Can one person make a difference?

Students read and interview MARINA NEMAT, the author of Prisoner of Tehran
The First Year Experience

[The First Year Experience is] “carefully crafted from many different disciplines, different instructional styles, different modes of thought ... different tools, different strategies, different opportunities ... all designed to push you to know yourself better and prepare you to become what you have come here to be.” —CEHD DEAN JEAN QUAM

For someone just embarking on the college journey, the first year is a critical transition. College is a new environment with new expectations, new norms, new rules, and new people. Navigating all these changes isn’t easy and having access to tools, skills, and resources is essential. With this in mind, the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) provides all first year students with a program designed to build a strong bridge to college life by integrating academic courses, career development, academic advising, and shared experiences. The First Year Experience (FYE), housed in the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, features a partnership between academic faculty in PsTL and student services staff in CEHD to target key student learning and development outcomes, including responsibility and accountability, appreciation of differences, effective communication, and skills for citizenship and learning.

FYE incorporates practices that research has found to support students’ learning and development—and to guide them toward a sense of self within the diverse environment that is the University of Minnesota. Two core components of FYE are the First Year Inquiry (FYI) course (a multidisciplinary, writing-intensive course that asks “How can one person make a difference?”) in the fall semester and a Learning Community (a pair of courses that integrate common themes and/or assignments for a common group of students) in the spring semester. FYE programming is designed to create pathways that connect first
HELLO,
Welcome to the first newsletter from Post-secondary Teaching and Learning (PsTL). As many of you know, PsTL was created when the University closed the General College. Some of you provided leadership during this transition. Others of you, our former and current GC students, provided inspiration.

At PsTL, we provide academic programs that support the transition to college, and research that aims to change the dialogue and knowledge about best practices in postsecondary education. Our academic programs and research focus on issues of diversity, access, and student success.

We have experienced many milestones these past few years: a new home in Burton Hall; the loss of our dear colleagues, Jill Barnum, Dave Ghere, and LeRoy Gardner, Jr.; the retirements of Pat James and Robert Yahnke; and the celebration of many successes among our students and faculty. I am inspired by my colleagues’ capacity to energetically adapt to change as they continue their work of outstanding teaching, research that impacts real life, and service that transforms the institution’s ability to serve students.

We would love to hear from you! Drop us a note, volunteer to be featured in a future issue of this newsletter, or stop by to see old friends or learn more about new programs. Feel free to email us at pstlpost@umn.edu. We remain in your debt.

Thank you.

AMY LEE, Department Chair, Postsecondary Teaching and Learning

PsTL STAFF (left to right) Barry Stehlik (executive administrative office specialist), Amy Lee (chair), Annette Digre (assistant to the chair), and Jennifer Franko (executive administrator).

PsTL's 2009–10 student cohort included:

- 95 TRiO students: (21% of class)—students from low-to modest-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities
- 55 CET (College English Transitions) students: (12%)—freshmen for whom English is not their first language
- 32 Honors students: (7%)

Forming Community with First Year Inquiry
Throughout the first year, the common question, “How can one person make a difference?,“ invites students to consider the role of the individual in shaping the world. Students approach this question in the multidisciplinary FYI class through the reading of a Common Book; by engaging with the author of the Common Book; through exploring ideas and experiences in journals and writing assignments; and in working with Student Services to identify strengths and improve skill areas. Through this integrated process, students learn how different disciplines approach problems and what content exists in different disciplines. This work enables students to explore their own affinities as they consider majors. FYI also has a writing-intensive designation, which supports students learning how to communicate in writing effectively.

The Common Book
Students reflect on the common question as it relates to their reading of a Common Book. A new book is selected each year and the author of the book comes to campus to speak directly
to FYI students. The shared reading experience is a powerful process that engages students from different backgrounds and cultures in a common intellectual experience. It forms a bond among students who get to meet and talk with others reading the book anywhere on or off campus. Each FYI class uses the book to further explore central themes, disciplinary concepts, and context.

The Common Book strategy, although not widely implemented in universities (at least not yet), has proven to be a profound tool for supporting student learning and success. Because students can learn to explore multiple perspectives and develop their analytical, research, and writing skills, it is a signature part of the CEHD-PsTL program.

Students frequently identify moments of deepest engagement in their learning when referring to the Common Book. They note that discussions with peers and class activities help with meaningful investigation of themes or issues in the book and bring a sense of shared purpose. And they enjoy working collaboratively to devise questions for the author’s visit. The Common Book strategy seems to bring both meaning and joy to the learning process for first year students.

