

Enhancing a Bridge Program with the First Year Experience Concept

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The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In September 2014, the Petroleum Institute in Abu Dhabi introduced the First Year Experience concept to its Academic Bridge Program in an attempt to enhance student learning and improve student retention. This paper describes how the First Year Experience program was implemented then concludes with the results of feedback from a student satisfaction survey. The PI Academic Bridge Program was created with three branches: Skills, Success and Socialize. The Skills workshops included a variety of topics, such as stress management and goal-setting. Once the Skills Workshop was underway, a Success branch was introduced. The Success component of the FYE matched students to academic advisors who would guide students in areas such as study skills, time management and self-awareness. The final component, Socialize, which included competitions, sports events and excursions for students, was then launched to complete the trinity. The first semester of the FYE-Bridge culminated in an awards ceremony where outstanding students were rewarded for their participation in the program. In light of the survey's positive findings, it is suggested that the success of the First Year Experience program at the Petroleum Institute can be replicated on similar Bridge programs with minimal impact on faculty workload and budget, yet with maximum impact on student learning and retention.

Keywords: Freshman, First Year Experience, ABP, Petroleum Institute

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Introduction

University foundation programs were first piloted in 1965 as part of the US government's Upward Bound project designed to facilitate access to college for disadvantaged students (U.S Department of Education, 2015). The nomenclature of such a concept may be recognized today in its various guises as an orientation, university preparation, bridge or bridging course, but its focus has shifted from the disadvantaged towards intervention designed to ease the transition from high school to university. By 1983, following a U.S government report titled *A Nation at Risk* which was highly critical of retention rates in the country's universities, especially in freshman year (Gardner, 1986), it became clear that foundation studies were not enough to prepare students for the rigors of a tertiary education. In response to this need, a conference at the University of Southern Carolina yielded the introduction of the Freshman Year Experience concept, also known as First Year Experience (FYE). The FYE differs from a foundation, or bridge program, in that it is designed to enhance the first year tertiary experience by continuing the process of higher education orientation through advising, mentoring, counselling, tutoring and community involvement designed among other things to foster student involvement and enthusiasm for their institution. This has ultimately led to greater student retention rates (Gardner, 1986). But what happens when retention rates and course enhancement need addressing in the foundation year as opposed to the freshman year? This paper examines the outcome of an FYE program when conflated with the Academic Bridge Program at the Petroleum Institute in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

In Fall 2014, under the guidance of Dr. Muna Balfaqeeh, Director of the Academic Bridge Program (ABP), a First Year Experience initiative was launched as part of the institute's strategic plan to address student retention rates and curriculum design. This paper will first describe how this FYE was installed and maintained then provide feedback from a student satisfaction survey pertaining to its delivery and reception amongst the student population at the Petroleum Institute (PI).

The Petroleum Institute (PI)

The PI was established in 2001 under the auspices of the Colorado School of Mines with funding from the UAE government and international oil companies, including Shell, JODCO and BP (Scott, 2004). Its creation came in response to a need for greater representation of Emirati nationals in the associated fields of petroleum engineering. The institute now has a student population of approximately 2,000 graduate and undergraduate students on separate male and female campuses. Around seventy percent of students originate from the Emirates while an international representation accounts for the remainder.

The PI's Academic Bridge Program (ABP)

In Fall 2014, there were twenty-eight full-time faculty members on the ABP serving a bridge program of approximately 110 male and 174 female students. These students were on segregated campuses and streamed by TOEFL scores into Intermediate 1 (TOEFL 420 to 457) and Intermediate 2 (TOEFL 460 to 497). A score of TOEFL 500 and above was required for freshman year entry. Students attended twenty hours of English lessons each week, or two hours per day between 8am and 12pm then two

hours per day between 1pm and 3pm with a four-hour morning block on Thursdays. They also undertook Math courses for two hours per day (except Thursdays), though these were not a pre-requisite to joining freshman year at the PI.

