

The First-Year Experience Movement: An Interview with Founder John Gardner

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ABOUT DR. JOHN GARDNER



John Gardner is a household name in the history of the student success movement in American higher education and globally. He is the original architect of the so-called “First-Year Experience” body of thinking, philosophy, practice, and scholarship. John is distinguished professor of Library and Information Science and senior fellow at the University of South Carolina; and co-founder (along with his wife, Betsy O. Barefoot) and executive chair of the 26-year-old non-profit organization, the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Higher Education.

J-CASP: In your book, *Launching the First-Year Experience Movement: The Founder’s Journey*, you wrote about your journey as a first-year student. You explained that you faced significant academic and personal challenges, such as a sense of unpreparedness for the expectations of college life and the struggle to find your sense of belonging within the university setting. However, you also found support from faculty, peers, and mentors who guided you through these formative years. Can you tell us more about what your college life was like for you?

Gardner: There are 12 chapters in that book. I spent four of them talking about the impact of undergraduate education on my development as a person, and to understate the matter, the impact was profound. The issue of *purpose* is fundamental to what happens to students. This includes both the purpose that students have, but also the purpose or purposes that the institutions have for them. And we’re trying to rethink the priority and the balance and the interplay of individual purpose and institutional purpose.

For me, my purpose—at 17 years old—was simply to do what my father had asked me to do. He’d made a pact with me. I would go to college for one year, and if I did not like it, then I would be permitted to leave. I did not want to go to college. I wanted to stay home in my little town in Connecticut and have a landscaping, lawn care, and tree service business. I got satisfaction out of doing beautiful work with my hands. My father was horrified by this. He thought that I really needed to go to college. Unfortunately for him, I was a counter-dependent adolescent.

My father was a graduate of an Ivy League Col-

lege. He wanted me to go to his Alma mater as a legacy; therefore, I did not want to do it. I decided to go to a small Liberal Arts College in Ohio—Marietta College—with a full understanding that I would go for a year, drop out, and come home. Another framing for this was that I had a significant other, and I was dreading being away from her. That was not a good way to start a college experience.

J-CASP: What other choices were you making in your first year that impacted your experience?

Gardner: I also chose to do things in my first year, academically, that were different than what I had done in high school. For example, instead of taking a science lab where I had experience, like in biology or chemistry, I decided to take geology. I just could not find a way to sort out the distinction between 400 rocks that I had to memorize. I failed that class. Instead of taking a language that I had experience with from high school, like French or Latin, I decided to take Russian. I failed that class, too. My academic performance was terrible. I had a 0.65 grade point average in my first semester, and I was placed on academic probation.

J-CASP: The hidden narrative here is that, obviously, you turned things around at some point. Was there anything particularly formative about transitioning out of academic probation?

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Gardner: I want to give my faculty a great deal of credit for my becoming—in the second semester—a pretty successful student. I got off academic probation. The college gave me no help in getting off academic probation. There were no structured processes that probationary students must go through, like at some institutions today. I just got a letter telling me I was on probation. This was sink or swim, all very hands-off. I had some very good professors, and I got invested intellectually. I began to feel somewhat that I belonged in college.

I also formed a relationship with a student who was one year ahead of me. He had a huge influence on me in terms of modeling successful college student behavior. I learned that the greatest influence on students during college was other students. He taught me how to take notes. He taught me how to choose my courses by who was teaching them.

J-CASP: I love that this does bring up peer mentors and the importance that they have. Many first-year experience courses have implemented peer mentors in their curriculum for those exact reasons.

Gardner: I have been encouraging that. I think it is one of the most important components of first-year seminar courses. My successors at the University of South Carolina can now measure qualitatively the difference in the experience that students have in a first-year seminar that either is or is not co-taught by an undergraduate student. There are very significant differences in the student experience.

J-CASP: How did you become involved in the first-year experience movement? Specifically, how did you get started in this career where you would be working with colleges and universities to rethink how they work with first-year students?

