

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN COLLEGES

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE FIRST YEAR INITIATIVE

The Initiative: At the heart of the UW Colleges' mission is excellence in teaching and student learning. The Engaging Students in the First Year (ESFY) initiative will provide faculty, staff, and administrators with numerous and exciting opportunities to foster student success as students make the transition from high school and post-high school experiences into higher education.

The ESFY initiative focuses on newly enrolled traditional and returning adult first-year students. It is based on more than 20 years of sound research and has been developed in consultation with Professor John N. Gardner, Executive Director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. The initiative has a curricular and co-curricular focus that will familiarize students with accessing campus resources, foster the development of positive relationships among students, faculty, staff, and administrators, and prepare students to become successful college students.

Background: The ESFY initiative began in 1999 with the institution's desire to increase student retention by increasing student success in higher education. Of the fall 2000-2001 freshman class in the UW Colleges, 64.3 percent of students remained enrolled in a UW System institution in 2001-2002; however, only 53.2 percent continued with the Colleges into their sophomore year. Institutional research demonstrates that students who remain with the UW Colleges through their sophomore year achieve greater success following transfer to a baccalaureate institution.

Development of the Initiative: To promote research and discussion on student success in the first year at the UW Colleges, Dr. James Anderson, University of North Carolina, was invited to the institution to discuss his work in building communities for diverse learners and engaging students. This led to institutional conversations regarding the engagement of students in their education during their first year to promote retention and student success. John N. Gardner began to work with the UW Colleges on this initiative with presentations, workshop participation, and consulting.

An internal grants program, *Grants to Increase Student Engagement (GISE)* was created which provided needed support to the campuses to advance the initiative which included the development of curricular and co-curricular activities, learning communities, and/or programming for diverse student populations. The 2001-2002 academic year closed with a Colleges-wide conference, *Initiating a First Year of College Experience at the UW Colleges*, attended by more than 100 participants. One of the conference outcomes was a document that identified the mission, goals, and key strategies for implementation of the initiative. Planning continued throughout the 2002-2003 academic year culminating in an institution-wide conference which provided an opportunity for individuals across the institution to share their expertise on existing programs, future plans, and concerns regarding student engagement and the ESFY initiative.

Implementation of the ESFY Initiative

For Fall, 2003, the major goal was to provide as many First Year Seminars, having a common core curriculum, as could be offered given budget constraints. Over 25% of freshmen are currently enrolled in First Year Seminars. Additional ESFY programming will include: development of additional learning communities, service learning opportunities, common reading activities, assessment activities, and interdisciplinary studies courses; establishment of a more intentional mentoring and advising program for first-year students; additional campus orientation programs and initiatives; and campus ESFY co-curricular activities.