FOCUS

ON THE FIRST YEAR

MON MAY 19 2025

3RD ANNUAL

REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

For faculty, professionals, administrators, and student leaders from regional colleges and universities

KEYNOTE

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: DECOLONIZING APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Dr. Daphney Alston
Southern Connecticut State University

Naa Opoku
University of Connecticut Hartford

FYE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

SCSU Southern Connecticut State University

WELCOME, COLLEAGUES, to our third annual Regional Conference on the First-Year Experience, supported by the College of Arts and Sciences, Faculty Development, the Division of Student Affairs, and the First-Year Experience at SCSU.

What began as an idea to bring a few local FYE colleagues together has expanded to a full-day conference, with presenters and attendees from all over the Northeast.

Our presenters include faculty, professionals, administrators, doctoral students, and undergraduate student leaders. This year, we are thrilled to welcome the student orientation leaders from Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts!

Our keynote speakers were chosen because they have been conference favorites, with rave reviews. They challenge us to rethink how we see our students and ourselves.

Thanks to you all for joining. We hope to see you again next year!

PROGRAM

8:30 AM-9:00 AM · EN B121

BREAKFAST/REGISTRATION

9:00 AM-9:30 AM · EN C112

WELCOME:LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Nicole Henderson, Director of FYE, SCSU

9:30 AM-11:00 AM · EN C112

KEYNOTE

Decolonizing Approaches to Teaching and Supporting First-Year Students

Dr. Daphney Alston
Associate Director,
Office of Student Involvement
and Leadership Development,
Southern Connecticut
State University

Naa Opoku
Clinical Case Manager,
Adjunct Professor,
University of
Connecticut–Hartford

In this keynote, Daphney and Naa will explore decolonizing approaches to teaching and supporting first-year students. Through real talk, lived experience, and professional expertise, they will challenge us to rethink how we show up for the next generation.

As the landscape of higher education continues to change, so should the pedagogical approaches of professors and instructors, especially those working with first-year students. In this session, participants will learn the tenets and theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Theory, as well as the prolific work of Mikki Kendall and Hood Feminism. We will apply these two theoretical lenses to how we support first-year students in our teaching practices, as well as addressing mental health and other basic needs.

11:00 AM-11:15 AM · EN B121

COFFEE BREAK

Take 15 minutes to grab a snack and chat with colleagues.

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

11:15 AM-12:00 PM

EN C113

Rethinking Student Assessment and Feedback Through Gameful Grading

David Petroski, Professor of Communication
Southern Connecticut State University

Traditional grading models can sometimes discourage engagement and risk-taking, particularly among first-year students who are still adapting to the expectations of higher education. Gameful learning offers an alternative framework that encourages student agency, resilience, and intrinsic motivation by drawing on principles from game design, such as leveling up, mastery-based progression, and meaningful choice. While I have implemented gameful grading in higher education classrooms, I am eager to explore how this approach might benefit first-year students specifically. This session will introduce key aspects of gameful learning and grading, provide examples of its implementation, and invite participants to consider how it could be adapted to their own courses. Through guided discussion, we will examine the potential challenges and benefits of gameful grading for first-year students and identify strategies to foster engagement, reduce anxiety, and promote a growth mindset in the transition to college.

EN C140

Wellbeing Coaching 101: Supporting Success Through Connection

Allyson Regis, Coordinator, Wellbeing Center

Nick Pinkerton, Associate Dean of Counseling Services and Wellbeing

Southern Connecticut State University

Supporting student wellbeing doesn't always require a formal intervention—often, it begins with a conversation. This session will introduce participants to approachable strategies for fostering student reflection, motivation, and resilience, particularly in the critical first year of college. Participants will explore a flexible conversation framework (the THRIVE script), goal-setting techniques, and the role of active listening in creating meaningful student connections. The session will also highlight how these tools can be integrated into everyday campus interactions—whether during office hours, informal check-ins, or advising conversations. By equipping faculty and staff with relationship-centered tools, this session supports a culture of care and contributes to first-year student retention and success.