Gardner: When I graduated from college in 1965, the biggest challenge facing me was the Vietnam draft. From the graduating class of 1965, we were being drafted in huge numbers. I opted to go to graduate school as an alternative to being drafted; however, I still received a draft notice during my first year. The Air Force, in its infinite wisdom, made me a psychiatric social worker. There were two of us, one psychiatrist and myself. We had 8,000 troops on the base and 19,000 dependents. I was exposed to concepts that I'd never had at any point in my life previously: the notion of service to others and having a mission. My mission meant that I was working with people who had

a huge variety of challenges and problems, and that was my duty. That work helped prepare me to work with college students and faculty and staff, and it's had a lifetime impact on me, even now 60 years later.

Now, at the same time, my commander called me into his office my first day on base, and he said, "Gardner, you have a lot of education. You have more education than anybody in the squadron except the physicians. Gardner, that means you're going to do community service." Nobody had ever ordered me before to perform community service. I said, "Yes, sir, but what is that?" And he said, "Gardner, it's whatever I tell you. In your case, I'm ordering you to do some college teaching." I said, "But, sir, I'm not a college teacher." And he said, "Gardner, we need college teachers. You're free in the evenings, and you will do college teaching at night." To my shock, I started teaching two weeks later. My commander had my credentials reviewed by the University of South Carolina, and I was immediately approved to teach six courses.

J-CASP: That must have been an incredibly difficult transition for you.

Gardner: I did not feel very prepared to teach, but I soon discovered that I looked forward to interacting with those students. My students were either the children of mill workers or the mill workers themselves. They were so different from me. They had not grown up with my privileges. They did not even speak the same version of the English language that I did. These students were so brave, and they had such high aspirations for their lives.

Teaching in college gave me the opportunity to do four things that I love to do more than anything: talk, read, write, and help people. I got to do those

things in the context of a mission. That mission was to bring higher education to first-generation, undereducated, neglected, non-privileged, rural South Carolinians, of whom there were millions of people like this in the United States. Not like the wealthy people I had grown up with. So, I knew that my mission had to be centered around doing something in higher education—to help the less fortunate and the less privileged. I found my overriding aspiration in life would be to prevent as many students in the future from having a first year that was like mine. In other words, I was an expert on how to fail. That helped me become an expert on how to succeed instead of failing. I needed that experiential introduction to college to help me in my work, to ultimately help students and institutions to do better with people than was done with me.

The first-year experience concept was born out of a student riot that led to an effort to humanize a university experience and to teach students to love the university.

J-CASP: You then went on to use that expertise as the first director of University 101 at the University of South Carolina. How was the program created?

Gardner: The first-year experience concept was born out of a student riot that led to an effort to humanize a university experience and to teach students to love the university. I came to the University of South Carolina full-time in September of 1970. Three months before I arrived there had been a riot. A thousand students had gathered and protested. They were protesting the Vietnam War, the American invasion of the sovereign nation of Cambodia, and they were protesting certain local issues that they were mad about with the university administration. The Governor of South Carolina called out the National Guard. The students were tear-gassed. Well, they did not appreciate being tear-gassed, so they moved to a different location on the campus. They moved into the Administration building, barricaded the university president in his office, and attempted to set the building on fire. He let them sit in and occupy the building for 24 hours, and then they released him. He told the press, and anyone who would listen after that, "The students have given me an extended opportunity for reflection on the meaning of student behavior." So, as educators, what can we learn if we take opportunities to observe student behavior and reflect on what that tells us.

The president of the university at the time, Tom Jones, concluded that the students were angry, which seemed pretty obvious. They tried to burn his building down. The question became, then, why are the students angry? Well, this president, 60 years ago, realized that the students did not trust the administration. The students were so distrustful that they were angry. They were hostile. But he also realized that students did not enter the university angry, hostile, and distrustful. There was something that had happened to them that made them so angry that they were willing to try to set the building on fire and burn it down. The question then became, "How could you produce college students who are not angry?"

