

Through the Gateway

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

All the way from surviving to thriving, a creative orientation program ushers Sooner freshmen through the perils of being the new kids on campus.

Incoming!

Every year they descend by the thousands on college and university campuses throughout the United States, fresh from high school, hometowns and families. The freshmen arrive, loaded with backpacks, laptops and varying degrees of homesickness, apprehension and determination to make it at a major league research institution. Although they may comprise the most energetic and idealistic class on campus, freshmen are also the most vulnerable, sometimes falling victim to the one-two punch of low grade points and high drop-out rates before their sophomore year.

The forecast for freshman retention and improved GPAs is considerably sunnier at the University of Oklahoma, thanks to an ever-growing University College program, which since 1988 has taken a

proactive approach to the challenges of that first college year. Patterned after a winning concept from the University of South Carolina, "Gateway to College Learning" gets freshmen up and running right from the start, providing insider tips to make life more productive, inside and outside the classroom.

"They have so many questions," says Alice Lanning, coordinator of freshman programs and Gateway instructor. "Where do I pay my parking ticket? Where is the Physical Science Building? How do I get a meal card?" These questions have to be answered first. Students who feel at home do better academically."

Gateway combats that lost-in-the-crowd feeling by keeping the optional, for-credit classes small, averaging only 25 to a section, and instructors greet students

by name from the first day of class. "Our instructors write welcome letters to their students and study their photo IDs before the semester starts," says Lanning. "On a campus of this size it's nice to have somebody know your name."

Freshmen typically make friends faster in Gateway than any other class. Using icebreakers from corporate retreats, students bond with their classmates before tackling a survival-kit curriculum of study skills, time management, how to read a college textbook, how to take notes, even how to decode a professor. "We work on writing skills, study skills, communication skills," says Lanning. "Gateway teaches students how to become *college* students."



Some of the most important lessons Gateway offers take place outside the classroom. During the first weeks of the semester, students are split into teams and sent off across the ovals in search of the health center, the library, the career center and the center for cultural diversity. At the end of the class, students know what resources are available and where to find them on campus.

"We also take the students to College of Fine Arts events: plays, musicals, museum exhibits. We want them to see beyond their class schedules; we want them to explore their options," says Lanning. "Gateway is about expanding your boundaries."

Lanning explains that the students often are asked to do things that they might not do on their own. They are required to interview a professor, particularly one they are a little bit afraid of. They also are asked to join a campus organization and, as a group, provide community service for Norman. In the past, students have adopted elementary schools, tutored at-risk kids, and volunteered at nursing homes, animal shelters and state parks.

"We have found that if students connect with an organization outside the classroom and outside the dorm, they are likely to bond with the institution better," explains Lanning. "We show them ways to get connected in a new situation. It helps at OU, but it also helps throughout their life."

Whatever mix of practical knowledge and social interaction Gateway provides, the combination is a winner. Statistics show that across the board students who take Gateway have a higher GPA than those who do not. This is true at every ACT level, for any type high school or ethnic group—and Gateway freshmen stay in school longer than their non-Gateway counterparts.

The secret of the program's success is due in large part to its instructors. Lanning, who has been in charge of Gateway since 1996, says she is "pretty careful" about who teaches its classes. The instructors, who must have a master's degree or higher, can be administrators, faculty, staff, adjuncts or retired faculty who miss teaching. They have back-

grounds in athletics, fine arts, business or engineering, but there is one prerequisite they all share.

"They must like freshmen," says Lanning. "They need to know who our freshmen are, what they need to know and how to teach in a way that appeals to them. They also have to know a lot about the University."

One such instructor is Marilyn Conner, recipient of Gateway's first Outstanding Instructor Award, a commendation heavily dependent on student input. After retiring from her job as assistant to the vice president for student affairs, Conner found that she missed the

popular Gateway instructors, and it is easy to see why. She greets each student by name, asking about their week, their friends, their activities. She celebrates student birthdays with chocolates for all and offers encouragement during the weekly quiz.

