



STRENGTHENING THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE



2018

University of Michigan

Introduction

In alignment with our mission, core values and commitment to excellence, the University of Michigan provides undergraduate students with a supportive and meaningful first-year experience. There are efforts throughout the institution, curricular and co-curricular, that focus on one key deliverable: helping our students thrive in their first year to set the course for robust academic and community engagement, from their pre-arrival to graduation.

We believe community matters for first-year students. With 98% of first-year students residing in the residence halls, Student Life is uniquely poised, often with campus partners, to provide informed support to first-year students as they navigate the critical transition into their new foray of higher education. This array of educational programs and support services constitutes U-M's First-Year Experience (FYE). Michigan's FYE provides opportunity for students to **gain the skills necessary to establish an academic pattern of success, develop sustainable and healthy relationships and engage and connect with a diverse learning community.** In short, U-M's FYE is designed to help students learn "what it means to be an educated individual and the responsibilities that come with gaining a postsecondary education." (Torres & LePeau, 2013)

We know that success for first-year students hinges on building diverse student learning communities where every student is present and engaged. We provide this first by guaranteeing that all first-year students have the opportunity to live in the residence halls, and then by offering intentional FYE programs and supportive resources. This purposeful model facilitates students' transition into this new higher education environment and prepares them for a productive U-M education.

Student Life's five-year strategic plan to improve diversity, equity and inclusion prioritizes strengthening our first-year experience curriculum and communities. This report sets out the details of our key areas of focus over the next phase of our plan, including our efforts to:

- strengthen and expand access to existing successful programs and communities;
- maximize first-year student engagement in learning opportunities; and
- coordinate outreach efforts, activities and events from pre-arrival through the first semester.

This briefing document defines first-year student success, a robust first-year experience and the considerations informing our efforts moving forward. It includes background about the impact of intentionally-designed FYE programs and existing U-M FYE efforts and their learning impact. In support of first-year student success, this report addresses the importance of strengthening first-year student presence and engagement in FYE.

Defining First-Year Student Success

At Michigan, student success is measured by factors beyond academic performance and graduation. We want students to thrive. Major findings in a national study affirm this framework that long-term student success rests on a student's personal, academic and interpersonal engagement. (Schreiner, 2013) The foundation for student thriving is built in the first year.

Eight demonstrated student behaviors define first-year student success (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005):

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- Developing academic and intellectual competences
- Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
- Exploring identity development
- Exploring a career and lifestyle
- Maintaining personal health and wellness
- Developing civic responsibility
- Considering spiritual dimensions of life
- Engaging diversity

First-Year Experience Program Impact on Student Success

Scholars are aligned on the positive and increasing potential of FYE programs to provide an effective transition to college by building community, supporting student learning, facilitating academic success and encouraging student engagement. Additional measures of success for first-year experience programs, include:

- establishing an “ethos” and a way of life (Van Zyl, 2011)
- retention and persistence into the second year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)
- learning what it means to be an educated individual and the responsibilities that come with gaining a postsecondary education (Torres & LePeau, 2013)
- written and oral communication, information literacy, problem solving, civic engagement, and intercultural and global understanding (Kinzie, 2013)

Students engaging in first-year experience programs are more successful than their peers who do not participate in these types of programs (Brownell, & Swaner, 2010). Those students engaging in FYE programs succeed at: having more positive relationships with faculty, becoming more knowledgeable about and making better use of campus resources, and exhibiting better time-management skills. In addition, students learn to become active learners by identifying their intellectual interests, reflecting on their learning and considering how to apply their knowledge to new settings.

Michigan’s First-Year Experience

Through Student Life and in partnership with academic units, U-M’s first-year experience provides structured opportunities for first-year students to learn and practice the building blocks for a successful and fulfilling educational experience. Michigan’s first-year experience provides opportunity for students to **gain the skills necessary to establish an academic pattern of success, develop sustainable and healthy relationships and engage and connect with a diverse learning community.** Current offerings aligned with these aims include:

Gaining Skills for an Academic Pattern of Success

- **Michigan Learning Communities.** These academic programs partnered with and offered within Housing provide an opportunity for students to integrate their classroom learning experiences with their residential life, allowing them to explore a specific field of study or area of interest. MLCs include: Health Sciences Scholars Program, Living Arts, Lloyd Hall Scholars Program, Michigan Community Scholars Program, Michigan Research and Discovery Scholars, Women In Science and Engineering Residence Program, Honors Program, Residential College.
- **Making the Most of Michigan class (Applied Liberal Arts 171):** . This one-credit, seven-week course is taught through the University’s Residence Halls and focuses on student goal-setting and navigating UM’s campus based on those goals, understanding social identities, and practicing the skills of reflection and meaning-making. This class takes place in conjunction with ALA 471, a course for the peer facilitators of ALA 171.
- **Ready, Set, Intern!** This workshop through the University Career Center helps first-year students begin their professional journey and explore their skills, interests, and values related to future endeavors.

Developing Sustainable and Healthy Relationships

- **Residence Education.** Annually, Residence hall peer educators provide over 2,000 workshops, programs, meetings and activities in residence halls.
- **Online Courses AlcoholEdu & Haven.** Prior to coming to campus, students receive prevention education on alcohol and other drug use and sexual misconduct. Approximately 96% of first-year students complete these courses.
- **Relationship Remix.** As a part of our sexual misconduct prevention work, Relationship Remix is a peer-facilitated program in all the residence halls that builds students’ skills on communicating their values and understanding healthy relationship behaviors.
- **First Ascent.** This Outdoor Adventure program through Rec Sports takes students on hiking/outdoor experiences before they move-in as first-year students.

