

# **The Role of First Year Co-ordinators in the Lives of First Year Students**

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## **Abstract**

*In 2010, the University of Wollongong's Faculty of Education introduced First Year Co-ordinators (FYC) as initial points of contact for beginning students enrolled in the five degrees that are offered at undergraduate level. This nuts and bolts session explores the initiative as well as student responses to the activities that accompanied it. The success of the team in carrying out their intended goals has warranted their continuation in these roles.*

## **Introduction**

Transition to university is a pivotal time in the life of commencing students. The experiences of students in their first year of study has received extensive attention over the past few years, with research indicating that a positive experience in the first year of study has a significant impact on success throughout the remainder of the degree (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Kift, 2008; Leese 2010). Researchers have focused attention on a variety of aspects of the first year experience in order to facilitate students' transition to university:

Greater efforts are being placed on getting first year student transition and sense of connection and engagement right in an effort to raise students' overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience as well as increasing the likelihood of degree completion (Yorke & Thomas cited in Burnett & Larmar 2011, p.22).

The concern with engagement with studies and connecting students with staff who could provide timely and relevant support was the focus of a team-based initiative adopted by the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. In this nuts and bolts session an outline of the work of the First Year Co-ordinators (FYC) team will be provided and accounts of student responses will be included. Information presented during the session reinforces the importance of supporting students within their first year and discussion about this initiative will encourage participants to explore the ways in which this approach may be adapted and improved both for the students in the Faculty of Education and for other institutions.

## **Background**

In 2008, the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) recommended major reforms to the higher education sector. National targets for the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and for the attainment of degree qualifications were part of the agenda. In addition, within this framework institutions were required to set specific targets for student participation and performance that would be monitored closely. Whilst staff in the Faculty of Education have always had a clear focus on supporting the experience of first year students, a greater emphasis has now been particularized around aspects of the nature of this support.

In response to an interest in supporting first year students and the target of ensuring that those from traditionally under-represented backgrounds are able to participate in the higher education sector, staff in the Faculty of Education recognise the need for additional and varied support. This approach is consistent with observations made by Bradley and colleagues (2008):

Once enrolled, they (people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those from regional and remote Australia as well as Indigenous Australians) require higher levels of support to succeed, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services (p. 27).

The FYC team is an important dimension of a comprehensive approach (First Year in Education) taken by staff in the Faculty of Education to the first year experience and is informed by the work of others who encourage a proactive approach to supporting students (Burnett & Larmar, 2011; Kift, 2008).

### **A co-ordinated approach to first year study**

Although there have been isolated attempts in the past to have academic members of staff assigned as first year co-ordinators to one or another of the five undergraduate degrees offered in the Faculty of Education, it was in 2010 for the first time that a formalised approach was adopted. As part of this approach, four co-ordinators were appointed, one taking responsibility for two of the smaller degrees that shared common subjects. The FYC team met regularly throughout the academic year to plan and implement a collective approach to supporting the cohort of first year students.

The appointment of the FYC team was intended to open communication channels within and across the degree programs about the first year of study and its effectiveness as a foundation for further studies. It also provided an opportunity to identify one member of academic staff that students in the first year of each program could contact when questions, concerns or issues arose.

From the perspective of the FYC team, our first meeting together as a team gave us insight into how the role was perceived by the Faculty, as the Sub Dean shared with us the emphasis from a university-wide First Year Experience Working Party. Our discussions ranged around ideas to work together, to extend our reach and support our students and resulted in agreement on a number of strategies and the particular tasks that we would implement across the programs. Strategies included the following:

- making sure the students were introduced to the FYC in their particular program at enrolment and also during a faculty-specific Orientation Day;
- attending a university-wide Parents Information Evening to answer questions and provide reassurance where necessary;
- sending weekly emails across the academic year (two major sessions) to the student cohort within each degree program;
- monitoring and communicating with students identified as being 'at risk' by academic and support staff;
- being available on campus and by email or telephone for students as an initial point of contact; and
- liaising with other academic and support staff as required.

As the 'face' of the degrees for first year students, the FYC team were an important touch point for students. Apart from their physical presence on campus, weekly emails with a particular focus were sent by each FYC to the cohort of students for which they were responsible. These emails had a common focus across the programs (e.g. "census date is near so check your enrolment") related to the time of the session and the perceived needs of students. Messages were written in a friendly and reassuring tone. The intent of these emails was to encourage open communication. As Lodge (2010) notes, "*getting the communication strategy right also has the potential to create savings in terms of the support required for students who do not readily understand what they need to do*" (p. 104). We saw open communication as key to the FYC role.

