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Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences for First Year Students

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Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences for First Year Students

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According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), only 55.5% college students in the United States graduate with a bachelor's degree within 6 years. This rate is even lower at 54.7% (NCHEMS, 2009). The statistics from the Complete College America Coalition indicate that by the year 2020, 59% of jobs will require a career certificate or college degree. Currently only 36% of Ohio adults have an associate degree or higher (Complete College America, 2011). There is an obvious need for interventions that will help students adjust to college culture and teach learning habits that foster students' abilities to persist to graduation.

Recognizing the need to support first year students during their journey through college, Cleveland State University (CSU) has implemented a new student success initiative. The initial step in the first semester is the freshman seminar course, *ASC 101: Introduction to University Life*. Recent research indicates that freshman lack fully developed study skills, critical thinking skills and information literacy proficiencies (Conley, 2007, Weiner 2010). A major challenge that first year students face at CSU is discerning the skills they will need to be successful in their college career. Freshman students soon learn that the strategies they relied on in high school are insufficient for rigorous college academics. This course provides structured support for students as they realize they must alter their approaches and develop new ones in order to be successful in college. Under the guidance of their instructors, students explore college culture and practice core academic skills that will serve them throughout their academic careers.

Introduction to University Life is divided into three distinct components: study skills, the common reading book and life on a college campus. The course includes a mandatory library session. In the past the library session was a stand-alone presentation conducted by a librarian. Students took a pre/post-test and attended the session with their class. The results from the pre/post-test indicated that not only did the students fail to advance their research abilities, but also that the majority lacked fundamental information literacy skills. These results did not support the outcomes of the course. Information literacy is a core skill college students need to be successful in obtaining a degree (Weiner 2010). Freshman students need to be proficient at

identifying their information needs, locating sources, critically evaluating information, synthesizing ideas, and using information ethically to complete college assignments.

In the spring of 2011, the Coordinator, First Year Experience and the First Year Experience Librarian teamed up to address the need for students to explore new study strategies and improve information literacy skills. The first outcome incorporated the common reading book into the class as more than a discussion piece. The common reading book became the foundation for teaching and reviewing study skills. The topics from the book were used during the library instruction to link the session back to the course content. This resulted in the creation of a hands-on library activity where the students brainstormed using mind maps and searched the library databases for sources in preparation for completing the culminating assignment, an annotated bibliography. Students practiced comprehension and study skills by reading their sources and then creating graphic organizers and Cornell Notes. In addition to advancing their research skills, the annotated bibliography provided an opportunity to practice critical thinking and writing.

The new approach has been in place since the fall of 2011. Requiring all sections to complete three specific assignments led to a few roadblocks. Veteran instructors resisted curriculum changes, teaching and grading using a rubric created a learning curve and developing staff training required time and commitment. In the summer of 2011 both new and veteran instructors were required to attend two workshops. Out of 38 Instructors all but 3 attended the workshops. The goal of the workshops was to help instructors feel comfortable using the new assignments. One workshop demonstrated how to integrate the research project into the curriculum.

Data obtained at the end of the fall semester determined that instructors would benefit from additional training on using a rubric and being consistent with grading. A committee of instructors was formed to review and improve the usability of the rubrics. Student evaluations indicated modifications to the assignment were necessary to improve student outcomes. It was decided that the best approach was to breakdown the assignment into three parts by scaffolding the activities. This new approach was implemented in spring 2012. The data from the spring student evaluations and instructor feedback was very encouraging.

This presentation will illuminate the process of weaving together three seemingly unrelated components -- study skills, a common reading book and life on a college campus -- to design a cohesive first year seminar that facilitates student success. The presenters will clarify the process of designing the activities, assignments and rubrics. They will share assessment results to show the impact that the changes have had on meeting the student outcomes for the course. The benefits of collaborating across departments to support student success will be highlighted.

After putting the session in context, the presenters will facilitate an activity that allows participants to experience using a rubric to grade an assignment. Attendees will also experience a simulated library activity. There will be opportunities to interact with colleagues and discuss the ideas presented.

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