



## Open Pathway

### *Quality Initiative Institutional Proposal Template*

*The enclosed Quality Initiative proposal represents the work that the institution will undertake to fulfill the Improvement Process of the Open Pathway.*

Signature of Institution's President or Chancellor

Date

Terry Wilkerson, President

Printed/Typed Name and Title

Rend Lake College

Name of Institution

Ina, IL

City and State

The institution completes the Quality Initiative proposal by responding to the questions in each category of the template. The institution may choose to include a brief implementation plan that addresses many of the questions below and replaces portions of the outline. Proposals should be no more than 4,500 words.

#### **Overview of the Quality Initiative**

- Description and Progress of the Quality Initiative

Rend Lake College is proposing the First Year Experience program as its focus for the Quality Initiative. Plans for the First Year Experience have evolved over the past twelve months with a Pilot planned for Spring 2014. The intent is to roll the program out for all first-time, full-time degree seeking students in Fall 2014. First-time, part-time degree seeking students will be included in the second phase of the initiative Fall 2015. Thus, the major milestones of the initiative will be accomplished during the Quality Initiative period.

#### **Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance**

- Potential for significant impact on the institution and its academic quality

Institutionally, Rend Lake College (RLC) believes the First Year Experience (FYE) program will have a significant impact on retention and overall academic achievement. Located in the Mississippi Delta Region, RLC's 1,850 sq. mile district (approximate population 90,394) is characterized by generational poverty. Specifically, a series of employment crises over the past several years—first the closing of the area's coal mines followed by the recent closing of several manufacturing and distribution centers—extend a regional history of socioeconomic distress. Poverty plagues families in the RLC district, and area unemployment rates soar as high as 11.9%, with changes in industry demanding a skilled workforce. Unfortunately, too many residents find themselves trapped by low educational attainment; at 13.4%, adult baccalaureate degree attainment lags dramatically behind state and U.S. levels.

Our students tend to work (75%), attend part-time (56%), and balance family obligations (16% single parents), all while being the first in their families to navigate higher education (71% first generation college students). Most of our students (85%) are low income. These at-risk students welcome the extra attention and convenient offerings that we can provide. As we advertise, RLC is “small enough to get to know you...large enough to meet your educational needs,” traits we strive to maintain by remaining responsive to emerging opportunities to best serve our students. Underprepared students attempting to enter and succeed in programs face steep obstacles in attaining advanced skills in math, reading comprehension, and critical thinking required by these programs; inadequately supported, too many never reach their goals.

When looking at our district’s demographics, it is clear our students have challenges to overcome. It is our strong belief that the FYE program, led by a full-time FYE coordinator, will assist these students in academic success. The FYE course will contain both lecture and lab components with lecture being delivered to larger sections, up to 40 students, and lab being presented in smaller sections, up to 20 students, allowing more one-on-one time with students. Research shows this set-up will assist in student success due to the feelings of connectedness with the instructor and ultimately leading to an institutional connection. The goal is to support students navigating their academic career and preparing to transfer or move directly into an occupation.

- Alignment with the institution’s mission and vision

A significant part of the Rend Lake College mission is to provide educational opportunities across cultural and economic boundaries to the diverse student population that we serve. Our college motto, “Our students’ success is our own success” embodies the true nature of our institution. The FYE program will help ensure our students’ success by providing vital skills to the students we serve. In turn, this will enhance our students’ ability to become strong leaders in our communities.

- Connection with the institution’s planning processes

RLC’s strategic analysis and planning process strives to ensure educational and enrichment opportunities that serve the needs of our students and community stakeholders. To that end, we annually engage in a college-wide strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. A host of internal and external individuals and stakeholder groups participate in ongoing institutional analysis. External constituencies (community leaders, business/industry advisors, external consultants) contribute to analysis through multiple avenues, including program and departmental advisory boards and the external evaluation associated with the Higher Learning Commission’s institutional reaccreditation process. We guarantee input from students through a student representative on the Board of Trustees, formal and informal course and program feedback, and student survey responses. Annual strategic planning emanates from ongoing SWOT analysis. The FYE program was recommended through this process. Furthermore, there is a clear institutional commitment to the program; it is being financed with 100% institutional funding. At the present time there are no grants involved in this project which demonstrates our commitment to this initiative.

