Best Practices in First Year Experience Programs
compiled by Heidi Leming, September 2009

- Living-Learning Communities/Linked Learning Communities/Clusters (NC State, UVA, USC, GA State, Univ. of MI, UC-Berkley)
  - GA State & Kennesaw State
  - Atlanta-Based Learning (GA State)
  - Michigan Community Scholars Program
  - Food for Thought (UC Berkley)
  - Residentally based programs where students also live together (GA State, NC State, UNC, FSU)

  *Great resource on-line through the Washington Center at Evergreen State that has a database of learning communities and resources in the U.S. [www.evergreen.edu/washcenter](http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter)*

- Common Reading Programs (NC State, James Madison, USC, UW – Madison, UT-Austin, Univ. of FL, UNC-Chapel Hill, GA Tech, UC Berkley)
  - Book read over the summer prior to starting class
  - Sections of first year courses connect with a common reading or text with programming outside the classroom related to the book’s themes or an author visit
  - Group discussions, author visits, lectures for the campus on similar topics

  *Great resource on-line through the National Resource Center that has a complete list of schools that have common reading programs, books that have been used, and other best practices. [www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr](http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr)*

- Experiential Learning Components (UNC – Chapel Hill, Univ. of MI)
  - Fieldwork, trips, performances, presentations, lab experiments
  - Trips – engage the development office to identify funding sources (ex. Supplies for a robotics competition)
  - Provide grant money for tickets to cultural activities or entry fees for competitions
  - Summer research experiences after the first year

- Civic Engagement and Service-Learning (UVA, UNC-Chapel Hill, NC State)
  - Atlanta-Based Learning (GA State)
  - American Democracy Project (TX A&M – Corpus Christi, Millersville Univ.)

- Use of Technology
  - Utilize on-line alcohol education program like mystudentbody.com (UGA, LSU)
  - E-portfolios used to encourage reflection by students and serve as an assessment tool
  - On-line articles, weekly newsletters that highlight important information or events, instructional videos, personality and vocational assessments, quizzes

Orientation and its role in making all of these components a seamless process from the very first interaction is a key piece in most of the literature. While orientation can be viewed as just the “registering of campus”, at many schools it’s the introduction of the campus culture and sets the tone for academic expectations and campus engagement.
Foundational Principles for Successful First Year Programs

1. Increasing student-to-student interaction (academic and positive social).
   a. Experiential Learning Components
   b. Living-Learning Communities
   c. Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS)
   d. Minority Academic Mentoring Programs
   e. Use of Technology – discussion groups
   f. Common Reading Programs
   g. Peer leaders – weekly class to prepare them to teach a section, how to assist freshmen, resources, etc.
   h. Collaborative laboratories – between disciplines

2. Increasing faculty-to-student interaction, especially out of class.
   a. Experiential Learning Components
   b. Living-Learning Communities

3. Increasing student involvement and time on campus.
   a. Student Affairs work
   b. Attendance at campus lectures and cultural events

4. Linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum.
   a. Living-Learning Communities
   b. Service learning as a component of discipline-based courses

5. Increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement.
   a. Common reading programs
   b. First Year Success Series – calendar of events that address first-year transition issues (Montclair State)
   c. Involving parents to understand expectations – Family Orientation, Family Weekend

6. Assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college.
   a. Academic assistance programs
   b. “Early Alert” warning systems for students at various points in 1st semester

Several of the best practices were taken from the 2008 book produced by the National Resource Center for The First year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina titled, “Exploring the Evidence: Initiatives in the First College Year”, Troxel W.G. & Cutrights, M. (Eds.).

The foundational principles listed above are frequently cited in the literature on first-year experiences and come out of the research done on the outcomes of first-year programs as cited by Betsy Barefoot in her work with the National Resource Center.