CAMPUS APPLICATION
RE-IMAGINING THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

Deadline for Submission: Friday, November 20th, 2015 at 5:00 p.m. EST

A. Institutional Name

Institution Name: Fitchburg State University

Name of Provost or Chief Academic Officer: Dr. Paul Weizer

Signature of Provost or Chief Academic Officer, indicating her or his support of this project:


B. Who Prepared This Application

Name: Dr. Sean C. Goodlett

Title: Interim Dean of the Amelia V. Gallucci-Cirio Library and Academic Support Centers

Contact Information:
Email: sgoodlett@fitchburgstate.edu
Phone: 978.665.3832 (office)

C. Proposed Composition of the Campus Innovation Team

Campus Team Leader (Vice President/Provost/Dean)

1. Name: Dr. Sean C. Goodlett
   Title: Interim Dean of the Amelia V. Gallucci-Cirio Library and Academic Support Centers
   Years with Institution: 15

   Check which category or categories this individual represents
   ___ Faculty Members
   ___ Assessment Expert
   ___ Learning Specialist
   X First Year Expert
   ___ Student Affairs Professional
   ___ Student Success Expert
   ___ Faculty Leadership
   ___ Student
   ___ Other
Other Members of the Campus Innovation Team

2. Name: Dr. Christopher Cratsley  
   Title: Director of Assessment  
   Years with Institution: 16

   Check which category or categories this individual represents  
   ___ Faculty Members  
   X Assessment Expert  
   ___ Learning Specialist  
   ___ First Year Expert  
   ___ Student Affairs Professional  
   ___ Student Success Expert  
   ___ Faculty Leadership  
   ___ Student  
   ___ Other

3. Name: Dr. Kisha Tracy  
   Title: Asst. Prof. of English Studies, Co-Coordinator of the Center for Teaching and Learning  
   Years with Institution: 6

   Check which category or categories this individual represents  
   ___ Faculty Members  
   ___ Assessment Expert  
   X Learning Specialist  
   ___ First Year Expert  
   ___ Student Affairs Professional  
   ___ Student Success Expert  
   ___ Faculty Leadership  
   ___ Student  
   ___ Other

4. Name: Dr. Stanley Bucholc  
   Title: Dean of Student and Academic Life and Business and Technology  
   Years with Institution: 39

   Check which category or categories this individual represents  
   ___ Faculty Members  
   ___ Assessment Expert  
   ___ Learning Specialist  
   ___ First Year Expert  
   X Student Affairs Professional  
   ___ Student Success Expert  
   ___ Faculty Leadership  
   ___ Student  
   ___ Other
5. **Name:** Pamela McCafferty  
**Title:** Assistant Vice President for Institutional Research and Planning  
**Years with Institution:** 18  
Check which category or categories this individual represents  
___ Faculty Members  
___ Assessment Expert  
___ Learning Specialist  
___ First Year Expert  
___ Student Affairs Professional  
X Student Success Expert  
___ Faculty Leadership  
___ Student  
___ Other

6. **Name:** Dr. Joseph Moser  
**Title:** Associate Prof. of English Studies and Honors Program Coordinator  
**Years with Institution:** 8  
Check which category or categories this individual represents  
___ Faculty Members  
___ Assessment Expert  
___ Learning Specialist  
___ First Year Expert  
___ Student Affairs Professional  
___ Student Success Expert  
X Faculty Leadership  
___ Student  
___ Other

7. **Name:** Jonathan Guzman  
**Years with Institution:** 1.5  
Check which category or categories this individual represents  
___ Faculty Members  
___ Assessment Expert  
___ Learning Specialist  
___ First Year Expert  
___ Student Affairs Professional  
___ Student Success Expert  
___ Faculty Leadership  
X Student  
___ Other

Did members of the proposed team meet to discuss this application?  
Yes, and we drafted the proposal collectively.

D. **Letter of Support from President/Chancellor**
Dear Dr. Westerhof:

Please accept this letter indicating my unqualified support for our campus proposal to participate in the Re-Imagining the First Year of College program. This program is consistent with the vision and goals laid out in our strategic plan and will allow our institution to move ahead in our overarching objective of improving student success.

