

The First-Year Experience: A Guide to Best Practices at Cornell University

By Brian O. Earle, Department of Communication

Why? The Rationale

Recently, Cornell University students completed three surveys, including a survey done by College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CAL S) students for the college's Undergraduate Program Review. The results of each survey indicated student dissatisfaction in their interactions with faculty and other students. The perception of the students was that faculty members are not approachable. Faculty members, however, felt that they were approachable. As a result of the finding that students feel isolated, many departments and advisors have worked to provide more opportunities for faculty-student interactions.

The National Conference on the First-year Experience has compiled extensive research to support the importance of the first-year experience for college students. Students who feel integrated and pleased with their initial experiences have better retention and graduation rates, are more pleased with their overall college experience, and are less apt to become social isolates. John N. Gardner, executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, states that the first few weeks are especially critical in establishing a foundation from which students will

- choose their undergraduate curriculum.
- choose a major.
- establish a good GPA.
- learn good study habits.
- develop positive attitudes toward faculty members and a willingness to interact with them outside class.
- develop a positive attitude toward the institution that continues after graduation.
- develop long-term relationships that last through and beyond college.
- decide which groups to affiliate with, e.g., fraternities, sororities, team sports, intramurals.
- acquire behaviors that may or may not carry over into later adulthood—from reading a daily national newspaper to alcohol abuse.
- develop economies of time.
- redefine their role within their family.

(From: Opening talk to Summer Institute on First-Year Assessment, John N. Gardner, Asheville, North Carolina, August 5, 2001)

Current Best Practices of Cornell University Departments

The following is a discussion of “best practices” that serve to enrich and enhance the first-year experience for students and how they are implemented by Cornell University departments and units (cited at the end of each description).*

Before Arrival on Campus

Welcome Letters

Before students arrive on campus, they should receive a letter welcoming them to the university, their college, and a specific department. This letter should be enthusiastic about their selected major and perhaps highlight some activities or career opportunities of recent graduates. It also should provide clear guidelines for what the entering students can expect from the department, including what classes they will take, how and when classes will be selected, when they will know their faculty advisor assignment, and important department meeting times and locations. The more information provided, the more comfortable the student will be upon arrival. Enclosing a list of the names of other new students and their hometowns may enable students to contact each other and perhaps discover shared activities, interests, and/or friends.

Some departments choose to welcome students by sending letters written by faculty members and peer advisors. These letters can be the first step in establishing positive student perceptions of the faculty. They provide an opportunity to share some information about the faculty and current students, including their interests, academic specialty, contact information, and summer availability. A schedule of fall semester courses could also be included. Those colleges in which students do not apply directly to a major may choose to send letters to students who have expressed interests in specific programs, or they may simply send a letter from the dean of the college.

*Please note that for each activity, every department or unit that uses that practice is not listed. Many departments use many of the best practices. I did not want any single group to be overwhelmed with queries, and I wanted to recognize as many units as was practical. I welcome any new ideas and plan to update this list in the future.

Best Practices—Welcome Letters

- **Pre-acceptance letter**

Before students accept the offer of admission to Cornell, some programs send a letter to admitted students who had expressed in their application interest in their area of study, providing more incentive for those students to attend Cornell.

Physics

Comparative Literature

- **Pre-arrival letter**

The department sends letters to accepted students from appointed faculty and student advisors. This practice gives students and parents both a faculty contact and a peer with whom they can communicate and ask questions.

Biology

- **Parents' packet**

The department sends information to parents of incoming first-year students, including what their child can expect, information about Parents Weekend, and whom to contact with questions or concerns.

Architecture, Art, and Planning

- **Pre-arrival computer training**

All students are required to take a computer seminar upon arrival on campus to acclimate them to the Cornell computer network. This department has created a program that enables students to complete the training before arriving on campus, allowing more time for exploration in other areas of Cornell.

Hotel Administration

Advising

Faculty Advising

Every department on campus offers a faculty advising program. Faculty advisors direct students to resources on campus, help them select courses, and assist in balancing academic and social activities. The best faculty advisors offer new students emotional support both during the initial adjustment period and throughout their college career. While some colleges are able to assign students to faculty in the department in which they have been accepted, students who have not declared a major before sophomore year are often assigned to faculty members who don't share their academic focus. Unfortunately, when students are not paired with a faculty advisor in their area of intended study, both students and faculty may find it difficult to relate to one another.

Best Practices—Advising

- **Welcome letter before arrival on campus**

The letter should contain the course schedule and information about the advisor. It also may request information about the incoming student to help the faculty advisor prepare for the student's arrival.