The Common Book for 2010 was *Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat (see page 6), whose story of personal triumph over imprisonment and torture in the Iranian Islamic Republic led her to bear witness to incomprehensible human-to-human injustice. In 2009 FYI students were engaged in *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines, a story about racial oppression and inhumanity in the American South of the mid-twentieth century. In 2008 the Common Book was *An Ordinary Man: An Autobiography* by Paul Rusesabagina, who saved over 1200 refugees during the Rwandan genocide and whose story became the basis of the Oscar-nominated film Hotel Rwanda.

**Learning Communities Enrich Second Semester**

In spring semester first year students enroll in a Learning Community, which serves to continue honing the academic and interpersonal skills developed in the fall. One student said, “...being involved in the learning community made a big difference. I found there was a lot of intellectual stimulation and challenge and also that we all pulled together to reach common ground.” We’ll report on Learning Communities in our next issue.

**How Successful Is FYE So Far?**

From quantitative evidence collected from 200 first year students in 2008–09, 80 percent noted that the FYE program contributed to their learning and development regarding their appreciation of difference.

In data collected from 270 first year students in 2009–10, 87 percent said the FYE program contributed to their learning and development regarding respect for the diverse viewpoints of others, and 85 percent said the program contributed to their learning and development in working with others from a diverse background.

Other results, from a 2008–09 FYE cohort, show a high percentage of students strongly agreeing (or agreeing) with statements about support in PsTL classes:

- 98% Instructors cared about my learning
- 94% Instructors had high expectations for my learning
- 94% I am satisfied with the attention I received from instructors
- 90% I am satisfied (or very satisfied) with the overall sense of community
- 93% I am satisfied (or very satisfied) with the overall quality of instruction
- 92% Taking courses with the same group of students provided social support
- 92% I formed friendships with students I met in my PsTL classes
Success Beyond the Finish Line: GC Alumnus Tom Harding (A.A., '83)

Tom Harding’s email carries two slogans. The first is “Outthink, not Outspend.” Such a motto definitely deserves a story. Tom’s is impressive and interesting.

From an early age, Harding dreamed of being an executive or owning his own business. A good education would allow him to get a good job so he could work toward his dream. He entered the former General College. He says, “If I had entered the regular system, I would have just drowned in anonymity. The GC classes were small and I felt I was getting individual attention—and I knew that these things were vital to my succeeding as a college student.”

He worked hard in his classes and “met all the time with my adviser. I never felt I was left on my own.” He competed at track and field, which, he says, “gave me lifelong discipline ... helped shape me into the person I am today.” Harding was the first in his immediate family to earn a college degree.

A work ethic and a sense of community garnered from his professors as well as from athletics taught Harding to think critically and take risks. After graduating, he worked in sales while keeping his entrepreneurial desire alive. In 1991 he started his own business in the basement of his house; he had a new child, a new mortgage, and did not qualify for a loan. With his own credit he created customer relationships that helped provide a sound financial footing.

Today his direct marketing company, Infinity Direct Inc., boasts a $17 million sales base and 35 employees. Harding attributes much of his success to building teams and empowering employees to make their own decisions. “When they have an ownership in the decisions, they care about the outcomes and that causes them to work harder.” These attributes are a direct offshoot of the discipline, work ethic, and community building he internalized while a student at the General College.

Naturally a team builder like Tom Harding would want to “outthink, not outspend” as he focuses on his customers. “Many ad agencies like to spend their clients’ money. At my company, we strive to be creative with great strategies and great campaigns, and not spend a lot of our clients’ money.”

Harding has become a lifelong University of Minnesota booster. He serves on the CEHD Alumni Society Board, and he received the University’s Alumni Service Award in September 2010. Also, he established the Harding Family Scholarships to support male College of Education and Human Development students on the track team who are the first in their families to attend college. In addition, he finds time to support University athletics, Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity, the Minnesota 4-H Foundation, and others.

Looking back and looking ahead, Tom Harding mused on his advice to young people: “a college degree is priceless and will make you a more well-rounded person and citizen. In life, you should dream as if you’re going to live forever.”

Succeed he does! Oh, and the second slogan on his email? It’s “Go Gophers!”

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“I lived for a good reason. I lived to tell this story.”
— MARINA NEMAT, 2010

The thematic question, “Can one person make a difference?,” is a principal component of the Common Book program that gives PsTL students a way to share their experiences, build community, and prepare for continuity and success in college.

On November 10, FYI students listened to Marina Nemat discuss her experience as a teenage prisoner in Iran and how she later came to terms with her arrest, torture, life sentence, and an interrogator she was forced to marry. Her 2007 book, Prisoner of Tehran, was read as this year’s Common Book.