- Evidence of significance and relevance at this time

Currently, all first-time, full-time degree seeking students participate in a one credit hour orientation course. The FYE course is going to replace the current orientation and be 1.5 credit hours with one hour of lecture and one hour of lab. The content of the course is relevant based on both general observations on our campus and on research that has been conducted both regionally and nationally. FYE courses have been documented as increasing student engagement and success in two and four-year institutions alike. According to the information released by the American Association of Community Colleges, the earnings that accrue to those above the age of 25 who hold an Associate’s degree, compared to those with a high school diploma, have remained largely stable over the last 20 years for both men and women. In 2011, women holding an Associate’s degree earned 31% and men 26% more than counterparts who only possess a high school diploma. First generation college students trying to escape poverty and unemployment in and around the Rend

Lake College district must successfully complete courses and programs at the community college level in order to obtain overall educational attainment level increases. According to the most recent census information, Rend Lake College district residents lack college degrees although they have completed some college courses. The FYE course will incorporate information such as this in an attempt to propel students toward college completion.

### **Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose**

- Purpose and Goals of the Initiative

The purpose of the First Year Experience program is to assist students in a seminar format with the help they need academically and socially to transition into college life and become a successful college student. The program will specifically target all first-time, degree seeking students. Rend Lake College hopes to support students by establishing a connection with their peers and the campus community, stimulating the exploration of campus resources, and promoting personal growth and development. The main focus is to give students the help they need through an interactive program before the student realizes they need help. Ultimately, the goal is to improve retention and completion rates. The intended goals for students in the First Year Experience program are as follows:

- Improve student engagement in the college experience by fostering personal connections and increased communication with faculty, staff, and peers.
- Improve soft and survival skills, such as time management and organization which lead to improved academic performance and are essential for success beyond graduation and in the workforce.
- Prepare students to meet professional standards for behavior including professional codes of conduct, integrity, and ethics.
- Help students understand and successfully navigate the college culture including the virtual and physical environments of the college.

- Evaluation of Progress and Accomplishments

Rend Lake College will evaluate the progress of the First Year Experience initiative by collecting and analyzing institutional and student data to determine the effectiveness of the program. According to RLC's IPED's 2012-2013 fall enrollment, 44% of RLC students are full-time while 56% attend part-time. RLC's First-to-Second Year Retention Rate (the percentage of students who began in Fall 2010 and returned in Fall 2011) for full-time students was 60%. The retention rate for part-time students during the same time frame was 44%. In an effort to improve retention rates, particularly for part-time students which account for 56% of RLC's student body, all full and part-time degree seeking students will be required to enroll in the FYE course their first semester and successfully complete the course as a graduation requirement. Once fully implemented, progress will be evaluated by comparing the retention rates prior to the implementation of the FYE Initiative with the retention rates after implementation. The goal is to improve the retention rates by 10% for each of the groups. Thus, the retention rate target for full-time students is 70%; the target for part-time students is 54%. The data will be analyzed at the end of each academic year to determine whether or not the goal has been met.

According to College Measures Data (as reported in CNN Money), the percentage of RLC students that graduate or transfer to a 4-year institution within 3 years is 68% placing RLC 14<sup>th</sup> in the nation. While it is clear that RLC is a front runner in this endeavor, it is believed that the FYE will contribute to maintaining and improving the transfer rates of students. After the full implementation of the FYE initiative, the goal is to raise this percentage to 70%. The data will be analyzed at the end of each academic year to determine whether or not the goal has been met.

The assessment tool to evaluate student learning will be a pre/post-test. The pre-test will be administered to the FYE students during the first two weeks of the semester. The post-test will be administered during the

last two weeks of the semester. The pre/post-test point improvement will be gauged by student, by section, and as an aggregate to determine where gaps in learning may occur. The data will be entered in RLC's assessment software solution, Tk20, where reports can be generated to analyze and track the data.

A "Think Tank" session will be held with the FYE instructors and mentors after the Pilot semester and subsequent spring semesters. The purpose of the "Think Tank" will be to discuss/brainstorm strategies for improving student success, retention, and completion based on the retention and completion data, student surveys, instructor surveys, and the classroom experiences. The suggestions from the "Think Tank" will be reviewed by the FYE Committee. This committee will meet on a regular basis to discuss and analyze the retention and completion data as well as the "Think Tank" suggestions. Based on the analysis, the FYE Committee will determine what adjustments should be made to the course to improve retention and completion.

