

First-Year Initiative Helps New Cadets Succeed

BY CHRIS FLOYD

It's no secret. Incoming freshmen in the nation's colleges struggle mightily. Add to that the extra burdens for VMI's new cadets, and those struggles are multiplied. The Institute is in the midst of a study that just might help alleviate the strain for 4th Class cadets.

Thanks to a grant from the Jackson-Hope Foundation, Lt. Col. Elaine Humphrey and Col. Mary Ann Dellinger created the First Year Initiative at VMI, now in its second year, and early returns are showing that the program might help acclimate new cadets to college life early.

"Nationally, high school graduates are not ready for college, period," said Humphrey, the director of the Miller Academic Center. "This has been bemoaned for years by colleges. Then when you add everything else that our rats have handed to them, it becomes a bigger challenge. We wanted to do something proactively rather than waiting until they got here and tried to figure it out on their own."

Though the concept of first-year programs for incoming freshmen is not new, VMI's program is uniquely structured to suit the struggles faced by cadets.

The program is divided into three sections during the first semester. Academics 101, held during the first five weeks, addresses lack of academic skills as well as problems associated with the Rat Line. In the next phase, called On Your Own, cadets get a chance to implement what they have learned without guidance from the instructors; all they have to do is report to Humphrey once for half an hour during the four-week session. The final five weeks of the program, AC 102, is designed to reinforce the concepts learned earlier and get the cadets ready for life after Breakout, when grade-point averages tend to take a nosedive.

AC 101 and AC 102 meet every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On Mondays, cadets meet with Humphrey to learn about study and time management skills. On Wednesdays, Dellinger takes control to focus solely on academics. Fridays are unique in that cadet facilitators work with the participants.

"We selected upperclassmen who could serve both as role models and essentially give credibility to what we had been saying [the rats] should do," said Humphrey. "When we say they shouldn't be polishing brass so much, they say we don't understand. But a cadet voice can answer the questions about how to be a good rat and a good student at the same time. They're not mutually exclusive."

Does the program work? Data collected from the last year's preliminary study would suggest that it does. On average, cadets who met or exceeded expectations in the program last year had higher GPAs than cadets who did not.

The early numbers also show that retention rates are much higher



Cadet facilitator Kodiak Bowers '14 works with 4th Class cadets enrolled in FYI at VMI. – VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

among students who participated in the academics program. Of the 50 new cadets who participated in FYI, 96 percent stayed on post after the first year. That's a 10 percent difference from the retention rate of non-AC new cadets.

"We're excited," said Humphrey. "The excitement is growing, and the belief is growing, both from the cadets and other stakeholders."

These numbers were impressive enough to allow Humphrey and Dellinger to continue their pilot study for another three years.

"Hopefully, by then we'll have enough data to support a decision to expand the program, ideally to all incoming rats," Humphrey said.

"We just have to keep the numbers up," Dellinger added.

In fact, Dellinger tosses out a few more numbers. Of the 50 new cadets who participated in the first year of FYI, 18 earned rank, 36 percent. Only 25 percent of the non-AC rats were awarded leadership honors at the end of last year.

"At the end of the day," added Humphrey, "I've never had anybody come back and say, 'This kind of program has hurt me.' As long as they give it a fair shot, it always winds up being beneficial."

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