The National Hispanic University’s
First-Year Learning Community Program

Introduction

A student’s first year at a university is critical to academic success and persistence to graduation, particularly if the student begins college linguistically or academically under prepared. Isolation thanks to a new environment away from high school friends, a rigorous academic workload coupled with the pressures of adult responsibility can overwhelm an eighteen-year-old freshman. If, in addition, the student is the first to attend college and/or must work to pay tuition and living expenses, the chances for failure are high. This describes most of the first-time freshmen at the National Hispanic University. The result of this combination of factors is an unacceptably high student loss rate at the university. We have to do a better job of serving the students who chose to study at NHU. We owe that to the students who put their faith in us. But we must also do better because failure to retain students negatively impacts tuition revenue, which, in turn, negatively impacts the quality of the academic program the university is able to provide.

The solution is to create a comprehensive First-Year Learning Community Program at NHU that serves incoming freshmen for their first year in college. National studies indicate that the highest dropout rate is between the first and second years. If a university is able to bring students successfully through these first two years, the likelihood that the student will persist to graduation rises dramatically. NHU already has some of the components of a first-year program: the Student Academic Assistance Center (SAAC) which provides limited tutoring, the Student Success Program (SSP) which monitors students during their first year and helps provide a social framework within which they can function comfortably, and the Ambassadors internship program which allows students to work at the university thus eliminating the distraction caused by needing to work at an off-campus job unrelated to the student’s studies. These components are supplemented by two crucial courses. Information 100 (INF 100) introduces students to methods for carrying out the library and online research that is necessary for them to write the papers that will be required of them in their classes. University 100 (UNI 100) is aimed at teaching students who have no family background that would familiarize them with the requirements of college how to be a successful college student. Finally, academic advising is carried out by faculty so that students and faculty get to know each other and so that faculty will remain in close contact with the students as they progress through their coursework.

In addition to strengthening the retention efforts described above, the University must knit these and several additional efforts that still need to be developed into a unified campaign. That well-coordinated program should prepare, retain, educate and graduate students with a very low loss rate. This unified approach would include the instructional programs, training of faculty and staff to teach and support in ways that aid retention and learning, a Summer Bridge program that ensures a successful transition from high school to college, Student Services including tutoring and counseling, monitoring of student progress and active intervention when a student begins to flounder, financial aid including work study, and student life programs that provide a social context that will aid retention.

The National Hispanic University seeks support from Applied Materials to create such a First-Year Learning Community Program for all freshmen students entering the university. The
primary purpose of the Learning Communities is to assist first-year students in obtaining the knowledge, academic skills, social and financial supports, attitude and practices to be successful in a university setting. We will accomplish this by creating an infrastructure with

- specifically designed instruction consistent with the cultural and linguistic background of students,
- well-prepared faculty trained not just in subject matter but in effective pedagogical means to help our students learn,
- a cohort model wherein students establish relationships with schoolmates thanks to proceeding through their classes together and engaging in group social activities,
- instructional approaches specifically designed to be effective with students having the characteristics described earlier,
- individualized math and English tutoring for each student who requires it,
- classes that teach skills for college success,
- counseling services to aid students whose life events threaten to move them away from achieving their educational objectives,
- formal means for faculty and academic support staff to work together to achieve success with each student individually,
- and adequate financial assistance to students in need including the option of on-campus work to minimize the distraction from school work that occurs when a student works at an academically unrelated off-campus job.

Goals

1. Increase the university’s retention rate as measured by the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) a national system that tracks fall-to-fall retention for first-time freshmen in the nation’s colleges and universities. Increased retention will be a milestone for measuring program success after the first year of the program and in succeeding years. Our expectation is that retention gains will be seen after the first year and that retention levels will continue to increase in succeeding years.

