CONTENTS

Game Changer: How a Graduation Distinction Can Impact Learning for All

From 2009-2011, three guideposts led to efforts to enhance undergraduate education at the University of South Carolina: (a) a recent revision of the university's general education requirements emphasized critical thinking and problem solving, (b) a strategic plan recommendation was made to increase community engagement, and (c) national literature related to integrative learning (Huber & Hutchings, 2005) and employers' expectations for graduates became a focal point in general education (Gardner, 2007). Goals associated with the undergraduate enhancement included increasing student engagement (e.g., community service, undergraduate research, peer leadership), a systematic effort to help students articulate and apply learning across experiences, and improved coordination across academic and student affairs (University of South Carolina, 2011).

Irma J. Van Scoy
Associate Professor & Executive Director
USC Connect, Office of the Provost, University of South Carolina

The work, coordinated through the offices of the president, provost, and student affairs, was linked to the university's reaccreditation. Ultimately, we aimed to create a culture of integrative learning at a large university across multiple campuses with nearly a hundred majors. One element of the plan was a graduation distinction to recognize students with significant beyond-the-classroom engagement and learning.

The Initiative

USC Connect is housed in the Office of the Provost with strong ties to the Division of Student Affairs and other units on campus (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad). The multidimensional approach to USC Connect (2017) includes centralized engagement resources (e.g., searchable database, recommendations by major, calendar of events), faculty/staff development opportunities (e.g., workshops, conferences, grants, faculty fellowships), systematic promotion of learning within and beyond the classroom (i.e., prematriculation, orientation, first-year seminar), and expanded use of e-portfolios.

The first year of USC Connect included a significant focus on integrative learning—for example, clarifying that a beyond-the-classroom experience by itself (credit-bearing or not), while key, is only a first step. Reflection through student discussions, journaling, papers, presentations, or projects is required and must go beyond

descriptions of *what happened* or *how one felt* to what was learned and how learning relates to other experiences, including academic work. We used university-wide forums and faculty workshops and sponsored faculty grants to develop integrative learning experiences that tie events beyond the classroom with related course assignments emphasizing analysis and application of learning.

During the second year, an opportunity related to what was originally a minor part of the plan arose. As we prepared a proposal to recognize students for significant beyond-the-classroom engagement and learning, interest was growing on campus for leadership skill development among students. This environment created an opening to merge recognition for integrative learning and leadership through a shared focus on preparing students to apply learning to solve problems in new settings. As a result, faculty senate approved *Graduation with Leadership Distinction* (GLD) within the USC Connect initiative to be awarded in the categories of community service, diversity and social advocacy, global learning, professional and civic engagement (internships and leadership), and research. The recognition appears on students' transcripts and diplomas.

Students, faculty, and staff embraced the idea, and more than 1,000 students have earned the recognition since the first graduating class in May 2014. The requirements for GLD put integrative learning in concrete terms. Students complete five requirements:

- extensive beyond-the-classroom experience in their pathway of interest (about 300 hours);
- three enhancement activities to increase understanding of that pathway (e.g., lectures, workshops, council meetings);
- six credits of related coursework;
- a public presentation; and
- an extensive e-portfolio that includes articulation and application of learning to leadership with links to student work (e.g., papers, PowerPoint presentations, experience evaluations).

Students are mentored through the process through individual advisement or a one-credit GLD e-portfolio seminar. Online resources include an e-portfolio content guide, technology support, and the USC Connect Graduation with Leadership Distinction E-Portfolio Grading Rubric.

A total of 103 faculty and staff have been trained to support and assess student learning through GLD e-portfolios. We solicit faculty and staff via established relationships to serve as reviewers, work with small student groups, and teach the e-portfolio seminar. Reviewer training focuses on norming sessions in which participants review student work using the GLD rubric. Additional workshops for those working directly with students include an introduction to integrative learning and strategies to support writing and provide feedback. Those who work directly with students or teach the seminar earn small stipends.

> "More than 1,000 students have earned the (Graduation with Leadership Distinction) recognition since the first graduating class in May 2014."

Benefits of the GLD initiative go far beyond students simply earning the recognition. Conversations between USC Connect and faculty/staff partners often begin with "Tell us how our students can complete GLD" but ultimately result in developing integrative learning strategies for all students. Reviewers and instructors apply learning from their experiences with students and e-portfolios to other components of their work. For example, two language faculty helped assess e-portfolios related to global learning. The next year, they became GLD seminar instructors, which led them to rethink their other courses. One added a four-part reflection component to a multiple-section 100-level course she supervised. Encouraged by the original two faculty, eight department members attended the next USC Connect faculty conference. The two lead faculty presented their work on integrative learning at national conferences.

The success of the graduation distinction changed the growth pattern of USC Connect. We originally planned to start with first-year students and progress through components for sophomores, juniors, and then seniors. Instead, we created bookends (i.e., an introduction to integrative learning in the first year and the graduation distinction for seniors). We are now developing integrative learning experiences for the middle years, but the distinction continues to be a powerful motivator.

Assessment Results

The most convincing evidence of students' ability to integrate learning comes from an analysis of GLD e-portfolios (see Table 1). E-portfolios contain sections on developing key insights informed by having classroom and beyond-the-classroom experiences; making connections across multiple experiences, disciplines, or perspectives; and recommending solutions/solving problems in ways supported by learning in and beyond the classroom. Analysis of GLD e-portfolio performance shows that students consistently meet expectations across all learning outcomes. Trained reviewers assess e-portfolios using the GLD rubric, a variation of the Association of American Colleges & Universities' Integrative and Applied Learning VALUE Rubric (2009) that has been modified over time as we continually assess reliability.

