Emerging Research and Practices on First-Year Students

Ryan D. Padgett
Editor

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Research on the first-year experience is as ubiquitous as the components of “the first-year experience.” The myriad of research and assessment—both national and local—have produced a sort of internal debate within higher education as to the consistency of the findings and the success of their application to practice. Stated differently, initiatives that produce results on one campus may not on another. This inconsistency has ignited researchers to be more conscientious about assessing first-year experiences, as evident from the increase in quality data, applied complex statistical models, and assessment strategies within the literature.

Yet despite higher education’s best efforts, pinpointing the exact means through which students succeed or persist on a four-year graduation track is as elusive as ever. With a greater diversity in the demographics of students, decreasing public appropriations, and calls for more stringent levels of accountability, research and assessment on the first year continues to be prevalent and relevant. In the face of these challenges, “institutions of higher education have increasingly embraced their obligation for assisting students with the transition to the college learning environment” (Swing, 2004, p. ix). To this end, this volume continues the examination of the first year and the factors that impact student success and persistence.

Together, the chapters within this volume provide a template for researchers on the statistical methods that need to be considered when conducting assessment on first-year experiences. Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive blueprint outlining the foundational understandings of first-year assessment. Grounded in the conceptual framework of sound assessment, Chapter 1 provides novice and intermediate researchers with a firm understanding of the decisions to consider prior to assessment. Chapters 2–4 utilize large, national surveys to examine the impact of the first year on a variety of learning and retention outcomes. Chapter 2 highlights three first-year programs (e.g., high-impact practices) that statistically increase student learning. Chapter 3 expands upon the programs of the first year by estimating the effects of vetted good practices across two psychosocial measures. In addition, Chapter 3 provides a sound argument for the need to disaggregate data across student characteristics to more accurately assess the impact of these practices across groups. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive predictive model, illustrating the importance of the use of control and covariate measures to estimate student persistence. Finally, Chapter 5 expands our understanding of the first-year experience by documenting the challenges of applying these experiences within two-year institutions.

Before practitioners can utilize data-driven processes, sound empirical evidence must be collected. The question as to “where to begin?” is
thoroughly discussed in Chapter 1. Jennifer R. Keup and Cindy A. Kilgo provide one of the more compelling and comprehensive examinations of assessment techniques. Supported by recent research, Keup and Kilgo provide a road map for emerging researchers on first-year assessment as well as considerations to help support these decisions.

Over the last decade, research on high-impact practices has become as prevalent as research on first-year experiences. Yet despite the overwhelmingly positive evidence, few have isolated the effects of high-impact practices within the first year. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, Malika Tukibayeva and Robert M. Gonyea estimate the impact of first-year participation in service learning, learning communities, and research with faculty on student learning. Critical to this evaluation is the snapshot of participation broken down by student and institutional characteristics.

The assessment movement within higher education has relied heavily on longitudinal studies to accurately estimate student learning and development. Using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, Kathleen M. Goodman presents a strong argument for the necessity to disaggregate data by student characteristics when measuring the effects of a program/practice on any outcome. If the ultimate goal for a researcher is to accurately measure the impact of participation and engagement, Goodman suggests that disaggregating data or accounting for conditional effects must become routine.

There is no magic potion with regard to fully understanding student persistence. However, the soundness of the analyses and statistical model are vital to the success of accurate estimates of college impact. Linda DeAngelo illustrates how to construct a strong and accurate model for prediction by accounting for prior research and utilizing valid controls and covariates. Using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s 2007 Freshman Survey and 2008 Your First College Year survey, DeAngelo walks through the creation of a prediction model and how the findings can influence future models and practice.

The overwhelming majority of research on first-year experiences has been limited to four-year institutions. Trudy Bers and Donna Younger examine the first-year experience but apply the experiences within the two-year setting. In addition to providing an overview of the literature, Bers and Younger discuss how the research can be integrated within community colleges and the challenges of delivering these programs and assessing them. The incorporation of this chapter within this volume advances the argument that first-year experiences are just as important and influential on two-year campuses as they are on four-year campuses.

By no means does the concentration of these chapters dedicated to first-year experiences indicate the end of such research. Arguably, the culmination of this research has generated practical debate on how to best serve and support student learning, development, and success. Together,
these chapters serve to enlighten the discussion and highlight new directions for assessment and research practices within the scope of the first-year experience.

Ryan D. Padgett
Editor

Reference

Supported by emerging research and practice, this chapter provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for first-year assessment.

Conceptual Considerations for First-Year Assessment

Jennifer R. Keup, Cindy A. Kilgo

For decades, issues surrounding student access and success have been of perennial interest to college educators and researchers, and the first year of college has been recognized as both the springboard for student achievement and success and a significant leakage point in the educational pipeline. Recently, the early success of first-year students has taken on even greater importance due to changes in the higher education landscape, including demands from regional accrediting agencies for more accountability, shifting demographics, differential success rates among new student populations, and a realization on the part of institutions about the importance—both financially and in meeting their commitment to students—of retaining their currently enrolled undergraduates. As such, institutional budget officers, policy makers, and others who invest in first-year student success are searching for research and resources to help inform data-driven decision making about promising practices to support the adjustment and success of first-year students and the effective use of high-impact educational experiences and practices in first-year experience programs.

Institutional assessment activities focused on first-year students have been both the impetus and response to this emphasis on first-year student success and first-year experience programs. Assessment data collected from first-year students are able to serve a wide range of purposes. They can provide an understanding of the background, characteristics, and needs of the student cohort; gauge satisfaction with their college choice and experiences; provide perceptions of campus climate from the newest members of the campus community; evaluate the impact and cost-effectiveness of first-year programs and initiatives; measure student learning outcomes and program outcomes; and create benchmarks against comparable institutions, an aspirant group, or nationally accepted standards (Schuh, 2005; Siegel, 2003; Swing, 2004; Upcraft, 2004). Further, empirical data collected from students throughout their first year in college have great utility with respect