

A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAM COMPONENTS AIMED AT ENSURING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO A LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY AND A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE IN THE CASE OF AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract

Although common in North America, the Liberal Arts model of education is much less prevalent in Europe and almost new in Eastern Europe. The American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) is one higher education institution offering a Liberal Arts experience to students.

The university has thus designed and implemented a First Year Experience (FYE) Program, which aims to introduce students to the liberal arts tradition and the new environment and to support their transition from high school to university. The FYE at AUBG includes a multiple-day orientation program, peer advising, academic advising, tutoring, a mandatory First Year Seminar, as well as a first semester mid-term faculty feedback.

This paper presents an overview of Cuseo's ten points of focus for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first year experience program (Cuseo, 2007), Kuh's "High-Impact Educational Practices", which educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and engagement (Kuh, 2008), Steward's best practices of a FYE program (Steward, 2016), and Upcraft, Garner and Barefoot's eight demonstrated student behaviors which define first-year student success, among others (Upcraft et al, 2004). The authors develop a comparative analysis of the four selected frameworks with the current program.

This paper further examines and presents insights based on the declared perceptions of students towards the FYE program components. The data was collected in 2020 via an anonymous online internal survey, and is based on a sample of 63 respondents, from an incoming class of approximately 240 students. The paper describes how new students evaluate different program components, and how they believe these have supported specific academic, personal and social learning outcomes.

The findings in this paper can serve as a valuable tool for educators and administrators in developing new, or enhancing current programs, aimed at supporting the transitioning of high school students to university.

Keywords: *Transitioning to university, First Year Student Experience, first-year student success, student behaviors, student perceptions on transitioning to university*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although common in North America, the Liberal Arts model of education is much less prevalent in Europe and almost new in Eastern Europe. The American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) is one higher education institution offering a full-time undergraduate Liberal Arts experience to students, coming predominantly from the region.

Because of the different type of higher education, the fact that the education is in English (a non-native language for the majority of the enrolled first year students, as well as the generally higher commitment requirements of higher education, the university is conscious about retention rates. One specific indicator of interest is the first year student retention rate, understood as the percentage of students who come back for their second year of study at the same institution. AUBG has a higher first year student retention rate compared to US based higher education institutions, but aims to keep retention high or improve upon this indicator (Fig. 1).

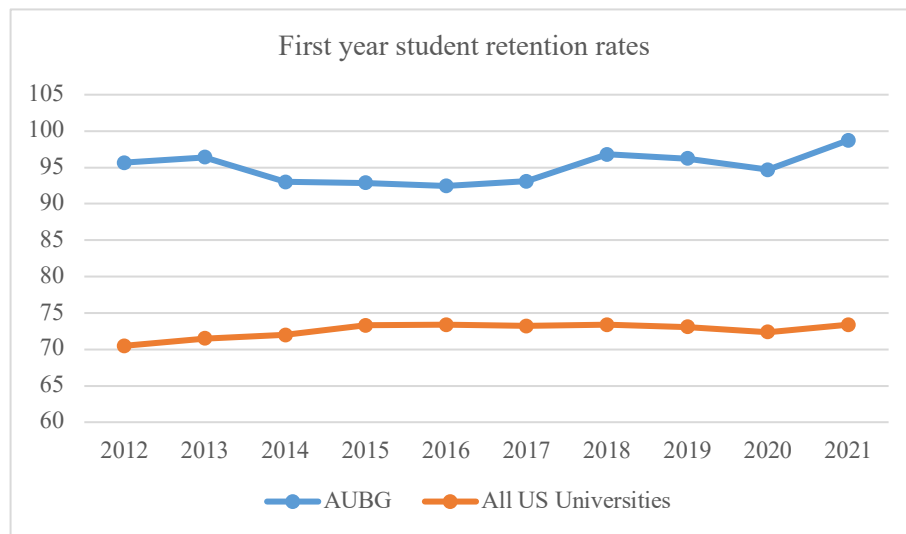


Fig. 1. First year student retention rates – a comparison of AUBG vs. all US universities for students on full-time starting enrollment intensity

Source: AUBG Office of Institutional Research and National Student Clearinghouse, Research Center, 2023

The university has thus designed and introduced a First Year Experience (FYE) Program, which aims to introduce students to the liberal arts tradition and the new environment and to support their transition from high school to university. The FYE at AUBG includes a multiple-day orientation program before the start of the first semester, peer advising, academic advising, tutoring, a mandatory non-credit bearing First Year Seminar called “Steps to Success”, as well as a first semester mid-term faculty feedback.

