

Report of the First Year Experience Task Force—December 2008

Task Force Membership and Charge

In the spring of 2007 President Oden, on behalf of the CSA, College Council, the Division of Student Life, and ECC, created the First Year Student Experience Task Force (FYSE), with the observation that:

Over the years Carleton College has undertaken a variety of efforts to provide information and experiences designed to prepare new students to thrive both academically and socially in this community (e.g., New Student Week). While these efforts have been successful, periodically, we as a College should review these efforts and programs in light of Carleton's growing emphasis on learning outcomes and early integration of first-year students into the Carleton community.

He gave the task force the following charge:

- Meet with the NSW 2008 planning group during the spring term.
- Review community proposals for ideas that could be incorporated into NSW 2009 and/or a program throughout the year (the proposals will be collected by the NSW 2008 planning group).
- Observe NSW 2008.
- Assess the advising and orientation needs of first year students and propose a program that addresses these needs throughout the first year, including academic orientation, advising, and social and residential orientation.
- Make recommendations about all aspects of NSW, including: arrival dates, advising prior to classes, testing, registration, the Common Reading exercise format, academic and residence life orientation components.

The task force consisted of the following students, faculty, and staff: Nimo Ali, Class of 2011 – CSA; Katie Blanchard, Class of 2010 – CSA; Ellen Esch, Class of 2011 – CSA; Ariel Vandevoorde, Class of 2009 – ECC; Chico Zimmerman (co-chair), Professor of Classical Languages; Deborah Gross, Professor of Chemistry; Clara Hardy, Professor of Classical Languages; Joe Baggot (co-chair), Associate Dean of Students; Liz Ciner, Associate Dean of the College; Heather Tompkins, Reference and Instruction Librarian; Steve Wisener, Director for Residential Life; T. Todd Masman, Director for Campus Activities; Meg Otten, Senior Associate Dean of Admissions.

Process

Consistent with our charge, the majority of our work and discussions focused on NSW, with a few conversations on how to extend orientation activities into the rest of the first term and first year. FYSE met several times in spring term to hear about how planning was going for New Student Week (NSW) '08 and to arrange the logistics for observing it. Additionally, arrangements were made for members of the task force to observe orientation activities at other nearby institutions (Grinnell, Macalester, St Olaf, and University of Wisconsin River Falls). The chance to observe other institutions' orientation programs proved very valuable in our own conversations about Carleton's program and informed many of the recommendations we make below.

After observing NSW, the task force met weekly during fall term of 2008. These meetings were a chance to share observations on NSW activities and to consider data collected from numerous surveys conducted by Campus Activities Director T. Todd Masman using Student Voice. There is a summary of the various survey results provided in Appendix A, and the complete data from these surveys are included in the appended data CD. We will report significant findings below where appropriate. We also made use of the standards and guidelines for student orientation programs produced by The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (included on the data CD). While we had hoped to conduct student focus groups to complement the surveys, the unexpected departure of T. Todd Masman made this impractical.

Near the end of fall term FYSE also met with Leon Lunder and Petra Crosby to discuss issues that arise specific to fall term athletes and international students who arrive before NSW and whose introduction to campus necessarily involves the complicating factors of scheduling and prior experience of campus life.

Observations of NSW

NSW has many moving parts that involve several different stakeholders, each with time-sensitive needs. This yields a complex agenda that requires an enormous amount of good will and cooperation. We wish to begin, therefore, by affirming that NSW has been very successful in helping incoming students make the transition to campus life smoothly. The survey data show that 64% of respondents strongly or moderately agreed with the statement “Orientation was an enjoyable experience,” and 69% gave NSW an overall rating of excellent or good. It was clear to us that all the constituencies involved worked together to make the experience as transparent and stress-free as possible for the students and their families, despite considerable turnover in the office of Campus Activities recently and the added complication of an all-class institutional assessment initiative.