EN B111

Strategic Structures to Maximize First-Year Student Support

Jordan Ochs, Director, First-Year Experience

Michelle Johnson, Assistant Director, First-Year Experience

Castella Copeland-Smith, Assistant Director, First-Year Experience

University of Connecticut-Storrs

As a large public Research-1 institution with five campuses, the University of Connecticut annually serves over 5,000 students across campuses through small, 20-student FYE courses with embedded peer mentoring. With a FYE team of only three professional staff, this may seem like a minor miracle! In this session, the UConn FYE team will share how they develop and leverage strategic structures to

maximize course capacity, support over 200 volunteer instructors, and train student leaders all to advance holistic student success in the first year and beyond. Participants will walk away with fresh ideas for structuring programming to scale FYE programs and services.

EN C 115

It's a Race, not a Sprint: Retention of First-Year Students in the Residence Halls

Isabelle Handy, Community Director
Keene State College

While much of college can feel like a lightning-fast adjustment for first-year students, life in the residence halls poses its own unique, longer-term challenges for residents. This presentation explores the predictable events our first-year students in residence often face on their roadmap to retention. We'll examine belonging, roommate conflicts, friend-group implosions, alcohol and drinking culture, norms and policies, and all the smaller challenges that our first-year students face after hours. How do we help students navigate those challenges on the road to who they want to be? How do we retain students in the residence halls despite these challenges?

12:00 PM-1:00 PM · EN B121

LUNCH

CONCURRENT SESSION #2

1:00 PM-1:45 PM

EN C113

Empowering Futures: Teaching Toward Career Readiness

Aimee O'Shea, Associate Director, Office of Career and Professional Development

Thierry Thesatus, Associate Dean of Career and Student Success

Southern Connecticut State University

Teaching career readiness skills in the classroom is essential for shaping a more equitable future for students. It levels the playing field, ensuring that all students are equipped with the tools needed to compete effectively in this job market. Join the OCPD and learn ways to integrate career readiness competencies into your syllabi and classrooms for first-year students. This program aims to empower faculty to intentionally engage in the enhancement of students' employability, leading to their future successes.

EN C140

Rethinking First-Semester Scheduling: A Data-Driven Approach to Student Satisfaction

Benjamin McNamee, Coordinator, First-Year Advising

Sal Rizza, Director, Orientation, Transition, and Family Engagement

Southern Connecticut State University

How can academic advising transform first-year course registration from a stressful experience into one that empowers students? Over the past decade, our institution saw a 10% drop in student satisfaction with first-semester schedules, alongside rising late-summer schedule changes. To reverse this trend, we reimagined our advising approach, prioritizing individualized guidance and student choice. By leveraging campus partnerships, providing one-on-one advising during orientation, and offering multiple opportunities for students to refine their schedules, we achieved an 18% increase in satisfaction. This session will explore how shifting from traditional registration models to a student-centered, data-informed approach can better meet the needs of today's students, particularly those from diverse academic backgrounds. Join us to discuss how you can implement similar strategies to enhance advising outcomes on your campus.

EN B111

Understanding Grief: Tools for Supporting Students in Times of Loss

Castle Yuran, Academic Coach

Nicole Davison, Academic Specialist

Quinnipiac University

Grief can be an overwhelming experience, especially for college students who are navigating personal loss while managing academic pressures and social challenges. This workshop is designed to help faculty and staff understand the complexities of grief and how it affects students in a college environment. We will explore the various ways grief impacts our students and offer practical strategies in an empathetic and supportive way. This interactive session will provide tools to help staff and faculty create a compassionate campus culture that not only acknowledges grief but actively supports students as they navigate their loss and find pathways to healing.

EN C115

Using AI to Support First-Year Student Success

Samantha Sciandra, Assistant Director, University Advisement: Student Success & CRM Specialist
Western Connecticut State University

Transitioning from high school to college presents many challenges for first-year students, including managing coursework, staying organized, and adapting to new academic expectations. Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be a powerful tool to help students navigate these challenges in a safe and effective way. This session will explore how AI tools—such as Copilot, ChatGPT, and Google Bard—can support first-year students by enhancing their organization, study habits, and wellbeing. This session explores how AI can enhance student success through personalized study plans, task and time management, not summarization and study aids, physical and mental well-being, major and course planning, and more. By integrating AI into their academic routines, first-year students can improve productivity, reduce stress, and build strong habits for success in college.

