

Executive Summary with Action Plan
Foundations of Excellence®
University of Northern Iowa
September, 2009

In the spring of 2008, the University began the Foundations of Excellence® process to evaluate the first college year as its special emphasis self-study as part of its reaffirmation of accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission. The Foundations of Excellence (FoE) process involved a comprehensive, guided self-study of the first college year, providing for a systematic assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses. The framework for the Foundations of Excellence self-study process are nine foundational dimensions that, as an aspirational model, provide general guidelines for intentionally designing an optimum first-year experience for our students. The FoE process focuses on institutional practices rather than student inputs to improve student engagement and success during the first year with improved retention being considered a likely outcome.

The Task Force initially undertook an evaluation of the first year at UNI by completing a Current Practices Inventory (CPI), which was a compilation of practices, policies, and other data related to the first year. Then two separate FoE® surveys, administered by Educational Benchmarking Incorporated, were conducted for faculty and staff and first-year students. 1,070 faculty and staff (or 49.7%) and 1130 new freshmen and transfer students (or 37.6%) completed the surveys. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis of the surveys provided a fuller picture than just relying on any one indicator or anecdotal evidence. In addition, other institutional data, including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), were utilized in the evaluation. Completing document analysis on course syllabi and other university documents provided added context for making conclusions.

Nine Dimension review committees, comprised of 130 faculty, staff, and students, used this wide array of data to complete an analysis of key performance indicators for each of the nine foundational dimensions. A brief description of the findings and Task Force recommendations are described below.

Key Findings

- There is no explicit philosophy statement regarding the first year of college.
- There is no coordinated, focused, campus- or division-wide collaborative effort to facilitate effective educational practice during the first year.
- Communication and collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs occurs in isolated segments and is not systematic.
- Student satisfaction is positive.
- Faculty development is lacking and should be significantly enhanced.
- Faculty are not recognized for excellence in teaching during the first year.
- There is no established set of universal learning goals and outcomes for first-year students clearly and routinely being applied campus-wide.

- Little evidence exists to indicate the university makes systematic use of the data to make improvements.
- Students do not have the necessary preparation for their current first-year classes, and they could use more support.
- Academic experiences of students and academic experiences need to be more effectively communicated prior and during initial enrollment.
- Students are generally satisfied with advising. However, the different advising and orientation models contribute to a lack of consistency and coordination.
- There is little evidence to show that the needs of individual students or specific sub-populations are determined through the use of evidence-based assessment.
- There appears to be no overarching, clearly communicated understanding of the meaning of diversity at UNI. Creating an understanding of diversity that is both broadly and clearly conceived and frequently articulated campus-wide is imperative.
- Other than anecdotal information, only scant evidence exists to demonstrate assessment is being used to improve the personalized learning opportunities for students at UNI.

Recommended Actions

The FoE Steering Committee, which was comprised of the co-chairs of each Foundational Dimension committee plus selected personnel across campus (e.g., Associate Provost for Academic Affairs; Director of Academic Assessment; LAC Coordinator; student body President and Vice-president), was tasked with prioritizing the recommendations of the dimension committees. The Steering Committee categorized the recommendations into four groups: institutional level recommendations, “just do it” recommendations, recommendations for other task forces and initiatives, and department/unit level recommendations. Four primary factors were considered in prioritizing and categorizing the recommendations: level of student impact, institutional priority, time for implementation, and need for and availability of resources.

Institutional Level Recommendations

1. Create a First-Year Council charged with the oversight of first-year programs. The organizational structure of the Council should have the following elements:

- a. This body should be charged with setting the strategic direction of the first year and for the assessment, monitoring, and reporting of specified first-year initiatives and learning outcomes, while the implementation of specific activities should rest with the appropriate departments or units.
- b. Leadership of this body should reside jointly in the divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.
- c. While this body is strategic in nature, it is understood that curriculum control should not be granted to this body.

- d. The current FoE Steering Committee should be assigned as the initial governing body and be charged with creating a permanent membership structure that ensures representation of students, faculty and staff, and key stakeholders in the success of first-year students from all over campus.
- e. This body should report directly to the President, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Vice President of Student Affairs.

