

Improvement Dimension Report
Lawrence Technological University

Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement. This assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis—a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institutions' overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year.

The Improvement Dimension looks critically at the areas of assessment and use of assessment for five initiatives that have the greatest impact on first-year students: academic feedback, University Seminar, advising, placement tests and Discovery Days. Additionally, the Dimension looks at assessment activities to improve the understanding of how student behaviors and patterns affect overall success. Lastly, it looks at the different strategies that have or have not been used by university constituents to improve the first year.

The following areas were discussed in depth and the recommended action item and evidence-based justification is provided.

1. University Seminar

Well-established purpose and learning outcomes pertaining to academic, personal, and career success need to be developed for University Seminar through systemic assessment of the course.

Justification:

University Seminar, like all courses, has end-of-semester evaluations by students of the course and the instructor. Feedback in recent semesters has been negative overall toward the course. The course is being assessed systematically, but the assessment has not impacted any decision-making about content or instructors. Also, there is no direct evidence to show that the current content has been useful or that it supports student success in college and beyond.

Evidence collected from the Foundations of Excellence surveys for faculty and staff suggests that feedback such as student evaluations and success rate of academic skills does not directly influence the faculty and staff who work with first-year students. The performance goal for faculty and staff response to using assessment results for the purpose of improvement is 3.5. LTU faculty and staff response ranged from 3.1 ("below") to 1.63 ("far below"). According to the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), first-year students scored higher than their geographic peers. This favorable response proves that LTU provided the support students needed to succeed academically. However, the senior-year response showed a noticeable drop (from 3.26 to 2.77 on a 4 point scale), and came in below their geographic peers. Clearly, if University Seminar is designed for long-term academic success, the NSSE results indicate the lessons learned are not reflected in the senior year.

Lawrence Tech's University Seminar is the first course in the Leadership curriculum, and this differentiates it from similar courses at other universities. The University Seminar serves the purpose of preparing students to be successful in college and prepares students to be leaders. Currently, these two topic areas tend to be focused on separately. Ideally, they should be integrated with one another. Thoughtful and well-stated learning outcomes are the first step in improving the course.

Additionally, University Seminar and Leadership Models and Practices (the second-year component of the leadership curriculum) should be better aligned for seamless and appropriate transition from one course to the next. In this regard, LDR 2001 students could serve as mentors during the service learning component of University Seminar. This relationship could strengthen the learning outcomes of both courses.

Responsibility: First Year Programs Office, Humanities Department
Supported by: Office of Leadership Programs, Office of the Provost

2. Discovery Days

Students and advisors should be surveyed on the effectiveness of Discovery Days content and delivery format with the intent that Discovery Days should be reconfigured to function more like an orientation and cover some topics introduced in University Seminar, as well as to provide separate sessions specifically for international students.

Justification:

First and foremost, documented assessment of Discovery Days is needed. Feedback for the usefulness and effectiveness of Discovery Days is not always collected, and when it is collected, it is unclear how it is used or documented. Most recent records indicate that 83 percent of first-year students participate in Discovery Days, which is one of the reasons for not providing all pertinent information and saving it for University Seminar. However, if students saw more value in participating in Discovery Days, then the participation rates could potentially approach 100 percent. Participation data (e.g., number of participants, satisfaction scores, etc.) are not provided to Institutional Research and are not available to the campus at large. Additionally, advisors are often uncertain about their role during Discovery Days. There is limited direction provided on what to do with students during their sessions. More effective communication and possibly training is needed as to the purpose and function of this first visit.

All international students (not just first-year) should have a special orientation on college life that addresses the cultural differences pertaining to academic requirements and classroom etiquette as well as the immigration laws regarding travel policies and student visas. Socialization issues should also be addressed to make the college experience more effective for them.

Responsibility: First Year Programs Office, Student Activities
Supported by: International Programs Office, Institutional Research

3. Advising

College of Arts and Sciences advisors should be trained by the departments whose students they advise. Consider inviting retired faculty to serve as advisors in their departments.

Justification:

Currently, faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences advise students whose majors are in other colleges (e.g., Engineering). Faculty advisors in the College of Arts and Sciences do not have an established relationship with the departments that provide their advisees. As such, there is no feedback provided on the effectiveness of College of Arts and Sciences advising, so it is unknown if students are receiving the level of service they need. Additionally, advisors don't receive training, so they are often making recommendations to students regarding course work and academic programs that they are not familiar with. It would be beneficial to have documentation for the advisors, such as a compilation of course descriptions, learning outcomes, master syllabi, and frequently asked questions to assist advisors outside of the advisees' departments.

According to the 2008 NSSE results, students expressed more dissatisfaction with quality of academic advising at their institution compared to their geographic peers. However, first-year students were more satisfied than senior-year students with the quality of advising. According to LTU's Current Practices Inventory (CPI), the advisor is expected to support the academic progress of their advisees and assist with the students' course selection for the following semester. Yet, the current design of the advising system is not set up to provide assistance for these advisors. Retired or retiring faculty who serve as advisors in their academic departments could be an invaluable resource for students who want to plan beyond one semester.

Responsibility: First Year Programs, Departments, Colleges
Supported by: Office of the Provost

4. Assessing the early feedback process

Develop a summative report each semester to determine if the early feedback process and timing is effective.

