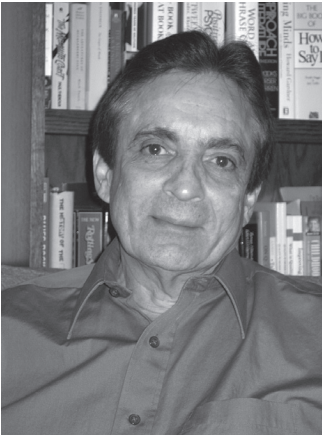


A Personal Interview with Joe Cuseo: A Pillar of the Profession

Interviewed by Denise L. Rode



Joe Cuseo holds a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology and Assessment from the University of Iowa and is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Marymount College (California)—where, for more than 25 years, he directed the first-year seminar—a core course required of all new students. He is a 14-time recipient of the “faculty member of the year award”—a student-driven award based on effective teaching and academic advising, the “Outstanding First-Year Student Advocate Award” from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and the “Diamond Honoree Award” from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) for contributions made to student development and the Student Affairs profession. Currently, Joe serves as an educational advisor and consultant for AVID—a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote the college access and success of underserved student populations.

Joe has delivered hundreds of campus workshops and conference presentations across the United States, as well as Canada, Europe, China, and Australia. He has authored articles, monographs, and books on effective teaching, advising, student

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retention and student success, the most recent of which are *Thriving in College and Beyond: Research-Based Strategies for Academic Success & Personal Development*, *Humanity, Diversity, & The Liberal Arts: The Foundation of a College Education*, and *Peer-to-Peer Leadership: Transforming Student Culture*.

Joe is a well-known and much beloved member of the first-year experience community, both nationally and internationally. A frequent conference speaker, he is known for his passion for serving first-year students and keeping their needs at the forefront of higher education, as well as for his self-deprecating sense of humor. Joe recently was interviewed by former editor of *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, Denise L. Rode.

Tell us about your background and your career journey.

I attended a small liberal arts college in Brooklyn (NY), where I majored in psychology with the rather vague intention of pursuing a career that in some way involved “helping people.” I went to graduate school in psychology at the University of Iowa, where I chose to specialize in verbal learning and memory; I thought that would best prepare me for a career that involved helping students learn. However, the graduate program was designed to turn out researchers, not teachers, so after completing my master’s degree, I switched to the field of Educational Psychology & Assessment and completed a Ph.D. in that area.

While working on my doctorate, I had part-time teaching experiences at a research university, a local community college, and a liberal arts college, so I got a taste of what it was like to work at three different types of postsecondary campuses. After completing my graduate studies, I took my first full-time faculty position at a teaching-oriented college on the Iowa-Illinois border. It was a school that placed priority on effective teaching and academic advising. I was fortunate to be at a place that rewarded me for professional activities that had direct impact on student learning and student success.

I was also fortunate to have a Student Affairs professional reach out to me when I first came to campus; he took a personal interest in me and invited me to have dinner at the home of the Dean of Students. He introduced me to the field of student development and engaged me in student life outside the classroom—including orientation and other co-curricular programming—none of which I learned anything about in graduate school. When he and other members of the Student Affairs Division wanted to start a first-year experience course at the college, they approached me to help them shepherd it through the psychology curriculum. I did that and also taught certain units of the course. It was this experience that first got me involved in the first-year experience “movement.”

I’ve often wondered if this accidental or serendipitous experience I had at the start of my career could and should be done *intentionally* (i.e., student affairs

professionals making a conscious effort to reach out to new faculty members at the outset of their career). I believe there are faculty who would be willing and able to collaborate with student development professionals—if we got to them early—when their professional habits and behavioral patterns are first forming. Such a proactive approach might provide the basis for establishing long-term collaborative partnerships between faculty and student affairs professionals, as it did for me.

What have been your primary research interests or foci? How have those interests evolved over the years?

Like the vast majority of new faculty, I entered the professoriate without receiving effective preparation in graduate school for teaching or advising. Consequently, I made those areas my primary focal points for research early in my career. I did this out of necessity because I was underprepared to assume these student-centered responsibilities and, quite honestly, I feared failure. As I gained more competence and confidence as a teacher and advisor, my research interests shifted more to student learning, retention, and success.

How has the field of orientation/transition/first-year programs changed since your entry into the profession?

I think the field has expanded well beyond its original purpose of facilitating the transition of high school students to the first year of higher education. The field now facilitates the transition of non-traditionally aged students, transfer students, and students with special needs. Orientation and transition programming has also been extended to support student transitions at later stages of the undergraduate experience (e.g., the sophomore-year experience movement). I think this is an exciting development because it is alerting us to the fact that the first-year experience should not just be first-term experience. If we aspire to deliver a *bona fide* first-year experience to students, not only should we front load support during students' initial term on campus, but also back load support with retention-promoting programming throughout the first year, including support at the very end of the first year that builds a bridge to the sophomore. At most colleges and universities, the brunt of student attrition occurs between the end of the first year and start of the second year, yet little is done systematically to intervene and intercept this potential attrition during the final weeks of the first year and the summer between students' first and second years.