Engaging and Connecting with a Diverse Learning Community

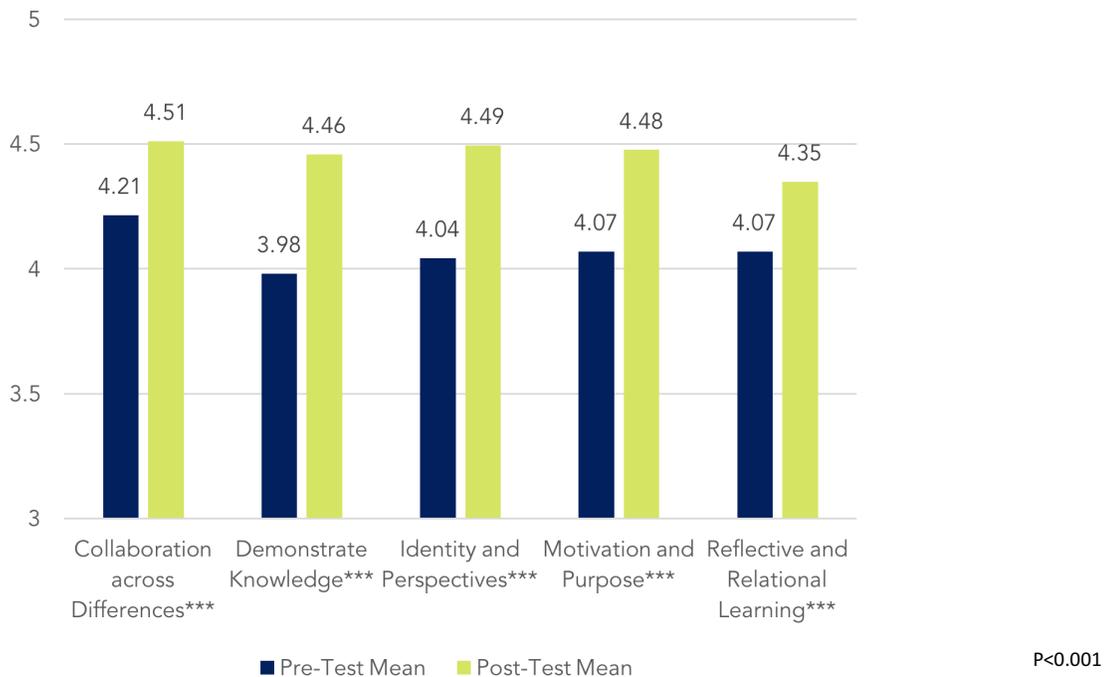
- **Change it Up!** In order to build a campus culture of intervening in harmful situations, Change it Up! uses interactive theater for students to practice noticing harm, including microaggressions, and become active bystanders.
- **Theme Communities.** Students can live in one of our 10 theme communities to tailor their residential experience to their interests and needs. Three examples are the First-Gen Theme for first-generation college students, Innovation Theme focused on entrepreneurship, and a Multicultural Theme bringing students of diverse backgrounds together in community.
- **MLead Academy.** This week-long experience for 650 students living in Housing provides students an opportunity to learn about leadership and assist others as they move into Housing.

U-M Student Learning Outcomes

In order to measure the impact of FYE efforts, students are assessed along six key learning outcomes utilizing a pre/post test methodology. These outcomes are in alignment with the established aims of higher education, as defined by AAC&U.

Collaboration Across Differences	Demonstrate Knowledge	Health and Wellness	Motivation & Purpose	Reflective & Relational Learner	Identities & Perspectives
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As an example of impact, surveys administered before and after completion of the class Making the Most of Michigan (Applied Liberal Arts 171) showed that students make statistically significant gains on all of the learning outcomes. A separate study suggests many of these gains are long-lasting. (Figure 1: Change in mean scores on ALA 171 pre-survey to post-survey 2014-2016):



Future Directions: Strengthen the First-Year Experience by 2020

An even more comprehensive and cohesive first-year experience will help students “establish an ethos and a way of life, through which [they] will experience the transition into university life.” (Van Zyl, 2011). U-M is working to make the first-year experience for students even more robust by building on the existing model, which is grounded in theory and best practice and informed by evidence of impact on learning outcomes.

Our multi-year actions over the next phase of our plan include refining assessment of current efforts; increasing the capacity of and connections between current successful curricular and co-curricular initiatives; and improving student access to and engagement with programs. We are currently focusing on:

- Providing more opportunities for first-year students to integrate their classroom learning experiences with their residential life by expanding access to Michigan Living and Learning Communities
- Helping more first-year students navigate and make meaning of their Michigan experience by increasing student access to Making the Most of Michigan, a goal-setting course in the residence halls
- Offering more first-year students the opportunity to tailor their residential experience to their needs, interests and diverse backgrounds by developing more Theme Communities in the residence halls (current themes include First-Gen, Innovation, and Multicultural)

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- Helping more first-year students explore their skills, interests, and values related to future endeavors by prioritizing University Career Center's programs devoted to helping students begin their professional journey
- Developing increased student intercultural competence by introducing the Intercultural Development Inventory pilot in more schools and colleges
- Providing more students with the opportunity to serve and learn about their surrounding community and meet new people by offering new community immersion programs during the first semester

In alignment with this effort, U-M will be adjusting the timeline for recruitment of first-year students by fraternities and sororities beginning in January 2020. This affects about 2,000 first-year students annually.

Successful Transitions

Successful implementation of the strategies outlined in the next phase of our five-year plan to strengthen the first-year experience will require continued investment in academic partnerships and institutional commitment to necessary change. We remain committed to providing a best-in-class first-year experience for our students. We are hearing from our students what works and we will continue to assess, refine and expand our programs to honor our commitment to academic excellence.

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