

# ***Primoris humanus vita scientia: Engaging Human Life Science Students in the First Year Experience***

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In 2008, the School of Human Life Sciences (HLS) developed and implemented an initiative to increase student engagement in the first year experience. The aim of the initiative was to improve student transition into university and to increase student retention, while simultaneously engaging students in fun and educational activities in a social context. The initiative was developed in the form of a challenge in which students were placed in course related teams. The challenge name (*Primoris humanus vita scientia*) was determined by the 2008 first year HLS student cohort. *Primoris humanus vita scientia* was a full year experience beginning on Orientation day in February and finishing at the end of semester 2. Apart from the initial Orientation session, student attendance was optional. This Nuts and Bolts discussion will provide an opportunity for attendees to share their experiences of using similar social innovations designed to engage first year students in a fun and motivating context.

## *Background of Project*

Students enrolled in the School of Human Life Sciences (HLS) are enrolled in one of six undergraduate degree programs which share a relatively common first year. These first year units are taught by HLS and other Faculties. However, students often lack a sense of community and belonging and become disengaged in campus life due to the online components of their units and off-campus commitments (i.e. personal, work, etc) outside of university studies. Skilled tertiary educators engage their students in not only subject matter but also academic norms, institution values, campus events, enrolment issues and student services<sup>1</sup>. It is also recognised that social support is essential to successful university transition<sup>2</sup>, as difficulty settling into the university community is one of the reasons why first year undergraduates may withdraw from university<sup>3</sup>. In addition, it has been shown that student retention can be aided by identifying strong social networks for first year students<sup>4</sup>.

## *Development and Implementation of a First Year Challenge*

In 2008, HLS trialled a first year challenge called *Primoris humanus vita scientia* challenge. This challenge began on Orientation Day before semester 1 when students were placed into challenge teams of 6-10 students, based on their course of study. Teams were asked to choose a team name relevant to their undergraduate degree and complete an orientation quiz to accumulate initial team points. Challenge activities were then organised during semester 1 to incorporate fun and relevant information for first year students, with teams completing

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<sup>1</sup> Kuh (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Friedlander et al. (2007)

<sup>3</sup> Harrison (2006)

<sup>4</sup> Yorke and Thomas (2003)

various quizzes to accrue points. In first semester, an event held just prior to Easter informed students of the importance of Census date and another challenge activity in first semester incorporated exam information. Semester 2 challenge events included HLS graduates talking to the first year students about their experiences, informing first year students about assignment feedback and teams completing quizzes and discussion board postings to accrue further points. The final event of the year was a social event incorporating the presentation of the *Primoris humanus vita scientia* challenge shield to the 2008 winning team. During challenge events, students were directed to a number of resources to assist them in their studies as first year students need to be taught, as early as possible, how to utilise tertiary resources effectively<sup>5</sup>.

Students were informed of upcoming *Primoris humanus vita scientia* events via email and lunch was provided at each event during the semesters. First year HLS students also received regular emails informing them of important forthcoming dates, learning resources and other vital information relevant to first year students or students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Science.

The importance of the First Year Experience cannot be over-estimated in its importance to supporting student success<sup>6</sup>. Improving student retention and the transition into university are of high importance in the University of Tasmania as part of the EDGE2 agenda<sup>7</sup> and the HLS *Primoris humanus vita scientia* challenge endeavours to enhance student engagement. Student feedback obtained through questionnaires in 2008 indicated that the challenge did increase student confidence and their ability to adapt to university life. Students who attended the events regularly enjoyed the food and opportunity to engage with other students and found the information presented beneficial to their ability to adapt. It is envisaged that a longitudinal study incorporating such feedback into future *Primoris humanus vita scientia* challenges will assist HLS in improving the transition to university for all HLS students.

#### *Nuts and Bolts Discussion: Development and Implementation*

The proposed Nuts and Bolts session will foster active discussion of the social opportunities provided by different faculties to ease the transition of first year students. Specifically, the Nuts and Bolts session will discuss:

- a) How do schools or faculties provide fun and engaging opportunities for students to experience university culture throughout their first year of study?
- b) The ability of social events held throughout the first year to improve student retention and engagement?
- b) How do schools or faculties inform first year students about relevant student matters in a social context?
- c) The use of competitive strategies by other faculties to engage first year students

This discussion will be of great benefit to all staff involved in the first year experience.

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<sup>5</sup> Kuh (2007)

<sup>6</sup> Longden (2006)

<sup>7</sup> University of Tasmania University Council (2009)

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