2. Increase the university’s persistence to graduation rate. This is a milestone that can first be measured in four years when students in the first cohort of to participate in the program reach their expected graduation date. The expectation is that persistence to graduation will be greater for the first cohort of students participating in the program than for students preceding them who did not have the advantages of the program. And it is expected that persistence to graduation rates will continue to increase as succeeding cohorts of students participate in the program.
Data

According to our Integrated Post Secondary Data Systems (IPEDS) report for academic year 2007-2008 (2006 cohort), NHU’s fall-to-fall retention rate for first-time freshmen is 60% for full-time students and 38% for part-time students. See below. While a 100% retention rate would be ideal, the University would like to retain 80% - 90% of its first-time freshmen after their first year. An improvement of 7% to 10% per year for both full and part-time students beginning with the 2008 cohort is a reasonable milestone for each of the next three years.

Retention Rates – IPEDS Reports

<table>
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<tr>
<th>IPEDS Reporting Year</th>
<th>Cohort Year</th>
<th>Full-Time Retention Rate</th>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>2006-2007</td>
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<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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According to our IPEDS report for academic year 2007-2008 (2001 cohort), NHU’s six-year graduation rate is 14.6%. See below. While a six-year graduation rate for low-income and/or working students does not tell the whole story because between 20% and 30% of our students from the 2001 cohort are still taking courses toward their degrees, the University expects that the six-year graduate rate would improve 10% per year for three years beginning in academic year 2014-2015. In other words, the six-year graduation rate for the 2008 cohort would be 24.6%, 2009 cohort would be 34.6%, and 2010 cohort would be 44.6%.

Graduation Rates – IPEDS Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPEDS Reporting Year</th>
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<th>Cohort Size</th>
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<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
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These are the Major Objectives That Must Be Accomplished to Put the Program in Place

1. Create learning communities among first-time freshmen.
2. Develop a first-year curriculum that focuses on literacy, numeracy, study skills, critical thinking, and social/psychological/self-understanding.
3. Integrate all student-success/support activities at NHU through common management.
4. Strengthen the Summer Bridge Program by focusing on the transition from high school to college.
5. Track and assess all participants in the First-Year Learning Community on a regular basis throughout their first year. Intervene as needed.
6. Provide professional development for faculty to teach first-time freshmen more effectively.
7. Sponsor more extra-curricular activities for freshmen to foster student life.
8. Involve the students’ families to foster a college-going environment at home.
9. Coordinate financial aid to minimize the number of freshmen who must work off campus to support their education.
10. Coordinate retention/student success activities with SJSU through the cross-enrollment agreement so that students who transfer to SJSU from NHU will succeed.
11. Leverage initiative to seek additional community partners and funds.
12. Assess and share results and information regarding best practices with the higher education community.

Strategic Actions, Timeline, Milestones by Which to Measure Progress

1. Schedule Fall 08 General Education Classes for First-Year students (4/08)

   All First-Year students take the same courses during the fall semester. They are placed in math and English courses based on their scores on NHU’s Accuplacer Test. The following courses have already been scheduled for this cohort for fall 08.

   ENG 40 English Grammars and Reading-Based Writing  
   ENG 45 English Grammar and Reading Comprehension  
   ENG 100 English Composition and Reading  
   ENG 201 Critical Thinking, Writing, and Reading  
   PSY 100 Psychology  
   SPC 100 Speech  
   UNI 100 The First-Year Experience  
   ART 100 Art Appreciation  
   ANT 100 Introduction to Anthropology

2. Hire First-Year Director (7/08)

   Begin search for this position once the proposal has been approved. See attached job description.

3. Hire Retention Specialist (7/08)

   Begin search for this position once the proposal has been approved. See attached job description.
4. Create an Assessment Plan (8/08)

   The University will contract with an outside consultant to create an assessment plan in coordination with the Director of the First-Year Learning Communities program and the Provost.

5. Administer Accuplacer Exam, the University’s English and math placement exam, to the First-Year cohort (7/08)

   The Accuplacer Exam helps place the students in appropriate English and math courses. The University is offering three beginning levels of English and three beginning levels of math during the academic year. During the fall semester, the focus will be on English, Math will be the focus of the spring semester.

