February 17, 2021

Dear Faculty,

Designing a new General Education program presents us with a rare opportunity that extends beyond curriculum reform and course recalibration. It is an opportunity to place the entirety of the student experience squarely into focus and to create or revivify structures that lead to student success.

The first year of college has long been recognized as a pivotal time in the academic, cognitive, social, and moral development of individuals. It is during the first year when students become acculturated to an institution’s expectations, values and methods of operation. During the first year they make important decisions about who they are and where and how they fit (or may not fit) into their newfound community and the broader world. Our mission challenges each of us to contribute to, “the balanced development of the total student” (BYU Mission Statement). This is best accomplished when there is a comprehensive approach to student success during the first-year and beyond.

The Office of First-Year Experience already plays an important role in both forming and supporting students through an extensive orientation, a robust peer mentoring program, and through active participation with other university initiatives designed to remove barriers and improve the student experience. However, The first-year does not--nor should it--belong to one organization. Succinctly stated, “The first-year experience is not a single program or initiative, but rather an intentional combination of academic and co-curricular efforts. . .” (Koch and Gardner, 2006)1.

Including a first-year seminar as an Exploration course in the new General Education program allows us to introduce an academic component to a student’s first-year experience. Roughly 80 percent of four-year institutions offer some type of seminar or classroom experience designed exclusively for first-year students. Decades of research on these seminars point to the potential to improve student outcomes in a variety of ways including retention, sense of wellbeing, academic performance and social adjustment, increased use of campus resources, improved relationships with faculty, increased confidence as learners, and overall student engagement in university life. These outcomes have been observed regardless of demographics although they can be particularly impactful among populations that might need extra support (e.g., first-generation, low income, under-represented students, etc.).

Additionally, by integrating a first-year seminar within a rigorous academic course, students have an opportunity to engage in multiple high-impact practices that might include common reading experiences, intensive writing opportunities, meaningful faculty interactions, collaborative assignments,

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and interaction with peer mentors. The first-year seminar then becomes an important gateway to several educational practices demonstrated to be beneficial to all students.

First-year explorations courses hold the potential to add depth and cohesion to the first-year experience by integrating curricular and co-curricular elements of a student’s education, providing a foundation upon which students might enjoy both the intensive and supportive experience envisioned in our mission and aims.

Sincerely,

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Director, Office of First-Year Experience