

THE INTEGRATED FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

In this white paper, I offer some ideas and direction for the Integrated First-Year Experience and hopefully bring new clarity and energy to this initiative. Firstly, there is no “magic bullet” or special program that will increase student success, persistence or retention. Therefore, the IFYE should not be viewed as a retention strategy, but rather as an educational effort in which our entire community, centered on our faculty and the curriculum, provides new students with an immersive experience. Such an experience should excite their imaginations, consistently deliver clear expectations, and quickly integrate them into our creative community. Although retention is a positive institutional outcome, deepening student learning is the goal of an integrated first-year experience.

Historically, there have been wonderful classes, programs and initiatives developed to welcome, engage and support new students, and we have made much progress over the last several years. However, the College still lacks clarity of purpose in its educational work with new students; consequently, our laudable efforts still lack integration. Moving forward, the spectrum of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for new students must flow from common educational goals and with increased synergy and integration.

Below are some ideas and values that may bring clarity to this integrated work:

- Columbia is a creative and intellectual community of students, faculty and staff. Columbia inspires its new students to become deeply integrated into our community as they begin an immersive, experiential, and experimental journey to create a body of work and to become well-educated citizens of the world.
- A balance between LAS courses, exploratory courses and major courses should guide the new student curricular experience. A student's first year should be the time to explore and “try out” a major, knowing students do not have a fixed, strict, linear path to their career and life after Columbia. Believing we are the right college for these young students in creative practice, it is then our responsibility to guide them and help them find their path within our disciplines.
- We are educating the whole person so we look to impact new students' heart, body and mind. The College seeks every opportunity to reinforce our values and expectations for our new students and to integrate them into our community. Rituals, traditions and moments of coming together create that community. We will encourage new students to participate in activities in and outside the classroom where their social development complements their academic and professional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Integrated First-Year Experience encourages a rich dialogue, galvanizes our community, and integrates our efforts; it is a comprehensive strategy felt college-wide. Its reach is extensive, yet its focus, specific. I recommend the following actions to further embed the Integrated First-Year Experience into the life and culture of the College which will deepen student learning and better integrate them into our community, and ultimately, improve their persistence and graduation rates (please note that some of these recommendations are underway):

ESTABLISHING VALUES

1. Faculty will examine the Key Principles for Student Success and either enhance or revise. Going forward, the principles will define our values and expectations for our new students. They will become a defining feature of all of our work with new students.
2. As proposed in the college-wide advising plan, focus College Advising solely on a robust advising structure for new students. Every new student, freshman and transfer, will be required to have in-depth discussions with their advisor, articulating their thoughts, objectives and questions about their educational and career path. This advising process becomes a defining feature in the new student experience. Expect students to have an academic plan-of-action by the completion of their first year.
3. Focus our professional development efforts on supporting faculty teaching first-year students. Inform and integrate part-time faculty into the IFYE experience. Develop structures that encourage IFYE curricular development and sharing.

HONING CURRICULUM

4. The structure and content of the First-Year Seminar needs to be revisited and reconsidered as the center of the Integrated First-Year Experience. The First-Year Writing program may also offer additional options for new thinking and structures.
5. Each department in which a student may major in will offer a specific introductory class or classes. This portal class, as it covers discipline-specific content, will also reinforce the College's core values, build the department's new student community, and encourage students' exploration. Bring together portal class designers across departments to share successes and challenges.
6. Address career and body of work development from the start, making it clear the connection between the curriculum and career outcomes.
7. Reposition and structure the LAS Core to offer a wide array of engaging and vigorous introductory courses designed for new students.

SHARING INFORMATION

8. Support services, both academic and non-academic, must be fully developed, clearly identified, and showcased for students, faculty, and staff.
9. A well-developed research protocol on the Integrated First-Year Experience must be established. The College should consistently and regularly publish data to the larger Columbia community, so as to track and make evidence-based decisions.
10. Before the start of each fall semester, host a one-day college-wide retreat for faculty and staff entirely focused on galvanizing the college community around the IFYE concept.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

11. Create smaller communities of new students that acknowledge their distinct characteristics or special needs. Clearly articulate the programs and services that attend to these special populations. Special populations include: honor students, at-risk students, veterans, minority students, commuters, LGBTQ students, and international students.

12. Offer the rituals, traditions and important markers (i.e. New Student Convocation, Weeks of Welcome, Orientation, and Columbia Crawl) in the new student experience as we reinforce our values and integrate our students. Articulate a co-curricular new student program that is integrated into the first-year curriculum.
13. Understanding that the learning community concept as articulated by Dr. Vincent Tinto has proven to be one of the most powerful learning tools for new students, we must seek to build formal and informal learning communities both within the curriculum and in the overall student experience. The Television Department has had great success with this concept.

SUMMARY

New students must feel the weight of our expectations and the support of our community. We must clearly articulate our core educational values for our new students and use them to shift our educational structures so that our students do not experience Columbia as a series of good but disconnected courses and events, but rather an immersive One Columbia experience. The Integrated First-Year Experience is not more programs or more resources, but an educational strategy defined and supported by a culture that makes our core values come to life for our students.