- **Invitation to the faculty advisor's home for a meal**

- **Invitation to eat together at an on-campus dining hall**

- **Regular meetings, phone calls, or e-mails**

These contacts ensure that the faculty advisors are in touch with their students' academic and personal lives. It allows students the opportunity to interact with the faculty on a regular basis and guarantees an alliance should any problems arise during their college experience.

Crop and Soil Sciences

Textiles and Apparel

History

Africana Studies

Near Eastern Studies

Policy Analysis and Management

- **Class advisors**

In some small departments, one faculty advisor is assigned to each incoming class. Students in the same class who share advisors are more likely to interact with one another.

Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

- **Master advising**

Faculty members are grouped into different levels of advising to distinguish outstanding advisors in the department. These "master advisors" are assigned to work with new students because they have proven to be most skilled at helping students acclimate to college life. At the end of the freshman year, students may be reassigned to another faculty advisor of their choice.

Hotel Administration

- **Training for advisors**

Some departments have created a training program for faculty members to reinforce for them various aspects of the student experience and raise awareness of problems or questions they may encounter as advisors. Faculty members are not assigned advisees until they've gone through the proper training.

Communication

Peer Advising

Several departments have peer advising programs. These are not meant to substitute for faculty advising but rather to familiarize new students with the university from a student perspective. Generally, a peer advisor is assigned to one or two new students and asked to make an effort to stay in regular contact with the new student(s) as long as the interaction seems beneficial. Contact also can be maintained through group activities involving new students and their peer advisers, such as meeting together for a bowling night, picnic, or other event before the course enrollment period.

Communication

Best Practices—Peer Advising

• Training

Students interested in becoming a peer advisor must go through a rigorous training program. They work hand-in-hand with the faculty and new students to provide a realistic student perspective.

Biology

• Peer advising

Some departments encourage older students to work with new students to help familiarize them with the campus as well as work through any academic or personal problems.

Occasionally, students, through department clubs or the college, unofficially advise new students.

Architecture, Art, and Planning

Religious Studies

Entomology

Ecology and Evolutionary Biology

Orientation

Once students arrive at Cornell, it is important for them to attend university-wide activities to become acclimated to the campus. These events usually include library tours, residence hall meetings, and social activities. They are opportunities for faculty members to serve as guides and discussion leaders and provide recognition for individual departments, colleges, and the university. They also can be an excellent way to change some of the prior perceptions new students might have about the faculty. Through the Faculty-in-Residence and Faculty Fellows programs, faculty members volunteer their services to residence halls across campus, participate in programs, and are available as mentors for students. The programs are well received by the students and provide another opportunity for students to get to know faculty outside the classroom setting.

Meetings in Departments and Colleges

Most departments hold a general department meeting with new students before the new students meet with their faculty advisor. These meetings, which vary in presentation according to the size of the department and the number of new students, are a great opportunity to personalize the faculty and share their outside interests, research specialties, and interesting facts. Meeting facilitators are discouraged from reading department information line by line. The best practice is to informally introduce the department and its faculty and provide a comfortable and fun way for new students to get to know one another. Most departments have faculty members say something about themselves as part of the introduction. However, if the department is large, the chair may introduce the faculty by projecting images of each faculty member rather than pointing out each person in a crowded room.

Some departments choose a more social or interactive way to introduce students once they arrive on campus, such as a reception or open house where food and “get to know you” activities are available. Sometimes students enjoy this type of welcoming orientation meeting more because an informal event is less stressful during this time of severe information overload. This is also a great way for department clubs and organizations to introduce themselves and recruit members in an informal setting.

Social Events with Departments, Clubs, and Faculty

Throughout orientation week, some departments sponsor social events such as meals in the dining halls, club outings, picnics or barbecues, and sporting events. These are another way for departments and faculty members to create a dynamic that ensures for students a comfortable atmosphere in which they can approach and discuss personal and professional topics with each other and the faculty.

Those departments in which students may not yet have declared their major can also host social events that informally introduce students to a field of study they may be interested in and its faculty. If departments prefer, department clubs could host events and reach out to new students.

Hotel Administration

Engineering

Bioengineering

Latin American Studies

Archaeology

History of Art

Religious Studies

Horticulture

Ongoing Activities

Once students begin classes and the orientation period is completed, some departments fail to consider those individuals who may still be uneasy and not yet entirely adjusted to Cornell life. Ongoing activities within each college and department are good ways to continue interaction with those students as well as help departments work together to create programs and best academic practices.

Freshman Courses

Several departments use an introductory or orientation course to maintain ongoing communication with their new students. Instructors of full-credit introductory courses might consider using the first five minutes of class to answer general questions and discuss new-student concerns. Other possibilities are inviting the advising coordinator to visit, inviting student organization representatives to give presentations, or organizing a student panel on activities, summer jobs, etc. Another option is to offer a one-credit course that provides direct contact and orientation information about your department and the college.