He worked with his faculty to create a course that would teach students how to love the university. In order to love the university, you have got to be successful there. You have to achieve your goals and find satisfaction and fulfillment. He worked with a group of 25 faculty and staff—myself included—to create and launch this course. His vision was to take student affairs professionals and mix them with faculty, and to see what kind of change could be made to make the university culture more student focused. This would hopefully change the culture of a large research university. The course was taught for the first time in the fall of 1972, with me as one of the instructors. The president would then have each of us teaching the course meet with him

to talk about our experiences and what the course had meant to us. The president was watching very carefully, because this was a pet innovation of his.

J-CASP: How did you become the first director of the program? Was it at the direction of the president?

Gardner: Two years after the course began, I got a call from the president's office. Well, I was, of course, quite apprehensive about that. I thought, "What, are they going to fire me?" I went to see him, and he said: "I want to offer you a job. You are not my first choice for the job. You are my third choice for the job. Unlike you, John, they were tenured full professors. You are not yet a full professor. You are not even tenured." I thought, "Oh, my God!" Then he said, "I want you to become the first faculty director of University 101." At this point, he had already resigned from the University; he was leaving after 12 years. Two weeks before he leaves, he is offering me the job. I thought he must be desperate. I was a risk taker by nature, so I talked with my dean, who would ultimately vote on my tenure. I also talked to my wife, who voted on my tenure every day. I decided to take the job.

This put me in the position to guide the redesign of the beginning student experience at the University of South Carolina. That was in 1974. I was exactly 30 years old. This gave me the opportunity, some years later—namely, 8 years later in 1982—to come up with this phrase, "The First-Year Experience." I wanted to think of language that all colleges and universities could use.

J-CASP: Were there any disruptions when the current president resigned? Did anything change when the new president arrived?

Gardner: The new President, William H. Patterson, had been at the University of South Carolina for 30 years. To my amazement, he was very open-minded about the course, but he was skeptical. To his credit, he ordered that an assessment be completed on the first 2 years of the course. He said, publicly, that he would honor whatever the results were. I really agreed with his notion of wanting the course evaluated. I felt that if we could not demonstrate that the course benefited students, then we should not continue that work. This was exceptional. By and large, colleges in the United States did not get into the assessment movement until 1985. This was 11 years before there was any widespread talk about assessment. The President, instead of asking me to conduct the assessment ordered that the assessment be done by someone who had no association with the program. It was external and objective. Dr. Fidler, who was well known at the university for finding out what students were doing and what they needed, oversaw the assessment.

J-CASP: What did the assessment reveal about the course?

Gardner: We had to evaluate not only the course, but to evaluate the preparation of the faculty for teaching the course. Dr. Fidler got information from all the instructors about what their goals were and set out to try to measure the extent to which they were achieving their goals. This all sounds very logical and sensible, but that had never been done. There was no course at the University of South Carolina where anybody had ever ascertained all the written goals from faculty. Also, no one had gone out and tried to measure whether or not the students were achieving those goals. This is a radical undertaking. Because of the nature of the evaluation, he looked at both qualitative and quantitative sources of evidence.

He also designed a survey that would be administered anonymously to all the first-year class in English 101. The goal was to get students to tell the University about the nature of their experiences. The survey—in addition to asking about their experiences—asked if they had taken University 101. The differences between the University 101 students versus the non-University 101 students were stunning. We found that the students who took University 101 were much more likely to know about the services and resources that the university offered. They had greater knowledge of how the university was organized and was working on their behalf.

Secondly, the survey asked students, “Have you used these services?” We found that the students in University 101 were much more likely to have gotten help. Thirdly, we asked if they were joining clubs, organizations, fraternities, or sororities. Well, we found that the students who were taking University 101 were much more likely to get involved and join organizations. We asked them questions like, “Do you go to plays?” “Do you go to concerts?” and “Do you go to things outside the classroom?” We found that yes, they were more likely to go do these things. There was a big difference. The students who had taken University 101 had a very different beginning student experience. The big outcome was that the students who had taken this course had a higher retention rate from first to second year than the students who had not taken the University 101 seminar.