1:50 PM-2:35 PM

EN C113

Supporting The Students' Support:
Group EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) For Self-Care

Joy Jegede, Assistant Professor of Social Work
Southern Connecticut State University

In higher education, we are constantly serving our students and colleges, pouring our essence into the work we do. We are aware of the benefits of and encouraged to practice self-care; and may sometimes wonder: how? what else is out there for me to practice? what time do I have to pour into myself? A significant component of self-care ought to address our thoughts, self-doubts, self-assessments, or any inner experience/s which may arise in our professional lives. In this session, you will be learning how to resource yourself by learning to install a personalized self-affirming truth using an EMDR Resource Development and Installation (RDI) skill. EMDR is a form of psychotherapy that helps individuals process and heal from traumatic experiences. Learn and practice a Bilateral Stimulation (BLS), Containment, Safe/Calm place in a group setting to install your self-affirmation, thus elevating your self-care practices. You will leave the session refreshed and equipped with a firmly installed self-affirming statement to support you and inevitably your work, students, and community.

EN C140

Education Collaboration: A Learning Community Experience

Judy Terpstra, Professor of Education

Angela Todaro, Director, Office of Educational Services

Southern Connecticut State University

Presenters will share their plan and methods for collaborating in a learning community for a focused group of pre-education students. We combined our First-Year Seminar and Intro to Special Education course to create a unique opportunity for pre-education majors to have combined assignments, trips to a local school to observe, and the opportunity to interview and ask questions of teachers and administrators. We will share our planning, implementation, and feedback, as well as our plans for growing this experience in the future.

EN B111

"One Week 2 Go": Engaging First-Year Students in Pre-Semester Activities at a Two-Year School

Linda Thiem, Coordinator of Student Engagement & Multicultural Programming

Leng Lim, Orientation Leader

Alicia Wheeler, Orientation Leader

Dorothy Boateng, Orientation Leader

Elle Mean, Orientation Leader

Middlesex Community College, Massachusetts

One Week 2 Go showcases how student orientation leaders at a two-year college designed and led a dynamic week-long pre-semester event to help first-year students get set up for success before classes began. This interactive session will highlight key components of the program, including last-minute essentials like navigating campus systems, accessing support services, building connections, and tackling practical tasks that can easily fall through the cracks. Presenters will share how they created an engaging, welcoming environment that balanced fun with function—empowering new students to feel confident and prepared on day one. Attendees will leave with insight into what made the program effective, adaptable takeaways for their own campuses, and a better understanding of how peer leadership can drive student engagement before the semester even starts. Presenters will also share key lessons learned about making pre-semester programming more inclusive, with a focus on reaching underserved populations such as first-generation students, adult learners, and those with limited access to technology.

During the interactive portion of the session, participants will work together to draft a "One Week 2 Go" checklist tailored to their own institutions, identifying critical last-minute needs and creative ways to meet them.

EN C115

FOMO in the Classroom

Christie Soltys, Assistant Director, Academic Development & Outreach
Quinnipiac University

Students don't want another lecture—they want an experience. And, no, not just another, "Tell me a fun fact" icebreaker. This session will explore how game-based learning can transform your classroom into an interactive environment where students feel a genuine Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) if they skip. You'll learn practical ways to integrate gamification into your classroom that could boost attendance, increase participation, and deepen learning. But engagement isn't just about fun; it's about effectiveness. This workshop will also connect these strategies to evidence-based learning practices, ensuring students are not only engaged but also learning in ways that enhance long-term retention and academic success. Walk away with activities that will make your classroom more dynamic, impactful, and enjoyable for both you and your students.

2:35 PM-2:45 PM · EN B121

COFFEE BREAK

CONCURRENT SESSION #4

2:45 PM-3:30 PM

EN C113

Managing Stress for First-Year Success: A Mind-Body-Spirit Approach

Niasia Mercado-Walters, Assistant Director, University Access Programs
Southern Connecticut State University

The transition to college can be a stressful time for first-year students as they adjust to new academic, social, and personal demands. This session provides professionals with practical strategies to help students manage stress using a holistic approach: mind, body, and emotional well-being. Using ideas from The Four Agreements by Don Miguel Ruiz, we'll explore how changing our mindset can help manage stress and build resilience. Participants will take part in a guided body awareness exercise to identify where stress shows up physically and learn how to help students create personalized self-care plans. We'll also cover practical tools for stress management, including mindfulness, breathing exercises, and positive self-talk.