2. Develop a first-year philosophy statement and first-year learning outcomes.

- a. Implement the draft philosophy statement developed by the philosophy committee.
- b. Ensure that the ideals described in the first-year philosophy statement are integrated into future institutional strategic planning efforts.
- c. Charge the First-Year Council to develop a list of specific first-year student learning outcomes through broad campus-wide input and in close collaboration with the Liberal Arts Core and University Curriculum Committees.

3. Develop a comprehensive plan for faculty development.

- a. Educate the faculty about first-year students, the importance of a positive first-year experience, and how they can participate in ensuring a positive first-year experience.
- b. Development of the plan should be an organized effort, developed with faculty and student affairs input.
- c. Create a subsection of the summer fellowship award to include a 4-week summer fellowship option specifically reserved for those who want to submit proposals to engage in substantial curricula or pedagogical enhancement or development. The first few years of this award could be targeted to first-year teaching, and could broaden after that to include other teaching enhancement or development projects.

4. Task the First-Year Council to develop a first-year cornerstone experience for all first-year students.

- a. The experience should provide time for students to learn about academic expectations, critical inquiry, student services and other resources, and to discuss and reflect upon their personal experiences, personal development, and the purpose of higher education.
- b. It should be developed in concert with the implementation of a more systematic evaluation of student needs.
- c. Collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs in developing and facilitating this course should be emphasized.

5. Develop a systematic process to define, identify, and assess the needs of first-year students, especially underserved populations.

- a. Move from an intuitive model of decision making to a data-driven process that identifies the unique needs of students.
- b. Develop interventions to meet the needs of specific students based on those identified needs through the implementation of an early warning system (e.g., MAP-Works; <http://www.map-works.com/>) and enhanced communication and outreach (e.g., improved online resources).
- c. Determine responsibility for the coordination and implementation of interventions for specific sub-populations of students.

6. Incorporate the Foundations of Excellence® process into other institutional improvement efforts that impact first-year students.

- a. The committee revising the Liberal Arts Core (LAC), the Diversity Advisory Committee, and the Provost’s Undergraduate Advising Council should include representatives from the First-Year Council, who can be tasked with representing the interests of first-year students on these committees.
- b. The FoE report should be shared and discussed among departments and committees that provide programs and services impacting first-year students.

7. Develop and implement a comprehensive plan for assessing and improving first-year programs.

- a. Annual assessment activities should be developed that specifically evaluate the programs designed to achieve intended first-year learning outcomes.
- b. A systematic, coordinated effort should be put in place through collaboration among faculty, staff, and students to ensure results are used for improvement.

Just Do It Recommendations

“Just do it” recommendations were deemed to have a high impact on students and require little or no time or cost to implement. These recommendations are included below and could be followed up on or implemented by the First-Year Council, once such a council is established.

- Disseminate a fact sheet to department heads with information about first-year students and programs to be communicated to candidates during phone interviews and campus visits.
- Provide information for first-year students and their parents in other languages on the University website.
- Showcase more assertively the academic side of the house, including academic expectations, in all forms of communication with students.
- Provide copies of an adapted version of the Panther Planner (or something similar) to students living off-campus, with content addressing the specific needs of off-campus and non-traditional students.
- Draft a Philosophy statement for the first year.
- Develop an informational unit on the importance of the first year for delivery at New Faculty Orientation.

Recommendations for Other Task Forces and Initiatives

As stated in the institutional recommendation number six, the FoE Task Force believes it is essential to consider the needs of first-year students in other institutional improvement efforts. The FoE Task Force developed a number of recommendations of importance in the areas of academic advising, diversity, and the Liberal Arts Core. Since the Undergraduate Academic Advising Council, the Diversity Council, and the Liberal Arts Core Task Force already are engaged in significant improvement efforts in each of these areas, the FoE Task Force recommends these task forces or councils consider implementation of the relevant recommendations described in Table 1 and further recommends these bodies consult with the First-Year Council on its discussions and actions related to these recommendations. In addition, the FoE Task Force recommends these groups provide information to the First-Year Council about how these recommendations have been implemented, in order to keep the First-Year Council informed about the work of these groups, as it relates to first-year students and needs.