Throughout the year, the FYC team liaised with subject co-ordinators, lecturers and tutors within the programs and, at times, across faculties. Close liaison with subject coordinators allowed the identification of 'at risk' students. Early contact with students encouraged the development of open relationships, so that follow-up with individual students could be more personal. When relevant, the FYC communicated with Program Directors and the Sub Dean as well as student support services to guide students in terms of both academic and personal support. Further, the open relationship made a mediational role possible before engaging other support staff more formally, such as Learning Development, for students who needed extra help with, for example, study skills.

In addition to the direct contact with first year students, the FYC team also attended presentations at the University by guest speakers with expertise in supporting students in their first year of study, participated in the UOW First Year Experience Working Party network and were funded by the University to attend the 2010 FYHE Conference held in Adelaide.

## **Outcomes**

While formal data has yet to be gathered about the role of the FYC team and students' responses to them, informal and anecdotal data are currently available. Anecdotal comments from students were discussed during FYC team meetings and notes were taken about the issues under discussion. In addition, a number of emails were received by the FYC team from students in response to the weekly emails sent.

From the responses of students across all programs it appears they felt reassured to have a key person with whom to identify. Believing as we do that this informal contact is significant, bridging communication with academic, administrative and support staff often meant that student concerns related to attendance, individual student progress, student disposition and group dynamics were addressed more quickly than might otherwise have been the case. In terms of the importance of individual contact with first year students Yorke (2006) notes the following:

Students need to feel welcomed into the institution. A feeling of being welcomed is developed through the quality of initial contact, and through induction programmes that engage with students as individuals (and where appropriate, as beginners to academic study) and do not simply overload them with information (p. 12).

The FYC team served as a conduit to the rest of the university community, facilitating student access to the wider range of information available. Sometimes, students just needed someone to talk to: "First of all I just want to thank you for being so understanding and helpful. All your support at that end is a great help and definitely easing the stress of it all." As a team, we were buoyed by such comments as this

feedback gave us a sense of collective efficacy and accomplishment. We noted that this helped us to build positive rapport amongst the members of the FYC team.

Students felt the support they were receiving was positive and one student made a point to send the following email message:

“I just wanted to say thanks for helping us feel settled. You probably don’t think it’s much, but the constant emails encouraging us to keep focused on tasks and to not neglect the rest of our daily life, gives me clarity that it’s not just me that is juggling everything, and with just a bit of focus, it can be done.”

The FYC team met regularly throughout 2010 to discuss student issues, as well as sharing what we were doing individually. We recorded successful strategies, explored improvements and shared responses we were receiving from students within our individual programs. This allowed us to build on each other’s successes, learning and growing in the role.

Notably, our students are pre-service teachers, and part of what we see as significant about the role of the FYC team is that we model strategies for providing academic and personal support to students as well as collegiality. Our team approach also helped us nurture each other through the sharing of experiences and strategies.

As we consider our focus for the current year, we have decided to gather formal data about the experiences of first year students in the Faculty of Education and the strategies we continue to develop to meet their needs. As we do this we are mindful of advice from Burnett and Larmar (2011):

Institutions with programs focused on a student-centred approach to success rather than attrition rates are more successful because they recognise there are multiple and complex reasons why undergraduate students fail to complete their undergraduate studies (p. 32).

While it is significant to determine the role that the FYC team may have on retention rates, we are also concerned with shaping the holistic approach offered by the Faculty of Education to the student experience.

### **Presentation Outline and Discussion Points**

The nuts and bolts session will be used to present an overview of the activities and outcomes of the work undertaken by the FYC team.

#### **Icebreaker – 5 minutes**

Introduction to the role of a first year co-ordinator. In your institution, what forms of communication can first year co-ordinators use to encourage beginning students to contact them?

#### **Presenters – 5 minutes**

Description of the FYC initiative and particular strategies used by the team in implementing it. What strategies are useful for first year co-ordinators in supporting students identified as being ‘at risk’ of academic failure in their first year of study?

#### **Paired discussion – 10 minutes**

Small group-based discussions about the role of first year co-ordinators or advisors, the concerns that are typically raised by (and for) first year students and strategies that may be used to support these students.

### **Presenters and whole group discussion – 10 minutes**

Whole group-based feedback and discussion with a focus on how the initiative could be developed further and how it may be adapted in other institutional contexts. What measures can be employed to determine the effectiveness of the approach taken by the FYC team in supporting beginning students?

We intend this brief presentation to be a springboard for discussion about the first year experience in other institutions and invite others to share their experiences as we collectively work to ensure our students enjoy success in the best university experience possible. Deliberate attention to the first year student experience is a key aspect of this work.

### **References**

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