

Student Life Committee
Vanderbilt University Senate
Report for Academic Year 2014-2015

Committee members:

Joseph Wehby (Chair), Peabody (2015)
Adam Anderson, Engineering (2015)
Brian Bachman, Chemistry (2017)
Houston Baker, English (2015)
Tony Brown, Sociology (2017)
Celeste Hemingway, Medicine (2015)
Alyssa Hasty, Medicine (2016)
Rolanda Johnson, Nursing (2015)
Michael Slayton, Blair (2016)
Edward Wright-Ross, A&S (2016)

Initial Charges for 2014-15:

1. Review of First Year Experience (continued from 2013-2-14)
2. Monitor Greek Life Task Force
3. Review of Student Grievance Appeal (New Charge)

Work Done

At our first meeting, we decided that given the scope of the task that the committee would continue our review of the first year experience via the Commons and the Vanderbilt Visions program and to continue monitoring of the work of the Greek Life Task Force at it related to /overlapped with the work of the Student Life Committee.

1. Review of First Year Experience

Summary of 2013-2014 Committee

For this charge, we engaged in some fact find activities to better understand how the first year experience has been evaluated thus far and to determine other sources of data that might be used in an evaluation. Our first activity involved inviting the Dean of the Ingram Commons, Frank Wcislo, and Nina Warnke, Assistant Dean of the Ingram Commons and Executive Director of the Visions Program. At this meeting, discussion centered on an historical overview of the Commons, a review of the type of evaluation data collected, a review of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for Vanderbilt Visions, and personnel perspectives from the Dean and Assistant Dean of the Ingram Commons was provided. In general, the consensus from the Deans' was that the first year experience was overall a positive one that resulted in modest improvement in some areas of students' life during their first year at Vanderbilt. Issues included:

- a. Currently the evaluation is bound by the data from the Quality Enhancement Plan; there are ongoing discussions with VIRG about adding additional questions.

- b. Committee was interested in the feasibility of measuring quality of faculty-student interactions earlier in the academic year and more often over the course of fall and spring semesters.
- c. There seems to be an increase demand for change/opportunity from students that is greater than the university can provide at this time.
- d. There was general consensus that faculty needed to catch up with transition toward a residential college model although the concern for lack of faculty time was discussed.
- e. The impact of Greek Life on the Commons experience was discussed. Questions raised on how this impact should be measured.

Following meeting with Deans Wcislo and Warnke, the committee developed an interview instrument to be completed by the Faculty Heads of Houses at the Commons. The interview form was emailed to each Faculty Head and members of this committee followed up in person or via phone/email. The purpose of the instrument was to get the perspectives of the faculty who are involved on the day-to-day lives of first year students. The question on the instrument included the following:

- 1) Based on your personal knowledge, elaborate on the degree to which Vanderbilt Visions and the Commons has influenced first-year students' acculturation-- academically, socially, and cognitively.**
- 2) Communal living on a university campus is designed to transform the entire college experience. To your knowledge, has communal living impacted students' life at VU beyond the first year?**
- 3) What do you perceive as being the role of faculty engagement in communal living?**
- 4) Other than residential faculty, how are other faculty engaged in this process? Could this notion of communal living and acculturation occur with more limited faculty interactions?**
- 5) What are your thoughts on the relationship between the Commons Experience and**
 - a. Greek Life?**
 - b. Athletes**
 - c. band members**
 - d. Other student organizations**
- 6) An initial evaluation of a cohort of students from their first to junior years of education revealed that Vanderbilt Visions and Commons was associated with a small effect on academic achievement. Elaborate on the possible reasons this occurred and what can be done differently?**
- 7) As Vanderbilt now embarks on the opening of the Warren and Moore Colleges, what do you think could be done differently as we move forward with residential colleges (i.e. lessons learned)?**

Based on information gathered in 2013-2014, the following set of recommendations was developed.

- a. Continue with review and evaluation of the first year experience including the use of additional data from student leaders and involved faculty (e.g. VUceptors), to have a comprehensive understanding to the Commons and Visions experiences as they relate to the overall goals of the program.
- b. Coordinate with College Halls program to determine best way to measure ongoing impact for the first year program.