The questions the researchers aim to answer are whether the FYE program is in line with student needs, best practices and whether it supports the transition of high school students to university in the case of a Liberal Arts environment.

This paper presents, among other sources, an overview of Cuseo’s ten points of focus for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first year experience program, Kuh’s “High-Impact Educational Practices”, which educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and student engagement, Steward’s best practices of a FYE program, and Upcraft, Garner and Barefoot’s eight demonstrated student behaviors which define first-year student success, among others. The authors develop a comparative analysis of the four selected frameworks with the current program.

The authors then further examine and present insights based on the declared perceptions of new students toward the FYE program components. The data was collected in 2020 via an anonymous online internal survey conducted by the university’s Student Affairs department, and is based on a sample of 63 respondents, from an incoming class of approximately 240 students. The paper describes how new students evaluate different program components, and how they believe these have supported specific academic, personal and social learning outcomes, which contribute to a successful transition from high school to university.

Finally, and based on the reviewed information, the authors present ideas on this study’s improvement and evolution potential for further iterations, so that data points can be enhanced and there can be opportunity for association and/or correlation analysis, based on declared evaluations, specific demographics for subgroup analysis, as well as the academic, co- and extracurricular success of the respondents to aid in the identification of at-risk subgroups.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Materials

The authors follow three directions in the literary review. The first direction identifies components and guiding principles of best First Year Experience (FYE) programs or behaviors attributed to a first year student's success. The second direction explores factors, systems and practices, which generally contribute to students having a successful university experience. The third direction looks at psychological theory of identity development in students.

2.1.1. First Year Experience program components

Cuseo (Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, 1999), has identified that "more than half of all students who withdraw from college do so during their first year resulting in a national attrition rate for first year students of more than 25% at four-year institutions. In his publication "A comprehensive first-year experience." Cuseo offers ten points of focus for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first year experience program:

1. Institutional Mission
2. New-Student Orientation
3. Classroom Teaching and Learning
4. Academic Advisement
5. The Curriculum
6. Academic Support Services
7. The Co-Curriculum (Student Support Services)
8. Faculty-Student Contact Outside the Classroom
9. Administrative Leadership, Policies, & Practices
10. Institutional Assessment

The Chronicle of Higher Education report "The Truth About Student Success Myths, Realities, and 30 practices that are working" (Lipka, 2019) provides three guiding principles for elevating student success efforts: Applying Student Data, Improving the Educational Experience, as well as Integrating Academic Support. The report further offers 30 practices in colleges around the USA which yield better results. Building a comprehensive "first year experience" at Southern Utah University is one of the 30 successful practices. It focused on fostering the sense of belonging among students while combining efforts of advisors, faculty members, peer mentors, etc. in reaching out and connecting to students before their arrival on campus and afterwards. In addition, the university hired a financial literacy expert to address the problem with students leaving for financial reasons. As a result the first to second year student retention rose nearly nine percentage points and the college saved over 5 million in tuition revenue from students who stayed enrolled.

According to the editors of Comevo, and based on the US News and World Report, which invites nominations for institutions with great first year experience programs to find top-notch examples of first year experiences across the U.S., the best first year experiences have several things in common. First, they offer (1) cross-disciplinary first year seminars with many options for students to choose from and select something different from the intended area of study. Next, they foster (2) community engagement. Third, they include all important information in a (3) digital guide so that it is easily accessible. Fourth, they have an (4) advising program which is very supportive to the first year students. And finally, they foster (5) building personal relationships not just with their peers but also with their professors.