Why was she arrested? As a schoolgirl, she challenged a teacher’s political rhetoric and wrote in a school paper of injustices she saw around her. She was questioning the dissolution of personal liberties after the Iranian revolution of 1979. For exercising freedom of speech, her name was placed on a list of dissident students: she was an enemy of the state—at age 16.

Nemat was taken from her parents’ Tehran home to the notorious Evin prison where she remained a prisoner of the Islamic Republic for two years, two months, and twelve days. Her sentence, without proper trial, was death by firing squad, later reduced to life in prison. Her ordeal ended with the costly purchase of her freedom.

Once outside, she returned to her family in Tehran, her religion, and her boyfriend who she married. It took six more years before she could emigrate to another country. During this period she endured a second ordeal, fearful that certain actions might result in her re-imprisonment.

Nemat survived Evin with its daily doses of brutality and death. She said, “I saw how I could help other young female prisoners; I made friends with them and reminded them of the things we loved to do, like read books, listen to the BeeGees, dance, swim, have fun with our acquaintances girls and boys. Before the revolution we never worried who was Catholic, who was Jewish, who was Muslim.”

Two decades after her release, she felt compelled to bear witness to the atrocities and to share her story. “I lived for twenty years in a state of shock, I was numb, I was traumatized, I had no emotions, not even anger. My family didn’t ask what happened at Evin and I didn’t tell,” she said. Until she had to.

As Nemat told the FYI students at Northrop Auditorium, she wrote to release her secrets so that “others will know that horrific outcomes unfold slowly, that torture in the name of goodness or rightness is wrong, and that we must speak out.”

She reflected on evil, irrationality, torture, punishment, unfairness, corruption, secrets, enslavement, rape, faith, and our duties as human beings. She told the students, “I lived for a good reason. I lived to tell this story.”

She gave students an intimate opportunity to ask her questions—“any questions, anything at all and I will answer truthfully—because I am dedicated to the truth.” As students
stepped forward, the atmosphere was filled with contemplation and amazement at this deeply moving true story.

In an evening session, which PsTL students attended and also was open to the public, Nemat again reflected on her experiences and how she came to terms with them. Nemat donated a portion of her speaking fee to the Center for Victims of Torture, one more way she strives to make a difference.

Can one person make a difference? Marina Nemat sets one mighty example for all of us, not because she lost her youth, not because she was tortured, not because her entire belief system was violated and destroyed, but because she found meaning in her experience and strength to speak out for basic human rights in the face of extreme personal danger. “I have to do this. It happened to me; it can happen to anyone.” She travels to many countries—but not to Iran. Prisoner of Tehran has been translated into 25 languages.
Transforming the **GRADUATE LANDSCAPE**

The mission for PsTL graduate programs is to serve current and future faculty and staff at undergraduate institutions who are interested in developing innovative teaching and learning strategies with an emphasis on access and success for traditionally underserved students.

Master’s degree students prepare for diverse learning environments

Our institutions and the educational experiences they provide are made richer by the diversity of students entering their doors. But many institutions have had difficulty providing effective academic and co-curricular support for multicultural students. College environments need to not only offer level-appropriate course content, but faculty who have a deeper understanding of the factors that impact teaching and learning, and of the pedagogical practices that can foster student development, retention, and success.

PsTL’s new Master of Arts degree in Multicultural College Teaching and Learning is among the first academic programs to engage graduate students in a critical examination of educational theory and practices that support diverse students. It also has the potential to transform higher education to better respond to and contribute to our complex society. And PsTL graduate students with careers in education are loving it!

Mary Davis is an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow with a charter school that reaches out to inner-city students ages 15–21. She is also a student in the program who said:

“The M.A. was the first program I had heard of that focused on populations who are often ignored or left behind in the post-secondary community. I have a strong interest in working with first-generation college students, both immigrant and American born, and hope to specialize in student retention. I worry that the many barriers faced by first-generation students will discourage them from completing their coursework. My graduate classes give me the opportunity to read about current theories and approaches in the realm of critical multicultural pedagogy and student services, and to converse with professors and other professionals about best practices in the postsecondary field.”

PsTL’s M.A. curriculum is designed to model the practices that students are studying. Faculty use active learning strategies, such as co-facilitation of classes, and value an explicit focus on engaging diversity in the class, not only through course content but through connecting lived experience with scholarly content.

This interdisciplinary master’s degree is intended to serve a broad constituency of stakeholders in higher education, from teachers to student support personnel and administrators who support undergraduates.

