

## SWOT Report

On Friday, January 16, 2004, members of the Great Starts learning community met in the Faculty Professional Development center. The purpose of the meeting was to brainstorm ideas for improving first-year student experiences at Kent State University. In order to develop ideas, each person in attendance was given a worksheet on which to jot ideas about current strengths and weaknesses in Kent State students' first year experiences, as well as future possibilities for first year students, such as opportunities and threats to the first year experiences.

When responses to the worksheets were compiled, there were many common responses and common themes among the replies given by members of Great Starts. This report will discuss the commonalities among the responses on the worksheets and some ideas on the present and future of first year students' experiences at Kent State University. In some cases, the same issue or theme is seen as a strength by one person yet mentioned as a weakness by another person. Both perspectives on such issues will be discussed, although no bias will be shown toward one perspective, in an effort to allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions on the issues at hand.

### **Current State of First Year Student Experiences**

After reflection upon the current first-year student experience at Kent State, there were several areas that were seen as strengths by members of Great Starts. The orientation program was noted by several people as a strength. More specifically, the student leaders are viewed as a strength of the orientation program, as well as the design of the program and the timing of the program in August. In addition, the program in its

entirety is seen as a strength, and the entire program was mentioned specifically by three people. Orientation in general was mentioned as a strength by eight people.

Support services available to students were an area that was seen by many people as an asset to the first year students' experience. Included under the category of support services were advising, which was mentioned by four people as a strength, support services in general, which was mentioned by three people, services for disabled students, and an overall caring atmosphere and a faculty willingness to help first year students.

On the other hand, support services were also seen as a weakness in the first year experience by some Great starts members. Five people noted that students are not directed quickly to program advisors, and students are not seen by advisors soon enough. In addition, it can be challenging to locate supports, and students may not be aware of what supports are available.

The campus was seen as a strength in the first year experience, with seven people mentioning the beauty of the campus, the location of Kent State, the city of Kent itself, the size of the school, or the proximity of the campus to students' hometowns.

Three members of Great Starts saw the proximity of campus to students' homes as a weakness, because students remain attached to parents. In addition, the large size of the school was seen as a weakness by some people because of the lack of community. It was also mentioned that there is a lack of activities in the town of Kent itself, and a lack of support in town.

Academics at Kent State were mentioned by nine people, including four responses about the strength of the academic programs, and other responses including the strength of the honors program and the value of a degree. In addition to strong programs, another

common response was a variety of programs available. Students have many choices and opportunities available, in academic programs and in the overall first-year experience at Kent State. Six people mentioned a variety of choices in academic or extra-curricular activities.

Although academics were mentioned as a strength, the topic of faculty appeared more often as a weakness than a strength. The most common response (with four responses) about faculty was that there is minimal tenure-track faculty involvement with first year students. This could be due to a lack of incentive for tenure track faculty to teach first-year classes. Other issues mentioned about faculty were the occurrences of poor teaching and of faculty who are indifferent. To be fair, students were mentioned as a weakness by three people, with many first-year students coming to Kent State unprepared for the workload of college courses. A lack of student preparedness for college was a common theme in worksheets and in the discussion at the meeting.

In addition to student preparedness, a lack of student connection to Kent State was a weakness that was mentioned many times by Great Starts members. Students tend to feel disconnected to Kent State, possibly due to large classes, which was an issue noted by three people. Another major issue that could contribute to students' lack of connection is a lack of concern for commuters, an issue which was brought up on the worksheet by six people. In addition, Great Starts Members mentioned that students do not feel an instant loyalty to Kent State, there is a lack of tradition, and there is a lack of department contact with first year students.

Along with a lack of connection with first year students, a lack of coordination among academic programs was also cited as a weakness in students' experiences. Two

people mentioned a lack of coordination among programs, and a lack of funding for coordination was also noted. It was also suggested that there should be greater coordination among regional campuses and the main campus.

Some other issues that were noted by Great Starts members were technology, which was seen by one person as a strength and one as a weakness. It was also mentioned that financial competition with two-year colleges is a weakness of the current program, but tuition wavers and scholarships were mentioned as a strength and a possible remedy to the financial strain that first year students face. The final main weakness that was noted on the worksheets and also discussed at length in the meeting was the timing of information. In other words, first year students do not get the information necessary for success soon enough in their first year.

### **Future State of First Year Student Experiences**

In addition to current strengths and weaknesses of the first year student experience at Kent State, possible threats and opportunities were noted by Great Starts members. Many of the threats and opportunities fell into the same categories that were mentioned as strengths and weaknesses.

