • Customize messaging to first-year students, recognizing that they are potentially the least-informed and most vulnerable students on campus. | Committee discussion |