Mathematics

Bioengineering

Hotel Administration

Theatre, Film, and Dance

Applied Economics and Management

Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

Agriculture and Life Sciences

Social Events

Several departments have pre-enrollment meetings or career exploration meetings with food (usually pizza). Others have a departmental picnic in the fall and spring. Many advisors invite their new students to a picnic or barbecue early in the semester, knowing that by the fourth week of classes, students often experience some homesickness or loneliness. Social events could also take place at one of the dining facilities on campus or as a Sunday brunch. For students who have not yet declared their majors, these nonacademic interactions allow them to make a more informed decision about what they might want to study. Clubs hold events throughout the semester, often for recruitment purposes; these events should incorporate some social aspects, as it is a wonderful method for students to become friends with other students with similar interests. Social events also can serve as a forum for discussion of summer jobs, internships, study-abroad experiences, and undergraduate research specializations within the departments. For those departments without a peer advisor program, these events are especially helpful.

Near Eastern Studies

History of Art

Crop and Soil Sciences

Latin American Studies

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Chemistry and Chemical Biology

Biology

Pre-Enrollment Meeting

Pre-enrollment meetings can provide general direction to first year students and answer their questions. They enable the advisor to give individual attention when they meet one-on-one with students who have already gained some information about potential courses. These meetings also provide a forum for discussing changes in the department, new courses, recommended electives, or other topics. Some advisors have had success gathering all their first year advisees for the first course-enroll meeting. Most first year students have similar spring semester courses and the meeting can open up discussions. For those departments whose students are not yet required to take specific classes within a major, or where a faculty member is paired with a student whose academic interests lie in a different area, it can be particularly helpful for first year students to talk through their course selections with a panel of peer students from the college. This also gives freshman students the opportunity to meet upperclassmen if a peer advising program is not yet instituted.

Each faculty advisor is given a code for students to enter once they have registered for courses. This procedure is intended to ensure that students and their advisors will meet and thoroughly discuss their academic options. Course enrollment can be stressful for students who are unfamiliar with the process or unsure of what they are capable of accomplishing in a semester. In an environment as academically rigorous as Cornell's, faculty members are encouraged to use the course enrollment time as an opportunity to check in and help students with concerns.

Communication

Physics

Resources

Web Pages, Newsletters, Bulletin Boards

Many departments have instituted web pages and newsletters for majors as a means of communicating departmental information to students. Students, particularly freshmen, find these sources of information helpful in visualizing future jobs and finding undergraduate research opportunities, TA opportunities, internships, summer jobs, a calendar of events, and other items of interest. By receiving a weekly e-mail or

Best Practices—Resources

- Some departments take **photographs of new students** to post on a department bulletin board and/or web page. Many departments have conveniently located informational bulletin boards.

Landscape Architecture

Biological and Environmental Engineering

Horticulture

- Many departments have created easily accessible **web sites** that provide daily updated information important for all students in the department.

Chemistry and Chemical Biology (www.chem.cornell.edu)

School of Hotel Administration (www.hotelschool.cornell.edu)

Economics (www.arts.cornell.edu/econ/)

Education (www.education.cornell.edu)

East Asia Program (www.einaudi.cornell.edu/eastasia/)

- **Weekly or monthly newsletters**, in print or electronic format, provide important information to students. The best newsletters include information about, for example, student birthdays, upcoming speakers, new courses, and new faculty members.

Biological Statistics and Computational Biology

Latin American Studies

Hotel Administration

Communication

Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

newsletter, or linking to an accessible web site, students are informed about activities and remain connected to the department. Students in departments with undeclared majors should have the opportunity to sign up for newsletters to make the transition into a major as smooth and as informed as possible. Another option is having a centrally located department bulletin board that can hold information about upcoming events and opportunities for students.

Public Space for Students

A public space draws students to your department and provides opportunities for informal interactions between new students and returning students. It also provides a place to post information and a meeting space for student organizations. Most student lounges are equipped with one or more computers that enable students to check their e-mail, check course assignments, and work online.

Animal Science

Food Science

Landscape Architecture

Hotel Administration

Department-Related Paraphernalia

Some departments sell hats, T-shirts, polo shirts, coffee mugs, and other items. These have provided departments with additional esprit de corps and recognition on campus. The items also can be sold to raise funds for student organizations, and a different item or logo can be added or featured each year. One department conducts a student design competition. Departments may want to consider presenting new students with a gift item that displays their department identification.

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Brian O. Earle
Department of Communication
Cornell University
328 Kennedy Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853
607-255-9706
boe1@cornell.edu

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