

The First-Year Student Experience at Whitworth U.

Fall

When students arrive on campus in September to move into the residence halls, we know they are facing all kinds of uncertainty. Some students are excited by this opportunity, while others are filled with apprehension. We familiarize first-year students with the campus, help them develop into good students, get them involved, and give them opportunities to make friends and explore their interests and values.

Orientation Week (*move-in weekend and the first days of class*)

In order to get first-year students settled into their new homes during Orientation Week, and to help them feel secure and ready for the challenges ahead, we strive to implement the following three goals: 1) Relieve their anxiety, 2) plug them into the community, and 3) create a sense of belonging, helping new students to feel at home.

I. Relieve Anxiety

- o Residence-hall floor meetings include “roommate inventories” that help students to know what to expect of their new room- and floormates.
- o All residence students participate in residence-area policy (RAP) implementation, where they help to decide the rules that will govern their living areas.
- o The Welcome Fair, on move-in day, allows students to find jobs, get bank accounts, get computers hooked up, rent refrigerators, get I.D. cards, and meet academic-advising assistants to get their class schedules ready to go. A campus tour is also provided for new students and their parents so that students can locate their classroom buildings before classes begin.
- o New commuter students and new transfer students have special seminars where they can meet with academic advisors, representatives from the registrar’s office, and experienced, successful transfer and commuter students.
- o Academic administrators and first-year-student advisors present seminars for small groups of new students in order to explain the academic expectations at the university. These members of Whitworth’s faculty and staff go over class schedules and course syllabi with new students to clarify where students should go and what they should bring to the first week of classes.

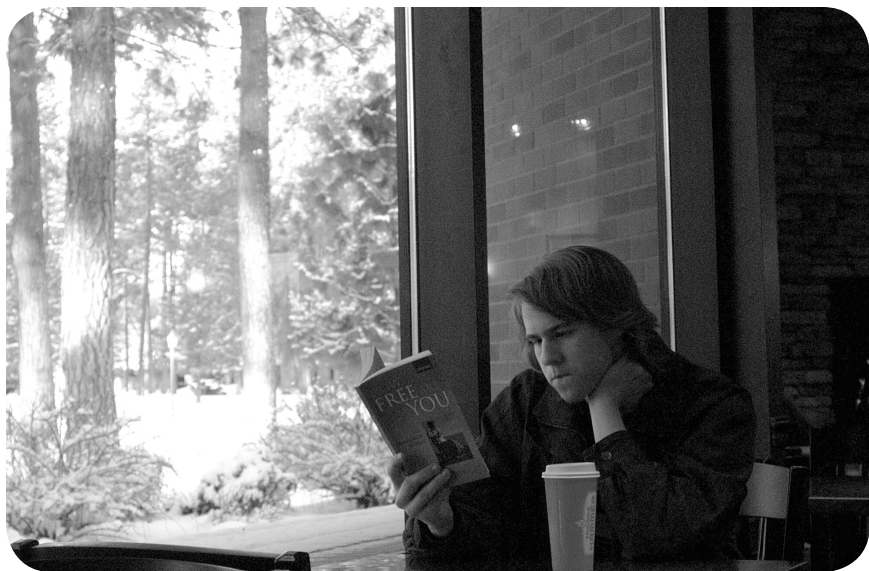
- Before classes begin, experts present study-skills and time-management seminars for first-year students.
- Student-life representatives present interactive theater-style productions on ways in which first-year students might deal with social situations, both positive and negative, in which they could find themselves.
- Traditiation, run by student leaders, introduces new students to one another through games and team-building exercises so that they begin to know others by name within 24 hours of moving in to their halls.

2. Plug People In

- The Welcome Fair on move-in day is designed to introduce new students to the university's student media, student government, and student activities – to get students involved immediately in campus activities.
- The “Plug-In Picnic” informally introduces students to faculty from Whitworth's academic departments and invites students to peruse the various ASWU clubs and organizations to allow them to decide how they want to become engaged in life at Whitworth.
- Residence-hall barbecues are held the first week for new students to meet informally with returning members of their living communities.

3. Create a Sense of Belonging

- First-year students are introduced to the history of Whitworth, to the students who make up their class, and to the mission of the university in a humorous skit acted out by university faculty members and administrators.
- Traditiation introduces first-year students to the traditions, songs, and chants of their respective residence halls in order to help them begin to feel a part of the long-standing traditions of their communities.
- The president of the university informally addresses the new class, welcoming its members to the fold and sharing with them Whitworth's expectation that they will live with grace and truth during their time here.
- Fall Convocation, which features faculty in full academic regalia, takes place during Orientation Week and allows all new and returning students to take part in the rich tradition that marks the beginning of the academic year.
- A formal dinner for new students celebrates their arrival in the Whitworth community.



Residence-Hall Programming (*first three weeks of school*)

- o Alcohol-awareness programs in each of the residence halls help first-year students, in particular, to understand the negative effects that drinking can have on their time at Whitworth.
- o Campus-wide sexual-assault-awareness programs are offered to help students understand that the early part of fall semester can be a most dangerous time, in terms of the incidence of acquaintance rape, on university campuses. Students learn the best ways to avoid dangerous situations and are taught how to help friends who might have to deal with this issue.

First-Year Academic Seminars (*GE 125, September-December*)

- o All first-year students are enrolled in one section of GE 125. A faculty member teaches each section of 16 students and serves as those students' academic advisor for their first year. Each student meets with his/her advisor at least four times during the fall term. Advisors seek to help students with their academic and personal development.
- o The primary course goal of GE 125 is to foster relationships between students and their peers as well as between students and faculty. This happens in the context of 1) aiding students in their transition to the university; 2) assisting students in dealing with ideas and pursuing a successful liberal-arts education; and 3) helping students to think about their vocations – as university students now, and in the careers that they will eventually choose.