   Fall Semester:
   - ENG 40 English Grammar and Reading-Based Writing
   - ENG 45 English Grammar and Reading Comprehension
   - ENG 100 English Composition and Reading

   Spring Semester:
   - MAT 40 Pre-Algebra Math Review
   - MAT 45 Elementary Algebra and Geometry
   - MAT 100 College Algebra

6. Identify and meet with Fall 08 First-Year cohort and parents (8/08)

   This is an informal evening event in order to get to know one another and discuss the focus and activities of the First-Year program. Invitees include the parents, students, current students, alumni, faculty, Provost, President, student services staff, and First-Year staff.

7. Student advisement for first semester (8/08) and for second semester (12/08)

   Each First-Year student meets with an academic advisor after taking the Accuplacer Exam to choose classes for the fall. The students will meet with an advisor to plan the second semester at the end of the fall semester. Advisors include First Year staff and faculty.

8. Begin Fall Semester (8/08)

9. Select and train 20 tutors/mentors (8/08 – 10/08)

   The tutors/mentors are successful juniors and seniors. They regularly attend classes with the First-Year cohort in order to have first hand knowledge of what their tutees and mentees are doing in class and to get to know the students in the First Year cohort. In addition to giving tutorial assistance, the tutors participate in
all extra-curricular and parent activities with the First Year students throughout the academic year. The tutors/mentors work an average of 10 hours per week at $10 an hour. They are also expected to maintain their own academic progress toward their chosen degrees. The position requires a minimum 3.0 cumulative GPA, with As and Bs in appropriate courses; tutoring experience preferred; and instructor recommendations and upper division standing required. Each tutor/mentor will receive a minimum of 5 hours training prior to working with the students.

10. Coordinate all retention and academic student services (9/08)

NHU already has some of the components of a first-year program: the Student Academic Assistance Center (SAAC), the Student Success Program (SSP), the Ambassadors internship program, INF 100 and the Library, UNI 100, and faculty-led academic advising. The Director, working in coordination with the Provost, will develop a unified approach that includes the instructional programs, Summer Bridge, Student Services, financial aid, and student life with the existing programs and initiatives that promote student success. The Director will submit a plan to unify the various retention, student, and academic services to the Academic Senate and outside consultant.

11. Coordinate retention activities with SJSU (9/08)

NHU enjoys a cross-enrollment agreement with San Jose State University, which includes provisions for shared student services. The Director, working in coordination with the Provost, will develop a plan to more fully use the services that SJSU provides for student retention and success. The Director will submit this plan to the Academic Senate and outside consultant.

12. First in-service training for First-Year faculty (9/08), second in-service training (2/09)

This includes faculty workshops and seminars to explore/create different methods and pedagogical approaches for working with at-risk college students during their first year experience. Since seventy percent of the teaching is done by adjunct faculty at NHU, faculty development is critical in sharing best teaching practices and developing effective pedagogical approaches to the first-year student population. NHU faculty will meet with the Retention Specialist regularly to discuss individual student performance, cohort patterns toward learning, ineffective/effective assignments, and student learning outcomes.

The faculty development plan will consist of the following: all faculty teaching the first-year cohort will attend two required effective teaching retreats per academic year (fall and spring). The retreat will set the tone and guidelines for faculty teaching the first-year experience. Topics include individual student
performance, curricular concerns, student learning outcomes, evaluation rubrics, and most importantly, best practices in increasing student persistence in their classes and retention overall. A first-year cohort model employed at the University of South Carolina will be used as a reference framework to develop a model that works for NHU’s student population.

13. First extra-curricular student activity (9/08), second (12/08), and third (3/09)

Activities include, but are not limited to, the following: intramural sports, student clubs, local field trips, and student-led workshops and seminars with the intent of fostering camaraderie and building a learning community. The Retention Specialist will organize, oversee, and evaluate these activities.

14. First assessment of student success and intervention (9/08), second (11/08), third (2/09), and fourth (4/09)

All faculty teaching First-Year Experience courses will submit an academic progress report for each student to the Retention Specialist after the third week of instruction. The report serves as an early warning system to prevent students from getting too far behind and to alert the First-Year staff regarding potential impediments to learning and individual student success.