The mission of Fitchburg State University stresses access and affordability. We serve a large population of first generation students and have an increasingly diverse student body. As we went through our strategic planning exercise last year, the entire campus community came together in recognition that improving persistence and graduation rates was paramount among our strategic priorities. Further, from a system perspective, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, in its annual Vision Project report, has highlighted increasing access to higher education and speeding completion to degree paths as high priorities. This AASCU and Gates Foundation program provides an opportunity to help shape our new approach to a first year experience, and we are anxious to participate.

As the call for participation indicates, the United States is confronting a profound set of national challenges. This is certainly true in Massachusetts as well. For the future of the Commonwealth, the need for a well-educated populace is critical. As an example, today, there are 17 information technology and computer science job openings for every one qualified applicant in the state. To fill that gap, more than 5,000 degrees are needed right now. Looking ahead, the state has estimated that 72% of all jobs will require some college education by 2020. To increase our persistence and graduation rates, we need to try new approaches and are open to exploring a variety of measures in doing so.

As you will see from our application, we have begun the process of innovation already. In the last year, Fitchburg State University has completed a strategic plan that includes the creation of a new first year experience as a key priority. Additionally, we made significant investments in the most comprehensive data analytics available to higher education in an effort to better understand our historic student population and begin to devise solutions based upon what our own student data tells us. We have also created a new office of Institutional Research and Planning dedicated to ensuring that all academic decisions are made using current and robust data.
In short, we have a lot to offer and much to gain from this project. I look forward to working with other AASCU institutions on transforming the first year of college and in the process transforming the lives of our students.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Richard S. Lapidus
E. Organizational Self-Assessment and Reflection Questions

Please respond to the following questions. For each question, please answer separately in no more than one page, double-spaced, Times New Roman, font size 12, per question (please note: there is no requirement or expectation that you need to use an entire page for each answer. Each response can be as long as it needs to be but should not exceed the one-page limit).

Campus Application

1. What significant reform has your institution successfully undertaken in the past 5 years that would suggest that your institution has the capacity to successfully engage in a major institutional transformation project?

2. Describe a successful collaboration with another institution or with a community partner that would demonstrate the capacity of your campus to benefit from participating in a collaborative national project with other partners.

3. What specific work have you already undertaken in the first year to improve retention, learning outcomes, and student success?

4. What are some specific areas of improvement, reform, and transformation in the first year on your campus that you would like to consider focusing on if you are part of this project?

5. What commitments and resources will your campus make available in order to optimize the likelihood that your participation in the project will result in broad, substantive institutional change?

6. What do you think your campus can offer in expertise, experience, or other attributes to other participating campuses?

7. Why do you want to participate in this project?
1. Perhaps the most significant undertaking by Fitchburg State University in the last five years involves the implementation of a data analytics system designed by EAB (formerly the Education Advisory Board). In September, 2014, the university joined more than 160 institutions of higher education participating in the Student Success Collaborative (SSC), which combines technology, research, process improvement, and predictive analytics to help institutions positively inflect outcomes with at-risk and off-path students. The implementation of this system has move the institution as a whole toward data-driven decision-making, and it has become the basis for reforms in everything from departmental and general curricula to budgeting.

Already, the system has been used to identify and assist undeclared students who had a clear pathway to graduation but had not yet switched into a major. In the past semester alone, we have guided 26 undeclared students into appropriate academic majors. A re-enrollment pilot is showing equal promise. Moreover, through tailored reports, academic departments are now able to assess key trends in student performance and identify opportunities for targeted initiatives, curricular change, and enhanced resources. Building on improvements in advising we have made through the implementation of Degree Works, the university will add a new advising platform, SSC Campus, which applies historical datasets to current students in order to provide advisors with detailed insights into their advisees; additionally, it delivers user-friendly communication and scheduling tools, as well as utilization and outcomes analytics, for student support services.

