

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Quality Enhancement Plan:

Sophomore Year Experience Program

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This proposal presents research on national trends for sophomore college students, internal research on VSU's sophomores, and the resources and assessments we already have to support an SYE program.

Quality Enhancement Plan: Sophomore Year Experience Program

Executive Summary

VSU has the faculty, facilities and funding already in place to build a strong, effective Sophomore Year Experience (SYE) program. Our award-winning Freshmen Year Experience (FYE) program faculty and staff are enthusiastic about participating in its development, and a new dorm with classroom space will be available as early as this Fall '08 semester. The Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Kurt Keppler, has received funding to begin a needs assessment for SYE and to hire a part-time staff member to lead this project. Student Affairs and FYE already have a fruitful and dedicated relationship, so growing an SYE out of our already-existing FYE program makes economic and organizational sense.

Research shows that on a national level, SYE programs designed with the university mission and student needs in mind significantly increase retention and graduation rates. SYE programs have varying delivery methods, but generally, the programs target the problem of student motivation as tied to career choices, college issues, and a larger purpose and life goals. VSU has a demonstrated need for such a program: we retain between 45-53% of sophomores who earned a 2.0 or less in their first year.

Furthermore, our QEP needs assessment data indicate that juniors are reflecting on what they needed their sophomore year, and the largest percent changes (greater than 8%) are in three of the four areas that the QEP team identified (Service Learning, Global Perspectives, and Interpersonal Connection created by an SYE program or research with faculty). These high changes in percentages indicate that juniors may have welcomed/expected more of these types of activities/opportunities during their sophomore year. In fact, any of the above named areas would serve as a focus/theme for an SYE.

I. Explanation of Topic

Sophomore Year Experience (SYE) programs have burgeoned over the past decade to address a widespread phenomenon: the “Sophomore Slump” college students experience as reduced motivation for a variety of reasons, which leads to declined academic performance and declined retention rates from the sophomore to junior year. VSU’s sophomore population is no different, and this QEP is designed to address that challenge as we accomplish our “Five Goals in Five Years” strategic plan.

Valdosta State University’s “Five Goals in Five Years” strategic plan—implemented in 2006—clearly states retention as a valuable component of our mission. VSU’s first goal is to “intentionally grow undergraduate and graduate enrollment (12,000 over the next five years) through additional new students and increased retention and graduation rates of existing students.” In particular, VSU is working to:

- Improve freshman to sophomore retention by 1% a year;
- Develop traditions and culture to encourage retention;
- Improve the advising process, consistent with the Enrollment Management Plan, to support students’ transition from general education to major field.

It is these specific strategies an SYE program would enact. Regarding sophomore to junior retention, our most recent retention data shows that retention rates drop significantly for sophomore students who earn a 2.0 or less in their first year (a range from 45-53%). We do a better job with sophomores who have a 3.0 or higher in their first year: 80% are retained.

The number of full-time sophomores enrolled from 2001-2007 has increased by 48%. In the fall of 2007, of the 2010 enrolled sophomores, 262 were undecided about a major. Our target group, to begin with, might be those sophomores who are undecided about their majors. Alternatively, Biology, Business Administration, Early Childhood Education, and Nursing are the four most popular majors; a starter SYE program might target one of these majors. However, our award winning FYE program targets those undecided first-year students and has higher graduation rates for those students than any other major in the Arts and Sciences. Because of its success in retention, our FYE program won a Best Practices award from the University System of Georgia in 2004. Growing an SYE program from FYE would be easily accomplished. A pilot SYE learning community was completed fall 2007. The SYE learning community consisted of 23 students who participated in the FYE program from fall 2006 and spring 2007. There were a few students who had declared majors in the class. These 23 students were in 3 linked classes: Perspectives on Leadership, Geology, and English literature. These courses were chosen because they would count for almost every major. All but three students have registered for Fall 08 classes.

Regarding traditions and culture that lead to retention, one major reason sophomores experience a “slump” results from having been lavished with time and attention during their first year, then suddenly feeling left to their own devices. They are “cut loose” from the support network and feel disconnected from a larger “purpose” for their academic lives/work. Developing a tradition and culture of support for sophomores has helped other universities improve retention, and the possibilities for design and implementation are endless and very exciting.

Our university has three strands of emphasis that would fold seamlessly into an SYE program, and would meet the needs students have pointed out on the QEP survey: more hands-on experience. First, the offices of Student Life for Volunteer Services, Career Planning and Cooperative Education, and On-Campus Job Management along with a cadre of interested faculty could create a service-learning component that’s the cornerstone of a VSU SYE program. This service-learning/ community service idea is also being developed as a separate QEP but could easily and fruitfully be combined with the SYE idea. Alternatively, a focus on international/cross-cultural communication and experience would draw together our Center for International Programs, the Modern and Classical Languages department, and OASIS to focus on sophomores. This international focus is another QEP being proposed. Both “strands” would require close and consistent collaboration among faculty and Student Affairs offices. A third possibility—the third QEP on undergraduate research—might also be a focal point for the “hands-on” experience and close collaboration with faculty sophomores are asking for.

