

# Legislative Report

## PENN STATE BERKS FIRST YEAR ENGAGEMENT PLAN

**Introduction:** The concept of a “first year” experience for incoming students is not new to higher education. For more than 20 years, colleges and universities alike have created innovative and effective ways to support student success during the most critical, first year of attendance. Approximately 90% of all colleges offer a first year seminar, course or experience to their entering class. Why would a college wish to devote its faculty, staff and resources to this effort? The answer is quite simple and compelling. Well designed, first year experiences increase the probability of students successfully completing their first year of study and their probability of graduation. This fact is good for our students as more become successful in their academic and personal endeavors. It is also good for Penn State Berks because we will retain more of our students. We want our students to experience success in all aspects of their lives, graduate and be productive citizens. One of the most commonly cited statistics of higher education is that the majority of students, who begin at a college, never graduate. This is not true at Penn State Berks where approximately 56% graduate within a 6 year period. Significant potential exists to assist more students complete their educational plans. A quality first year experience is the critical first step. There is a considerable body of national research that helps to inform discussions about the most effective ways to introduce and positively engage first time students to college life. Small class size, direct involvement of faculty, peer mentoring, linked courses and content that includes:

- (a) academic skill development
- (b) experiences that reinforce the academic rigor of college study
- (c) psycho-social development

are but a few of the many characteristics of successful programs. Penn State Berks has now been presented with this chance to thoughtfully examine its approach to the first year experience of students. The outcome should benefit all.

**Background:** On April 29, 2008, the University Faculty Senate ratified the following legislation (Appendix B): The existing FYS requirement will be replaced as follows: Each University Park academic college, each of the 19 Commonwealth campuses, and the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), all of which are called “units” for the purposes of this report, shall submit a *First-Year Engagement Plan* for achieving the goals and objectives of first-year engagement, as stated in the 2008 report of the SCGE, for baccalaureate, associate degree, and provisional first-year students enrolled within the unit. To restate, these are as follows:

### Goals

- 1.) To engage students in learning and orient them to the scholarly community from the outset of their undergraduate studies in a way that will bridge to later experiences in their chosen majors,
- 2.) To facilitate students’ adjustment to the high expectations, demanding workload, increased liberties, and other aspects of the transition to college life.

## Objectives

- 1.) To introduce students to university study,
- 2.) To introduce students to Penn State as an academic community, including fields of study and areas of interest available to students,
- 3.) To acquaint students with the learning tools and resources available at Penn State,
- 4.) To provide an opportunity for students to develop relationships with full-time faculty and other students in an academic area of interest to them, and
- 5.) To introduce students to their responsibilities as part of the University community.

**Berks Initiative** In May 2008, Mohamad A. Ansari, the Berks Senate Chair, appointed an ad-hoc committee to draft a First Year Engagement Plan (FYEP). In June 2008, the Ad-Hoc Committee administered a survey to full-time faculty and students. The respondents were asked to participate via the faculty and student list-serves. Sixty (54.5%) full-time faculty and 102 students (3.9%) completed the survey. These response rates are reasonable considering that the intent of the survey was informational and two-thirds of the survey items were open-ended. The purpose of the survey was to: (a) ascertain student and faculty perceptions about the first year seminar, (b) determine if the First Year Seminar (FYS) should be offered, (c) identify campus resources that would help meet the UP FYEP goals and objectives, and (d) solicit additional comments and suggestions about the FYEP at Penn State Berks. At the September 22, 2008 Penn State Berks Faculty Senate meeting a forensic report was presented which listed three models for a first year engagement plan at Penn State Berks. Following that discussion, the model that generated the most support is the one discussed below:

## Penn State Berks First Year Engagement Plan

- The FYEP will be a partnership between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.
- The FYEP will include an orientation program that introduces students to the campus community.
- The FYEP includes a one-credit first year seminar that ideally would be linked to a 3-credit course. (3+1 model).
- Flexibility: Faculty will choose to emphasize any one or combination of the following themes for their FYS:
  - Social and Personal Adjustment to College
  - Topics based FYS (faculty choice of topic)
  - Discipline based professional type seminar
  - Skills based seminar
  - Faculty can choose which course the FYS would be linked to
- Consistency:
  - Engage the students for the equivalent of one credit
  - Limited to 25 students
  - All seminars must meet the goals and objectives specifically stated in the University Senate legislation regarding the First Year Engagement Plan.

## Recommendation:

The Ad hoc committee recommends that the First Year Engagement Plan proposed above be approved by the Penn State Berks Senate.