A New Foundation, a New Credential for Practitioners

Increasing diversity in schools—racial, cultural, ethnic, class, gender, religious, sexual orientation, disability, age—has signaled the need for a different foundation for teaching and learning. The Post-baccalaureate Certificate in Innovations in Undergraduate Multicultural Teaching and Learning brings relevant research and new energy to create workable solutions so that students can attain a higher level of education, particularly those who traditionally have been underprepared and underserved.

Anise McDowell, a student in the program who works in the Office of Equity and Diversity on Pre-Collegiate Initiatives, wrote:

“I was drawn to the program because of its intent to address multicultural learning and teaching head-on. I feel that the subject matter in my courses is very insightful and the understanding about multiculturalism is very tangible. This program is helping me to collect and organize my skills and knowledge so I can better teach and serve students using the principles of universal design, multicultural education, and social justice education. I have really found my place here at the University and am going to obtain a master’s degree in this area. I also like the small seminar classes
because the other students are teaching or student services professionals and have a lot to offer to the rich and lively conversations that compliment the curriculum."

The Certificate is based on current research into educational theory and practice, applying a multicultural focus to curricula and courses, emphasizing campus climate, classroom culture, and instructional practices. The program’s goal is to support the development of expert instructors informed about the foundations for academic success and the educational needs of diverse populations.

Early indications are that a multicultural teaching and learning credential will be attractive to many practitioners from all walks of life. Alison Link, a student in the program, said:

“When I was getting ready to return home after working in Austria for two years, I worried about fitting back into the city I’d grown up in. I had pretty much decided on graduate teaching licensure when PsTL’s new program in undergraduate multicultural teaching and learning caught my eye. I was instantly struck by its core commitment to access issues and multiculturalism. This seemed like a way to pursue my process of cultural self-examination that started while abroad. Now, I definitely feel I’ve found my academic home here. I’ve been so impressed with the faculty’s energy and dedication, and also with peers and courses that have challenged me to ask hard questions about access and multiculturalism. I want to be a part of the creative solution.”

Bring On the Future
A teaching and learning transformation has begun at the post-secondary level. A broad understanding of multiculturalism is employed that includes race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and religion and an acknowledgment that personal identity is complex and various. New strategies will help close the gap of academic disparities by bringing long-term, systemic, and comprehensive solutions to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all.

Partnerships to Develop Fresh Strategies in Higher Education
What if we could network policy makers, educators, community members, and scholars to improve outcomes for students in higher education? With seed money of approximately $2.5 million from alumnus Tom Jandris, we can—and we will!

The Jandris Center for Innovative Higher Education launches early in 2011. During months of preparation and strategic planning, co-directors David Arendale, from PsTL, and David Weerts, from the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development, met with leading state legislators, educational advocacy groups, campus organizations, faculty members, and others to articulate the Center’s vision and major themes. Ongoing interdisciplinary Innovation Design Teams intend to erase barriers, develop signature programs, and provide, as Tom Jandris said, “fresh thinking and innovative solutions for today’s problems in postsecondary education.”

Center activities will be both campus-based and interactive and will include public sessions, workshops for graduate students, conferences, webinars, videos, and a host of resource materials. Arendale and Weerts agree that the Jandris Center is a major step forward and “one of the most exciting approaches to sharing ideas and programs geared toward improving higher education outcomes.”
PsTL’s RESEARCH: A Solid Foundation for Postsecondary Education

1. Multicultural communities and education

Professor Jeanne L. Higbee earned her M.S. in Counseling and Ph.D. in Educational Administration/Higher Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has published on developmental education and access and success in higher education and she serves on numerous editorial boards. Her current work is focused on creating a new pedagogical model for integrated multicultural instructional design (IMID) that values diversity in every aspect of the postsecondary teaching and learning process. “IMID addresses (a) how we learn/how we teach, (b) what we learn/what we teach, (c) how we access academic support services/how we provide natural supports for learning, and (d) how we demonstrate our knowledge/how we assess learning.” Higbee partners with state, national, and international professional organizations and with postsecondary faculty and student development staff members from within and outside the University.

She notes, “So much has changed since my career in higher education began in 1974. Now, there is a better understanding of concepts like racism and ableism as social constructs. Interdisciplinary multicultural research—whether quantitative or qualitative—is more likely to be valued.” That said, she believes that many teaching practices in higher education have not changed radically enough to create learning experiences that are welcoming to all students and provide equitable opportunities for academic success.