I would love to see the FYE movement connect with the sophomore-year and senior-year experience movements to begin creating a set of interlocking initiatives that may serve as a blueprint for the development of cumulative, stage-sensitive sequence of programs that facilitate students' transition *to, through, and from* college. If this can be done, first-year programs would not function as stand-alone experiences after which students are set adrift to navigate their remaining time in college; instead, the first-year experience would be seen connecting with and

serving as an introduction to subsequent stages of the college experience. Such an extended and connected view of orientation and transition programming would also enhance the credibility and clout of the FYE by allowing it to be something more than an initial, isolated program that merely facilitates new students' transitional adjustment to college, then terminates after the first year (or first term). Instead, the FYE would function as an integral introduction and gateway to a carefully designed and sequenced series of educational experiences that has a meaningful *beginning, middle, and end*.

Admittedly, accomplishing this expanded role of the FYE would be a herculean task, but if we can least approximate it, it would provide students with a much more connected and cohesive collegiate experience than they now have. I think the need to remove "silos" and make the student experience "seamless" doesn't only apply to forging better connections between the divisions of Academic and Student Affairs; it also involves forging better connections between the first-year experience and subsequent student transitions in their undergraduate experience.

What trends do you see on the horizon for first-year programs? What do you see in the future of the profession (challenges and resolutions)?

If I had to single out one, I would say *academic advising* of first-year students. A real challenge for first-year students is the increased pressure being placed on them to make early decisions about their college major. Legislative budgetary pressure to expedite students' time to graduation, coupled with the pre professional program accrediting agencies adding more course requirements for accreditation in their specialized field, are combining to put more pressure on new students to make early and perhaps premature decisions about committing to a college major. Beginning college students need time to mature developmentally, to familiarize themselves with the college curriculum, to explore their options, and to discover their educational and vocational identity. Given the mounting pressure for early academic decision-making, it becomes even more imperative that proactive and intrusive advising support be provided to new students to assist them with educational planning and decision-making to increase the likelihood that they choose a major that is truly compatible with their personal talents, interests, and values.

What skills and competencies are needed by first-year professionals? What advice would you give a new professional entering this field?

I've always felt that professionals involved in the FYE movement are more than student advocates because they not only advocate, they also agitate; they are often the change makers and reform agents who push their institutions to be more student-centered, holistic, and humane. Research on recipients of the first-year student advocate awards from the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition reveals that these advocates were also

institutional change agents or organizational gadflies who sought to improve the overall quality of undergraduate education at their institution (Chaskes & Anttonen, 2005). I am proud to be associated with such a caring and committed cadre of student advocates and change agents.

That being said, I see lots of new professionals, fresh out of graduate school, assuming FYE positions. Because of their younger age, lower professional status, and sometimes their gender (female), their idealistic interest and efforts to mobilize the campus for student-centered change often do not resonate well with older, change-resistant faculty and administrators.

My advice to new FYE professionals is to resist the temptation to succumb to cynicism and retain your idealism and passion for promoting positive change. The FYE movement needs you, and your campus needs you to raise our collective consciousness (and conscience) about being student-centered. At the same time, remain aware that your forceful efforts are taking place within a larger system of countervailing forces that can often impede and retard your efforts. Balance your idealism and enthusiasm by focusing on how your individual, day-to-day efforts are impacting the lives of the students you touch, while maintaining your sanity by remaining mindful that there is only so much you can do to promote change at the grassroots level.

The type of radical, transformative change that we'd like to see happen in higher education will have to take place as an evolutionary, not revolutionary process, and it will only take place when your local efforts are augmented by larger-scale, systemic change involving higher education policy makers, administrators, and faculty. In the meantime, keep making a difference one student at a time, catalyzing change from the bottom up, while keeping an eye out for those who are positioned to provide top-down support; when you get their ear—be sure to bend it (tactfully).

In your experience, to what constituencies is the FYE professional responsible? Which is/are most important? What would you advise for new professionals in the field?

I think all FYE professionals would agree that as a *student-centered* profession, our first and foremost constituents are our students. When you think about it, those working in the first-year experience field represent the only higher education professional body whose job title is centered squarely on the constituents they serve—first-year students. All other higher education professions are titled in terms of the function the professionals perform (college admissions, university registrars, academic advisors, etc.) Even the national FYE conference is distinctive in that it's the only conference that is expressly titled and driven by the *student experience*, rather than by a professional organization. Whenever I'm at an FYE conference, I feel proud to be part of a community of educators who have checked their egos at

the door and made a professional commitment to serve the least experienced and most vulnerable members of their campus community—first-year students.