EN C140

The Universally Designed Entry-Year Experience

Sara Flowers, PI & Director of Adult Transitions, Learning and Success (ATLaS) Scholars
University of Maine at Augusta

First- and entry-year experience research focuses on several aspects assuming a traditional college experience. Strategies for the first- and entry-year experience frequently include activities that preclude some of our most vulnerable students who encounter barriers to these opportunities. With college attendance and reentry becoming increasingly critical for all members of our society and the economy, there is a growing need for first- and entry-year experiences for the nontraditional student such as adult learners, scholars who are parenting, incarcerated scholars, and other people experiencing unique challenges that prevent them from participating in the high-impact and evidence-based first-year activities that higher education institutions already do. This presentation is about strategies and lessons learned by one program in Maine funded by a FY22 Congressional Earmark to address the first- and entry-year experience of adult learners.

EN B111

What If We Didn't Give Up on Them? Coaching First-Year Students Back from Dismissal

John Carl Cruz, Coordinator, Early Alert/Academic Support Services

Shirley M. Consuegra, Coordinator, Early Alert/Academic Support Services

University of Rhode Island

First-year students who earn below a 1.0 GPA often face a critical and emotional crossroads in their college journey. At the University of Rhode Island, the Program for Academic Skills and Success (PASS) provides these students—who are subject to dismissal after their first semester—with a structured and supportive pathway to return and thrive.

This session will share the design and impact of PASS, highlighting how intentional coaching, success contracts, and personalized support help students regain academic footing and reconnect with their sense of belonging. Facilitators will share lessons learned, including strategies for fostering accountability with compassion, leveraging graduate student coaches, and cultivating a culture of care within academic probation processes. Facilitators will also discuss how coaching in PASS has been transformative not only for students on probation—but also for the graduate students who support them.

In addition, presenters will reflect on their own experiences as mid-level professionals of color working at a predominantly white institution and explore how identity-informed practice shapes their student success work. Participants will leave with actionable ideas for creating supportive structures for students on academic probation—and for building relational, equity-centered approaches that humanize institutional processes.

CONCURRENT SESSION #5

3:35 PM-4:20 PM

EN C113

This, That, and the Other: The Role of Freewriting, Visual Interpretation, and Dialogue to Promote First-Year Student Engagement

Emily Cole, Assistant Director of Academic Advising
Southern Connecticut State University

After a long departure from in-person interactions with students during COVID, one might assume that social/academic engagement and participation would elevate naturally when we returned to in-person. Instead, we found college students nervous to make eye contact, nervous to make mistakes, and nervous to speak up, maybe now more than ever. This presentation will focus on three main engagement strategies that helped me build a supportive and trusting learning environment without sacrificing intellectual integrity and academic rigor in our first-year experience course at SCSU. Using insights from researching and observing introverted student learning, we are able to highlight ways in which ALL students can show comprehension, practice social engagement, and dissect complex theoretical material using large group discussion, symbolic/visual interpretations, and personal, sensory-driven weekly journals. Please join me as I humbly reflect on what worked (and what didn't) in my classroom during my first two semesters teaching the first-year seminar.

EN C140

Clean Up Your Student Meeting Notes with S.O.A.P.

Nicole Girouard, Academic Coach
Quinnipiac University

Few things are more frustrating than pulling up unclear notes before a follow-up meeting, only to feel unprepared and unsure of what needs to be addressed. "SOAP Notes: A Clean Approach to Recording Student Interactions" explores how a structured approach to notetaking can transform student support. When meetings are clearly documented, it creates a foundation of accountability, ensuring both the student and coach (or advisor) are aligned on goals and action steps. This session focuses on why clear, actionable notes matter – providing consistency, enhancing communication, and empowering students to take ownership of their success can drive meaningful outcomes.

EN B111

Growth Mindset and Student Engagement in Support Services

Kate Ayotte, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs
Central Connecticut State University

This presentation will stem from the research that I conducted for my Ed.D. dissertation in 2021 about the correlation between growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and college students' engagement in support services. The findings of the study show that students who have a growth mindset are more likely to engage in academic support while they are in college. They are more likely to believe that they can improve their academic performance when they work hard, overcome an academic setback if they apply themselves, and further their understanding of course concepts and material through seeking additional support. The findings of the study prove the importance of students developing growth mindsets before or early on in their college experiences. While growth mindset is being incorporated into K-12 education, the study provides key implications for the work of practitioners and student affairs professionals who provide Orientation and First-Year Experience programming. It is critical to incorporate mindset programming in these initiatives to encourage students to reach out for help when they are struggling and for overall retention and persistence.

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