The other thing Dr. Fidler looked at were the differences between those who persisted and those who did not. How are they similar? How are they differentiated? Well, what he found was really striking. There is a measure that is taken of every entering student. It be-

comes like Hester Prinne in *The Scarlet Letter*. It is called the predicted grade point average. Algorithms predict what the persistence rate will be based on high school class rank and scores on standardized aptitude tests. We found that the students enrolling in University 101, as a group, had a lower predicted grade point average. We would have assumed they would have been less likely to persist. Yet, we found exactly the opposite.

The big finding from this research is that a population that was more at risk were persisting at higher rates than students of a lower risk. That was a hugely significant finding. And when you broke it down by gender, race, and ethnicity, again, those same variables were discovered. We knew that somehow, in this experience we had designed for new students, an experience not all of them had because the course was an elective, something was happening that made a difference. It was a perfect control versus experimental group research study that we not only did for one year, but we continued for the next 25 years. We kept continually measuring this.

A few years later, a guy came to me a few years later who said, “John, we know there’s this magic. These University 101 students move in greater numbers to become sophomores. What we don’t know are the graduation rates. Does the cure stick?” And I thought, “Oh, my God! Now he wants to know if I am responsible for graduation rates?” I was nervous about this. But what we found was that yes, the persistence rates were getting higher, but so were the graduation rates. The moral of the story for your readers is that assessment can be and should be hugely significant and important for shaping outcomes.

J-CASP: As you continued to conduct this research every year, what did you do with the results?

Gardner: When assessment results were reported to me, I said, “Okay, what’s actionable? What are we learning here? What would further improve performance?” This course was so effective that once the university community became aware of its impact, they became more supportive. There were a couple of other variables that influenced the level of acceptability. One was the fact that as the course grew in enrollment, we had to have more and more faculty and staff teach the course. We developed more and more allies for the course.

Another thing that we had going for the course was me. That does not sound very modest, but it was not just me as a person. It was the fact that we had stable leadership. Often, innovation is not sustained because the innovators do not stick around. They move on

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to some other toy to play with in the higher education sandbox. In my case, I stayed in the job for 25 years. The course had a lot of stability, and that also was another support for sustaining the innovation.

J-CASP: The assessment was great for faculty and administrative buy-in, but was any of the data communicated to students? Were you advertising the class and saying, “Hey, this is an elective, but you should buy into it and sign up.”

Gardner: Yes, [I did this] for 25 years every summer, 5 days a week, for 5 weeks. I went to orientation and presented to a group of new students and their families. I would say to them:

We have studied this course for x number of years, and we can tell you quite factually that if you take this course, your probability of becoming ultimately a sophomore and a graduate of the university will be greater than if you do not take this course. Do you want to survive at the University of South Carolina? You ought to consider taking this course.

Well, not only were the students there, but their parents were there. We know that many of our students in the earlier years were told, “Kid, I’m paying the bill here, and you’re going to take this course.” Now, 53 years later, that’s 53 years later, we have grandparents who come to orientation who were first-year students at the University of South Carolina. They took this course. Their children took it. They had children, and now those children are taking this course.

This became a built-in characteristic of the university that the public in the state expects their children to participate in. We have proven that this works, and that, as a university, we are committed to providing this kind of support for new students. It is a testimony to the commitment of a large research university to a population of students that many places do not make a big deal about. Historically, the notion was that first-year students are kind of like cannon fodder in the military. They come and they go, and there’s an endless supply of them, and so if we lose them, we will replace them. That’s a bankrupt model, we think.

J-CASP: What were the key elements that were initially placed in University 101 that had this immense impact on first-year students, the ones that fought against the “bankrupt model” of how to view first-year students?

Gardner: We hoped to foster the notion that a student needs focus. We also wanted to provide humanistic education to address the total needs of the students. There was also the need for faculty and staff development. The unique thing about the course was that it was also a course for faculty who taught it. There was a preparation process where instructors had to

go through basically a 4 to 5-hour training program to teach the course. Instructors for the course were also a mixture of faculty and staff. There was also an emphasis on introducing students to the resources and services that the campus provided. None of these basic elements have changed over the years, but how we deliver the experience has.