> "Two language faculty helped assess e-portfolios related to global learning. The next year, they became Graduation with Leadership Distinction seminar instructors, which led them to rethink their other courses."

Table 1

Graduation With Leadership Distinction (GLD) E-portfolio Mean Ratings

E-portfolio component	Learning outcome focus	2013–2014 ($N = 89$)	2014–2015 ($N = 216$)	2015–2016 ($N = 370$)	2016–2017 ($N = 430$)	All years
Key insights	Articulate learning from beyond-the-classroom experience	3.45	3.26	3.32	3.31	3.34
Key insights	Describe how beyond-the-classroom learning relates to course/major concepts or theories	3.30	3.08	3.17	3.26	3.20
Analysis	Make complex connections	3.37	3.02	3.09	3.21	3.17
Leadership	Make recommendations based on learning	3.17	2.90	3.00	3.10	3.04

Note. Ratings on a 4-point scale; 3 = meets expectations.

Implications

Lessons learned from our work apply to programs supporting students in meaningful beyond-the-classroom engagement, integrative learning, critical thinking, and similar skills. They are particularly relevant to large institutions. In summary, the graduation distinction appealed to faculty, staff, and students, and its detailed requirements helped communicate objectives of integrative learning. Its success provided a base for building this type of learning into a university culture.

Our experience reinforced findings (Barber, 2012) that students need significant support in expressing learning and specific guidance in understanding the applicability of academic work. We had not anticipated developing a course focused on e-portfolio development, but we found a course to be the most effective and efficient delivery system for support. An added benefit was building a cadre of instructors with deep understanding of integrative learning who carry their new insights back to their departments and work with all undergraduates.

We continue to build on our progress in integrative learning that the GLD helped expedite. We are confident that integrative learning for *all* students is attainable, even at a large research university. **e**

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Contact

Irma Van Scoy
ivanscoy@mailbox.sc.edu

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Building Personal Productivity in FYE Courses

Ryan Korstange
Assistant Professor &
Coordinator of UNIV 1010/2020

Middle Tennessee State University

A critical transition students must make in college is adjusting to a different pace and type of work, which requires intentionally developing a productive workflow. The impetus for improving instruction in workflow management at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) came through the results of our regular program review, which is aided by administration of the *College Success Factors Index* (CSFI), an online survey that categorizes student attitudes and behaviors in 10 skill areas affecting success. Pretest results consistently demonstrated that time management, task management, and precision were among incoming college students' weakest skills. Also, reflective essays consistently indicated that students struggled to manage their academic (and non-academic) workloads, even if they demonstrated mastery of time and task management skills through other academic measures. This article lays out a method for supporting students as they develop productive practices in their first semester.

Allen (2003) asserts that workflow includes five discrete stages. In his words, "We (1) collect things that command our attention; (2) process what they mean and what to do about them; and (3) organize the results, which we (4) review as options for what we choose to (5) do." Moving more efficiently through each of these stages increases productivity. Instruction in time management skills is commonplace in first-year seminar (FYS) courses and textbooks and is a mainstay in successful FYS curricula, with many studies correlating effective time management with increased academic success (Balduf, 2009). However, instruction directed at time and task management skills often results in exposure to sterile systems that students do not use. In distinction, everyone has a workflow, even if inefficient; therefore, directing the curriculum toward identifying and improving students' workflow should be more applicable and useful for the students.

Thus, a new approach was undertaken at MTSU, focusing not on the development of conceptual mastery of time management skills as an abstract concept, but on a broader strategy of workflow management and applying and continually revising these skills outside of class. The instructional plan contains several components, including formative assessment, direct instruction, application, and reflection.

Program Implementation and Evaluation

To give students an accurate picture of their current workflow, they are assigned a 72-hour time log. In this assignment, students record everything they do in 30-minute increments. Through direct instruction, students can access several productivity tools and strategies and infer time management principles and practices from experimenting with these systems.

Four productivity systems that have particular utility for first-year students include the following:

1. ***Eat That Frog!*** (Tracy, 2007) is a task management system whose operating principle is to do the most dreaded task first. The "frog" for students is often

a challenging project or studying for a class that they do not enjoy. Doing challenging work first is an excellent strategy for improving class performance and is an easy system to put into practice.

2. **Personal Kanban** (Benson & Barry, 2011) is a simple task visualization and workflow system. Each task is written on a Post-it note, and all tasks are organized onto a Kanban board in three columns: Options, Doing, and Done. As a study session begins, the student looks over the options list, picks whatever task needs to be completed at that moment, and moves the Post-it note to the Doing column. The goal is to be doing no more than three tasks at a time. Students benefit from ease of use, particularly in adding tasks, but also in managing workflow and moving projects toward completion.

3. **Big Rocks** (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994) starts with the assumption that every day will be filled with activities. To use this system, the student proactively identifies blocks of time to accomplish the most important tasks first. The basic idea is that scheduling critical projects makes them more likely to get completed, ensuring productivity.

4. **Pomodoro Technique** (Noteberg, 2010) is a time management and motivation system that presupposes two ideas: (a) big projects are overwhelming and (b) short periods of focused work are valuable. The system operates on a schedule of 25-minute uninterrupted periods of productive work, followed by a five-minute break. Many college tasks cannot be completed in 25 minutes. However, the intent is not to force every project into 25 minutes, but to break tasks up into manageable pieces that one can accomplish in a shorter period.