Steward (Steward, 2016) has identified that first year student retention at Tennessee Board of Regents universities for 2013 is 76.9%, or about 23% of students do not return for a second year. Hence the need to support retention through an appropriate program she moves on to identify best practices of a FYE program in 6 selected TBR universities as:

1. Common Reading
2. New Student Orientation
3. Summer Bridge/Transition Programming
4. Learning Communities/Course Blocking/Freshman Interest Groups (FIG)
5. Living Learning Communities
6. First-Year Experience Programming
7. First-Year Seminar
8. Civic Engagement and Service Learning
9. Experiential Learning Component
10. Peer Mentoring
11. First-Year Academic Advising
12. Early Alert Warning Systems

In the guide “Challenging & Supporting The First-Year Student: A Handbook for Improving The First-year of College” (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot) the authors suggest eight demonstrated student behaviors which define first-year student success:

1. Developing academic and intellectual competencies
2. Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
3. Exploring identity development
4. Exploring a career and lifestyle
5. Maintaining personal health and wellness
6. Developing civic responsibility
7. Considering spiritual dimensions of life (TBD)
8. Engaging in diversity

2.1.2. Factors, systems, and practices contributing to students having a successful university experience

In his article, “The Power of Personal” in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Chambliss argues that personal relationships are of critical importance for students in having a successful university experience. According to him, good relationships with supportive fellow students, caring professors, and helpful staff members in the university can smooth a student’s path to a wide array of social, academic, and career benefits.

In the book *How College Works*, Chambliss and Takacs (Chambliss, Takacs, 2018) present their findings of a 10-year study in a small college trying to understand what actually makes a difference in the student experience while facing the challenges of entering, choosing, belonging, learning and finishing university. They argue that during entering “integration into the college community is crucial to a student’s remaining in school and thus for their physical and psychological availability for any kind of academic work.” Therefore, they suggest, “the institutions themselves can make the integration easier.” Chambliss and Takacs view the relationships as “central to a successful college experience.” They believe that “fostering relationships with peers and teachers actually enhances a student’s ability to learn.”

In his book, “The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs” Richard Detweiler (Detweiler, 2021) analyzes the educational experience and life outcomes of 1000 graduates who attended a broad range of types of institutions. One of his findings reveals the importance of the educational context (how education is delivered) for creating an effective educational experience. He views the authentic learning community

– one of the context’s attributes – as central to the university experience. According to Detweiler, “The idea of “authenticity” is that faculty, students, and staff interact with one another in intellectually and personally meaningful ways, informally and formally, not only in the class but outside of the class as well.”

In “Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practices with Theory” (Goodman, Schlossberg, et al., 2006) the authors describe the 4S System, which can also be applied to the transition of students and the coping resources utilized by students. The system describes four major factors, which influence the ability of individuals to cope during a transition. They include the Situation, the Self, the Support, and the Strategies.

The Situation variable refers to what is happening and includes an event or non-event, and the characteristics as trigger, timing, control/source, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, and assessment. The “Self” variable refers to whom it is happening and pertains to personal characteristics or psychological resources. The Support variable refers to what help is available and includes social support (intimate, family, friendship, network, or institution) and options. Finally, the Strategies variable refers to how the person copes - coping responses divided into functions and strategies (including information seeking, direct action, or inhibition of action).

George Kuh (Kuh, 2008) has identified “High-Impact Educational Practices”, which educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and student engagement.