The FYSE had at least one member (frequently more) observe every event on the official NSW schedule. After comparing notes we agreed on the following strengths of the program:

- In general we felt that it was good for all incoming students and their parents to hear the same message about life at Carleton at the same time on day one
- We also felt that there was good overall balance of time devoted to the academic mission of the college, institutional values, and student life
- We thought that there was a good balance between rules, realities, and aspirations
- We admired the active involvement of the President of the College, and we felt that our senior administrators in general did an excellent job welcoming students and their parents
- This was the first year that NSW had both an official opening and an official closing, and we thought this was very appropriate
- Some particularly effective activities we noted: “Not on our Campus,” The Welcome Tent, Gould Library’s scavenger hunt, Activities Fair and Academic and Support Fair

Our own observations were generally consistent with the survey data, and we feel that every effort should be made to continue the features identified above in future NSW activities. We also made the following observations about areas that we felt needed addressing:

- Day one, while generally welcoming and well-coordinated felt too crowded, especially for students who arrive later in the day and do not have time to unpack (literally and figuratively)
- The following days seemed disjointed, with many activities that had little connection to each other that would be apparent to new students.
- There seems to be too many different “groupings” (NSW, advising, floor, and common reading) for many students to feel as though they connect to any particular one. We noted that NSW groups lose a lot of participation after the first day.
- Continuity was further hampered by interruptions (advising, auditions, etc.) that drew students away from scheduled activities
- While diversity issues are woven throughout NSW activities, they are not talked about in a structured, intentional way.
- The Student Life skits, while well-attended and well-executed, emphasized a “work hard/play hard” ethic that might be problematic in some respects.
- There was very little programming that spoke directly to the academic expectations and challenges of the college classroom.
- Apart from advising, faculty seemed largely absent from NSW. This is especially apparent in the Common Reading groups.
- There was some confusion about actual times for events (different in different published information).

- While the days were full, we felt that new students needed to have more things to do in the evening.

While we note that a jam-packed, slightly eccentric 5-day program may be a very accurate introduction to life at Carleton, we feel that some re-structuring of NSW could accomplish just as effective a transition that might feel less hectic and stressful for everyone involved.

Recommendations for NSW—Short Term

Making recommendations for NSW is complicated by the fact that it is hard to know to *whom* one is making them. Currently planning for NSW is housed with the office of Campus Activities and they have carried out this task with dedication and skill. Given the vital importance of this orientation to the entire campus, however, and the extensive coordination of very disparate stakeholders that it requires, we believe it is time to create a broader committee to carry out NSW. This leads to our **first general recommendation**: Planning for NSW needs to be coordinated and executed by a Steering Committee whose members are drawn from all the constituencies who have a stake in orientation and who meet regularly throughout the year. While all parties have been acting in good faith (as we noted above), it is clear to us that NSW is simply too large, complex, and important to be left to a single office. We recommend that the steering committee be composed of representatives from Student Life, Campus Activities, Dean of the College Office, faculty, and Academic Support Services, with co-chairs representing both the social and academic elements of orientation. We are especially concerned to have a stronger presence of academic voices (faculty) to provide direction on issues such as academic fair, common reading, academic advising, language placement, music placement, academic orientation, and other issues. The Steering Committee will also decide which office or offices will attend to the logistical details of NSW.

This new steering committee needs to be guided by a clear set of goals that support the mission of the college overall through orientation activities. These goals need to be assessable to determine the effectiveness of NSW and to provide ideas about areas of strength and areas that need improvement. To that end we make our **second general recommendation**: The steering committee needs to adopt a Statement of Purpose that will guide its planning for future NSW's and provide the basic theory behind our practice. We propose the following statement of purpose:

The purpose of New Student Week is to provide incoming students with experiences and information that prepare them to thrive both academically and socially in their first year at Carleton and beyond. We accomplish this through activities and interactions designed to introduce new students and their families to the values of the institution, as they are embodied in, and enacted by, the people, programs and lived experience of our campus. Our hope is that by the end of the orientation period, students have begun to situate themselves in this rich environment with a clearer sense of how their own talents and abilities can flourish and grow.

Specifically, new students should feel that they have one or more reliable sources of information for academic issues and institutional policies and regulations. They should have an awareness of the support structures on campus for social, emotional, and physical health and well-being. They should begin to gain a first-hand understanding of the rewards and challenges of living and working within a diverse community and begin the process of making social connections within such a community. While students may not get all of their questions answered or anxieties addressed, we hope that they enter their first term confident that they can find the help and resources they need to succeed.