After discussing these systems, students draft a comprehensive strategy for managing both the academic and nonacademic obligations of their semester. This one-page *strategy document* describes their workflow management system and justifies its effectiveness. They also are asked to put together the tools their system requires to show in class. For example, a student could build a Kanban board or compute the number of Pomodoros they expect to use to complete a task. The goal is for students to use effective time management tools, not just know about them abstractly.

Students reflect on their workflow system twice during the remainder of the semester. First, about one month after the productivity assignment, students reflect in writing on how they are spending their time, the productivity of their workflow, and their progress toward academic and social goals for the semester. They also identify changes or revisions they want to make to their productivity system. Second, as part of the final project, students demonstrate their improved productivity system and reflect on its usefulness over the semester.

The current revision has been in place for one semester, so long-term results of the change are unavailable. In the short term, the following results can be reported. First, every student enrolled in our FYE class produced and used a productivity system. CSFI posttests indicate that students showed moderate gains in task management (from an

> "At the end of the course, students reported increased perception of academic control and feeling more academically prepared."

average score of 17 on the pretest to a score of 16 on the posttest), time management (18 pre, 17 post), and precision (18 pre, 17 post). The gains were not as high as expected, perhaps because regular reflection allowed students to recognize weaknesses in their productivity systems, resulting in a more accurate, but lower perception of skill in these areas. Also, at the end of the course, students reported increased perception of academic control and feeling more academically prepared.

In light of the large-scale transition that students face in their first year of college, instructional strategies that both help students acquire essential skills and enable them to make meaning of those skills and concepts are increasingly important. There is no one right way of working productively, just as there is no one right path toward graduation. Exposing students to a variety of productive approaches, encouraging them to create and apply their own workflow management system and regularly reflect on its effectiveness, gives them more control over their academic experience. It also helps them improve productivity through supported experimentation.

ALIGNING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENT SUCCESS:
CASE STUDIES OF SOPHOMORE-YEAR INITIATIVES

Submissions are invited for a new volume exploring institutional efforts to support student success in the second college year. Cases from a variety of institutional types highlighting a range of initiatives are welcome. Preference for publication will go to submissions describing initiatives featuring cross-functional collaboration in the design and delivery of the program, innovative approaches to ensuring vertical or horizontal alignment with respect to sophomore-year programs, and high-quality assessment. The deadline for submissions is August 1, 2018. For complete guidelines and to submit a case study, visit sc.edu/fye/publications/development.html.

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Contact

Ryan Korstange
ryan.korstange@mtsu.edu

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Training First-Year Seminar Peer Leaders Through Extended Orientation

Mike Dial
Assistant Director,
University 101 Programs

Sloane Stuart
Graduate Assistant,
University 101 Programs

University of South Carolina

The University 101 (UNIV101) Peer Leader Program is a vital component of the nationally recognized first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina (UofSC). Along with helping plan and facilitate more than 28 creative and interactive lessons over 15 weeks, peer leaders (PLs) often design activities to build community in the classroom while also serving as mentors and resources for first-year students. Since the university introduced PLs in 1993, much has been learned about how to prepare and develop students for and through this role, and various internal assessments have shown PLs' capacity to positively impact first-year students.

For most UofSC students, UNIV101 is an optional, but encouraged first-year seminar. A majority of the first-year cohort (80%) do enroll, including students for whom the course is required: Capstone Scholars, Opportunity Scholars, Teaching Fellows, and Arnold School of Public Health majors. Each year, about 160 sections of UNIV101 are co-taught by a PL serving for the first time. Considering a majority of the first-year cohort enrolls in UNIV101, PLs make a significant impact on incoming students and the campus culture.

Impact on Overall Course Effectiveness

Through internal research, UNIV101 staff can confidently say that PLs contribute positively to first-year students' progress, persistence, and learning. The First-Year Seminar Assessment (FYSA) is administered to all UNIV101 students at the end of each fall semester. Data from the 2013 FYSA were analyzed to determine peer/graduate leaders' impact on the UNIV101 course as measured by the FYSA's Overall Program Effectiveness factor. In 2013, the instrument was sent to 3,848 students and yielded a 59% response rate ($n = 2,272$). The dataset was coded to include a variable indicating whether a section was assigned a peer or graduate leader or had no teaching partner assigned. The data were then analyzed to find differences in means for overall program effectiveness between sections that had a teaching partner and those that did not. An independent samples *t*-test yielded significant differences in program effectiveness for sections of the course with a PL ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.56$) and sections without a teaching partner ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.78$); $t(2,270) = 9.46$, $p = .01$.

All sections of UNIV101 are team-taught by a faculty or staff member and an undergraduate PL (200 sections) or graduate leader (30 sections) from the Higher Education and Student Affairs master's program. Given impact of teaching partners on the success of first-year students, UNIV101 staff place significant emphasis on recruiting and preparing new PLs for this role and supporting them during their experience.

Extended Orientation Training Model for PLs

Similar to UNIV101's extended orientation seminar for first-year students, PL training is designed to give these student leaders the information and support they need when they need it and are ready to receive it. While this training model is not new, programmatic staff

have learned to better train, support, and use PLs over the years. If training is frontloaded prior to serving, PL trainees can be inundated with information without the context to make sense of it. Instead, the UNIV101 model is a best practice, extending each PL's orientation to their role as a mentor, resource, and facilitator for learning over two semesters, beginning the semester before serving and continuing through their service.