15. First parent engagement (10/08), second (1/09), and third (3/09)

The parent component will have the following four goals:

- **Esperanzas**: To help parents understand the critical role they play in motivating and inspiring their children to succeed in higher education.
- **Ambiciones**: To help parents understand the resources that are available for them to learn English, complete their GED, learn computer skills, and make use of other available resources.
- **Información**: To provide parents with the information and strategies they need for their children to qualify for financial aid, scholarships, and other resources that are available to them.
- **Orgullo Cultural**: To help parents utilize their cultural and linguistic strengths as a basis to assist their children in their university aspirations.

16. Review and select library additions and educational software (10/08)

The Director will work with the University Librarian to develop a strategy to purchase books, databases, and/or software to support the First-Year Experience student success.

17. Schedule Fall 08 General Education Classes for First-Year students (4/08)
All First-Year students take the same courses during the fall semester. The Director will work with the Chair of General Studies to schedule the courses for the First-Year cohort.

18. Begin Spring Semester (1/09)

19. End-of-year celebration for First-Year students, parents, faculty and staff (5/09)

This is a social event to celebrate the year’s successes. Prospective First-Year Experience students for next year and their families will be invited to the event, as well.

20. Revise General Education curriculum (8/08 – 5/09)

University faculty members will revise and redesign all 22 General Education courses during the academic year, beginning with the math and English courses. The Chair of General Education and the Provost will coordinate this activity in order to provide a rigorous breadth of study in different major fields of knowledge that will prepare students for a seamless transition into a prospective major or to transfer to another four-year university with junior standing. The general education curriculum will form a foundation for lifelong learning. That foundation includes critical thinking, effective communication, awareness of the broader human experience and multicultural society, and appreciation of the responsibilities of persons to themselves, to each other, and to their community.

Curricular Changes:

- Twenty-two general education classes need to be restructured to teach and assess student learning outcomes in the following areas:
  - critical thinking
  - writing effectively
  - oral communication
  - awareness of the broader human experience and multicultural society.
- Life-long service to the community and society in general.
- Incorporate peer teaching within the curriculum.
- Scaffold academic skills across the curriculum and identify skill/learning outcomes with each class/discipline.

21. Participate in Summer Bridge Program (6/09 – 7/09)

The First-Year Experience staff will participate in Summer Bridge 09 as included in the unified plan developed by the Director and Provost. See above.

22. First-Year progress report (7/09)
The Director of the First-Year Experience program will submit a progress report on the first year of the program to the Provost, Faculty Senate, and Applied Materials. The report will address each of the activities and milestones discussed above. In addition, the Director may produce a paper/presentation regarding best practices for promoting student success with first-generation Latino students.

23. Submit 2009-2010 IPEDS report (Fall 09)

The Office of Planning and Institutional Evaluation submits our IPEDS report annually.

24. Complete outside evaluation of the First-Year Experience program

The outside consultant will submit a comprehensive report consistent with the evaluation plan developed at the beginning of the academic year. This report regarding the results of the first year of this program will be submitted to the Provost and Applied Materials. This report will be the basis of potential further funding.

Funding Investment & Request

Consistent with the funding priorities of Applied Materials, National Hispanic University seeks an Applied Materials investment of $340,000 for the creation of the First-Year Experience Program. NHU will seek funding for subsequent years from Applied Materials based on the successes of the pilot year and from other funders, private and public. See attached Advancement Plan. The university will sustain this program from non-grant resources within five years. The program will be sustained through gradual increases in tuition and through increased enrollment and retention. Currently, the tuition for NHU students is $6,000 per year, but is scheduled to increase to $8,500 within five years.

Annotated Budget for Academic Year 2008-2009

Budget Items

1. First-Year Program Coordinator @$100,000

2. This individual will be a full-time professor with assigned release time to coordinate all aspects of the First-Year Program. The First-Year Experience Director will be a full-time, 12-month position reporting to the Provost. The Director will have responsibility for full project administration and oversight of the First-Year Experience program including the following: implementing, administering, supervising and evaluating the program; supervising personnel; planning and coordinating academic support programs; establishing working relationships with NHU faculty, staff, administrators and other organizations to promote increased retention and graduation rates; working with colleagues at SJSU; monitoring the connection of students with basic skills faculty, peer tutors, mentors and coaches; modifying the project design based on what is learned from the formative and summative evaluations; and participating on university committees when assigned.
Education and Training  A Master’s Degree in Education, Counselor Education, Administration, Developmental Education or a related field is required.