1. First year seminars and experiences
2. Common intellectual experiences
3. Learning communities
4. Writing intensive courses
5. Collaborative assignments and projects
6. Undergraduate research
7. Diversity/Global Learning
8. Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
9. Internships
10. Capstone courses and projects

Pascarella, Duby and Iverson (Pascarella, Duby, Iverson, 1983) identified, among others, three factors, which show significance in college withdrawal – “Academic Integration”, “Social Integration” and “Intention”. “Academic integration” is “operationalized by a nine-item scale” including first semester freshman grade-point average, expected grade-point average for the second semester of the freshman year, hours spent studying per week, number of unassigned books read for pleasure, number of cultural events attended, informal contact with faculty, peer conversations, participation in honors programs or accelerated classes, participation in career development programs. “Social integration” is defined as the sum of four variables - developed close personal relationships with other students, personally satisfying student friendships, non-classroom interactions with faculty, which have had a positive influence on personal growth, values, and attitudes, as well as non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on student’s career goals and aspirations. “Intention” is measured through likeliness to enroll in the university next fall.

In their paper “Student-Faculty Informal Relationships and Freshman Year Educational Outcomes”, Pascarella and Terenzini (Pascarella, Terenzini, 1978) investigate “student-faculty informal relationships and student educational outcomes. “The findings lend support to the general hypothesis of the study, concerning the influence of student-faculty relationships on educational outcomes. After controlling the influence of 14 student pre-enrollment variables, eight measures of the frequency and strength of student-faculty informal relationships accounted for modest but statistically significant

proportions of the variance in both extrinsic (academic performance) and intrinsic (self-perceived intellectual and personal development) freshman year educational outcomes.”

The tested Student-Faculty interactions in the Pascarella and Terenzini study include “Academic course information”, “Discuss career concerns”, “Resolve a personal problem”, “Discuss intellectual matters”, “Discuss a campus issue”, “Socialize informally”. The authors also found that in four-year residential colleges, social integration is more important to retention than academic integration, though the latter is still important.

In “Thriving in College”, the author Laurie Schreiner defines “The five factors of thriving” as:

1. Engaged learning
2. Diverse citizenship
3. Social connectedness (FYE)
4. Positive perspective
5. Academic determination

Tinto (Tinto, 1993) identifies three major sources of student departure: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated into the intellectual and social life of the institution. Tinto's "Model of Institutional Departure" states that to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems.

Tinto further defines three principles of effective retention:

A) Institutional Commitment to Students - Effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals.

B) Educational Commitment - Effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students.

C) Social and Intellectual Community - Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members.

Findings from a “Student Voice” survey show how “first-generation college students reveal feelings of isolation and sources of worry for many students whose parents didn't graduate from college, as well as how particular support from professors and other areas of campus have helped or would help”. (Mezarik, 2022) Furthermore, “first-gen students... at any college may feel “imposter syndrome,” a sense that they don't belong there”.

2.1.3. Psychological theory of identity development in students

One of the well-known theories of identity development in students includes Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors of student identity development: Developing Competence, Managing Emotions, Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, Establishing Identity, Developing Purpose and Developing Integrity (Chickering, Reisser, 1993).

2.2. Methods

2.2.1. Qualitative comparative overview with other FYE programs and systems

This paper first presents a sequential comparative review of the AUBG program with three selected FYE program components (Cuseo), (Steward), (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot), as well as one programs, systems and practices list (Kuh).

2.2.2. Quantitative student survey with scale data

This paper further uses results from an anonymous online first-year student survey as primary data from descriptive research. The authors measure to what extent students declare that they are trained or exposed to different aspects of a FYE program, which have been selected to contribute to student success.

The feedback is gathered after the completion of the program and during the second semester of the first-year students. It asks them to reflect on the orientation, diversity training, “AUB 100 Steps to Success” course, advising (inaugural pre-course registration and mid-semester performance), tutoring, as well as campus experience. The scale data from the Likert questions provides an opportunity for basic descriptive statistics and frequency analysis.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Comparison of the AUBG FYE program components with selected frameworks and best practices

The overview presents a sequential comparison of the current AUBG FYE program components with selected frameworks from the presented literature review. Four frameworks have been identified for the comparison, namely (1) Cuseo’s ten points of focus for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first year experience program, (2) Kuh’s “High-Impact Educational Practices”, which educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and student engagement, (3) Steward’s best practices of a FYE program, as well as (4) Upcraft, Garner and Barefoot’s eight demonstrated student behaviors which define first-year student success.