Supported by our new Office of Institutional Research and Planning, engagement levels with this data analytics package have already been high, with deans, department chairs, faculty, and staff participating in data analysis, discussions, and outreach campaigns. In short, the institution as a whole has committed to a cultural shift, where data will help guide student retention and completion initiatives, curricular changes, as well as intrusive advising efforts.
2. Beginning in 2013, the university partnered with 7 Massachusetts community colleges to apply for support as part of Complete College America’s (CCA) Guided Pathways to Success (GPS) in STEM Careers initiative. Upon selection for the grant project, Fitchburg State joined institutions from Massachusetts, the District of Columbia, Idaho, Illinois, and Ohio in exploring new ways to provide clear academic degree maps, default class schedules, guaranteed milestone courses, and proactive advising support to students in the high-demand fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Through multistate and statewide meetings, members were able to collaborate with state higher education leaders, other campus teams, and national experts to develop STEM completion goals, analyze local STEM labor markets, and implement Complete College America’s GPS best practices. A team of faculty and administrators shared the institution’s experiences in creating default schedules for incoming students, providing academic degree maps (four year plans of study), and proactive advising to at-risk freshmen, and experimented with new models for developmental mathematics. Through the technical support provided by CCA and discussions with teams from other institutions, Fitchburg State developed and implemented a new GPS plan to facilitate transitioning undeclared students to one of three STEM “meta-majors” – called areas of Academic Interests and Motivations (AIMs) – in Health Sciences, Natural and Physical Sciences, or Computer and Technological Sciences. Incoming students were registered for a default set of courses for each AIM and received proactive advising designed to help them transition into an appropriate major. In the summer and fall of 2015, faculty helped identify and advise an initial cohort of 29 STEM AIMs students. The benefits of this project are already evident, as 83% of these students are registered for Spring semester courses and 35% have transitioned into a major as compared to 71% and 33%, respectively, for pre-majors who did not participate in the STEM AIMs project.
3. In recent years, two initiatives have addressed retention rates, learning outcomes, and more generally student success for first-year students. These include the use of College Student Inventory (CSI) data to engage in proactive advising and an initiative to improve student performance and progression through developmental and freshman-level mathematics courses.

The CSI/Proactive Advising project entails identifying academically “at risk” students using selected indicators from the CSI and other data, such as SAT Verbal and Accuplacer scores. Some 200 incoming students are identified annually as at risk and are assigned to faculty trained in proactive or “intrusive” advising. These faculty work with the students on study skills, time management, course expectations, course attendance, career planning, and class scheduling. Students receiving this intrusive advising had a retention rate of 83%, slightly higher than the other students in these same majors who had not been identified as at-risk (82%). In contrast, at-risk students who were not in the majors with retention specialists had a much lower retention rate of 71%.

Moreover, as part of the new first-year mathematics progress requirement, students must enroll in developmental or college-level mathematics courses in their first year; assignments are based on placement scores, high school GPA, and planned college-level math course. They must take mathematics courses continuously until they have completed their first college-level math course; incoming freshmen are preregistered for the appropriate math course. This policy is supported by automated academic progress notifications, a computer-based modular approach to developmental coursework with two tracks and co-requisite supplemental instruction. As a result, the percentage of students completing college-level math within their first year increased from 23% to 48% for students requiring remedial mathematics and from 53% to 81% for students placing directly into college-level mathematics.
4. The greatest potential for improvement and transformation lies in the creation of a first-year experience (FYE) program, a goal set in the most recent strategic plan. At present we address lagging non-cognitive skills and dispositions (e.g., organization, time-management, and persistence) among our students in a piecemeal fashion, while we neglect to assist our students with financial literacy, work/life balance, or other life skills – weaknesses in the freshman year flagged by our student team member, Jonathan Guzman. The campus innovation team, following the lead of a committee reexamining the general education curriculum, has already discussed the construction of learning communities and learning-living communities. In short, we are poised to put in place one of the most significant high-impact practices, and we would benefit greatly from the experiences of the other 39 campuses when constructing our FYE program.

Our strategic plan also calls for the exploration of “the use of professional advising to build a foundation of student success.” We would therefore potentially be looking to expand existing proactive or intrusive advising and roll out new academic coaching services, while leveraging the SSC Campus platform to transform the first-year experience at Fitchburg State.