UNIV101 PLs engage in more than 30 hours of development through a selection process; two 4-hour training workshops; a two-hour Syllabus Preparation & Teambuilding Workshop (SPTW); and a three-credit-hour academic course, EDLP520: The Teacher as Manager, taken the semester they serve. All stages of training emulate the UNIV101 classroom environment—small group sizes (less than 20), engaging pedagogies, and team teaching. Through this extended orientation training, PLs are prepared to help facilitate creative, interactive lessons designed to meet students' needs.

Recruitment and Selection Process

Internal assessment shows that most PLs apply because UNIV101 instructors, other university faculty and staff, and past PLs either encourage or formally nominate them as outstanding candidates. By acknowledging a student's capabilities this way, the recruitment process fosters mentorship and positive feedback that guides PL candidates toward a developmental opportunity. Interested candidates submit a three-essay application requiring reflection and articulation of desired development. Based on applications, UNIV101 staff invite candidates for group interviews, where staff begin to make applicants aware of intended program outcomes and develop their leadership skills. Rather than asking traditional interview questions, UNIV101 staff use group activities to facilitate reflection on first-year student needs and practice mentoring and helping skills. Modeling these activities also prepares applicants to use engaging strategies in their UNIV101 classes.

Spring Orientation

After interviews, about 160 new PLs are selected and begin formal training. Spring orientation introduces them to the conditions that have been identified as contributing to first-year seminar success (e.g., engaging pedagogy, increased sense of belonging, seminar instructors' role in identifying student challenges and making appropriate referrals). PLs spend significant time identifying a variety of methods for contributing to these conditions in and beyond the classroom. Additionally, PLs identify traditional aspects of the role, best practices for building successful relationships with their teaching partner, and ways to develop community in the classroom.

At orientation, PLs receive the PL Toolkit, a manual for their role and textbook for EDLP520. The Toolkit provides historical context for UNIV101 and the PL program and guidelines for team teaching. Of particular use to PLs, the Toolkit includes 49 community-building activities and 27 teaching strategies for the classroom. PLs also have access to SharePoint, an intranet site with videos, PowerPoint presentations, and sample lesson plans and activities. In addition, PLs can use the UNIV101 textbook and the Campus Resource Guide, an online guidebook covering information and updates for university programs and services.

> "The UNIV101 model is a best practice, extending each peer leader's orientation to their role as a mentor, resource, and facilitator for learning over two semesters."

Syllabus Preparation and Teambuilding Workshops

The knowledge and skills covered at orientation, specifically those focused on developing healthy relationships with teaching partners, prepare PLs for workshops on syllabus preparation and team building, which they attend with their UNIV101 co-instructor. UNIV101 holds eight of these workshops to allow instructors and PLs to attend a workshop together as a teaching team. Here, the pairings learn about UNIV101 assessment findings from the previous semester and new program initiatives. They also have time to lay the foundation for their teaching-team relationship and plan their course. Consequently, PLs are empowered to contribute to course planning, and the seeds of a mentoring relationship are planted.

Fall Training

Before class starts in August, fall training helps prepare PLs to build community with and among their UNIV101 students. Facilitators help PLs identify the difference between accessibility and approachability and strategies for achieving the latter with first-year students. They also brainstorm responses to potential challenges and practice facilitation techniques for effectively co-teaching UNIV101. PLs attend training with their EDLP520 class to initiate community among groups of new PLs.

EDLP520: The Teacher as Manager

Recognizing the need to continually support and train new PLs as they serve in UNIV101, EDLP520 assists PLs throughout their role and furthers their leadership development. The course commonly includes facilitation skills, helping skills, leadership styles, values exploration, diversity and inclusion, and classroom management strategies. Additionally, the course assignments prompt teaching teams to set goals early on to facilitate their success. Through EDLP520, academic staff prepare PLs to lead a risk-reduction session on alcohol and other drugs and report sexual assault and hazing. EDLP520 instructors also lead discussions to aid PLs in marketing their experience on resumes and in interviews.

Along with ongoing training, EDLP520 is a vehicle for group problem solving and reflection among new PLs, enhancing their success and experience in the role. While UofSC is an opportunity-rich environment, student leaders often lack a formal setting to critically reflect on their engagement. EDLP520 allows PLs to make meaning of their experiences through class discussion, small-group activities, and reflective assignments. Each EDLP520 class also creates virtual communities, often using the GroupMe chat app, which allows PLs to connect with one another and receive support from UNIV101 staff and a returning PL virtually 24/7.

Benefits of Extended Orientation Training Model

As an extended orientation model of training, the UNIV101 Peer Leader Program continues to successfully produce PLs who contribute to overall course effectiveness. Over time, first-year students increasingly indicate that PLs are valuable to their UNIV101 experience (see Figure 1). Assessment results from first-year students' UNIV101 end-of-course evaluations suggest the program continues to improve in preparing PLs to make

