First Year Experience programs are common across higher education today – they are often used as a signature element in an education and touted as a means to prepare students for their college career while increasing retention and graduation rates. In reality, many of these programs are delivered by graduate assistants and not faculty invested in the institution. As a result, the value and consistency of programs are sometimes not as advertised. At PLU, the Freshmen Year Experience Program 101 writing course is taken very seriously as a part of the educational experience for students and faculty invest a great deal of effort ensuring students attain the writing skills they need to succeed. How?

Callista Brown has led the FYEP program since 2010 and has thoughtfully implemented a common writing assignment across all sections – it was incrementally and collaboratively developed by the faculty and continues to be modified each year.

In 2010, a common assignment pilot was designed based on an assignment FYEP 101 faculty developed already. In this first iteration, participating faculty chose student work - a quality essay and a weak essay - and then wrote their own essay about the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Faculty discussed their learning together and developed rubrics to utilize for evaluating student work in future terms. Since that time, the common assignment and the rubrics have been incrementally modified based on faculty conversation and feedback. Each year faculty teams gather to assess a random sample of essays and reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the papers to inform future conversations among faculty regarding curricular and pedagogical improvements.

Over the past 5 years the FYEP assessment process has been a faculty conversation of student work. It is not about complying with reporting requirements or meeting some arbitrary benchmark of alleged performance. Students and faculty change each year but what does not change is a continuous conversation about student experiences and student work.

Assessment is a means to inform faculty development leading to curricular and pedagogical experimentation. FYEP under the leadership of Callista Brown has ensured that faculty conversation about student learning be the focus of the effort. PLU students have benefited as a result of this enlightened approach.
For many years transfer students considering PLU were not given definitive information about the specific courses that would transfer into the major – sometimes not until after they were enrolled in their first semester. As a result, it was not known if the student would graduate in a timely manner.

While transfer students still selected PLU, it was difficult to make the case to prospective students – not only was tuition higher than other institutions but the student was given no guarantee of time to graduation as major specific course transfer information was not provided. This information was given to students for their other college choices putting PLU in a difficult position competitively.

This has all changed thanks to a team effort at PLU from faculty to admissions to the registrar’s office to the Academic Deans Council. Students are now given a “5-Day Promise” in which PLU provides the student with the ability to run a CAPP report for a variety of majors.

Pulling this off has been no easy task. The workload in the registrar’s office has increased dramatically – faculty must respond quickly to requests so the CAPP report information can be entered manually by the admissions office. Despite the increased workload, Beth Crippen in the Registrar’s office and Sean Lacy in Admissions have somehow managed to maintain their friendship 😊

Importantly, prospective transfer students are given information in a timely manner now and admissions counselors no longer have to convince students to attend PLU despite the lack of information. It is yet another step we are making in a team effort to continuously improve the recruitment and retention of qualified students that can succeed in the distinctive environment of PLU.

At the March 4 General Education workshop attended by PLU faculty and student life staff there was virtually unanimous agreement that a culminating experience in the general education would be a sensible approach to integrating the core values of inquiry, leadership, service and care.

Just as in the major, participants agreed a developmentally laddered approach to general education addressing institutional learning goals should replace what students and faculty currently see as a checklist. Capstone is probably not the best word however...might create confusion! Any ideas?

Contact Dave Veazey for the full general education student survey report – or with any questions and with any future submissions to Improving the PLU Experience. dav@plu.edu x8145 For a copy and to see other editions go to: www.plu.edu/institutional-research/