Fall 2014 FYE Launch

A team of coordinators was appointed by the Director from the pool of ABP faculty members. For reasons of consistency, it had been decided the ABP split the structure of its First Year Experience into the same three components found on the PI's Freshman Year Experience, namely Skills, Success and Socialize. What follows is a description of how this trinity was formed and developed.

Skills

Skills, the first component of the new program to be launched, became the branch on the ABP FYE designed to deliver general interest and academic topics to students through 30 to 45 minute workshops during lunch breaks. Its inception involved the Skills Coordinator inviting expressions of interest from ABP faculty for workshop ideas. From the initial submission 16 workshops were then selected and a schedule produced and displayed on both male and female campuses. The workshops were also advertised through student email and classroom teachers. A sign-up sheet for a maximum of 25 seats was then placed in the Independent Learning Centre on each campus with several places reserved for 'seriously at risk' students. The initial schedule of activities included topics such as, time management, stress management, the transition from high school to university, goal-setting, useful apps and even a workshop on tai-chi. Because the timing of workshops fell during student break time, a light lunch was provided at the end of workshop sessions. Faculty giving workshops were not paid extra for their work; however, their efforts would be recorded on their Annual Faculty Performance Review under the *Service* section.

Success

The Success branch on the FYE focused on academic advising, tutoring and counselling. With a professional PI counselling team already available under the umbrella of PI Resident Life, the focus turned to advising and tutoring. As with the Skills component, expressions of interest were canvassed from faculty for members willing to act as academic advisors, then once the list had been compiled by the coordinator, each student on the ABP was assigned an advisor with whom they were required to meet at least twice throughout the semester. Despite most faculty not having much experience or training in academic advising, approximately 80% of faculty signed up for advising duties, and each was assigned an average of 12 advisees. An initial Meet & Greet of all advisors and students was organized in a lecture theatre before scheduled one-to-one meetings were arranged. Concerns were raised surrounding the instructor and advisor's roles in relation to the student: Is an advisor supposed to tutor? Should an advisor assign homework? Why can't instructors simply be assigned as advisors to their own students? In light of these concerns, it was agreed that the role of the advisor as a tutor remain at the discretion of each faculty member until a proper tutorial centre could be created to which advisors could refer students. Consequently, advisors drew on their own academic

background and advising skills to address advisees needs until a clearer role description could be drafted.

A flagging system was introduced on the institute's CAMS ERP system so that instructors could flag a student on their class list and add comments before the database alerted the student's advisor of the issue. A meeting was then be initiated by the advisor. Flagging criteria included missing course quizzes, a mid-term grade of F, poor attendance and behavioral issues. Students flagged twice i.e. in English and in Math were referred to a second phase of academic advising called AIMS (Academic Intervention and Mentoring Service).

AIMS (Academic Intervention and Mentoring Service)

The AIMS program was specifically reserved for students seriously at risk of failing two subjects and thus facing an increased threat of termination from the Petroleum Institute. If an advisor noticed on the ERP system that an advisee had been flagged twice, the student was referred to the AIMS program coordinator. In the inaugural semester of advising on the FYE, a total of four male and seven female students were referred to the AIMS program where the AIMS coordinators programmed a weekly schedule with their AIMS advisees while maintaining contact with the advisee's English and Math instructors to monitor any improvement in academic performance. Once a student had demonstrated improvement in the agreed areas, s/he was un-flagged.

Socialize

Socialize, which is a formalized social calendar of activities on the ABP, became the final branch in the trinity. Conference and exhibition excursions, sports, recreation, social activities, competitions and charity fund-raising are all examples of Socialize events designed to help stimulate interactions and interest between students and the world beyond the institute. The Socialize Coordinator was tasked with creating and implementing a dynamic social calendar for male and female interests both on and off-campus. Faculty who participated as volunteers and chaperones etc. were able to indicate their participation on the Service section of their Annual Faculty Performance Review.