"Knowledge and skills covered at orientation ... prepare peer leaders for workshops on syllabus preparation and team building, which they attend with their UNIV101 co-instructor."
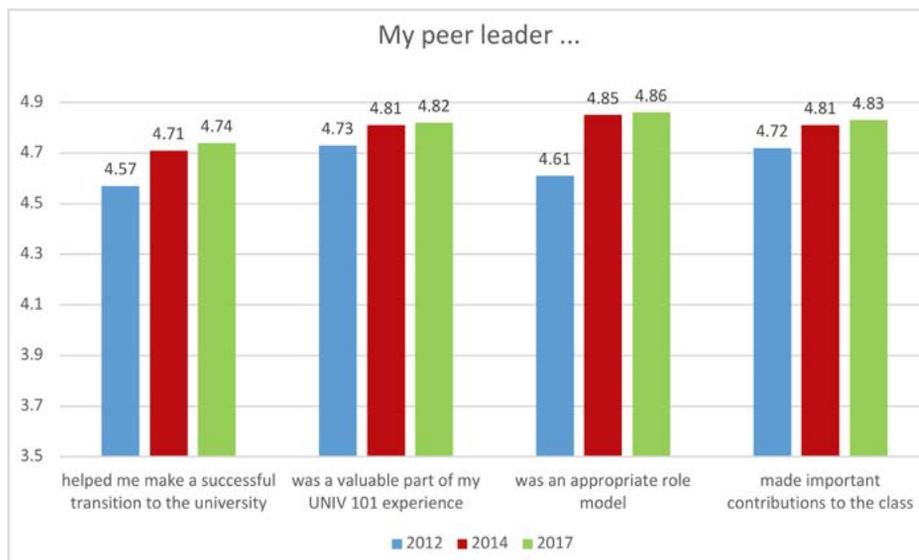
Figure 1. Peer leader impact on a UNIV101 course. Data retrieved from UNIV101 student end-of-course evaluations and presented on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

significant contributions to the classroom, serve as appropriate role models for first-year students, and help those students successfully transition to UofSC.

Further, PLs benefit from the extended orientation training model, which is designed to challenge and support these student leaders before and throughout their experience in the role. As defined in the program's learning outcomes, PLs develop and articulate transferable skills applicable to the UNIV101 setting and to their personal and professional goals while serving. They also enhance communication and facilitation skills, identify personal leadership styles and strengths, and establish positive relationships with students, faculty, and staff. At the end of each fall semester, new PLs complete end-of-experience evaluations. These student leaders increasingly attribute growth in a number of transferable skills to their participation (see Figure 2).

"EDLP520 allows peer leaders to make meaning of their experiences through class discussion, small-group activities, and reflective assignments."

As a result of serving as a University 101 peer leader (including training and EDLP520), I improved my
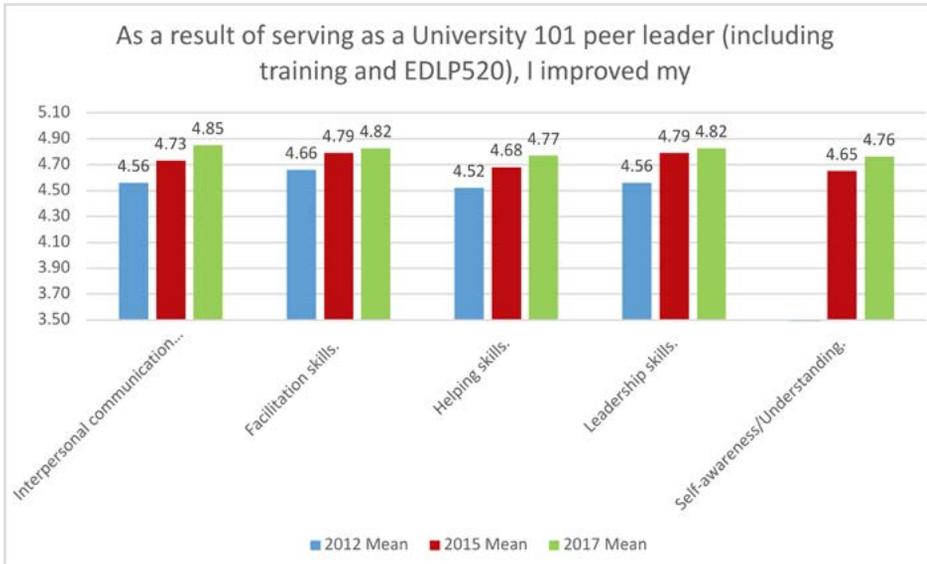
Figure 2. PL transferable skills. Data retrieved from end-of-PL-experience evaluations and presented on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

UNIV101 PL training and development continues to produce PLs who make a positive impact on first-year students. This extended training model is a best practice for developing PLs in a way that prepares them for the role, supports them during their experience, and equips them with transferable skills. For more information on this model, see the University 101 Peer Leader Program website. **e**

Contact

Mike Dial
mdial@mailbox.sc.edu

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First-Year Transition Messages: Exploring Language Evaluation

Kathryn Wilhite
Academic Program Specialist
Kennesaw State University

In a recent article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Supiano (2016) describes how several colleges and universities have begun to audit the frequency and mode of their communications with incoming students, examining the *how* of their messages. There is also merit in examining the *what*, or the language in communication pieces sent to students during the high school-to-college transition. This communication is important, as it helps establish connections between school and students as well as providing institution-specific definitions that clarify that interaction.

Language's Potential to Aid Student Adjustment

Astin's Input-Environment-Outcomes model (IEO; 1991) provides a framework for considering effective student adjustment by recognizing that students bring their own perspectives, experiences, and understanding (i.e., input) to their engagement at a school. Institutions design and develop resources, programs, and interventions (i.e., environment) to help students adjust to college with the aim of supporting their success. The outcomes are the measurable impact of student success.

This model is appropriate to apply to a study of pre-enrollment communications if we think of language as a form of input from Astin's (1991) model. From this perspective, language is the context students bring to the communication pieces they receive before they attend an institution. Context is influenced by lived experience (Burke, 1966; Ogden & Richards, 1989) and therefore can vary as much as the demographics of diverse student populations; institutional language, therefore, can begin to define the college environment before students arrive on campus. If institutions harnessed this potential, students could begin understanding their role at a school through their perception of the institutional environment. Is it possible, then, to begin supporting student adjustment during this phase of the transition?