With this statement of purpose guiding their thinking, the steering committee can begin planning this spring term for the following summer and fall's activities. This statement should also be shared with incoming students and their parents as part of the orientation material that currently is provided in advance of NSW.

To the greatest extent possible, orientation activities should be designed and executed with this statement of purpose in mind.

In addition to those two general recommendations, FYSE has ideas for improving NSW in both the short term and the longer term. Our short-term recommendations include:

- **Unpack the first day.** Students need more informal time to unpack and get to know their roommates. Information sessions for parents and family that we currently hold after the opening welcome in the Chapel can be held starting in the early afternoon. The formal welcome in the Chapel can begin later in the afternoon, with the formal send-off of parents coming soon after the general welcome.
- **Limit the groupings.** We believe that much of the disjointed feeling of NSW can be reduced by making just two basic groupings for students—one social and the other academic. We believe that the current hall floor group should be the social group that students bond with and feel a connection to in their first week. This should be balanced by an academic grouping that is currently the advising group associated with an academic advisor. This second group could become the logical home for a common reading discussion, and could be associated with a first-year seminar.
- **Make the days cohere.** In our observations at other campuses, we noticed that the various days of orientation had a certain “theme” or clear goal for the day. We believe this is a good model and suggest that the new steering committee find a way to make each day revolve around a theme or task (or set of related tasks).
- **Keep the Wednesday-Sunday model.** While it is beset with its own issues and problems, we did not find compelling evidence to suggest changing the basic schedule of NSW from its current format. The complex interplay of early arrivals (athletes and international students) as well as the timing of the Labor Day holiday makes early consultation and communication among the different stakeholders essential, as we noted above in the suggesting the formation of a steering committee for NSW.
- **Better use of NSW leaders.** As we noted above, we suggest an academic and a social grouping for incoming students. We believe that NSW leaders could supply much needed cohesion to the academic portion of NSW, since they currently receive training about academic rules and regulations, but are rarely called upon to share their knowledge in this regard. Current advising groups only meet together one time as a group, and we feel that this is a missed opportunity. NSW leaders could supplement meetings with academic advisors, not only during NSW, but also throughout the first term as part of an extended orientation to academic life at Carleton.
- **Focused diversity event.** As we stated above, it is clear that the college values diversity and welcomes students from all backgrounds to campus. Finding one’s place in a diverse campus is a challenge that is not completed in a single orientation period, but the groundwork (and ground rules) should be undertaken in a focused and intentional way during NSW. We suggest an event on the model of “Not on our Campus,” which could be complemented by events later in the fall term and the rest of the year. One suggestion might be to have a “Chili Night” event during NSW to get students acclimated to the notion of talking about difficult issues with their classmates.
- **Whither the Common Reading?** It is clear that for many years much of the work on diversity issues during NSW was located in the Common Reading. While there exists a small and very dedicated group of facilitators for these discussions who wish to see it continue, we believe it may be time to either retire the Common Reading, or rethink its format. Student response to this year’s reading, which moved away from the idea of diversity, was mixed. We believe that this should be a high quality experience in line with the academic experiences of our students during the school year. The problem has been insufficient faculty participation, which might arise from a variety of reasons, but it makes the job of finding enough willing discussion facilitators difficult. We offer some further thoughts on the future of the Common Reading below in our section on longer-term suggestions.
- **Keep Academic and Support Fair in some form.** Student response to the Academic and Support Fair this year was quite positive, and we noted that members of the support staff found it especially useful to connect with students early on in their time on campus. We also note that language departments and interdisciplinary programs and concentrations find this event to be a

good place to heighten awareness of their offerings. This leads to some ideas for further exploration by the steering committee:

- We observed at St Olaf a “foreign language breakfast” that allowed students time to interact with faculty from different language departments prior to registration. This allowed faculty to “intervene” in decisions about language before enrollments were set.
- St Olaf also provided an opportunity for students to visit different departmental presentations on their programs and learning goals. Students had 4 half-hour slots during which they could choose departments or programs that interested them. They then attended presentations by those departments or programs. This might be a more congenial approach to what goes on at Academic Fair
- **Provide more guidance about classroom/academic expectations.** As it stands, NSW gives students a good overall introduction to campus life and issues, with the exception of actual classroom experience and expectations. Surveyed students responded to the statement “Orientation helped me to know what to expect socially at Carleton” with a mean response of 4.60 on a 5-point scale (5 being strongly agree). The same statement regarding academic expectations only scored 3.96. We believe this gap needs to be addressed in a focused and intentional manner. We recommend adding a panel presentation by faculty and students designed to give incoming first-years an interactive opportunity to form clear expectations about engaging with faculty and peers in an academic setting, work load, time management, office hours, and academic honesty. Such a panel might begin with some formal remarks (e.g., 3 common mistakes made, and 3 successful strategies employed, by first year students) and then move on to a question and answer period. This is a format currently used to orient new faculty to campus, and we believe it would be very productive for new students as well.
- **Monitor needs of early arrivals.** Our conversation with Leon Lunder and Petra Crosby highlighted some of the special considerations for students arriving early to campus. These students necessarily come to campus before NSW and receive their own orientation to campus in advance of the rest of the incoming class. Worries include the tendency of these students to skip some NSW events and to form their own social groups that incoming students find hard to break in to. While this may present challenges, continued clear communication should minimize these issues. One specific suggestion we have is that the cohort of NSW leaders include several international students, and specifically students who served as international student leaders during the International Student Orientation, to help signal the importance of participation in NSW events and to help shape social activities that are sensitive to the needs and concerns of international students. Another suggestion is to make sure that there is minimal duplicate programming during the two orientations.
- **Continue with summer registration for now.** We found it difficult to come to a strong consensus on the issue of summer registration. We are aware of the competing demands of curricular planning, which is greatly aided by summer registration, and meaningful and responsive academic advising, which is not. Survey data suggests that a significant portion (28%) of incoming student who responded to the survey were “somewhat” or “very” uncomfortable with summer registration. While this number seems high to us, we do not have comparison data for other forms of registration, and we decided not to make a specific recommendation for change in the short term. We do, however, have some recommendations for ways to improve registration in the long term, and they are discussed below. The faculty may wish to take up this particular issue for consideration independent of this FYSE report.
- **More specific suggestions.** We realize that NSW is not a limitless space to be filled with all the good ideas we encountered and considered. Here, nevertheless, is an abbreviated list of additional recommendations:
 - **Make space for institutional assessment.** NSW’08 provided the college with the opportunity to participate in the Wabash National Liberal Arts Experience Study, a longitudinal assessment of student experiences and learning that will be vital to the college’s overall efforts at institutional assessment. While Carleton won’t be involved in such a demanding study every year, we believe that each incoming class should be made aware of the importance of this kind of assessment and their participation in generating assessment data. A culture of reflective practice should begin with a student’s arrival on campus, and it should be an intentional and expected part of NSW.

- **Make support services visible.** Part of becoming a self-directed learner is knowing when and where to find help. The sooner students get connected to our librarians, technologists, and tutors the better they will succeed. Our support staff needs to have a strong presence in NSW.
- **Use the web.** While many students surveyed found the college website to be useful. Many had specific ideas about how to make it better. In general we support the idea that students be provided with more detailed information about the college in general, and NSW in particular. Perhaps with some information coming in the form of video messages or useful vignettes about transition concerns.
- **NSW feedback is vital.** As a final note, the NSW surveys have provided a wealth of detailed information about student experience, and we strongly endorse their continued use, along with focus groups, to assess the effectiveness of NSW in the future. Analyzing this data should be the main function of the steering committee during the fall and winter term in preparation for spring planning. In fact, the new steering committee should start its deliberations this spring with a review of the findings of the surveys from the fall of 2008 in addition to the recommendations of FYSE.

While this list of recommendations may appear to be long, most of the suggestion will require only small shifts and tweaks to leverage what we already do into a more effective orientation program.

Recommendations for NSW—Longer Term

The FYSE has tried to separate practical, immediate recommendations from those that require more discussion among certain constituencies, or the commitment of more resources, or both. We are aware that our conversations have been taking place within the context of a larger conversation on campus about adopting new graduation requirements, and some of our conversations included brainstorming about ways that NSW, and indeed the entire first year, might change in response to new curricular requirements. The first and most promising of these changes is a mandatory first-year seminar.

