

Let's Focus More on the First Year

Students enter college hoping it will be a major step up from what they were doing before, writes Roger Martin, but they are often disappointed.

By Roger Martin

Do we have our priorities backward?

It has long been a truism in American higher education that junior and senior year are seen as at the top of the curricular pecking order. That is when the major is taken and, frankly, that is where most of our senior faculty *really* prefer to teach.

First year, on the other hand, is seen by many of us as less important. And because of this, guess who is often assigned general education and introductory courses? Adjuncts, graduate assistants and our most junior faculty.

It's almost as though introductory and general education courses that define the first two years of college are what students get through as quickly as possible so that they can get to the good stuff in their third and fourth years -- that is, upper-level courses and the major.

But this view is out of sync with what many prospective college students and their parents are thinking. In a book I recently wrote about the transition from high school to college, virtually all of the high school seniors I interviewed, along with their parents, hoped that the first year of college would be a major step up from what they were doing in high school. But they are often disappointed.

At many colleges and universities, first-year students take large introductory courses in classes of 100 or more. Teaching is usually done by an instructor lecturing in front of the classroom while students dutifully take notes later to be regurgitated on a quiz. There is very little class participation involving discussion and debate. Writing anything over a few pages is unusual.

Arizona State University has gone even further. They are offering a Global Freshman Academy that allows first-year students to take their courses by the use of MOOCs (massive open online courses). Students won't even have to

leave the comfort of home to complete their first year! First year is seen as a means to an end, with the end being upper-level courses and the major. But I would argue that the first year of college is far more important than this -- perhaps, in some ways, just as important as the final years of college.

Why do I believe this?

- First year is when college students get a sound, cross-disciplinary grounding in the liberal arts and sciences, especially those who go on to vocational majors like engineering or nursing. The liberal arts are where they learn how to think critically and how to communicate effectively, skills that are crucial for a generation that will have many different careers in their lifetime.
- First year to sophomore year is when attrition is at its highest. When I was a college president, 20 percent of first-year students at my institution didn't return for their sophomore year. Some transferred, but many dropped out of college altogether. Why does this happen? In far too many exit interviews I have seen, dropouts say that they found their first-year classes meaningless. I will never forget the admissions tour I took at a well-known university with my youngest daughter. We were in the university's amazing library, and the tour guide, a sophomore, was bragging about the fact that most of his teachers were graduate assistants. "They're really cool," he said, "and understand our generation," whereupon a mother standing next to me uttered sotto voce (but loud enough for everyone to hear), "Why am I paying a small fortune to have my child taught by someone who is only a couple years older than she is?" That parent was articulating what many parents I interviewed for my book were saying: for \$50,000 or more per year, the expectation is that their children will be taught by experienced faculty with the requisite credentials, not by part-time employees or graduate students.

Of course, many of the instructors assigned to introductory or general education courses including adjuncts and graduate students are quite capable teachers. But I believe that first-year students could really benefit from *also* being taught by senior faculty members who excel in the classroom. In many ways -- and I know this is heretical -- assistant professors who just completed their Ph.D. dissertations are probably the most capable of teaching the major that requires up-to-date knowledge of their discipline. Senior faculty, on the other hand, who through wisdom and experience have a wider view of the world are, in my opinion, the most qualified to teach general education

courses designed to give first-year students a broader perspective on human knowledge and, in the process, excite them about what will come later.

Increasingly, colleges are coming to see the crucial importance of the first year. At one college I feature in my book, the freshman writing seminar is largely taught by the college's most distinguished and experienced senior faculty, who are handpicked because they are also master teachers. First-year advising is also being given a new emphasis. At far too many colleges, advising is relegated to new faculty who have limited knowledge of the curriculum or to adjuncts who have equally limited office hours. But many colleges, realizing that solid advising reduces attrition, are assigning experienced faculty who are skilled at advising or professional advisers to first-year students.

For these colleges and universities, the first year has been given a new priority.

I'd like to end by saying that there is money to be raised by rethinking the first year, which should make presidents who are reading this article happy. I believe that philanthropic individuals and foundations, concerned about the cost of higher education and the human waste when students prematurely drop out and don't graduate, will resonate to programs that support first-year students and keep them in college. I'm talking about:

- Innovative first-year general education programs that challenge and excite first-year students through active learning (including discussion, debate and writing) so that they don't want to leave college.
- Endowed writing centers and other support systems that can save kids who come to college with academic deficiencies.
- Endowed first-year opportunity programs that keep underserved and first-generation students in college.

Attrition is enormously expensive. A college of 2,000 students like my own that loses 20 percent of the first-year class potentially forgoes \$5 million or more in tuition, room and board, which for many colleges is more than the development office raises each year in the annual fund.

In summary, by putting more energy and resources into the first year I believe we keep more of our students in college and thereby cut down on the enormous human waste when otherwise good students prematurely leave college with outsize debts they can't pay back because they are unemployable. At the same time we improve our bottom line by not losing so

much in tuition dollars. Most important, we graduate students for whom education from the very beginning is a pleasure, not a hardship to be endured.

Bio

Roger Martin is president emeritus and professor of history at Randolph-Macon College. He is the author of Off to College: A Guide for Parents. This essay is based on a presentation at the Council of Independent Colleges' Institute for Chief Academic and Chief Advancement Officers.