While working in parent and family programs, the researcher found conflicting messages in the information first-year students received while preparing to enroll at a four-year, public, regional institution in the Southeast. Specifically, students and their families were confused at orientation, having received conflicting messages about
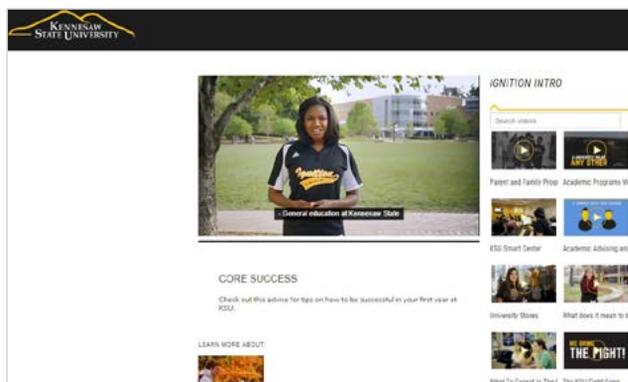
Kennesaw State University reached out to admitted first-year students for Fall 2016 via a pre-orientation video series. Photo credit: Kennesaw State University. Photo source: kennesaw.edu

the enrollment process, the institutional culture, and students' identities at the university.

Based on this positionality, the researcher proposed a comprehensive evaluation, through inductive analysis, of the communications sent to incoming first-year students. Without data to support a "gut feeling" and without an existing tool to measure language during first-year transitions, the researcher sought to develop a framework to understand the correlation between language and success.

Evaluating Communication

A rubric developed specifically for this study combined Weimer's (2013) strategies for balancing power in the classroom with Foucault's (1972) assertion that language is power. The rubric measured how well the language in the institution's communication pieces during the college transition applied the empowerment strategies of Weimer and Foucault on a five-point scale. Additionally, the communication pieces were reviewed for frequency and consistency of specific words and phrases; the 50 most-used words and phrases were measured to evaluate which messages were emphasized and how reliably words were defined.

Nineteen communication documents sent to all admitted first-year students for Fall 2016, from acceptance to matriculation, were reviewed. The qualifying documents belonged to the offices of admissions, financial aid, housing, bursar, orientation, and the Department of First-Year and Transition Studies, which houses first-year seminars and learning communities. The pieces ranged from e-mails and letters to phone scripts and videos; some were sent through the admissions office, while others were sent directly from departments using student records. Those pieces handled by admissions were sent on a timeline relating to a student's individual acceptance. Departments managing their own communications did not necessarily do so on a coordinated timeline. This study did not consider each document's modality; rather, they were reviewed exclusively for language, looking only at transcripts and text. Documents were not analyzed separately but rather as a group of related communications from the institution, or one holistic communication experience.

Findings and Themes

Inductive qualitative analysis confirmed the rubric as valid for use in future research and practice through the emergence of themes relating to the intent. The rubric is a productive measure of both language and message. After validation, the original rubric was edited to reflect the emphasis that developed on both the timing of messages and on invitations for students to respond. Additional edits to the rubric simplified the language analyses category.

Five themes, the last one an emerging theme, are present in evaluating the rubric findings:

- *Language balance is achieved when the meaning of terms is articulated as they relate to the student*. Language balance defines the student's role in the institutional environment by defining terms as what they are, what they do, and what they say. For example, in one document, the course description explains

> "Students and their families were confused at orientation, having received conflicting messages about the enrollment process, the institutional culture, and students' identities at the university."

that a first-year seminar is a small, mandatory class in which intended outcomes are interaction with faculty and connection with peers. This balance in defining the terms emphasizes for an incoming student the definition of the first-year seminar at a specific university, as well as how they are expected to perform in the course.

- **The timing of the message and the opportunity for future discourse define the intended relationship**. The empowerment strategies of Weimer (2013) and Foucault (1972) assert that understanding the timeline that information will be available, paired with invitations for interaction, increases comprehension, leading to a discursive, participatory relationship. Documents that specifically acknowledge the timing of the message, its connection to other transition messages and events, and the explicit invitation to discuss the content offer a locus of control to the recipient that is empowering and delineates the relationship between institution and students.

- **Word choice matters within each document and influences the interpretation of other documents**. Selected words express a communication piece's intent and influence the overall experience. In this study, the reviewer found inconsistent definitions of the word *register*. In most cases it referred to enrollment in fall courses, but in others the word was used to direct students to sign up for an event or activity. Another example was inconsistent terminology used to identify the population. While most of the documents referred to the enrollees as *first-year students*, two documents used the term *freshmen*. Word choice both communicates the institution's values and signifies how well departments and divisions are working together to express those values.

- **Empowerment strategies are most compelling when choices invoke participation and provide motivation**. Weimer (2013) suggests giving students choices related to how they interact with content. Communications are most successful when the choices presented include incentive for making decisions, coupled with clear and innovative pathways for participation. Some documents clearly outlined the merits of specific options (e.g., benefits of selecting a learning community), then followed with information on direct pathways to opt in to those experiences.

- **An intentional, connected communication experience matters**. The 19 documents are not one comprehensive communication experience; they are isolated and disconnected. Within them, however, an insulated communication experience exists between the seven video transcripts. These transcripts performed better on the rubric overall. The intentional design of the experience and the uniqueness of the mode may influence how well the language is intended to successfully employ empowerment communication strategies.

The study only reviewed communication pieces sent to incoming first-year students, but future analysis could use the rubric to review pieces intended for students in other collegiate transitions. The rubric's validation means that in practice, those who correspond with incoming students can identify areas for employing empowerment strategies in future communications.