When one latecomer drags tardily into class, with the excuse "I overslept," Conner welcomes her, as well. The day's lesson? Time management—and not a minute too soon.

Conner has been so impressed with the Gateway experience and the positive effect it has on freshmen, she recruited her retiree husband into the program. A former OU



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■ University College's new dean, Doug Gaffin, left, Alice Lanning, coordinator of freshman programs, and Assistant Dean Myrna Carney oversee a Gateway Program that has grown from 25 sections in 1988 to 52 sections in the fall of 2002. The optional orientation course usually has a waiting list.

daily interaction with students.

"I love freshmen," she says. "They're eager and open-minded. Each class has a personality of its own. They can be outspoken or introverted. My first task is to adopt a style of teaching that fits the class. I try to be flexible and open, and I hope I can teach them to be. I really enjoy teaching Gateway; it lays the foundation for everything else they will learn at OU."

Her Tuesday/Thursday class is a multicultural mix of athletes, Greeks and independents. Conner is one of the more

swim coach and assistant athletic director, Bob Conner has been teaching Gateway classes for the past three years and has become a favorite with the students.

Besides intuitive instructors, another key component of Gateway is the class assistants, made up of students who have gone through the program themselves. Lanning says freshmen are sometimes worried that they will not connect with people or make friends in their new environment. Gateway assistants provide a built-in human resource and role model.

"It's nice for the kids to have someone their own age to talk to," says Lanning. "Part of their job as assistants is to call each student in the class periodically and see how they are doing."

Lauren Anderson, honor student, Gateway alumnae and current assistant, is sold on the program. "Gateway really helps bridge the gap between high school and college. It's one of the reasons I stayed," she says.

Tremayne Phillips, a physical therapy major from North Little Rock, Arkansas, says he would have left his second week at

OU if not for Gateway. "I was from out-of-state and didn't know anyone here. I didn't know the campus," he recalls. "I had a tough time with homesickness."

At the end of the semester, Phillips wanted to stay involved with the program. "I had a tough transition," he says. "If I can help someone else make it through, that's what I want to do. You come here, and you're not used to the independence. I think it's harder on the kids who are from out of state and aren't familiar at all with the campus."

Myrna Carney, assistant dean of Uni-

versity College, agrees that those unfamiliar with the campus do have a harder time, and that includes most of the freshman class. "Of all our incoming freshmen, less than a third have parents or siblings who have attended OU," she says. "Only half have parents who have graduated from college, so the experience can be overwhelming if left on their own."

Gateway staff and instructors go out of their way to make sure that does not happen. "We have a pretty comprehensive support network," says Lanning. "If a student misses two Gateway classes in a row, we're on the phone. We want to make sure they are okay. Our goal is to intervene before there is a problem."

Another safety factor in place is the Midterm Outreach Program. Gateway instructors help students learn relaxation techniques to get them through midterm stress and will intervene at the first indications of academic problems. "There are early warning signs," says Lanning. "When we see them, we can reach out very quickly and find out what's going on."

The optional Gateway classes have become so popular with students and parents, they have grown from 25 sections in 1988 to 52 sections in the fall of 2002. And, with freshman enrollment climbing over 3,800, there is usually a waiting list. Lanning hopes to continue offering an increasing number of Gateway sections.

"We are very pleased with the students coming out of Gateway," she says. "These are kids who want to make it. We're here to help them succeed."



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■ **TOP:** Gateway freshmen gather around their instructor, drama professor Greg Kunesh, in jacket, to deliver a Monday morning report on the community service project they carried out the previous Friday evening under the direction of student assistant Jessica Craig.

■ **LEFT:** Each semester Career Services Director Bette Scott, at right with Paige Carneal and Jeremy Mendez, welcomes to her office two-student teams from Gateway classes to explore the employment planning and placement resources the University makes available to OU students.