Exceptional Beginnings Program Overview

Beginning at the moment a student makes the deposit to confirm his or her plan to enroll at the University of Mount Union, the Office of First Year Initiatives strives to provide a seamless transition from high school to the college. Beginning with New Student Communication series, this transition continues to be supported by the summer Preview program and the Fall Orientation program prior to the school year. The Exceptional Beginnings program is the next step in this process that will follow the students into their first semester and throughout the school year.

Exceptional Beginnings is part of an ongoing and multi-faceted transition process for new University of Mount Union students involving academic, intellectual, and personal development pursuits. It is a University-wide first year experience program with the mission of helping each first year student transition from high school to college by providing a supportive community to learn and grow, encouraging academic excellence through co-curricular learning, fostering the development of the whole student, and developing a connection with the Mount Union community.

Research has shown that student engagement on campus can be an important predictor of success. Since the inception of the First Year Experience program, now known as the Exceptional Beginnings program, seven years ago, Mount Union has found that retention and persistence rates for the students involved in the program have been higher than compared to their counterparts outside the program. For this reason, as well as the change in the Mount Union curriculum, the program was expanded to include the entire first year class.

Raider Challenge

Exceptional Beginnings programs are offered to all first year students, and the Raider Guide will encourage them to participate. However, first year students will also have the opportunity to opt-in to the Raider Challenge. Opting in will give them the opportunity to earn extra housing points as well as the chance to win upgraded semester-end prizes. To complete the Raider Challenge, a first year student must opt-in to the program online, and then attend two programs in each of the five educational areas listed below. Once this is completed, students will be eligible for the Raider Challenge incentives.

Peer Mentors (Raider Guide Staff)

The principle behind the Raider Guide role is that first year students relate particularly well to upperclass students, and as a result are encouraged to excel academically, socially, and as campus leaders themselves. The Raider Guides’ primary role is to facilitate the creation of a positive relationships with the members of their Exceptional Beginnings group. This year, the Exceptional Beginnings groups are each one First Year Seminar section, allowing the Raider Guides to mentor outside the classroom while the FYS instructors mentor them in the classroom. The Raider Guides can capitalize on the familiarity among the students provided by the dual experience in and out of the classroom, building stronger relationships in the group. They will also be tasked with planning events for first year students and encouraging them to attend other Exceptional Beginnings education programs.

The Five Educational Objectives of Exceptional Beginnings

1. Making Responsible Decisions in College related to:
   a. alcohol and drugs
   b. nutrition and wellness
   c. financial responsibility
2. Taking Responsibility for Your Education by:
   a. taking advantage of academic support opportunities
   b. taking advantage of outside the classroom learning opportunities
3. Creating Balance and Maintaining Mental Wellness
4. Getting Involved and Taking Advantage of Opportunities on campus
5. Learning and Living in a Diverse World

These objectives will be met via a variety of programs. Some of these program are planned and implemented through the Office of First Year Initiatives and the Exceptional Beginnings program, while others are programs already planned, by various campus offices, and that the Exceptional Beginnings staff will encourage first year students to attend.
Program Types

**Online Educational Programs**
Think About It – A two-part online alcohol education module all first year students will be required to complete. The first part of the module will be complete early in the semester, and several months later, a check-up module will be required. It not only educates students about alcohol and drugs, but also allows us to collect information from students about their beliefs and actions relating to alcohol and drugs. This is the second year an online alcohol education program will be required of first year students.

**Individual Raider Guide Group Programs**
Raider Guides will work with the students in their group (one FYS course group) and serve as an upper-class student and mentor to incoming students. Not only will these Raider Guides plan and implement area programs and encourage their groups to attend both the educational programs outlined below, but they will also work to develop individual relationships with students in their groups. They will do this through one-on-one interactions as well as by planning events for their small group members to participate in.

**Area Programs**
Exceptional Beginnings staff members will be charged with creating and implementing programs for the first year students in their groups, in addition to the individual contact they will be expected to have. These programs have a dual purpose of both inviting students to participate in social interactions with Raider Guides and their fellow first year students as well as having an educational element that revolves around transition and personal development. These programs will be offered one per week.

**Educational Programs**
Throughout the year, the Office of First Year Initiatives, in partnership with other offices and departments on campus, will implement education programs addressing the five Exceptional Beginnings educational topics or encourage first year students to attend programs, which address an EB educational area, that are already planned by other areas or offices.

**Individual Incentives for First Year Students**

**Raffles at Individual Events**
At each EB weekly event, as well as many events sponsored or promoted by Exceptional Beginnings, there will be small raffle that only those students in attendance will be eligible to win.

**Semester-end Drawings**
In addition to the event drawings, there will be a large semester-end drawing for larger bookstore packages, other gift packages, or gift cards.

**Raider Challenge Incentives**

**Housing Points**
All students who complete the Raider Challenge – attend ten total programs, two from each educational area – will earn extra housing points, which will aid them in earning a better lottery number for the spring housing lottery. These extra points could enable these students to better be able to get into the housing they would prefer (likely suite-style housing) for their sophomore year.

**Semester-End Drawings**
These students will also be eligible for enhanced end-of-semester raffles such as a Cleveland sports package and a Microsoft Surface.

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**Office of First Year Initiatives Staff**

Jesse Douglas, Director  
330-823-6051  
douglajs@mountunion.edu

Anthony Turon, Graduate Assistant  
330-823-5985  
turonai@mountunion.edu