Table 1 Recommendations for Other Task Forces and Initiatives

Recommendation	Committee/Council/Task Force
Initiate a discussion regarding the “value” of faculty advisement when considering	Undergrad Advising Council

matters of tenure and promotion throughout the campus.	
A sub-committee or individual from the Undergraduate Advising Council should be designated to develop, monitor, and evaluate assessments related to academic advising. A written plan of administration and for potential utilization of results should be a prerequisite for inclusion of material in academic assessment instruments.	Undergrad Advising Council
Implement a cohesive, collaborative, university-wide academic advising plan, involving academic advising and faculty advisors. This would allow for professional development for faculty and academic advisors and provide for hiring additional academic advisors so that the ratio of Office of Academic Advising advisors to students is capped at 1:150 and the ratio of faculty advisors to students capped at 1:20.	Undergrad Advising Council
Develop a network of campus advisors to enhance communication, promote advisor development and share best practices.	Undergrad Advising Council
Recommend a minimum standard of training for departmental advisors who may wield considerable influence on student scheduling as they progress into major coursework.	Undergrad Advising Council
Create common learning outcomes for the first-year advising programs to help with delivery of services in a consistent manner and to provide a more effective means for assessment across advising models.	Undergrad Advising Council
Undertake a full revision of Liberal Arts Core (LAC). Those LAC courses that are taken during the first year should be carefully selected and structured to meet specific learning goals designed for first-year students.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
Develop a consistent and holistic philosophy for the LAC that goes beyond a menu of compartmentalized competencies and that integrates knowledge, student identity formation, and institutional expectations.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
A diversity component should be identified in the revised LAC. This need not necessarily be an additional course. Rather, courses that already address diversity issues could be identified and highlighted as such.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
The role and purpose of the LAC should be identified and clearly communicated to students.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
Appoint a committee to coordinate each of the courses in LAC Category 1. These coordinating committees, while respecting the freedom of each faculty member to shape their own sections, should foster sharing and mutual support, and provide the forum for discussion and implementation of assessment driven improvements. The Humanities Coordinating Committee may be a possible model.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
Refine the assessment process for the LAC through the following actions: clarify the student outcomes and objectives for each category; devise annual assessments linked to these outcomes and objectives; use the results in collaboration with faculty delivering the courses to make improvements.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
Advertise the Liberal Arts Core Excellence in Teaching Award more broadly across campus and to other stakeholders.	Liberal Arts Core Task Force & Committee
Provide specific faculty training for addressing diversity in the classroom, including infusing diversity into curriculum and diversity discussions. Individuals providing training should be rewarded for their efforts.	Diversity Council
Give monetary awards for faculty to attend conferences, workshops, etc., that focus on diversity.	Diversity Council
Establish a broader institutional definition of “diversity” to include currently underserved populations such as GLBTQ students, religious minorities, and non-traditional students.	Diversity Council
A clear and consistent message, regarding diversity and its importance, should be articulated frequently to the UNI community.	Diversity Council
Identify the populations that are facing obstacles for access to opportunities on campus, and figure out ways to remove those obstacles,	Diversity Council
Institutionalize the espoused commitment to the retention of diverse populations of students and faculty.	Diversity Council
Continue to support already existing programs, like Black History Month, Women’s History Month, Jump Start, Academic Learning Center Programs, CME, etc. that contribute to diversity at UNI.	Diversity Council
Articulate and promote the value that diversity is the responsibility of the entire university community.	Diversity Council
Institute the use of the Global Perspectives Inventory.	Diversity Council
Expand the programming and learning resources available for programs like “Character Counts” and directly articulate its utility in developing a civil campus	Diversity Council

community.	
Include contribution to diversity as a criterion for merit, service awards, and other awards.	Diversity Council

Department/Unit Level Recommendations

Department/unit level recommendations were deemed to pertain to the operations or programs within individual departments, and although important, had a lower institutional priority. These recommendations were forwarded to individual departments for consideration and action and are listed in table 2 below. The FoE Task Force recommends these departments/units consult with the First-Year Council on its discussions and actions related to these recommendations, and let the First-Year Council know when/if these recommendations have been implemented, in order to keep the First-Year Council informed about the work of these department/units, as it relates to first-year students' needs.