Passport Control

With a plethora of activities in Skill, Success and Socialize, and almost three hundred students to coordinate, it was essential to install a monitoring system whose purpose would be to encourage students to embrace the FYE concept and also record the students' participation. Consequently, a passport system was introduced. Each student was given an FYE Bridge Passport -a portable, pocket-sized booklet of ten pages which they produced at FYE events and meetings in order to receive a stamp for their participation. In Fall 2014, ABP students were encouraged to collect a minimum of 10 stamps for Intermediate 1 or 11 stamps for Intermediate 2 over the course of the semester. For Fall 2014, it was decided that no grade penalties would be applied if the student failed to reach his/her quota. However, there were rewards for those students who exceeded the FYE expectations.

End of Term Awards

In order for the ABP to show its appreciation to the students who helped amplify the presence of the FYE by exceeding the number of stamps in their passports, separate awards ceremonies were held in auditoria on the respective campuses at the start of Spring 2015. Instructors were asked to tally their students' stamps for each branch of the FYE and enter the data onto an excel sheet on the institute's shared drive. Results showed that 24% of students (n=69) exceeded their stamp quota. The awarded students were separated into three categories and given the following prizes:

- Top overall stamp collectors = Mini i-pad (n=12)
- Top stamp collectors for each branch = \$US135 gift voucher (n=17)
- Students exceeding the minimum number of stamps = Cinema tickets (n=40)

Following the success of the FYE in Fall 2014, it was decided that for the subsequent semester FYE participation would constitute 5% of course grade where all ABP students would be required to attain a minimum number of twelve stamps.

Student Survey

At the end of Fall 2014, FYE Coordinators created an online survey to measure participants' impression of the new FYE Bridge Program and collect ideas from students on how the FYE might be enhanced. A link was then distributed to the student population (n=284) by email with a response rate of 45% (n=129) and with an approximate even split of male and female respondents.

Highlights of the FYE Bridge Program

As a result of the FYE Bridge:
75% of respondents agreed that it helped them to engage in student life at the PI.
67% said they had become better students.
61% believed they had increased their knowledge.
56% believed they had built better relationships with others.

On the question of ways to enhance the FYE Bridge, three recurring themes appeared in the open-ended option:

- greater contact with other universities and/or community outreach eg. hospitals.
- increased number of social activities, events and competitions.
- more focus on English & soft skills – less focus on TOEFL.

Skills Highlights

Workshops had an average of 18 attendees per session (n=16).
69% (n=85) attended at least one workshop.
80% of respondents rated the workshops as 'helpful'.
72% (n=71) ranked the Abu Dhabi Science Festival as 'very useful'.

Success Highlights

87% (n=87) of respondents agreed that advising was helpful.

67% (n=79) preferred their advisor *not* to be their instructor.

53% of respondents (n=64) *did not* participate in a group counseling information session.

Socialize Highlights

73% (n=84) wanted more fitness and sports activities on campus.

82% (n=95) suggested more events related to charity work.

The most popular events include the Japanese tea ceremony and the excursion to the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference (ADIPEC).

Conclusion

The aim of the ABP's FYE program was to address student retention rates and encourage greater interaction between students and their institute by broadening contact with faculty through their roles as advisors, tutors, workshop presenters and social activity volunteers. Though is too early to gauge the impact that the new program is having on student retention, the anecdotal evidence is promising. The results of this study further indicate that the FYE Bridge Program at the Petroleum Institute is not only enhancing the student learning environment, but also allowing faculty to share their life experiences and personal skills and talents with interest and appreciation from the student body. Such an initiative may therefore not only serve the pedagogical interests of the students, but may also attract potential students to bridge programs in both government and private sectors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the ABP faculty, FYE / ABP coordinators and Dr. Muna Balfaqqeh, Director of the ABP, for their creativity and dedication. You are all inspirational people.

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