

**First-year Experience Conference: Opening Conversations on First-year Success
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Small Steps to a Big Idea: Personalizing the Postsecondary Experience

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For nearly a century, educational philosophers and theorists from John Dewey to Alexander Astin and Terry O'Banion have highlighted the need for alternative ways of delivering postsecondary education. During the same time higher education underwent a transformation making the experience available to an increasingly diverse student population. By and large, however, a pedagogy of 'academic Darwinism' was dominant.

At the turn of the century, an emphasis by government policy makers on outcomes measurement, performance indicators and accountability frameworks for higher education highlighted low graduation rates and high attrition in many institutions. These results, when combined with a renewed interest in human capital theory as a means of bolstering economic growth, energized research on policies, processes and structures within higher education to improve the postsecondary experience, promote learner engagement and, ultimately, student retention and persistence.

During the past decade, theory, research and practice focused on maximizing learning and student retention have held a consistent message; institutions must engage their learners. However, the diversity that so profoundly characterizes today's postsecondary student population presents a challenge recognized by John Dewey in his 1938 book, *Experience and Education*. He argued that to effectively engage learners we must recognize and accommodate the different backgrounds, experiences, strengths and weaknesses of individual students. When faced with this prospect, higher education administrators typically argue the enormous cost of doing so within a context of limited financial resources makes such efforts impossible.

This keynote will argue that, while there are only a few examples of institutions adopting a personalized approach to the delivery of the postsecondary experience, those that do exist suggest the need for another transformation of higher education. And it is one that is long overdue.