- c. Recommend adding faculty from Commons and College Halls programs to be ad hoc members of student life committee.
- d. Continue working with Greek Life Task force to determine the impact of Greek Life on the first year experiences.
- e. As the residential colleges expand, continue monitoring subgroups of students to determine their level of involvement in their residences.
- f. Invite Dean Wcislo to meet with to provide an update to the Full Senate on the Commons program

Summary of 2014-2015 Committee Work

For this charge, we gathered additional information this year to supplement data gathered from the Dean Frank Wcislo, Nina Warnke, and the Heads of the Houses on the Commons. Specifically we reviewed three sources of information. First, based on a recommendation from this committee, Dean Frank Wcislo presented to the Faculty Senate in October, 2014 and we used his presentation to better understand the current status of the Commons Experience. Second, we invited Ryan McKinney, a Resident Advisor on the Commons, and Rebecca Chong, a VUceptor to meet with the Student Life Committee to discuss the first year experience from their perspectives. Finally, members of our committee interviewed (in person or via email) 24 undergraduates to get their input regarding the first year experience. For these interviews, the committee created a brief set of questions as a means to solicit their opinions. The questions were:

1. *To what degree to you think the first year experience (Commons, Vision, Houses) has influenced your acculturation-academically, socially, and cognitively-into Vanderbilt.*
2. *We have heard from other students that there is a general concern of over programming during the first year experience. Please expand on this idea by answering the following questions.*
 - a. *What is true for you?*
 - b. *If so, how did you manage balance?*
 - c. *Are there benefits of having a number of programming options for your first year?*
 - i. *Was this true for both the spring and fall semesters?*
 - d. *Which did you find most beneficial*
 - i. *Required programming (e.g. House events, Visions)*
 - ii. *Optional programming (e.g. clubs, campus organizations)*
 - e. *How did you choose what to do and what not to do?*
 - f. *Did programming help you become more integrated/involved/connected with the Vanderbilt community?*
 - i. *Does this continue to be true?*
 - g. *Other comments regarding programming?*
3. *Briefly discuss your view on how the first year experience impacted your view/experience with diversity in terms of organizations, groups, friendships.*
4. *Was/Is time management an issue during your first year? If so, how have you managed to balance your academic and social life?*
5. *Do you believe there is a strong intellectual presence (e.g. enhance/supplement your learning) in the first year experience?*

6. ***Did you find Greek recruitment/activities impact the first year experience? Please note both positive and negative aspects.***
7. ***Is programming similar to your first year experience something that you would like to continue into your sophomore, junior and senior years at Vanderbilt?***

Summary of Results

From the data reported by Dean Wcislo in his presentation to the Faculty Senate, as well as from the statements of Ryan McKinney, Rebecca Chong, and the undergraduate interviewees, it is clear that taken as a whole, the first year experience is viewed positively by students. Based on a synopsis of the students' first year experiences, overall the students expressed a positive attitude toward the first year experience. There appears to be a high agreement among the various sources of information that the first year experiences are key components of acculturation at Vanderbilt, although this effect appears to be mostly influenced by social acculturation and to a lesser degree on academic and cognitive acculturation. Comments from the interviews of current undergraduate students seem to support this finding.

- ***The first year experience really helped build the relationships I have now and create a foundation for making more.***
- ***Being in Visions created friendships with people I may not have met otherwise and my student VUceptor was a great resource in all things Vanderbilt, from classes to social life.***
- ***The first year experience has played a fairly large role in influencing by acculturation. I think the Commons helps me see other first years very frequently, which has helped to build many relationships.***
- ***Being able to talk to faculty in this period of your life candidly can transition you into being able to talk to them academically. The Commons promotes this kind of living and learning community. It's a perfect in-between from high school to college. They aren't thrown into the general college population. There are more safety nets around them in the first year.***
- ***This current batch of heads of house is doing a good job of motivating their students to get involved in small group dinners and presentations. Especially the Commons Seminars—they help you to have experiences that you wouldn't necessarily have.***

However, among the student interviewees, there seemed to be more disagreement in the role of Visions in the acculturation process. While the responses regarding the Commons living experience were overwhelming positive, the response with regard to Visions was a little more mixed.

- ***Visions helped answer any questions the students had about anything regarding academics, social life, clubs, etc., but I began to be a drag to attend every session and event.***
- ***My involvement in the activities that were specifically meant for freshmen, such as the Vision groups, helped ease my acculturation into Vanderbilt to a great degree.***

- *On the other hand, I do not think Visions was a necessary part of my first year experience. This may be because I had a weaker group, but I personally felt it was a waste of time and I did not stay friends with any of the other members in my group.*
- *Visions was not that beneficial to me as my group did not interact very well.*
- *Visions was very helpful-especially at the beginning of freshman year. Getting to know a small group of people, even if they don't turn out to be close friends, is helpful.*

The students also repeatedly reiterated that “over programming” is an issue. A preference for “optional” programming was conveyed by several respondents.