> "This (language) balance in defining the terms emphasizes for an incoming student the definition of the first-year seminar at a specific university, as well as how they are expected to perform in the course."

Implications and Recommendations

The study presents a useful tool for exploring empowerment language and communication strategies with students. In practice, the rubric gives institutions a framework to evaluate their communication pieces. The third theme emphasizes the importance of cross-divisional and multi-departmental collaboration in communication with incoming students. Departments must coordinate with one another for consistency of message.

Institutions can use this research to invite cooperation around understanding commonly used words and phrases, establishing institutional context for students through consistent meaning. Collaborating on institutional lexicons or word matrices that guide practitioners who develop communication pieces could define a college's values more clearly, clarifying the environment and students' roles within. For example, this research could help advance the notion that *freshman* is an outdated term that does not meet criteria for empowerment messaging because it is not inclusive, accurate, or consistently used; the term *first-year student* better establishes an understanding of the student's role. Finally, the strategies can encourage communications that weave the reasons and ways to make choices into the decision-making process.

The rubric affords a pathway for further research about language used with students in other transitions (e.g., transfer students, graduating seniors, first-year graduate students). It can also provide a framework to examine language used with special populations. Future research can explore intentional communication's influence on designing for empowerment messaging, as well as whether the modality matters. Perhaps the most exciting implication is the research opportunity to evaluate language strategies and assess their impact on students' perceptions of the institution, exploring whether empowerment messaging affects quantitative and qualitative measures of student success. This research can explore student adjustment and tackle the idea that interventions may occur before students physically arrive at an institution, including intermediate environment interventions that could better support transitions.

There is more work to do to understand the impact of language in transition communications on student success in college. This study opens the door to continue examining the nature of the relationship between language and success. What can be asserted is that it is possible to better use proven and theoretical strategies for empowerment messaging in communications with incoming first-year students.

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Kathryn Blaisdell Wilhite
kwilhit5@kennesaw.edu

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Research Spotlight: How Are Institutions Using Senior Capstones to Prepare Graduates for Life Beyond College?

Dallin George Young
Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition

University of South Carolina

The senior year is a time of contrasts for many students nearing the end of their undergraduate experience. During this time, they enjoy the confidence that comes with developing and demonstrating mastery in their chosen field of study, building strong social networks, and working to solidify their lifelong interests and values (Gardner, Van der Veer, & Associates, 1998; Hunter, Keup, Kinzie, & Maietta, 2012). However, they may also be grappling with the insecurity of what lies ahead. The end of the senior year can bring anxiety about new social environments, future living arrangements, graduate school, student loan debt, and grief associated with the loss of college friends, college identity, and the security of a familiar atmosphere (Taub, Servaty-Seib, & Cousins, 2006). Even the prospects of securing employment after graduation can elicit both excitement and anxiety.

As they prepare to enter the workforce, most senior students believe they are well prepared in areas related to career success (Hart Research Associates, 2015). However, employers take a different view. Whereas 59% of soon-to-be graduates reported high levels of confidence in being prepared to apply their knowledge and skills to the real world, only 23% of employers agreed (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Recognizing the necessity and opportunity to respond, institutions of higher education have built structures to support students during this time of transition.

The most recent administration of the National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences (NSSCE) contains responses from 383 colleges and universities about how they are structuring educational practices during students' final year to help prepare them for life after college. The institution-level survey, administered by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, aims to expand knowledge about specific types of culminating experiences. The 2016 NSSCE follows up studies conducted in 1999 and 2011.

Institutions' Focus: Job Placement and Employability

When institutions were asked to identify their goals for senior-year students, they predominantly listed career preparation (71.1%) or job placement (62.6%; Young, Chung, Hoffman, & Bronkema, 2017; see Figure 1). These goals, while lacking specificity, point to desired outcomes that benefit the graduating senior as well as the institution. Graduating students gain knowledge and skills that will set them up for success in their chosen careers, while institutions benefit from improved alumni engagement, student satisfaction, and ratings of institutional quality, which frequently include metrics based on graduate salaries and alumni giving (e.g., College Scorecard, *Forbes, U.S. News & World Report*).
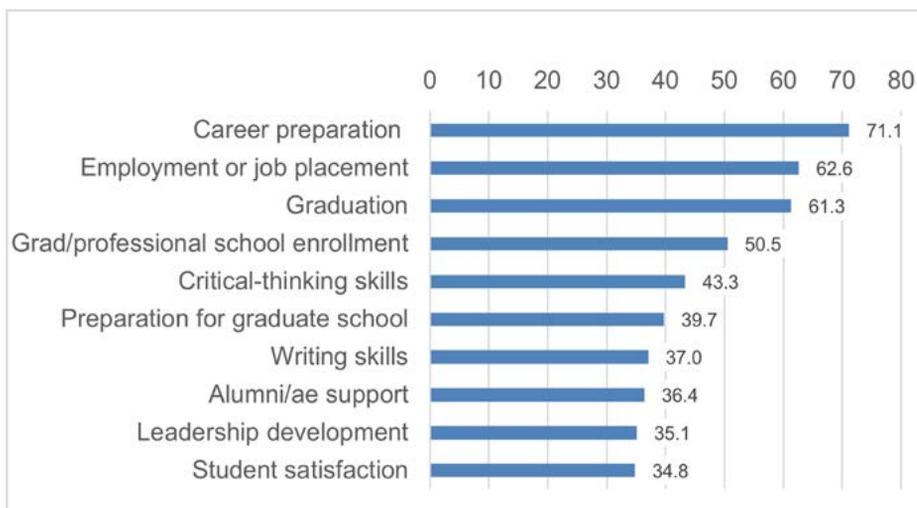
Figure 1. Ten most frequently named objectives for senior year. Source: "2016 National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences: Expanding Our Understanding of Culminating Experiences," by D. G. Young, J. K. Chung, D. E. Hoffman, & R. Bronkema. 2017.