Justification:

Currently, feedback takes place five weeks into the semester, and this process may be premature if we would like to determine if a student is at risk or not at risk. Early feedback is designed for faculty to look at academic behavior patterns such as irregular attendance, poor quiz/test scores, missing homework, etc. Students identified as "at risk" are contacted by their academic advisor and the First Year Programs office. The current rate of faculty participation in this intervention is 77 percent. The university is using the early feedback methods as a means for assessing the student, but it is unclear if the data and the feedback process itself is being assessed. Who collects and analyzes the data on student achievement mid-term? What are the indicators that early feedback is helping students successfully complete the semester? There is no way of knowing if this system is effective, because the system itself has not been assessed. Additionally, classroom attendance patterns and other indicators that affect academic development may be related to issues that are addressed by the Dean of Students Office, but the Division of Student Affairs is not currently involved in this process.

Additionally, the timing of early feedback (usually within four or five weeks of class start) may not be working to the advantage of the students or faculty who need to assess them. Anecdotal evidence suggests early feedback is requested even before the first test or essay of the semester is assigned. This could partly explain the average response rate for early feedback.

Responsibility: First Year Programs Office, Institutional Research
Supported by: Dean of Students Office, Office of the Provost, Department Chairs

5. Internal assessment of student engagement

Develop benchmarks and intended outcomes for student engagement, and conduct an internal assessment of student engagement activities that have been linked to student success.

Justification:

The NSSE survey was one method of measuring how scholastic challenges and student engagement affected academic and social success. However, there are no benchmarks or outcomes listed in the Evidence Library or in the CPI that indicate Lawrence Tech's expectation for student engagement. Factors such as time allocation; student interaction with faculty; student interaction with each other; student use of campus services; class attendance patterns; and overall patterns of student involvement are not measured for the purpose of improving campus understanding as to their roles in student success. The existing data (e.g., NSSE results) only enable us to compare LTU's student engagement with other universities, rather than with our own expectations. The university has educational goals, but has yet to establish student engagement goals.

Responsibility: Division of Student Affairs, Office of Leadership Programs
Supported by: Institutional Research, Assessment Committee

6. Resource Center for First Year Experience and Education

Center for Teaching and Learning could offer First Year Experience conferences on campus for faculty, including adjuncts, who teach University Seminar and for First Year advisors. First-year education resources should be stored in a designated section within the library.

The Faculty and Staff surveys indicated a low number (2.6 on a 5.0 scale with 3.5 being the goal response) of individuals participating in on-campus professional development regarding the first year. Currently, there is little to no broad campus exposure to external experts regarding the first-year experience or campus-based knowledge or expertise regarding the first year.

From time to time, experts dealing with first-year issues should be invited to campus to give presentations to all who would be interested (e.g., University Seminar instructors, advisors, service organizations). This guest presenter could be invited to ignite discussions on-campus or to wrap-up discussions at the end of the academic semester or year.

The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) could help disseminate peer-to-peer information to faculty. The CTL could offer First Year Experience conferences on-campus for faculty including adjuncts who teach University Seminar and First Year advisors.

To facilitate a growing interest in the first-year experience, a designated area of the university library could be committed to first-year education and experience resources for faculty to share, rather than confining resources to the CTL office.

Responsibility: Center for Teaching and Learning, Library
Supported by: Office of First-Year Programs

7. Conference Reports

Faculty and staff who attend conferences pertaining to pedagogy and first-year experiences should report ideas in a campus-wide forum.

Justification:

Currently, attendance at conferences pertaining to the first year is relatively low. According to the survey results, faculty response averaged 1.6 (on a scale of 1 to 5 with 3.5 being the goal response). While faculty may regularly attend conferences specific to their discipline very few attend conferences regarding the first year experience. Furthermore, the information learned at conferences is not disseminated across campus. A monthly newsletter in which faculty prepare a 1-2 paragraph summary discussing the conference, what they learned, and what they presented could be developed to help initiate discussions of interest between faculty. Presentations from select faculty and staff could take place at the end of each semester for more exposure to information learned at conferences.

Responsibility: Faculty, staff, Office of the Provost
Supported by: Academic departments, colleges

Committee Leaders:

Melissa Grunow, Leadership Curriculum Coordinator
Nicole Villeneuve, Professor of Chemistry

Committee Members:

Gary Cocozzoli, Director of the Library
Karen Evans, Undergraduate Management Director for A&S
Gretchen Maricak, Associate Professor of Architecture
Mary Thomas, Director of Institutional Research and Academic Planning
Philip Vogt, Associate Professor of History
Natalie Zebula, Reference Librarian

Steering Committee Advisors:

Gladys Aviles, First Year Programs Coordinator
Steven Howell, Associate Provost

Recommended Grade: C

Recommended Action Items:

- University Seminar (*High priority*)

Well-established purpose and learning outcomes pertaining to academic, personal, and career success needs to be developed for University Seminar through systemic assessment of the course.

- Advising (*High priority*)

College of Arts and Sciences advisors should be trained by the departments whose students they advise. Consider inviting retired faculty to serve as advisors in their departments.

- Discovery Days (*High priority*)

Students and advisors should be surveyed on the effectiveness of Discovery Days content and delivery format with the intent that Discovery Days should be reconfigured to function more like an orientation and cover some topics introduced in University Seminar, as well as to provide separate sessions specifically for international students.

- Internal assessment of student engagement (*Medium priority*)

Develop benchmarks and intended outcomes for student engagement, and conduct an internal assessment of student engagement activities that have been linked to student success.

- Assessing the early feedback process (*Medium priority*)

Develop a summative report each semester to determine if the early feedback process and timing is effective.

- Resource Center for First Year Experience and Education (*Medium priority*)

Center for Teaching and Learning could offer First Year Experience conferences on campus for faculty, including adjuncts, who teach University Seminar and for First Year advisors. First-year education resources should be stored in a designated section within the library.

- Conference Reports (*Low priority*)

Faculty and staff who attend conferences pertaining to pedagogy and first-year experiences should report ideas in a campus-wide forum.