The presented sequential monadic comparisons in table form aim to ascertain whether identified, recommended and best practice aspects are (a) covered in the AUBG FYE program, (b) covered in other academic experiences and curriculum, (c) covered in other university activities or (d) are not formally covered or integrated into the formal liberal arts university experience within this institution. As components and aspects have a wide definition, the authors have used both the description of and further first-hand experience with the AUBG FYE program components, as well as professional expertise to reach a conclusion on whether these are covered or not covered. The authors’ expertise comes from their respective roles as Coordinator of the Advising Center at AUBG and as an Instructor at the university and lecturer in the “Steps to Success” course, part of the FYE.

Cuseo's 10 points of focus	AUBG FYE Program
1. Institutional Mission [...and Vision]	☑
2. New-Student Orientation	☑
3. Classroom Teaching and Learning	☑
4. Academic Advisement	☑
5. The Curriculum	☑
6. Academic Support Services	☑
7. The Co-Curriculum (Student Support Services)	☑
8. Faculty-Student Contact Outside the Classroom	☑
9. Administrative Leadership, Policies, & Practices	☑
10. Institutional Assessment	☑

Table 1. Comparison of AUBG FYE program components with Cuseo's ten points of focus for the development and assessment of a high-quality, comprehensive first year experience program.

Source: Compared with Cuseo, Joe. "A comprehensive first-year experience." J. Cuseo, An Institutional Planning (2007)

Kuh's "High-Impact Educational Practices"	AUBG FYE Program
1. First year seminars and experiences	☑
2. Common intellectual experiences	☑
3. Learning communities	Not part of program
4. Writing intensive courses	Other academic program
5. Collaborative assignments and projects	Other academic program
6. Undergraduate research	Other academic program
7. Diversity/Global Learning	☑
8. Service Learning, Community-Based Learning	☑
9. Internships	Other academic program
10. Capstone courses and projects	Other academic program

Table 2. Comparison of AUBG FYE program components with Kuh's "High-Impact Educational Practices", which educational research suggests increased rates of student retention and student engagement.

Source: Compared with Kuh, George D. (2008). "High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter." AAC&U, Washington, D.C. 34 pp.

Steward's best practices of a FYE program	AUBG FYE Program
1. Common Reading	✓
2. New Student Orientation	✓
3. Summer Bridge/Transition Programming	✓
4. Learning Communities/Course Blocking/Freshman Int. Groups	✓
5. Living Learning Communities	✓
6. First-Year Experience Programming	✓
7. First-Year Seminar	✓
8. Civic Engagement and Service Learning	✓
9. Experiential Learning Component	Other academic program
10. Peer Mentoring	✓
11. First-Year Academic Advising	✓
12. Early Alert Warning Systems	✓

Table 3. Comparison of AUBG FYE program components with Steward's best practices of a FYE program.

Source: Compared with Steward, "Identifying Best Practices in the First Year at Tennessee's Public Universities", Tennessee Board of Regents, Board of education in Nashville, Tennessee, 2016

Upcraft, Garner, and Barefoot's eight demonstrated student behaviors	AUBG FYE Program
1. Developing academic and intellectual competencies	✓
2. Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships	✓
3. Exploring identity development	Other university experience
4. Exploring a career and lifestyle	✓
5. Maintaining personal health and wellness	✓
6. Developing civic responsibility	✓
7. Considering spiritual dimensions of life	Not covered
8. Engaging in diversity	✓

Table 4. Comparison of AUBG FYE program components and targeted student learnings and behaviors with Upcraft, Garner, and Barefoot's eight demonstrated student behaviors, which define first-year student success.

Source: Compared with Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, "Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student, A Handbook for Improving the First Year of College", Wiley (2004)

3.2. Analysis of the first year student feedback on components of the FYE program and other aspects integrated within the academic and extracurricular activities.