In regards to improved advising, part of FYE’s success results from intentional, consistent, supportive advising; an SYE program would continue that intensive advising, the goal of which is to guide students into a good match with a major. As you will see in the section below, many schools fold their SYE programs into their existing, already strong FYE programs.

Finally, an SYE program would support VSU’s third major goal: developing academic programs “...which prepare students to be responsible, thoughtful and productive citizens.” As sophomores make decisions about majors and life directions, an SYE program could help them sort through and thoroughly explore what their values and beliefs are, and guide them toward the appropriate majors.

II. Research of Best Practices and Current Literature

Chartered in 1986, *The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition* (FYE) is considered the leader in first-year studies (Pattengale 19). Other valuable resources include Molly Schaller’s *About Campus* article on sophomores (July/August 2005, vol. 10 #3), the FYE Sophomore Listserv on the *Resource Center* website, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA f. 1979), and the leading researcher on the sophomore experience, Dr. Jerry Pattengale. For brevity’s sake, Pattengale’s work

and the national survey results will be drawn upon for this portion of the QEP. A fuller bibliography is attached to this report.

The dearth of research points to this important summation, as phrased by the *Resource Center*: “It seems...that the effort to establish and enhance initiatives for sophomores requires a reallocation of **focus** more than any reallocation of institutional *resources*” (emphasis Original). That being said, some key features in the general trend of sophomore initiatives are important to cover.

The observation of a “sophomore slump” is at least 50 years old (Freedman 1956) and based on an examination of personal and academic development. The *Resource Center* uses this definition for the 2005 survey’s target group: “sophomores are students in their second year of post-secondary education.” Some schools name a range of credit hours to define “sophomore.”

The survey received a 33.5% response rate (382 out of 1139) from accredited, four-year institutions in the U.S. It should be noted that because the survey was sent to student affairs professionals, survey findings may under-represent academic affairs initiatives.

The most common initiatives included Career Planning (74.2%), Major Selection (65%), and Academic Advising (61%). Least common are Learning Communities (17.7%), Sophomore Publications (16.8%), and Peer Mentoring (15%).

Survey results also show that private schools are more likely to offer a sophomore year initiative, class events, and student government initiatives. 29.5% of institutions have assessed their initiatives through locally designed surveys, focus groups and data analysis. 37.3% are planning future sophomore initiatives, and those with current initiatives were more likely to be planning future ones.

Initiatives described in the survey tend to fall into four categories of focus: Comprehensive, Residential, Major/Career, Mentoring, and Academic Course initiatives. (Note: there are also quite a few “other” categories).

Institutional Examples

Comprehensive initiatives

Beloit College (Wisconsin) features “venture grants” and sophomore retreats. The retreat focuses on personal academic issues, like major choice, study abroad, career planning, and identifying campus issues like recycling, creating a coffee shop, and library hours. The venture grants are comprised of 13 grants, \$500 to \$1500 each. The grant proposals are “Entrepreneurial, self-testing, or intellectually challenging activities in which the winner(s) attempt something (academic or non-academic) that benefits others.” Students apply in their first year and implement as sophomores.

Stanford University features sophomore seminars, residential learning communities, and direct coordination with FY programs.

Residential initiatives

These programs emphasize living/learning cohorts and have dorms dedicated to first and second-year students:

Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo
Eastern Kentucky University
U of Central Arkansas
Southern Arkansas
University of South Carolina

Feature: S.L.U.M.P retreat (Sophomores Learn, Understand, and Map a Plan). USC also has “themed” residence hall sections: students interested in the environment are housed together; music majors are housed together; those interested in international relations are housed with international students; etc.

Major/Career initiatives

These initiatives build two to four programs/events a semester for their sophomores that emphasize major/career choices, and/or have residence halls that house particular majors.

College of the Holy Cross
Macalester College
Texas Christian University

Mentoring initiatives

These programs focus on intensive, very intentional advising, particularly for undecided majors.

Indiana Wesleyan
Kennesaw State University
University of Louisville

Academic Course initiatives

The centerpiece of these initiatives is a course or series of courses about leadership or skills for success in college:

U T at San Antonio
Indiana Wesleyan (3 credit course)
U of Indianapolis (required)

Cautions

Our major challenge is the disconnection between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs; successful sophomore year initiatives are based on cross-divisional working groups, and this component may need the most effort. Jayme Millsap Stone and Terri Files of the University of Arkansas have studied the disconnection between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs: perceived differences create the cultural divide. For example, faculty may assume that Student Affairs staff is more “touchy-feely” and not as “educated,” and that any research Student Affairs produces is therefore not as rigorous as academic research would be. Faculty also tend to assume that Student Affairs must “serve” them by serving students’ non-academic needs. Student Affairs staff may feel faculty are more sophisticated, have more time than they do, and have more general expertise. Stone and Files encourage the faculty to think of Student Affairs staff not as expert service givers, but co-creators and partners in education, because they may not realize that many Student Affairs staff have higher degrees and have performed legitimate research in their area.