If the college were to adopt a mandatory first-year seminar, we believe that many of the academic elements of NSW could be gathered into the purview of the faculty who would be teaching those seminars in the fall term. In the ideal situation we would incorporate elements of NSW more directly into the curriculum, just as the social elements have been incorporated into the co-curriculum. With some coordination, these seminars could serve as the locus for advising and the immediate, practical concerns about getting off to a good start in college, as well as a more extended orientation to academic life in general. We also felt that the logical home for some type of common reading could be the first-year seminars, with the initial meeting to discuss the reading serving as an introduction to classroom expectations in general. We also discussed the possibility of the current NSW leaders each being connected to a specific advising/seminar group as a way to extend the orientation and mentoring of new students beyond the classroom.

If advising were to be linked with the first-year seminars, one way to ameliorate some of the anxiety about summer registration from both students and faculty would be to have faculty seminar instructors more closely involved in advising students in advance of the actual registration in August. This would require an extra commitment from faculty during the summer, and probably from the college as well, and so we realize that this suggestion requires more extensive conversations than FYSE was designed to have. Nevertheless, several of our peer institutions do manage to have mandatory first-year seminars linked to advising, and the educational benefits that this provides outweigh, in our opinion, the costs. If the college decided to move away from summer registration, faculty leading first-year seminars could still be utilized as academic advisors during NSW, with the aid of NSW leaders.

Perhaps paired closely with a first-year seminar, we also imagined the opportunity for students to work in peer-led discussion groups on topics of diversity as a complement to a RAD-type requirement. ECC is currently proposing a pilot program of a similar model based upon the successful Inter-Group Relations program at the University of Michigan. It might be possible for incoming students interested in pursuing some form of inter-group dialogue to be housed together to make these conversations even easier to initiate. In any case, we believe that issues of diversity, community and equity require ongoing engagement by

students, and we would like to see some longer-term program that can build upon the diversity event that we propose for NSW.

In short, a new set of graduation requirements offers the possibility to re-imagine the way our students become acquainted with the academic domain of the college. If the faculty votes in new graduation requirements, we urge whatever implementation committee, or committees, that come into being to be flexible and to be willing to consider our recommendations in designing the first-year experience.

What we did not come to agreement on

One of the issues that we did not discuss very much, and for which we only had limited (though quite positive) input from students was the pre-frosh trip. FYSE in general believes that issues of equity were served by the discontinuation, but we also believe that the learning that come from such a shared experience is invaluable and ought not to be lost entirely. We would encourage the college to consider alternative ways to make this experience available to all students, either before NSW or after they have been on campus a few weeks. Possibilities include day trips, service opportunities, as well as a more extended experience, perhaps over mid-term break. In Appendix B we have included a sample plan, designed by one of our student members, that incorporates many elements of our recommendations above, as well as a pre-frosh trip element. We hope that this will prove useful to the new Steering Committee in its planning.

Another element that has been demonstrated to be effective in helping students make the transition to college (especially students from high schools with fewer resources) are summer “bridge” programs. Given the resources involved in such an undertaking, FYSE did not feel that it was empowered to recommend even a pilot program of this type. Nevertheless, we believe that bridge programs have great potential to the level the playing field for a student body that comes from an increasingly diverse set of backgrounds, and we feel that the college might wish to explore options in this area.

Final thoughts

The work of orienting students to campus can be daunting, but it is also vital to the success of our institution. NSW is a place where many separate domains on campus must intersect, and their competing claims for time and attention can cause unintended tension and anxiety among our new students. We have been impressed during our work over the past three months with the enthusiasm and good will among all the various offices and departments of the college to work together toward the common goal of helping our students make the transition to a new environment. We are confident, therefore, that the recommendations that we have made will be received with the good will in which they are offered. Members of the FYSE are ready to meet with the various constituencies and committees who commissioned the report or who read the report and would like to have further conversations about our findings. We welcome the opportunity to help strengthen this important institutional process.

Respectfully submitted,
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for
The First Year Student Experience Task Force