Table 2 Department/Unit Level Recommendations

Recommendation	Department/Unit
An advisor handbook should be continue to be developed which includes key points of information that should be covered with all first-year students. This could include suggestions for best practices as well as consistent learning outcomes for advisees.	Office of Academic Advising
Continue and enhance joint staff development opportunities between the Department of Residence and Academic Advising, and make current Department of Residence (DOR) staff training more overt in recognizing the connection between Academic Advising and the Department of Residence.	Office of Academic Advising and Dept. of Residence
The assessment being done by the various programs in the Academic Learning Center should be made more accessible to the campus community.	Academic Learning Center
Expand the Office of Admissions electronic newsletter currently sent to a small number of high school counselors to a wider network of high school guidance offices or counselors.	Admissions
Continue to clarify the function of the Center for Multicultural Education to emphasize its broader educational role for the entire campus, and not just as a center created exclusively for underrepresented minority students. The recommendations of the Fall 2008 Task Force on the CME should be implemented	Center for Multicultural Education
Increase university support for GLBTQ students.	Dean of Students
Create a website for first year students which will include FAQs and a compilation of data/information/links to individual departments. This will assist students, but will also assist faculty and staff in making appropriate referrals.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
In communications to parents, include more techniques and strategies for supporting their students' academic success.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
Orientation programs should be coordinated by the Coordinator of New Student Programs or a university committee to ensure that student outcomes assessments are completed. For all first-year Orientation programs, a designated coordinator (e.g., the Coordinator of New Student Programs) or a committee should be appointed to monitor and evaluate orientation assessments.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
Implement assessment measures using different methodologies to assess intended orientation outcomes. The New Student Survey is a good example of an assessment measure that evaluates the orientation program from a student outcomes perspective.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
Create a standardized set of questions to be included on assessment measures for all orientation programs.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
More clearly assess the needs of Jump Start participants to determine if current practices align with identified needs.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
Enhance efforts to integrate international and multicultural students with the general student population.	New Student Programs/CME/International Programs
Create consistency by requiring Jump Start students to attend summer orientation and allowing Jump Start participants to select courses in collaboration with department, college, or intake academic advisors.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs
Create Welcome Week activities that provide opportunities for interaction among all students.	Dean of Students/New Student Programs

Springboard houses should be utilized to capture impressions of services offered, programming effectiveness, and as a focus group for other first year assessment, since all students living in those houses are first-year students.	Department of Residence
Program participation rates in the residence halls should be more fully utilized as an indicator of interest in a particular topic or for historical prediction of attendance in the future.	Department of Residence
Students attending programming events in the residence halls should be given the option of providing basic feedback on that event through a brief survey for immediate feedback.	Department of Residence
External resources should be examined to improve assessing the goals of residence life programming. Grant funding or UNI special allocation money could be pursued to specifically find opportunities to quantify traits related to behavior for trending over time. Collaboration with UNI's strategic marketing services or other consulting companies should also be considered.	Department of Residence
Examine utilizing other electronic methods to convey programming information to students as a supplement to programming efforts. Examples include using a Facebook® group page, blogs, the Department of Residence website, and/or the UNI cable TV station. Currently, marketing of survey participation primarily occurs through e-mail solicitation and personal requests from RAs. Using additional methods could help to increase participation rates, share assessment information, and communicate helpful information to freshmen as they arrive on campus.	Department of Residence
A more formalized assessment review process should be examined to ensure improvements based on formalized assessment data are being completely reviewed for future changes. The creation of an assessment review committee, comprised of RLCs, RAs, Residence Life staff, and perhaps other non-Residence Life staff that may be able to help with information analysis would be useful. Applicable assessment findings should also be shared with the campus community or other departments for their feedback and knowledge.	Department of Residence
House surveys should be coordinated centrally as a means to compare results between different halls and increase participation rates. Providing incentives to complete this survey should also increase participation, which has proven successful with other surveys within the Department of Residence.	Department of Residence
Evaluate the timing of surveys and the populations affected. Also, examine how Department of Residence surveys coincide with University surveying efforts, if possible. This examination would help ensure students are not over-surveyed and information is not duplicated among other University assessments.	Department of Residence
Increase opportunities for first year and upper class student connections through Department of Residence programs, and to explore other creative approaches to help students connect with faculty and staff members.	Department of Residence
Fund additional sections of developmental courses, including Intermediate Algebra (800:004) and College Writing Basics (620:002), to meet student needs.	Office of the Provost
Provide stronger visibility and emphasis on academic programs and academic experiences of students (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad, internships) in print and other media forms (including recruitment presentations and campus tours), and include more frequent use of faculty profiles on marketing and recruitment materials.	UM & PR