J-CASP: In your book *The First-Year Experience Movement: The Founder’s Journey* (2023), you wrote that the experience that impacted you the most during your career was losing your first higher education position due to your civil rights activism. Later, you received several awards that honored your commitment to diversity and inclusion, such as the *Administrative Affirmative Action Award*, for your outstanding work promoting equal opportunities at the university, and the *Administrative Award for Outstanding and Dedicated Service* from the USC Black Faculty and Staff Association. Did those experiences influence the curriculum or mission of University 101?

Gardner: One of the original goals of the course was achieving what we called a sense of belonging and a sense of community. Even though this is a predominantly White university, we saw the biggest gains in sense of community in our Black population. And remember, the course was not organized for a particular race, ethnicity, or gender. It was organized for all students. However, we were very mindful that the experiences we were providing would be particularly valuable for people who have not had privilege and wealth before they came to the university.

The University of South Carolina was racially integrated in 1965. We were unlike a number of the other flagship, southern, research universities that were integrated with federal troops and federal marshals or court orders. The University president at that time, Tom Jones—who was the same president who offered me the job as the third choice—made a decision to work with his board and the community of Columbia, South Carolina, to peacefully integrate voluntarily.

The president had been the first at any southeastern university flagship to request one of the TRIO programs after the Higher Education Act of 1965. We were the first because we agreed to racially integrate our housing, which was a requirement to get the federal money for TRIO.

The TRIO program we had was Upward Bound, which was a program for high school-age youngsters. Our president loved Upward Bound. He was amazed at what that program was doing for these kids. The Upward Bound families who were agreeing to have their kids come to the university to participate in this were largely Black families. The President wanted to do something like Upward Bound for the whole student body. He knew that the experiences that students were

having at Upward Bound—if more students had these kinds of experiences—then we would have more success with students who were the target demographic of TRIO programs—namely, those who had less privilege, little money, and the negative association with race.

So, this man, this president, was a native of Mississippi. He had been educated in the North. He was a graduate of MIT. He realized that for South Carolina to fully recover from the Civil War, it had to kind of re-join the Union in terms of bringing everybody together. There were a lot of us in the university who knew that we were a part of history. We were part of the continuing Civil Rights Movement.

So yes, certainly, during the 25 years I led the course, I was very aware that the work I was doing with all my students was continuing to advance the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement, originally the Civil Rights Act, was for all Americans, including Americans who had not been initially blessed with the kind of privilege that I had as a person. And so yes, I was very, very conscious that I was part of that continuing movement. Higher education has a role to advance all people in society and give them more of an opportunity for the American dream.

J-CASP: In contrast to your work advancing civil rights, there has recently been a different shift. Since 2023, 134 anti-DEI legislations have been introduced across 29 states and even at the United States Congressional level. Astonishingly, 26 of these pieces of legislation have been signed into law (Chronicle of Higher Education, n.d.). These legislative actions seek to ban Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices, DEI training, DEI statements, and DEI-related questions asked during interviews and to prohibit identity-based preferences for hiring and admissions. Do you see parallels between historical struggles for civil rights and the new wave of anti-DEI legislation for higher education?

Gardner: I do look at what you called civil rights as something that is a way of viewing American history. But also, as a way of looking at the evolution of our society, its educational systems, its economy, its legal structure, and its political order. I see that since the founding of the Republic, there has been a gradual expansion of what we would call civil rights, legal privileges, and rights of citizens. There has been a continual change in the role of the federal government in relation

to this core objective. The actions taken over 200 years to expand the rights and opportunities for citizens have not been entirely consistent. There are periods when we have expanded those rights and options, and periods when we have contracted them and restricted them. And right now, we are in the latter.

Since the trajectory has gradually and consistently expanded towards rights and opportunities—particularly for people who previously were underrepresented and under-resourced and not receiving the benefits of American citizenship to the extent that some others were—I see us as being in a period of negative reaction against those efforts. We often use the metaphor of a pendulum, and a pendulum has swung very significantly here. I think that will change. I think that is inevitable. Right now, we are doing this in a way that there are big gainers and big losers.