This anonymous First Year Experience (FYE) survey was conducted online in March 2020. There were 63 participating students (out of an incoming class of approximately 240), who had participated in the FYE in their previous semester of that same academic year.

The AUBG FYE program has been developed based on best practices and adapted to suit local needs. The survey has been developed for the primary purpose of evaluating the FYE program, as well as additional experiences, which support first-year student adaptation on campus.

Respondents are asked to “Rate (their) level of agreement or disagreement” with predefined statements. All questions use a balanced 5-level scale with answer options coded 1-5 (disagree-agree) for weighted results. The questionnaire is divided into 4 different sections. One section of this survey covers service departments satisfaction. It is proprietary and confidential and not a focus of this research. The results of the remaining twelve questions, originally distributed in three sections for more convenient respondent interaction with the survey, have been united in one table for convenience.

The below-presented analysis (based on the data presented in Table 5.) includes all surveyed components and aspects, some of which may not be exclusively covered within the FYE program, but are present in the parallel academic and extracurricular initiatives.

Eleven aspects of the program were evaluated, followed by an overall evaluation to what extent the first year student experience helped the respondent for a smooth transition from high school to university. Aspects include:

1. Adequate information about what to expect prior to arriving on campus
2. Sufficient guidance and support for course selection and pre-registration
3. Acquaintance with the university and the support resources on campus during orientation
4. Helpfulness of academic advisor
5. Ability to find ample opportunities to practice civic responsibility
6. The level to which the AUB 100 course helped the formation of productive study habits
7. Diverse opportunities for exploring career and life choices provided by campus life
8. Ability to meet other students and make friends
9. Adequacy of options on campus to maintain personal health and wellness
10. Opportunities to interact with those who are from diverse backgrounds
11. To what extent timely feedback and advice from professors and advising staff was beneficial

The average level of agreement with the level to which components and aspects, separately, and altogether, were beneficial, stands at 4.37/5.00. Considering the balanced Likert scale including a “neutral” response option this corresponds to the average answer falling between somewhat agree and agree, leaning towards somewhat agree.

The overall level of agreement with the level to which respondents’ first year student experience helped their smooth transition from high school to university stands higher (4.47) than the average (4.37). A positive evaluation (somewhat agree or agree) was given by more than 91% of respondents, 7% of respondents have opted for the “neutral” answer option, while only one respondent (representing 1.73% of all) disagreed, that the FYE program helped their transition to university.

The top three rated FYE program components and campus opportunities are “Orientation helped me get well acquainted with the university and the support resources on campus.” (4.73), “Timely feedback and advice from professors and advising staff was beneficial.” (4.58), and “I have many opportunities to interact with those who are from diverse backgrounds.” (4.53). For the highest-rated “Orientation” component close to 97% of respondents “agree” or “somewhat agree” that “[it] helped me get well

acquainted with the university and resources on campus”, with only 3% being “neutral” and no respondents disagreeing to any extent with the statement.

The next set of components, which display higher than average results are “Prior to my arrival to campus I was given adequate information about what to expect.” (4.41) and “It was easy to meet other students and make friends.” (4.40).

There are two FYE program components and campus aspects, which were rated at the average level (4.37) – “Campus life provides ample opportunities to practice civic responsibility.” and “Campus life provides diverse opportunities for exploring career and life choices.”

Three components and/or aspects are rated with below average results but still hold high averages placing answers between “somewhat agree” and “agree” – “My academic advisor was helpful.” (4.33), “There are enough options on campus to maintain personal health and wellness.” (4.30) and “I received sufficient guidance and support for my course selection and pre-registration.” (4.29).

There is one outlier FYE program component (“The AUB 100 course helped the formation of productive study habits.”) which has an average score below 4.00 at 3.70/5.00. Close to 65% of respondents have selected positive answers, close to 16% are neutral, and a higher number of respondents – 19 (or 19%) have expressed “disagreement” or “slight disagreement” with the statement that the “Steps to Success” course has helped them form productive study habits.

	DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	SOMEWHAT AGREE	AGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Prior to my arrival to campus, I was given adequate information about what to expect.	1.59%	4.76%	6.35%	25.40%	61.90%		
1		3	4	16	39	63	4.41
I received sufficient guidance and support for my course selection and pre-registration.	3.17%	4.76%	7.94%	28.57%	55.56%		
2		3	5	18	35	63	4.29
Orientation helped me get well acquainted with the university and the support resources on campus.	0.00%	0.00%	3.17%	20.63%	76.19%		
0		0	2	13	48	63	4.73
My academic advisor was helpful.	1.59%	6.35%	9.52%	22.22%	60.32%		
1		4	6	14	38	63	4.33
Campus life provides ample opportunities to practice civic responsibility.	1.75%	3.51%	10.53%	24.56%	59.65%		
1		2	6	14	34	57	4.37
The AUB 100 course helped the formation of productive study habits.	12.28%	7.02%	15.79%	28.07%	36.84%		
7		4	9	16	21	57	3.70
Campus life provides diverse opportunities for exploring career and life choices.	1.75%	0.00%	15.79%	24.56%	57.89%		
1		0	9	14	33	57	4.37
It was easy to meet other students and make friends.	1.75%	1.75%	14.04%	19.30%	63.16%		
1		1	8	11	36	57	4.40

There are enough options on campus to maintain personal health and wellness.	3.51%	1.75%	12.28%	26.32%	56.14%		
	2	1	7	15	32	57	4.30
I have many opportunities to interact with those who are from diverse backgrounds.	0.00%	1.75%	7.02%	28.07%	63.16%		
	0	1	4	16	36	57	4.53
Timely feedback and advice from professors and advising staff was beneficial.	0.00%	0.00%	12.28%	17.54%	70.18%		
	0	0	7	10	40	57	4.58
Overall, my first year student experience helped my smooth transition from high school to university.	1.75%	0.00%	7.02%	31.58%	59.65%		
	1	0	4	18	34	57	4.47

Table 5. Level of agreement or disagreement with statements related to components of and opportunities part of the FYE program and life on campus during the first semester (n=63, scale: 1-5 (disagree-agree))

Source: AUBG First Year Experience (FYE) survey, conducted March 2020

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Student evaluations of the FYE program components and other aspects, present in the parallel academic and extracurricular on-campus initiatives

The consistently high evaluations of the first year students confirm that many of the FYE program and related campus onboarding events, initiatives, and resources contribute to supporting the transitioning of high school students to university. As this survey's primary purpose has been to get general student feedback to keep track of component quality and possibly improve where necessary, some questions are not necessarily aligned to distinguish all components, which support the transitioning to university – they simply provide a level of satisfaction to track over time and adjust component make-up or implementation.

4.2. Considerations on the contributions of the highest and lowest evaluated FYE program components

The “orientation” component is the highest-rated FYE program component. At the same time, it is not easy to compare to the other components. Other FYE program components are more focused and shorter. The “orientation” is a multiple day event, that presents multiple aspects of campus, academic, and student life. It thus encompasses more useful information and activities, which is likely to lead to a higher respondent evaluation.

“The AUB100 course helped the formation of productive study habits” is the lowest evaluated FYE program component. Similarly to the “Orientation” component, there are several relevant considerations when reading the data and applying it to future decisions. The AUB100 “Steps to Success” course is another lengthy, rather than singular, component, which spans throughout the majority of the first semester. It includes attendance and participation expectations. One hypothesis is that the respondent evaluations may further be influenced by a comparison of the course with other academic courses, that students take in their first semester. In this case, considerations are that the AUB100 course is more practical, and related to soft skills and habits, so students may not fully realize the value in comparing to academic courses of interest. In addition, having passed through the AUB100 course students may have done well in their other courses by applying knowledge from AUB100 (eg. how to survive group projects). They may have had a positive experience in their other academic courses and not be able to

assess the value of the AUB100 in terms of not having a point of comparison without having passed through AUB100, which may have resulted in a negative experience with their other theoretical courses. A final consideration - the AUB100 course is in its infancy. Topics are being evaluated and updated. Respective professors teaching specific topics are also updating content and lecture structure, which leads to possibly better-fine-tuned content and content delivery since the timing of data collection. It is interesting to note that after a slight decrease in first year retention rates from 2012, the trend is reversed positively in 2017, which coincides with the introduction of the mandatory AUB100 "Steps to Success" course (Fig.1). There is, however, not sufficient information so that we can solely or categorically attribute the retention rate rise to the introduction of the course.