- All first-year students will share experiences like Convocation and Community-Building Day, programs in the Speakers & Artists Series, and discussions of the common-reading book. (All incoming students receive a thought-provoking book during the summer; the university's goals in providing these books are to provide students with a shared intellectual experience, to promote development of critical-thinking skills and engagement with challenging ideas, and to strengthen the academic community and intellectual relationships among faculty, staff and students.)
- Each section of GE 125 is unique in that it relates directly to the expertise of its faculty leader.
- For students who enter Whitworth at midyear, one section of GE 125 is held each spring.

Small-Group Opportunities (*September-May*)

- The chapel program at Whitworth has trained student coordinators who organize new students into small groups for the study of scripture, for support and for service.

First-Year Student-Leadership Opportunities (*end of September-May*)

- Associated Students of Whitworth University (ASWU, the university's student-government organization) holds some residence-hall-representative positions open to allow first-year students to have a voice in student government. First-year students may run for office at the end of September and can then serve their halls in paid leadership positions through the end of the academic year.

The Weekend (*mid-September*)

- o This retreat, planned by students and geared mostly toward the first-year student, gets students away from campus to a beautiful setting to meet new friends, hear a challenging speaker and be renewed in Christ.

Residence-Hall Programming (*October*)

- o Study-skills programs are provided in each hall after the first set of midterm exams to help students understand the benefits of developing good study habits and time-management skills.

Career/Major-Selection Workshops (*October*)

- o The Whitworth Career Services Office holds an open house for all first-year students.

Residence-Hall Programming (*November*)

- o Going Home, a program that takes place right before Thanksgiving Break, explores what it's like for first-year students returning home for the first time – many to find that their rooms have been converted into home offices, their high-school friends are on different schedules, and their relationships with their parents are in need of re-tooling.

Multicultural Programming (*September-May*)

- o Cultural-diversity coordinators are students hired to provide support, counseling and campus programming geared toward creating an inclusive, educated and diverse community. Programming takes place in the residence halls and throughout the campus.

Spring

Planning: Major/Career (*February-May*)

- o The Whitworth Career Services Office offers a course that explores and defines a first-year student's interests, values, goals and personality in relation to his/her choice of a major. The course also provides detailed information regarding career and job opportunities to help students make good career choices and deal successfully with other major decisions.

Career/Major-Selection Workshops (*March*)

- o The Whitworth Career Services Office holds an open house for first-year students.



Transitional Trials

(Making it Through the First Year of College)

From the Whitworth Health
and Counseling Center

We asked some first-year students if it would be helpful not only to know that they were going through normal stages in their transition to college, but to talk about what, exactly, those stages might look like. They said “Yes!” Here, then, is a list of stages that student-development experts have deemed “normal” for frosh as they make a successful transition to university life.

Acute Anxiety: During their first few days on campus, new students encounter new roommates, university administrators, unfamiliar classrooms and a whole new world of responsibilities. This is perhaps the most difficult time for first-year students, since they know what they are losing but are uncertain about what they may be gaining. First-year students wonder what is expected of them in order for them to be successful and accepted into this confusing new world. This is also a time of acute homesickness for some.

The Honeymoon: While they’re feeling anxious, first-year students may also have unreasonable expectations regarding immediate intellectual experiences and a thriving social life.

End of the Honeymoon: A few weeks (or, for some, a few months) into the term, students begin to realize that college is not all freedom and fun. Hard work, frustration and disappointment abound. Students may receive their first low grades during this stage. Disillusionment begins.

During this phase, a new student is likely to operate on the basis of three myths regarding health:

Physical Health: Students may think that they do not need to sleep regularly, eat well or visit the health center if they are sick. Depression can be a result of such thinking.

Mental Health: The second first-year-student myth is that attending a university is fun, that it will be the best time of their lives, and that everyone can handle it. While it’s true that this can be a wonderful four years, it can also be stressful when so many areas of development, including academic competency, independence and personal relationships, are being addressed at the same time. All the facets of university life add up

to stress, which can be the result of a real problem, such as a lack of time, or an imagined one, such as the fear of failure. Whitworth counselors can help students deal with those pressures.

Academic Health: Myths in this area are numerous. “You don’t need to study every day; you can pull an all-nighter before an exam,” or “You don’t need to go to class; just copy someone’s notes” are familiar comments. Most academic problems stem from two sources: poor time management and lack of study skills. Study-skills classes and workshops are available through Whitworth Student Life.

The Grass is Always Greener: Immediately after receiving their midterm grades, some students will begin to think that university life must be better at other schools. They’ll become certain that transferring to another institution will solve all of their problems. At this point, some students are tempted to externalize problems, looking to fix blame outside themselves for their lack of success.

You Can’t Go Home Again: The first visit home in the fall of the freshman year is always traumatic, because things there have often changed dramatically. This is a time for thoughtful students to evaluate how much they have changed and grown.

Fear of Failure: For some students, procrastination sets in after midterms when they realize that they are not doing well despite hours of studying. At this point, some students want to avoid all reminders of failure. This phase is often marked by the appearance of examination phobia and what may be called “sleeping-sickness syndrome” in students. Students may sleep 12, 14 or even 16 hours per day in order to escape the pressure of attending class and taking examinations.

Putting it All Together: During the second term, students begin to view college as a total experience. They come to see that classes, hanging out, movies and other activities are actually related and part of a cohesive whole. Students can now judge the opportunities available on campus and can understand that hard work and active involvement are necessary to take full advantage of university life.