I want more Americans to have the privileges that I have. I don't think we should be handing out the same degree of success to everybody. Proponents of the new system are trying to argue that we will make more decisions based on merit. The question then is, "How do you get to the position in which you can demonstrate merit?" People have to have more education to be able to demonstrate more effectively that they deserve a meritorious upward movement in society. I have devoted my professional life to trying to advance opportunities for all students. That means making sure students who have been deprived of opportunities are given some compensatory action.

In my own case, I was born into privilege. I was not literally born into privilege because I was adopted. But my mother was a 15-year-old, pregnant out-of-wedlock woman. If she had kept me, I would have never had the privilege that I ended up having. That was the luck of the draw. I did not do anything to earn privilege. It was handed to me. I want to see more students go to American colleges and universities, including those who get technical vocational training, to have the opportunities that I have had.

J-CASP: You mentioned the pendulum, the swinging back and forth with all this legislation. Do you see that impacting courses like University 101? Oftentimes, there are requirements that diversity, community, and communication are involved in that curriculum. Do you think there may be any changes or obstacles for University 101 courses in the next few years until the pendulum swings back?

Gardner: I do. It is already occurring. The people who

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are elected to state legislatures have the right, according to state constitutions and the federal constitution, to determine how federal tax dollars are spent. They do not want tax dollars spent on certain topics or subjects that are offensive to them. So far, the courts are letting them do that.

This may be the most important thing I am going to say to you about this, but I see some reason for optimism here. If we truly are committed to merit, we ultimately have to give everybody the opportunity to be evaluated based on merit. Students do not have that now, because they do not have the opportunity to achieve merit.

I am hearing it argued that the focus must not be on subpopulations. The focus must be on all, theoretically, students. Suppose there are initiatives on college and university campuses to provide compensatory advising for students in certain student subpopulations. Okay, if we said, “instead of looking at subpopulations, we must guarantee all college students a certain quality of advising,” then I think that will be very healthy. We will get better academic advising. We will be making changes in academic advising that will benefit all students. I want to see that, I really do. I saw how we got major societal changes through legislation like Medicare, where we did not argue that Medicare was only for people who did not have the means. I am in favor of the argument that we should be doing things in higher education for all students.

For 25 years, I became a very well-known leader for a particular higher education intervention called University 101, which, for others, is a prototype of a college and university course that teaches students how to be successful in college. Students would be more likely to thrive and flourish and then go on to have more opportunities. Leading a course like this, even in 1972, I knew that that course had to be for all students.

Everything we do in that course is towards advancing all students. Now, when we looked at the data on who seemed to gain the most, it was students who had been historically underrepresented. It was because University 101 had given them more of a slice of privilege that previously they were not getting. So, by going to a university where we are equalizing the treatment of all students and we are giving all students this opportunity, we are also seeing proportionally bigger gains in the disadvantaged population. In that way, I’m fine about trying to guarantee to all students effective advising, tutoring, counseling, and whatever forms of student-success resources we consider.

J-CASP: Speaking of interventions and supports, there are several types of course-based student support options, such as learning-to-learn or learning frameworks courses, in addition to FYE and university seminar courses. The former tends to focus on learning theories and strategies, while FYE courses tend to focus more on be-

coming acclimated to the college environment. In Texas, there has been a merging of FYE and learning frameworks courses so that learning theory is intertwined within FYE curriculum. What are your thoughts on these types of trends right now?

Gardner: Well, I think it’s very healthy. I think these multiple approaches complement each other. I think students need to learn how people learn and understand what might be more effective ways to improve their own learning strategies. I think all students could benefit from that. I also think that all students could benefit from some of the other things we are doing in University 101 to get students help and have experiences that might enhance their self-esteem.

In the case of my university, our goal from the very beginning—and this may not sound academic—was to teach students to love the university. We wanted to give them such an experience that they would truthfully say, “We love being university students and we want to be here. There is no place we would rather be than here doing this at this time in our lives.” If they can develop that attitude, then they are going to be much more open to learning and whatever the university wants to offer them.

The dichotomy you have suggested here is a function of the fact that one of the wonderful things about American higher education is that we allow, as a country, Texas to do Texas. We are not saying that in all 50 states we have to do the same thing at exactly the same time in the same order.