However, when institutions work toward goals too narrowly focused on job training or placement, they risk overlooking the educationally effective practices, learning outcomes, and skills that can lead to long-term career success or other vocational pursuits. Recent employer surveys on desired qualities in college graduates have helped clarify how institutions can best prepare seniors for the workplace. According to research commissioned by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), 80% or more of employers list written and oral communication, teamwork, ethical decision making, understanding of democratic institutions, critical thinking, capacity to innovate, and ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings as important skills for job candidates (Hart Research Associates, 2013, 2015). Additionally, more than 90% of employers in these surveys indicated the ability to "think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a graduate's] undergraduate major" (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 1).

Capstones Typically Aim for Higher Order Thinking

One of the key structures developed to support senior student success has been the senior capstone experience (Young et al., 2017). So, if these experiences are an important vehicle for meeting senior-year objectives, the question arises: How are senior capstones structured, and how well positioned are they to prepare graduates for employment?

Nearly all respondents to the 2016 NSSCE (98.7%) reported offering senior capstones in academic departments (Young et al., 2017). These capstones most frequently took the form of a discipline-based course (96.6%), a thesis or independent research project (69.4%), an internship (68.7%), an arts exhibition or performance (66.3%), or student teaching (66.3%). Although far fewer respondents (37.8%) offered campuswide capstone experiences (i.e., capstones available to any student on campus irrespective of major), a similar pattern emerged regarding those capstones most frequently present on these campuses: a capstone course with a general education focus (46.5%), thesis or independent research

"More than 90% of employers … indicated the ability to 'think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a graduate's] undergraduate major.'"

paper (27.7%), capstone course with other focus (19.8%), or arts exhibition or performance (17.8%).

These results point to two findings related to the capstone as a vehicle for career preparation and placement. First, a majority of institutions identified career-related experiential opportunities such as internships and student teaching as capstones in academic departments. Such supervised practice experiences are important opportunities for students to apply learning in real-world settings, often directly related to a chosen career path. They also are important aspects of a job search, giving senior students critical social networks, experience, and the ability to describe how to apply what they have learned that will make them attractive candidates.

Second, a course-based initiative was the most frequently identified type of senior capstone experience, whether offered campuswide or in specific disciplines. To better understand institutional goals for senior-year students, the NSSCE asked respondents to identify the main objectives for students participating in the campuswide capstone course. The most frequently identified objectives were critical-thinking skills (43.0%), integrative and applied learning (32.7%), academic skills (19.6%), career preparation (16.8%), and writing skills (16.8%), all focused on higher order thinking (Young et al., 2017). Other frequently selected campuswide capstone objectives aimed at developing higher order thinking in students included analytical or inquiry-based skills (15.9%) and ethical reasoning (11.2%). Notably, the list of course objectives from which institutions could choose was the same as the list of institution-wide objectives for seniors mentioned in the previous section. Thus, many capstone courses have been created with the goal of developing those attributes among seniors that employers have described as being essential to career success.

How Capstones Can Maximize Opportunity to Improve Workforce Readiness

Taken together, the survey results show the capstone can play a critical role in preparing students for success beyond college. While previous research has documented how outcomes such as critical thinking, integrative learning, applied learning, and writing skills are connected with participation in senior capstone experiences (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008; NSSE, 2009), institutions that implement capstones must attend to the quality of the experience to achieve results.

For example, Daly (2015) suggests that to achieve gains in critical thinking, educators should structure the capstone to expose students to conditions that lead to abstract, creative, and systematic thinking; he also advocates for requiring students to write more. The *USC Connect* program at the University of South Carolina is one example of this. Seniors who participate in the course-based format of this campuswide capstone enroll in a section of University 401 connected with the program in which they integrate out-of-class experiences with academic learning in real-world settings. Students gather artifacts from their experiences beyond the classroom and, using perspective gained from their academic disciplines, generate key insights on those experiences in one or more

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pathways including diversity and social advocacy, community service, global learning, professional and civic engagement, and research. Finally, students are challenged to bring their perspective to bear as they identify and propose a solution to a real-world problem. Course instructors challenge students to engage in deep and systematic reflection and integration while supporting them with tools to accomplish the tasks. The students' efforts go into an integrative e-portfolio and are graded. Those who successfully complete the requirements earn Graduation with Leadership Distinction on their transcript and diploma.

Research has shown that connecting in-class learning with life events, translating knowledge from classroom into action, experiencing personal growth, and connecting a career path with its effect on society are linked to increased creative problem solving and innovative capacity (Mayhew, Simonoff, Baumol, Selznick, & Vassallo, 2016; Mayhew, Simonoff, Baumol, Wiesenfeld, & Klein, 2012). Employers agree that applied learning is essential for achieving these desired outcomes and report that student work on applied learning projects "would improve learning and better prepare them for career success" (Hart Research Associates, 2015, p. 6).

More information about the 2016 NSSCE can be found in the research report recently published by the National Resource Center: 2016 National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences: Expanding Our Understanding of Culminating Experiences.

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Contact

Dallin George Young
youngdal@mailbox.sc.edu

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