Experience  The Director must have three to five years of progressively responsible administrative experience in a higher education setting, of which at least three years has been working in Student or Academic Support Services and experience with equal opportunity programs serving low-income, first-generation college students or students with disabilities.

Other Abilities and Skills  The Director must have knowledge of learning theory and styles, and educational methods; excellent verbal and written communication skills; interpersonal skills needed to deal effectively and courteously with students from diverse backgrounds, administrators, faculty, and the public; knowledge of computer instructional technology and use of student databases; and sensitivity to diversity and multicultural issues; preferably have similar life experiences to those of low income, first generation NHU students. See attached Job Description.

3. Retention Specialist @ $60,000

This is a full-time, 10-month position. The position reports directly to the First-Year Experience program Director and is responsible for assisting with identifying, designing, coordinating, supervising and evaluating the First-Year students and structured academic support services program, social services and activities for the students.

Education and Training: This position will require a minimum of a Bachelor’s Degree in Social Science, Liberal Studies or Education; Master’s Degree in Counseling, Student Personnel, or Education is preferred.

Experience: This person will have at least three years work experience in advising and implementing retention strategies with university students at-risk of dropping out. Experience working with target student population is preferred.

Abilities and Skills: The Retention Specialist will have excellent written and verbal communication skills; interpersonal skills necessary to deal effectively and courteously with students, administrators, the public, and faculty; knowledge of local human service resources would be a plus; sensitivity to diversity and multicultural issues; and background similar to the First-Year students preferred. See attached Job Description.

4. Student Tutors and Mentor @ $60,000

Twenty student tutors and mentors who work 10 hours a week @ $10 per hour up to a total of 6,000 hours for academic year 2008-2009.

5. Tracking and Evaluation Software @ $20,000
The University will purchase available software to track and evaluate student and program performance, consistent with the Evaluation Plan created by the outside consultant, Director, and Provost.

6. Faculty Development @ $10,000

This will fund regular faculty workshops and seminars to explore/create different methods and pedagogical approaches for working with at-risk college students. Funds will be used to pay the presenters, purchase food and supplies, and provide stipends for the participants.

7. Parent/Family Workshops @ $10,000

This will fund the university’s engagement with the parents and families of our first-year students, in order to create a college-going culture and awareness within the families of first-generation college students. Funds will be used to pay the presenters, purchase food and supplies, and provide childcare services for the participants.

8. Extra-Curricular activities @ $10,000

Activities could include, but are not limited to, the following: intramural sports, student clubs, local field trips, and student-led workshops and seminars. Funds will be used to pay any entrance or event fees, purchase food and supplies, and cover travel expenses.

9. Library @ $10,000

The University will use these funds to purchase books, periodicals, and educational software and data bases in coordination with the Librarian and the program Director to support the First-Year students.

10. Curriculum Development @ $50,000

All of our General Education curriculum will need to be revised and integrated to serve our first-year cohorts. The funds will support faculty release time to rewrite all of our 22 GE course outlines.

11. Evaluation Consultant and Assessment Plan @ $10,000

NHU will use these funds to hire an outside consultant to develop an Assessment Plan and conduct program evaluation throughout the year.

**Program Support Plan**

We are asking Applied Materials to launch the program by supporting the first year and to make contributions in the out years. We estimate that we will need to maintain grant funding for approximately five years as the university raises tuition and increases enrollment. Our target is to have transferred program support to tuition by the end of five years. We expect at the end of five years to have an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students and a tuition level of $8,500. The table below lists the foundations and corporations from which we will seek funding and the
amount of funding we expect to request. In determining how much will be needed each year to carry out the program, we are assuming a three percent increase in cost each year to account for inflation. The estimated five-year cost of the program is $1,806,000. It is expected that requests totaling $2,280,000 will be made of prospective donors that have been identified to date.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Amount Requested</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Amount Requested</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Amount Requested</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
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