4.3. The way ahead – upgrading the evaluations for better data and decision-making

In this section, the authors are addressing several aspects regarding potential improvement of data gathering, which will support better analysis and decision making for universities.

Respondent participation rate for this study stands at approximately 26%. While this is an acceptable base from a population of 240 there may be self selection bias. Requiring first year students to submit this evaluation, in the form of making it mandatory, or introducing certain incentives, rather than keeping it voluntary, may assure much higher participation rates and more representative data.

The current FYE components and campus opportunities questions are designed with another primary purpose in mind - to get general feedback, ensure tracking, and identify improvement needs. As such, the question format is not necessarily designed for- and does not explicitly aim to establish the contribution to the successful transitioning. University administrators may opt for a dual assessment method where there are two questions per component/aspect. One would rate the perceived importance and/or quality of components and aspects, while the other can be tailored to specifically ask about the perceived contribution towards the successful transitioning to university process.

Despite the general positive evaluation of the FYE program and parallel campus life opportunities and aspects, transitioning may be easier or harder for certain subgroups. Including additional segmentation components will help identify well performing and at-risk groups. Some basic segmentation criteria, which are good candidates for tracking are gender, ethnicity, nationality (or a simpler split into local and international students).

The opinion survey is a useful tool to understand first year students and how useful the FYE program and its components are to them in their transitioning process. Ultimately, university administrators will benefit from verifying these subjective declarations. One way of accomplishing that task is to gather information on students' high school and subsequent university grade point average (GPA) or cumulative grade point average (CGPA), depending on when the FYE program feedback is gathered (during or after the second semester). Establishing correlations between either a declared or system-linked anonymous link to GPA or CGPA with the evaluations will support a better understanding of how well the FYE program and its components support the successful transition of high school students to university.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Transitioning from high school to university can be a challenge for many students. Many universities have designed and introduced different initiatives to support the incoming classes and improve retention.

The FYE program at AUBG has been designed to assure a smooth transition of high school students to university, as well as prepare for the specifics of the liberal arts education, campus, curricular and extracurricular activities in the local community, thus supporting retention rates.

The review of selected frameworks and recommended best practices in literature, as well as the subsequent benchmarking of the AUBG FYE experience, demonstrate that the program under review has been developed and is implemented with consideration to the majority of them. The student transition is also supported by aspects, not specifically placed in the FYE program, but which are present and can be experienced through campus, academic, co-, and extracurricular activities.

Student evaluations show a high level of agreement with the statements aiming to assess whether the FYE program components and related aspects are beneficial for high school students transitioning to university. Tracked indicators, allow for adequate annual performance measurement on the implementation and declared satisfaction with or usefulness of the components and aspects.

There are several ways to enhance information collection through participation and the data gathering tool. Increased participation through the introduction of mandates and incentives will assure less potential bias from self-selection. The introduction of two sets of question per component – one about the perceived quality, and the other about the declared contribution to a successful transition of the first year students to university. Contributing components may be further broken down and supplemented with the full list of recommended components and aspects from the presented frameworks and lists. Adding further respondent demographics and actual academic, co-, and extracurricular performance will support an even better identification of at-risk subgroups or variables.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Dean of Students, the Dean of Faculty, as well as the staff from the Office of Institutional Research at the American University in Bulgaria for making the data available and giving permission to use it for this paper so that peer educational institutions can benefit from the findings and better support high school students with their successful transition to university.

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