2. Teaching and learning in postsecondary education

Associate Professor Leon Hsu, a physicist by training, pursues three strands of research: (a) how students learn to solve problems in the context of an introductory physics class; (b) the development of students’ attitudes and beliefs about physics and learning it in a physics course for non-science majors; and (c) ways to increase the number and quality of high school physics teachers.

He says, “in the first two areas, it is important to get a handle on how students from different backgrounds view ‘problem solving’—what their beliefs are about science and the learning of science. Knowing this, one can design instruction to reach and be effective for the widest range of students.” The third area means producing teachers with the ability to reach and teach the widest range of students and to be flexible enough to accommodate new challenges involving students with diverse backgrounds and learning preferences.

Hsu and his collaborators have found that, in guided-inquiry-based physics courses for pre-service teachers and non-science majors in which the nature of science was treated only implicitly, students’ attitudes and beliefs about physics and the learning of physics became more expert-like, even when the nature of science was not an explicit part of the course.

Hsu says, “In the field of physics, there’s been a change in the sense of legitimacy of education research because increasingly it is being performed by physicists. I think that has caused physicists to be more willing to look at these results to try to improve student performance.”

3. Access, transitions, and persistence in diverse contexts of higher education

Assistant Professor Na’im Madyun studies the connection of the African American experience to educational outcomes. His research uses various social behavior theories to explore educational disparities and the achievement gap.

He says, “Part of my research focuses on cultural capital—mainly how to leverage cultural capital to advance students of color toward more successful outcomes. Part of this requires increasing both an awareness and understanding of the criticalness of culture capital in how we teach, how we learn, and in the interaction of the two.”

Madyun feels that trust is inextricably tied to all interactions. Within a context of trust, interactions are perceived to be absent of a large degree of self-interest. “So, we must design interactions that require and demonstrate the reduction of immediate self-interest,” he believes. Creating such changes might bring about the interconnectedness to support students in their transition to higher education.


4. Witherspoon, N. and Na’im Madyun. (Eds.). *The role of spirituality, religion and the African American church on educational outcomes* [Special Issue]. *The Journal of Negro Education*; Summer 2010; Volume 79(3).

During fall semester 2010, PsTL faculty members shared their research projects.

- In September, Assistant Professor Tabitha Grier-Reed summarized her research to date on “Career Development and the African American Student Network,” curricular and co-curricular ways to enhance access and success in higher education for diverse students. She also presented ideas for future research directions.

- Professor David Arendale presented “Access at the Cross-roads: Learning Assistance in High Education” in October. Learning assistance is a diverse set of approaches, programs, and best practices supporting students as they meet academic expectations for their coursework. It often operates at the crossroads of academic affairs, students affairs, and enrollment management.

- Assistant Professors Rashné Jehangir and Na’im Madyun reviewed their research on “Bringing the Neighborhood into the Classroom: Implications for Self-Authorship” in November. They examined statistics and experiences of marginalized students while suggesting ways in which educational and community contexts can impact their journey toward developing self-authorship—an “enduring way of making sense of the world.” Educators need to be aware of “provocative moments” that serve as crossroads in a journey of self-awareness. This presentation was based on Jehangir’s and Madyun’s articles that appeared in *Urban Education* (July 2010).

Attendance for the Spring PsTL Research Series colloquia is free. For information, go to: www.cehd.umn.edu/pstl
When we began the FYE program after months and months of researching what should work and discussing how to make the General College alumni proud of our new efforts, I never imagined we could get so close to the mark in such a short time. We faculty are happy with the results we see on the faces of our first year students and their enjoyment of learning. At this year’s Capstone event, faculty members saw the cohesion of students and it did seem like they were having fun."

"I’m from a small town. I graduated high school in 2008 and I was in the top ten all four years. I have one sister who is a teacher, and two brothers who are currently in college. Ever since kindergarten I have wanted to become an elementary and special education teacher. I want to be that teacher who helps children set goals and reach their goals. I love seeing the big smiles on their faces when they understand a concept or do something right. I want to help children reach their dreams just as my teachers have led me in the right direction to reach my dreams. “I received the Greater Minnesota Scholarship upon entering my first year here at the University of Minnesota in the PsTL program; I am now a junior. This scholarship has given me an opportunity to continue my schooling, taking some of the cost burden off my shoulders. It’s helping me succeed at my goal. I am in the Elementary Education program and I love it. My fellow classmates are fun to have in class and I enjoy learning about every aspect of teaching and being a teacher—the ins and outs of education from standards to why children think the way they do. I love the elementary ed program and I cannot wait to start teaching on my own!"