Large classes and an impersonal atmosphere were noted as threats to first year students by five people. Lack of connection, and lack of coordination were also cited as threats by four people. One possible remedy to students' feelings of lack of connection and the issue of lack of community would be to group students with other people in their majors sooner. An increase in collaboration between areas could also help students feel more connected, and could foster a greater sense of community.

In order to increase faculty involvement with first year students, there could be more small seminars taught by tenure-track faculty in their specific area of expertise. There could also be an overall revision of first year English and lower-level math classes.

Another threat that faces first year students is an overall unawareness of the demands of college-level work, the newness of the college social atmosphere, and the transition from home to college. Several members of great Starts addressed this problem with possible opportunities for improvement. There could be more activities for students and opportunities to assist students in the adjustment to college life. Some ways to accomplish this would be through partnerships with local high schools, such as the library instruction course that is currently held for local high school students. In addition, Kent State could take advantage of the time between a student's acceptance to the school and the beginning of the school year for additional orientation. Such orientation could possible take place through an online course. Another possibility is to include sessions about getting prepared for college life in the current orientation.

Numb	Score	Area	Text
27	8	O	Group first-year students sooner with others in their major (A&S in particular)
33	7	O	Linking students and professional learning communities
28	6	O	Offer small seminars for first-year students taught by tenure-track faculty in their expertise
36	5	O	Opportunities for informal students, staff, faculty interactions
29	4	O	Help students prior to beginning college (partnerships with local high schools, offer online courses to set expectations)
31	3	O	Group cohorts of students in first-year classes
39	3	O	Support for second year students (transition from 1st to 2nd year)
30	2	O	Establish more learning communities
32	2	O	Have students become meaningfully engaged in learning and research
35	2	O	Video clips made by students to cover FYE "Tips" (Redone every year)
37	2	O	Develop an orientation focus on commuters, cohort scheduling
38	2	O	Provide support for faculty to take students to professional conferences
34	1	O	Faculty offices in residence halls
45	7	S	Residential campus in small town, close to urban centers
49	6	S	Renewed interest in FYE, learning communities, etc.
41	5	S	Advising (formal, informal, caring attitude of faculty and staff)
43	5	S	Variety and strength of academic programs
50	5	S	Good people who want to help
51	5	S	In some majors students mentor each other
48	4	S	Excellent faculty and staff
52	3	S	Student employment serves as another "anchor" for students
40	2	S	University Orientation (student instructors; early start, academic, social, and personal transitions)
44	2	S	Variety and choices of extra-curricular activities
46	2	S	Student services offices are strong (career services, campus life, evening advising, COSO)
54	2	S	Physical campus is "nice"
42	1	S	Proximity to hometowns offers personal support and independence
47	1	S	Stronger academic commitment of freshmen (2.5 or above admissions)
53	1	S	We have a better connection to our own history and culture that we share with new students
18	10	T	Difficult academic, social, and personal transitions challenge time management and values of freshmen
14	7	T	Too many large classes
16	7	T	Students are unprepared academically and socially for college-level work
24	5	T	Determining balance between Kent as a business vs Kent as an educational community
23	4	T	Faculty and staff lack of understanding of student growth and development
15	3	T	Impersonal atmosphere, lack of connections
19	3	T	External pressures (family, finances, health, work)
26	3	T	Reappointment, tenure, promotion, rewards do not emphasize freshmen needs
25	2	T	Lack of integration and consistency within University structure (jsilo)
17	1	T	Faculty unawareness of multiple student learning styles
20	1	T	Lack of self-confidence
21	1	T	Bad first semester
22	1	T	Lack of knowledge and how to make decisions
4	12	W	Poor teaching and indifferent faculty distance students (department responsibility is ignored)
5	8	W	Lack of coordination among programs and campuses leaves students lost
11	7	W	too many things to do, spread too thin, not taking enough time for people-priorities
6	6	W	Lack of connections and community for commuters
8	3	W	Not knowing how to get information
2	2	W	Advising and support (not soon or often enough, student don't seek assistance)
3	2	W	Impersonal, large institution mixed with academic apathy fails to connect students
12	2	W	Too many adjunct faculty and/or TT faculty who won't teach LD (?)
13	2	W	Too much "one size fits all freshman." Need to address differences (commuters, non-traditional
7	1	W	Course schedule availability
9	1	W	Large size
10	1	W	Too many options, need to focus

