To: Mary-Ellen Boyle, Associate Dean of the College

Walter Wright, Dean of the College

Davis Baird, Provost

From: Deborah M. Merrill, Associate Professor of Sociology

Date: February 7, 2012

Re: Assessment of First Year Initiative Courses

The following assessment of the FYI program is based on student experiences during the initial year of the LEEP requirement that all students complete an FYI in their first year at Clark. Results are based on intensive interviews with twenty students who fulfilled their FYI in academic year 2010-2011. Interviews were completed in the fall of 2011. The following ten students were responsible for interviewing the students, analyzing the data, and writing up the results: Hannah Berry, Jarrod Brennet, Christine Covino, Amanda D’Andrea, Parker Edmonds, Devon Grayson-Wallace, Kathryn Nowoswiat, Alana Schaffman, Ryan Short, and Mercedes Susi. Danielle Fontaine acted as the research assistant.

Results:

*The vast majority (95 percent) of the students believe that their FYI was somehow distinctive from their other courses. Of the 20 students, 85 percent report small classes or discussions/labs for their FYIs, while 80% believe that they received frequent feedback. However, fully 35 percent report minimal communication with their advisor. While students are more likely to meet with advisors to plan and select future classes, they are less likely to talk to their first year advisors about a future academic major or career. Students also find FYIs to be beneficial in providing a sense of community and acceptance, offering more discussion and therefore greater engagement with the material, and learning the university processes involved in addressing various needs. Overall, the FYIs were “less intimidating” and helped to introduce them to the college experience.

*Most (85 percent of) students collaborated with others on group projects in their FYI. All of these students said that they learned something from their classmates and learned how to work in a group. Group work also exposed them to varying opinions and perspectives. Also, 80 percent addressed situations in which there was no clear answer in their FYI. At first they were frustrated or stressed by this, but they eventually became more comfortable. Most were able to successfully register, find classes that interested them, and access materials to do research, including using the library.

*Students found time management to be their greatest challenge in their first year, including balancing academics with their social lives and co-curriculars. Clark students emphasize academic success even for their first year. Over half (60 percent) who found time management to be a challenge in their first year continued to find it a challenge in their second year. The vast majority believe that their critical thinking
and writing improved in their first year (85 percent and 80 percent respectively). They attribute the latter to a large number of writing assignments and their Expository Writing course. However, 60 percent state that their quantitative skills still need work and have not improved. They attribute this to the fact that they did not take any math-based courses during their first year because “they haven’t frankly needed to.”

*Students state that college is mostly about finding yourself and learning (although rarely about academics). Secondarily, they believe that it is about social networking, finding a passion, and the degree that they will receive. Because of the emphasis placed on the college experience and its effects in determining what one becomes, fully 70 percent of students had considered transferring during their first year. The interest in transferring was due mostly to anxiety that one might be missing out on life-altering experiences by not being at another university as well as academic concerns such as certain programs not being offered. All students cited social factors for why they did not transfer including their friendships with other students, their esteem for and relationships with Clark faculty, and feeling a part of the community as well as not wanting to “start all over” at another university.

*Students are highly engaged with co-curricular clubs and organizations, including sports teams. In particular, 95 percent belong to at least one group. On average, students belong to three clubs or organizations and spend 7.74 hours participating in them. Over half have a leadership position on at least one executive board. Slightly over half provide services to the community. Clubs and organizations were found to be a crucial aspect of the transition to college and a significant part of retention. Students who inject themselves into co-curricular life are becoming acculturated to the Clark community, which allows for a smoother transition to college. GPA also seems to be higher in general for students who are involved in more clubs and organizations and who spend more hours in those organizations. Employment, however, especially employment off campus, substantially reduces participation in both clubs and organizations and in community service. Nearly half of students have a job: 10 percent off campus and 35 percent on campus. Students spend between 2 and 18 hours per week working.

*Students’ main academic goal as sophomores is to maintain a high GPA for study abroad or fifth year programs. Others have more modest goals such as keeping up with reading and being more comfortable with higher level course work. Some students are not confident about choosing a major, which they attribute to a lack of support from their advisor. They are also anxious about choosing an advisor for their major and feel pressure to choose someone who will offer good advice. They are not confident about how they can find such a professor though since they are not aware of faculty members’ different areas of expertise. Students do not list specific skills or bodies of knowledge that they wish to acquire or learn. Their primary focus is to fulfill PLS courses and the courses required for the major/minor. They learned mostly through experience and trial and error during their first year and secondarily from faculty and upperclassmen.

*The majority of students (75 percent) express satisfaction with ITS services. Two of those who were dissatisfied point to lack of Mac support. Several students also state that library resources are limited for research purposes.
Suggestions for improvement:

1. Too much emphasis continues to be placed on “checking off” required PLS and major requirements during the students’ first and second years. The administration and advisors can lessen this through counseling.

2. Greater institutional attention needs to be placed on the process of selecting a major and major advisor. One possibility would be to have workshops at the end of first year and beginning of sophomore year with the chairs of departments that would be facilitated by Academic Advising. Students need more prominently placed information on faculty members’ areas of expertise.

3. First year advisors need to continue their counseling into their advisees’ sophomore year with discussions of choosing a major (and possibly career). Students are looking for guidance and personal attention in the process. Advising needs to extend beyond helping students to select courses.

4. Time management lectures should take place after classes start rather than being bunched up during orientation. It is not until after classes start that students can appreciate the need for time management.

5. FYIs need to devote some time to improving quantitative reasoning skills. Even courses that are not math-based could incorporate reading tables and graphs or accessing/interpreting data sources. Understandably, this may be a stretch for humanities courses.

6. Clubs/organizations and community service are a crucial aspect of the transition to college and a significant part of retention. The university should try to keep working students on campus by increasing the number of work study jobs.