### **Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative**

- Level of Support for the Initiative

In 2012, a committee was formed to evaluate the current new student orientation program and formulate a plan for renewal and revitalization of a truer face-to-face First Year Experience (FYE) course. The committee members included faculty, Division Deans, Academic Advisors, the Vice President of Student Services, the Vice President of Academic Instruction, the Dean of Enrollment Management, the Director of the Trio programs, and the Learning Enhancement Specialist. The committee explored potential goals and outcomes for the course. Members also talked with second year students to determine their ideas about improvement. Committee members attended numerous workshops as well as the Midwest Conference on First Year Experience. Members have continued to use the networking and contacts gained from the conference in planning and preparation. In early 2013, the committee reported to the President and President's Cabinet on research findings and progression timeline. The President and Cabinet voted to move forward in a fully committed campus-wide effort.

FYE was included as a key project in the college-wide strategic plan. Resources for instruction, technology, and appropriations were included in the FY 2014 budget.

In August 2013, the first ever First Year Experience Coordinator was hired and began reworking curriculum and planning for the pilot which will begin Spring 2014. Students in the Spring 2014 pilot will be first-time, full-time, degree seeking students. After the pilot ends, revisions will be made and a plan implemented to institutionalize the course by expanding to include all degree seeking students whether part-time or full-time. The committee will continue to be an integral part of the First Year Experience effort.

- Individuals Involved in Implementation

The FYE Coordinator will instruct a number of sections for the course as well as train and monitor other First Year Experience instructors. Key faculty and staff have been identified to serve as instructors of the project. For faculty, the college has made a commitment to include FYE instruction as part of instructional load. Staff who serve as instructors will be given release time from their regular duties. The FYE Committee will serve in an advisory capacity to the FYE Coordinator helping to design the training, identify the instructors, and monitor the implementation.

- Potential Challenges

One of the biggest obstacles that we continue to face is helping students to understand the value of the FYE course. Research shows that students who experience one or more personal connections with faculty and staff tend to be more successful and complete their intended educational goal. Assessment of the outcomes of the

FYE course will take several years. It will require compiling data to measure completion and satisfaction. Potential tools and methods of evaluation are being reviewed.

Due to development of new programs, physical space on campus is limited creating another potential obstacle for the face-to-face portion of the course. Room utilization reports will be used to plan and schedule classes and activities.

- Resources Committed to this Initiative

The resources RLC has committed to the FYE initiative include the hiring of a First Year Experience Coordinator, the cost of instruction for the multiple FYE lecture and lab sessions, the cost of traveling to various FYE conferences and workshops, and the operating budget. Committed resources also include the time and effort invested by the committee and administration to see this initiative move forward.

**Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative** (The institution may include a brief implementation or action plan.)

1. *Describe the primary activities of the initiative and timeline for implementing them.*

- Fall 2013
  - Hired FYE Coordinator
  - Develop curriculum
  - Train instructors
- Spring 2014
  - Pilot w/select group of first-time, full-time degree seeking students
  - Monitor student success within the course
  - Survey students and instructors at midterm and end of semester
  - Add FYE sections to course and classroom schedule for Fall 2014
- Summer 2014
  - Hold “Think Tank” session with FYE instructors
  - Review of “Think Tank” results by FYE Committee
  - Evaluate/revise curriculum based on “Think Tank” results
  - Prepare for complete implementation of FYE program
- Fall 2014
  - Implement to all first-time, full-time degree seeking students
  - Monitor student success within the course
  - Develop an early alert system to identify at-risk students early in semester
- Fall 2015
  - Broaden implementation to include all first-time, part-time degree seeking students
  - Create an online FYE course designed for online degree seeking students
- Spring 2015
  - Pilot the online FYE course for students seeking an online degree
- Ongoing
  - Continue to collect data and track student progress evaluating student retention and completion rates in following semesters
  - Continue to implement changes to curriculum as evaluation and programs dictate

While the timeline is aggressive in implementation, the immediate collection of data and monitoring of student progress in the pilot group is essential to verify and/or adjust the instructional strategy for the FYE. The FYE is to be a living breathing model that is fluid enough to have longevity with generations of students, but consistent enough to provide viable data to support accurate evaluation of the program itself.

**Institutional Contact for Quality Initiative Proposal**

Include the name(s) of the primary contact(s) for the Quality Initiative.

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