- *The first two weeks of school are very overwhelming as a first year, especially those first few days before classes actually start. Having so many programs in those first days sounds good in theory, but quickly became very overwhelming when you are in the middle of trying to make friends and adjust to a new environment. It gave the week a very “camp like” feel and I think that made it harder to adjust once classes actually started and you realized you were not at camp, but here to stay.*
- *In the beginning it was overwhelming, but always having something to do kept me from thinking about home or how hard the transition is.*
- *To an extent. The first few days were certainly the longest for me of the entire fall semester, but that was primarily due to efforts in getting situated on campus. While some events helped with that, others seemed to be somewhat unnecessary (as suggested by my friends).*

The theme of “over programming” was also noted by our interviews with the resident advisor and the student VUceptor.

- *Yes, it's one of the flaws at VU. When you have so many programs, it's tough to get a good crowd to attend*
- *There is a Commons calendar, but it doesn't have everything on it. Anchor Link is supposed to be that, but it's not up and running 100% yet.*
- *They are more likely to go because an RA told them about an event, or an upperclassman sent them an invite on Facebook.*
- *There often needs to be incentives to get students to come to educational programming (food, movie, etc.).*

Related to the issue of over programming, there was also some discussion of whether the first year experience was positive for all first year students. More specifically, the resident advisor and student VUceptor were asked about the first year experience for athletes, band members, and international students.

- *It's not so much an issue, because they already have communities. Except for international students, we need to do more for them because they don't have as much of a sense of community as others. There are about 200. They stay here over the holidays, too.*
- *I have been involved with the Multicultural Student group, and I can say that it is an individual case-by-case basis. It depends on the student and how well they acculturate.*

- ***The way we currently do programming, it doesn't really help the international students. And athletes don't have time to come to programming/events. They are too tired after practice and school.***

In our interview with students, there were only a few upper class students who responded to this question "Is programming similar to your first year experience something that you would like to continue into your sophomore, junior and senior years at Vanderbilt"?

- ***I think it's a separate experience from the Commons. I have been frustrated living there. I thought it would be a community. Instead, it has been very isolating. They have stepped it up in the last few weeks. But still I have concerns. We don't have an identity in Warren/Moore. We are invested in communities and other groups that we are already involved with. There should have been an application form, not a lottery system to get in. It shouldn't be Commons 2.0, but it should be people who are interested in building community together. It should be students programming for themselves.***

The theme of Greek Life and impact on the first year experience was also discussed. Again, there was consistency in responses across the different informants, with much of the discussion centered on how Greek recruitment is actually a year-long process (unofficially) and that the Commons provided some safety net for that time period. The Chair of the Student Life Committee attended most of the meetings with the Greek Life Task Force, so many of the themes related to the impact of Greek Life on student life can be found in the Task Force report. Some comments related to Greek Life included:

- ***It's harder for guys since there are more expectations for guys to hang out at the fraternities than for the girls to do sorority events.***
- ***If there wasn't the Commons, it would make it harder for first year students. They would have less of a safety net, especially if they don't get into the frat/sorority of their choice or don't want to go Greek.***
- ***These students have no idea how to deal with failure. So, I don't think that there's a way to change this. I actually think they need to experience rejection and learn how to deal with it. Academic failure is also a part of this.***
- ***There are no office hours for social rejection. At least for academic failures, there are office hours and professors you can talk to about this.***

Summary and Recommendations

Based on the themes from these different sources, the Student Life Committee has made the following conclusions. Overall, the first year experience can be seen as a positive one albeit one that requires consistent and perhaps more sensitive monitoring in order to determine its effectiveness on the lives of students during their first year on campus as well as to better understand the long term impact on their overall Vanderbilt experience. In addition, better monitoring of variables influencing the quality of this experience (i.e. over programming and Greek Life) should be required. As the investment in the residential college movement

continues, the Student Life Committee believes that increased monitoring of the impact on Vanderbilt students in terms of their experiences should be required. Thus, the recommendations of the Student Life Committee are as follows:

1. Review and evaluate all first year programming focusing on the types of programs, number of offerings, attendance and redundancy. This recommendation is key to monitoring the level of programming offered to first year students.
2. Continue efforts on the creation of an easy-to-use common calendar that can be used to better coordinate activities associated with First Year Experience including Visions. The committee recommends that the Offices of the Dean of Commons, Residential Life, Anchor Link, and the Dean of Students work together on this issue of a common calendar.
3. Develop a sensitive metric to continue to monitor programming and its effectiveness during the first year and beyond. We believe that this process should not just be summative, but should have some formative features in order to better monitor change over time.
4. Although the evaluation/recalibration of Visions seems to be an annual activity in the office of the Dean of Students, the committee recommends the use of the metric recommended in #3 to help with the reshaping of this program.
5. Develop and incorporate a metric to assess the impact of Greek Life on acculturation after the first year experience.
6. The Committee recommends that a Greek Life sub-committee with the Student Life Committee be required so that the recommendations from the Greek Life Task Force can be monitored on an annual basis.