

Developing a First-Year Transition Camp: A “How To” Guide to Get Started

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A number of programs are being developed as campuses strive to enhance retention and graduation rates. One example includes pre-college transition camps. This article will share strategies for designing a transition camp to promote student success.

Literature Review

Many campuses across the country have focused more attention on increasing the retention of first-year students. Several programmatic and outreach initiatives have evolved to promote successful adaptation and acclimation to the campus environment. Transition camps and bridge programs have become a model utilized by many campuses. Pre-college acclimation through such programs has been successful for some campuses in equipping students for the journey into the college experience and college learning.

The literature base for such efforts is sparse and inexact in that every program is operated in a different structure. Many do seem to share the consistent support of research on college transition and adjustment: Upcraft, Gardener, & Barefoot (2005) – student success; Schlossberg’s (1989) marginality & mattering; Rendón’s (1994) – validation; Sanford’s (1967) – challenge & support; and Astin’s (1984) – involvement. Engagement and connection to the institution has historically been shown to positively impact retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

Transition camps also provide a mechanism for linking students with aspects of the campus environment to shape their overall experience (Strange & Banning, 2001). While the literature base should be specific to a campus’s particular needs, it is essential in grounding the program implementation, curriculum development, program evaluations, assessment, and garnering campus support. As a result, institutions can use the transition camp as a model for specific sub-populations or all new students.

Institutional and Program Overview

Louisiana State University is a large, public, research institution. In addition

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to being the flagship institution of Louisiana, LSU is recognized as a land, sea, and space grant university. The Fall 2011 enrollment was just under 29,000 students, including approximately 24,000 undergraduates (49% male, 51% female, and 78% Louisiana natives).

For the last 12 years, S.T.R.I.P.E.S. (Student Tigers Rallying, Interacting, and Promoting Education and Service) has provided incoming students with an opportunity to connect to the campus environment prior to the start of classes through a four-day, three-night program. Key program components include academic success, college readiness, history and traditions, involvement, leadership development, relationship building, service, and connection to campus resources and services.

The program has evolved from 65 participants in the initial session to over 600 in Summer 2011, and will expand to three sessions with a capacity of 900 in Summer 2012. The chart below provides the comparison of participants versus the overall class cohort. Camp participants show higher retention rates (1st – 2nd year) and five-year graduation rates.

TABLE 1

Year	Retention to 2 nd Year*	Graduation (5 year)*
2000	89.1% (83.3%)	73.4% (49.7%)
2001	93.7% (84.2%)	63.8% (50.9%)
2002	87.6% (83.8%)	66.3% (52.3%)
2003	90.0% (85.0%)	56.7% (52.0%)
2004	85.4% (83.1%)	62.1% (53.0%)
2005	91.3% (82.6%)	70.4% (54.0%)
2006	92.1% (84.7%)	71.2% (59.2%)
2007	87.3% (85.4%)	
2008	88.0% (83.6%)	
2009	88.9% (84.1%)	
2010	89.8% (83.8%)	

*S.T.R.I.P.E.S. participants compared to first-year cohort

Following are components for campuses to consider when developing a program.

Understanding Your Campus

While traditionally coordinated out of one office, a transition camp really is the work of an entire campus community. Determining whether your campus is ready for the implementation of a transition camp is the first step. Consider

conducting focus groups with current students, including both first-year and upper-division students, as well as faculty and staff to see what they believe is necessary to include and is helpful in the first year. Focus groups will also help determine if there is support for a transition camp. In addition, it is critical to have discussions within your unit/division to ensure that an effort will be supported internally.

The next critical step is to meet with the campus's accounting/finance area to gather information on policies and procedures, building a budget, determining registration fees, providing scholarships/fee waivers, selecting/compensating student staff, establishing accounts, locating potential sponsorships and fundraising opportunities from alumni, and more. Your marketing/public relations staff can assist you in determining guidelines and a process for marketing. If you have time, your initial process can involve having a student worker gather data on model programs and peer institutions. Institutional research staff can provide historical data on the student demographic profile as you build your case.

Designing a Curriculum

There are four essential elements to consider when creating a transition camp: program length and location, program content, responsibility for implementation, and the campus departments that need to be involved. Reviewing your university's first-year retention data and strategic plan along with reviewing peer institutions' programs will also help determine the focus areas for your curriculum.

Program Length & Location

S.T.R.I.P.E.S. began as a 2½ day program off campus and has since moved to a 3½ day program on campus. Determine the time available for your program, taking into account summer school schedule and other summer programs taking place. If your program will take place on campus, working with your campus housing office to determine available space and open dates may shape the duration and direction of your program. Whether on campus or off campus, both locations have their pros and cons. While being off campus can be a fun adventure, students may miss out on the "real life" campus feel and opportunity to acclimate to campus before classes start.

Program Content

Learning outcomes are essential before developing the program content. Making clear, concise, and measurable outcomes helps to focus efforts in developing content as well as having a foundation to create the program evaluation. Outcomes should be specific to your campus needs and structure. This ensures greater buy-in from key constituents.

Who is Responsible

Determine what office will implement the program as well as which staff member(s) will work with the program. Staffing should include student leaders. S.T.R.I.P.E.S. has seven executive staff members who work on the program for a full year, 40 small group leaders who facilitate small group activities during the program, and 12 program assistants who assist with the implementation and logistics of the program sessions. When considering student staff, one must determine eligibility requirements (grade point average, availability) as well as the selection process (application, interview, group process). Targeting marketing efforts to recruit the initial group of student leaders can benefit you as you start.

Involvement of Campus Departments

As previously mentioned, a transition camp is really the work of the entire campus community. How are you going to involve other departments? What role will they play in the implementation of the program? S.T.R.I.P.E.S. offers information sessions sponsored by various campus departments as well as mentors for the small groups. Depending upon the size of your campus and number of departments, it may be difficult to engage staff due to vacations in the summer, but consider how faculty and/or staff can be involved to expose the participants to other members of the campus community.

Developing an Action Plan

The action plan should include a timeline for program implementation, proposed dates, earliest opportunity to reserve space on campus, a registration deadline, student staff selection and training dates, and most importantly program capacity. For your first effort, ensure that the size of the program is manageable.

A proposed budget should include such factors as space rental, housing, meals, supplies, printing, program novelties, scholarships/fee waivers (if students are charged to participate), and marketing to prospective students. Consider identifying sponsors or alumni donors for various aspects of the programs (e.g., scholarships/fee waivers, meals, novelties).

Some campus offices to meet with in the early design phase can include: admissions (to market program to applicants); information technology (registration form, file storage, website development); registrar (participant performance/retention tracking); foundation (identifying potential donors); and human resources (student staff stipends).

Designing a Marketing Plan

Marketing is essential for recruiting participants and student staff and for gaining the support of current faculty, staff, and students. Consider the support

of internal constituents including undergraduate admissions, orientation, alumni association, the institutional foundation, student life, athletics, university relations, and academics. In addition, support from outside constituents can include high school guidance counselors, community businesses, visitors' bureau, and local media outlets.

Marketing can begin as early as the fall semester prior to your program through recruitment visits and website content. Additional marketing can include postcards, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and brochures. Orientation sessions can be utilized to maximize visibility for your program.

Assessment and Program Evaluation

Assessment for the program needs to be tied directly to the learning outcomes. The data collected through evaluation will provide support for the program and guidance as to what needs improvement. S.T.R.I.P.E.S. distributes an online survey to all student staff and participants to gain valuable feedback on program initiatives.

A successful program is feasible for any campus and can serve as a great recruiting tool for prospective students and promoting student success.

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