Work is already underway to revamp the freshman orientation program to incorporate more academic preparation and career advising for incoming first-time freshmen and transfer students. New orientation programs would build on our existing initiatives, including the “focus on the future” collaboration between our academic advising and career centers, to help students explore career paths and majors. Regardless of the specific changes, better preparation from the outset will ultimately serve students well throughout their academic careers and in the work world; furthermore, this effort conforms to our strategic plan, which calls for the alignment of the “curriculum with skills and aptitudes valued in the workforce.” Any revised orientation programs would serve as a foundation to the FYE.
5. Deep and lasting institutional changes are required, for increasingly the university will have to address the needs of traditionally underserved populations. Our institution has historically served low-income and often first-generation students. At present, nearly 80% of our students receive financial aid, and we have seen a 42% increase in Pell Grant recipients over five years; some 37% of our currently-enrolled students are first-generation, and, having already grown Hispanic enrollments by 168% in the last five years, in our current (2015-2020) strategic plan we have set a goal for ourselves to “increase the enrollments of Hispanic students to equal or surpass our state peers in order to better reflect and represent the local community.” The same plan also calls for the University to increase the six-year graduation rate of Hispanic students such that we “halve the current achievement gap.” To address these coming demographic changes, the university is committed to implementing its current strategic plan. Among the top priorities is the creation of a first-year experience program. Similarly, we have set ourselves the task of exploring the use of professional advisors to increase retention, persistence, and graduation rates.

Moreover, the institution has a wide variety of resources at its disposal during any implementation of the RFY program. The EAB Student Success Collaborative provides access to a full collection of services – from peer benchmarking to live webinars and national student success summits – designed to facilitate cross-membership learning and the sharing of best practices. We also anticipate the staff of the newly-established Institutional Research and Planning office playing a large role in assessment efforts, as well as data collection and analysis. On the faculty side, Kisha Tracy, the co-coordinator of the Center for Teaching and Learning, is herself a member of the campus innovation team, which should facilitate the coordination of faculty efforts; to that end, the Center sponsors regular pedagogical discussion groups, which could in the future be steered toward freshman year experiences and related topics.
6. Fitchburg State University has extensive experience partnering with other institutions, particularly on learning outcomes alignment and assessment for the purpose of redesigning curriculum to meet student needs. Through the Lumina and Gates Foundation funded American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Quality Collaboratives (QC) Dyad and Multi-State Collaborative (MSC) for Learning Outcomes Assessment projects, Fitchburg State has partnered with a local community college, Mount Wachusett (MWCC), and collaborated with institutions from California, Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The QC Dyad with MWCC and work on the MSC brought together teams of over 20 faculty from each institution as Assessment and Curriculum Scholars to create assessment and assignment development tools in the areas of information literacy, written communication, civic engagement, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking. Through these projects, we addressed first-year, transfer, and senior-level expectations for student learning, assessed them using faculty-developed assignments and rubrics, and began employing them to increase student success, culminating in a shared development day with MWCC in the spring of 2015. Our experiences will be helpful to other institutions, especially those which seek to create assessment models. We are in the process of reviewing and revising our general education curriculum and have been using our assessment expertise to review the goals and curriculum for our entry-level English classes, better align our whole curriculum with our desired learning outcomes, and explore opportunities to improve student learning in our first-year courses. As part of this work, we are engaged in the Davis Foundation funded Learning Assessment Research Collaborative (LARC) and will be sharing our results by developing and testing a series of online assessment modules that we will make available to other institutions.
7. The “Reimagining the First Year of College” project is an excellent fit for Fitchburg State University. We are currently at the critical point of implementing a first-year experience program and revising our general education curriculum in ways that we hope can provide substantive improvements to the freshman year. Through these changes we have the opportunity to build on promising initial work we have begun, such as the EAB Student Success Collaborative, GPS in STEM, CSI/Proactive Advising, and first-year math progress requirements.

Our desire to partner on this work with AASCU member institutions and the Gates Foundation stems from our recognition that moving the dial on retention, persistence, and graduation rates – especially for underserved populations – will require collective effort across the campus and fresh perspectives from outside the university. Collaboration with the 39 other institutions looking to reconfigure their freshman year is thus the principal benefit, but we also anticipate making extensive use of the support given to the campus team leader and the innovation team members. At the same, we are eager to connect with experts on first-year reform.

It ought not go unsaid, moreover, that both our president and the chief academic officer, who are relatively new in their positions, would gain much from working with like-minded officers at other AASCU member institutions. Conversely, while our effort to gain an institution-wide perspective through the EAB’s Student Success Collaborative is only just beginning, we are hopeful that the resources the EAB affords will be useful to the construction of a repository of promising or proven strategies that can be shared with the other institutions in the RFY project. Lastly, our proven track record with collaboration, as well as the faculty and staff expertise we have developed in learning outcomes assessment, demonstrate our willingness and potential to be a strong partner.