Another distinctive characteristic of the FYE profession is its collaborative spirit and willingness to partner with other professional constituencies. The diversity of professional representation at FYE/SIT conferences traverses disciplinary and divisional boundaries. Since its inception in 1982, I've always felt that FYE conferences have served to model the type of partnering needed to create a "seamless" learning environment—long before this term became so ingrained in postsecondary parlance. It's a movement that helps dismantle territorial barriers and helps to facilitate the formation of alliances across insulated units of the college, encouraging them to work in a coordinated and complementary fashion toward a common cause—student success. This collaborative spirit is also evident on the FYE Listserv (comprised of almost 3,500 members) who so generously share their student-centered ideas and student-success-promoting materials with colleagues across the country and around the world.

What books, journals, media, or other resources do you consider "required reading" for orientation/transition professionals (new or experienced)?

I have several suggestions. Three books with the term "first year" in their title that I'd recommend are *Challenging & Supporting the First-Year Student* (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005), *Improving the First Year of College* (Feldman, 2005), and *Teaching First-Year College Students* (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006). In addition, I'd recommend three books relating to undergraduate education in general: *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991 & 2005), plus two older classics whose messages are timeless: *College—The Undergraduate Experience in America* (Boyer, 1987) and *Achieving Educational Excellence* (Astin, 1985).

What do you know now that you wish you'd known as a new professional?

My parents always said that I was a naïve kid. As new professional, I guess I carried that naiveté with me. I thought higher education would be free of the politics, territorialism, and elitism that characterized other societal organizations. Naturally, I was wrong. I learned that those of us in the student success business must be continually cognizant of the reality that higher education institutions are not designed to maximize student learning and student success as much as they are to meet the self-serving interests (and egos) of faculty, staff, and administrators. I'm not saying this to be cynical or to suggest that I regret my decision to enter the higher education profession. What I am saying is that my idealism as a new professional had to be tempered by this unfortunate reality; I've since learned to be mindful of it and to be armed and ready to ask, "Is this policy, program, practice, or procedure truly working in the best interest of our students?"

What is your perspective on some of the watershed changes, articles, events in the profession, documents like the Student Learning Imperative, or other things that you have seen to be formative for the profession?

In addition to the Student Learning Imperative, other watershed concepts that seemed to have influenced our language and thinking were the “new learning paradigm” (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and the “learner centered” college (O’Banion, 1999). Personally, I’m hopeful that the growing interest in and scholarly support for the concept of *emotional intelligence* will have an enduring impact on our student success efforts. I view this movement as reaffirming the origins of the “freshman year experience” movement, which emerged from the concerns of a former president of the University of South Carolina, Tom Jones, who thought that his university needed to treat its students more humanely and holistically. The result was the creation of University 101, a course designed to address the student as a whole person, including their affective and interpersonal needs. Notably, President Jones had an engineering background and was strongly influenced by the work of a student development professional, Nevitt Sanford, author of the 1968 classic, *Where Colleges Fail*. Sanford argued that colleges fail whenever they treat students as less than a total person and ignore the fact that effective learning depends on the person’s whole being, not merely on his or her “abstracted intelligence.”

I’m also hopeful that the emotional intelligence movement will fuel the growth of first-year seminars that have a holistic (whole-student) focus—i.e., the “University 101” model—which also involves partnerships between faculty and student development professionals.

What is your fondest memory or interaction that had the most impact on you?

I remember a professor I had as an undergraduate who approached me after our last class session and told me that he really enjoyed (and appreciated) having me in his class and the contributions I made to it. After finals, he invited me and some other students to his home. I never forgot that professor and what he did for my academic self-image. When I became a professor, I was very mindful of making attempts to connect with students outside the classroom; I think my memorable experience with that professor had a lot to do with it. Later in my career, when I got involved in student success research, I discovered multiple studies pointing to the power of faculty-student contact outside the classroom; this further reinforced my memory of that professor and my desire to replicate his approach with my own students.

What is your perspective on how orientation, transition, and retention fit into higher education and the ramifications of these programs?

FYE professionals play a pivotal, proactive role in promoting students’ initial

transition to higher education and their subsequent persistence to college completion. Today, the national expectation is that all young people should continue their formal education beyond high school to assimilate into the American workforce and accommodate the current economic challenges facing our nation. America once led the world in college graduates; it now ranks 16th and is in the process of dropping further. College completion rates are particularly low for low-income, first-generation, and ethnically diverse students. The greatest growth in America's future high school graduates will be among groups of students with historically low rates of college completion: low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. Given these changing demographics, the students whom our nation is depending on the most to complete college are the students most at risk for not doing so. These students come from less privileged backgrounds that have not equipped them with the cultural capital or college knowledge needed to succeed in higher education; consequently, FYE professionals become potential surrogates for supplying these students with the cultural capital they need to complete college and elevate our nation's graduation rates. Thus, I see current professionals working in the field of student orientation, transition, and retention as not only as doing altruistic work essential to the future of our students; I also see them as doing patriotic work essential to the future of our nation.