Another challenge concerns trying to do too much too fast. Rajesh Bellani at Colgate University observes that trying to implement an SYE in residence halls and student organizations while simultaneously addressing diversity and career development can lead to failure (2007). Colgate had to back up and work from a “less programming, more mentoring” approach, concentrating on a Sophomore Seminar as the cornerstone of the program, which has now become an example of Best Practices at national conferences.

III. Student learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes encompass a wide range of student attributes and abilities, both cognitive and affective, which are a measure of how their college experiences have supported their development as individuals. Cognitive outcomes include demonstrable acquisition of specific knowledge and skills, as in a major; what do students know that they didn't know before, and what can they do that they couldn't do before? Affective outcomes are also of considerable interest: how has their college experience impacted students' values, goals, attitudes, self-concepts, world views, and behaviors? How has it developed their many potentials? How has it enhanced their value to themselves, their families, and their communities?

These affective outcomes tend to be the focus of many SYE programs because they specifically address “sophomore slump” issues. Rajesh Bellani of Colgate University calls this slump “the Jan Brady Syndrome,” that middle-child position in which sophomores struggle for an identity and purpose (2007). Bellani’s work echoes research from the past twenty years: Richmond and Lemons describe the sophomore year as a “no-man’s land” (1985, p. 176); Chickering and Reisser note that “student are dressed up and raring to go, but are not sure what to do or where to go” (1993), and Furr and Gannaway observe that sophomores are “...confused and directionless” (1982).

James Pattengale and many other scholars have made a general assertion about developing learning outcomes for sophomores: “The dream needs to be stronger than the struggle” (2006, p. 22 Growth Journal). Chip Anderson puts it another way: “If the Why is big enough, the How will show up” (cited in Pattengale, 22). Based on this evidence, the VSU SYE program could consider the following outcomes of a carefully designed SYE course:

- SYE students will be able to clearly describe connections between an education and a successful life.
- SYE students will be able to clearly describe at least one life goal and the plan to attain that goal.
- SYE students will be able to clearly articulate their values and beliefs and demonstrate a gain in confidence and life direction.
- SYE students will be able to explore alternatives and make commitments.
- SYE students will be able to move beyond their intellectual, emotional, and cultural comfort zones.
- SYE students will be able to apply specific knowledge and skills to an out-of-classroom experience/project.
- SYE students will be able to articulate how they might “improve the human condition” through careful study and thinking about their educational goals (Zlotkowski, 2002).

These outcomes are necessarily general at this point and could easily be refined to reflect what the potential SYE focus might be. Whatever that focus becomes, it will be crucial to galvanize a team of faculty and Student Affairs staff who are committed to the target group and to each other. A theme of “Connection, Collaboration and Communication” would support those instructors, advisors, RAs, tutors, etc. who are involved.

IV. Discussion of Resources

VSU currently has the faculty, facilities, and some funding available to develop this QEP. Exploratory efforts are already underway to build an SYE program, although better communication and collaboration between offices would maximize and streamline our resources.

Funding

Based on a Board of Regents initiative awarded to Student Affairs, \$65,000 is available to fund an SYE annually, provided there is proof that the program is positively impacting the university. Currently, the Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Kurt Keppler, is using \$15,000 for a research assistant to gather information about SYE programs at our benchmark institutions and to investigate what our sophomores need here at VSU. In the fall, Dr. Keppler plans to survey second-semester sophomores and juniors about what they lacked or liked at the beginning their sophomore year.

Another portion of the \$65, 0000 will go to a new, divided position: 50% SYE and 50% Student Affairs.

Faculty

As mentioned above, a new faculty/staff position would help coordinate the new program. In the meantime, the leaders of our FYE program have been doing their own research; Marsha Walden, Director of Advising, will be writing her dissertation on the SYE, using VSU sophomores as her focus. Dr. Cheri Tillman, FYE Coordinator, has piloted a Perspectives course targeting sophomores of varying majors. Of the 23 students in this course (fall of 2007), only three have not registered for Fall 2008. Two of those who did not register were “undecided” about their major. Student Affairs staff are available to teach potential SYE courses, particularly from Residence Life and OASIS.

Facilities

The OASIS office, located in the University Center, has office space for two to three faculty/staff members, and a series of classrooms. New residence hall construction includes classrooms for potential SYE courses. VSU has two brand-new dorms, one of which already houses a good many sophomores.

IV. Possible Assessments

Internal measures

Course grades based on a combination of the following:

- journals
- group discussions
- oral presentations of research
- portfolios of collected work
- collaborative projects

External measures

- Strategic Planning data collection, such as enrollment patterns, and retention and graduation rates, GPA rates
- Surveys, such as *The College Student Inventory*
- Focus groups
- Analysis of VSU data in the context of national trends

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