J-CASP: And because of those measured outcomes, learning-to-learn courses in Texas generate formula funding and are primarily offered at the 3-credit hour level.

Gardner: I think these courses are more likely to flourish and be sustained if they look more academic. I think that it is a good preventive measure to persuade observers and managers of the resources of colleges and universities that they really ought to be offering students these kinds of experiences.

I would regard the differences as being healthy. And just because there are differences now, it does not mean that those differences will always remain. The courses, their content, and the pedagogy used by those who teach them are constantly being modified because of the direct feedback these courses get. And so, I think all this is very healthy. If these adjustments had not been made in Texas, Texas would not be able to give academic credit for these courses, and students would not be able to use federal aid to support enrollment participation.

J-CASP: In 1999, you and Betsy O. Barefoot founded the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (the Institute). The Institute is a

non-profit that partners with colleges, educators, and philanthropic groups to improve outcomes associated with teaching, learning, retention, and college completion. The Institute also has the mission of expanding access and opportunities for success to all students. Can you share some of the institute's current initiatives?

Gardner: This was an extension or a continuation, but under a different legal construct of the center that I had established at the University of South Carolina in 1986. We got a grant initially from The Pew Charitable Trusts to launch this new organization, and the charge we received from the funder was to do new work, to not duplicate what I had done at the University of South Carolina. The grant enabled us to do a number of new things that I had not yet had the opportunity to do at the University of South Carolina.

For example, I am working with a team right now for a book on what we call our newest initiative. It is called *The Graduate Student Experience*. We are looking at what needs to be done to help mature more advanced students, of whom we have about 4 million in the United States, but for whom we do not begin to provide the resources, support and attention that we do undergraduate students. We have a contract right now with the Johns Hopkins University Press to get a book out about this. That book, I am assuming, is going to have a major impact. Another example would be that a few years ago, we got a grant from the Gates Foundation to do a major initiative around improving transfer student success. We are not a research organization. We are an organization that is comprised of innovators and practitioners. But because we are continuing to learn and we want people to read about the kinds of things we know and discover, we want to write about and publish those innovations.

We also work with colleges and universities on deliberate efforts and processes to create plans to transform their student experience. We provide direct consulting services for colleges and universities. We have a number of what we call *academies*, which are short-term learning experiences. Academies include six or eight sessions offered virtually around particular topics that would help colleges and universities improve.

We have also been looking at what the greatest areas of failure are for students. The highest failure rates are in what we call gateway courses in math, English, biology, chemistry, American history, and sociology. Since 2012, we have been offering a major initiative which we call Gateways to Completion. It is a process to help colleges and universities redesign their

highest failure rates. We think they are failing because institutions have not done an effective job designing the courses and looking at the pedagogy that students are being confronted with. So, we are making a major effort to try to make these gateway courses have a design that is more likely to produce successful students.

Another thing we are doing is what we call transformation. I have a colleague whom I work with, Drew Koch, who is arguing that to better help students, institutions have got to transform themselves more significantly. And he is recognizing that this is not a short-term process. And so, when we get a college collaborating with us in our transformation project, it is a 5-year commitment. So, we have longer-term commitments to some of our initiatives.

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J-CASP: In 2022, you launched a podcast called "The Office Hours with John Garner" as an extension of your work in higher education, in which you discuss topics related to student retention, institutional transformation, and the challenges faced by the underrepresented groups. You also often invite guest speakers, including higher education leaders, educators, and experts. What led you to start a podcast?

Gardner: I have been podcasting now for about 3 years, and I have interviewed approximately 170 people. The focus of these interviews is on innovation in higher education and innovation in the lives and practices of these so-called *innovators*. I wanted to see what I could discover about the characteristics of effective innovators, and to have a medium to disseminate those findings.

Although I have gotten credit for my innovations, most of my work is not innovation at all in the sense of me creating new things. It is about me learning from others and things that I could adapt and use. So, I decided on the podcast.

I had been a blogger before I became a podcaster. I had a blog for 9 years, and I wrote 375 essays. And they were longer than many blogs. I cannot explain precisely when I got to a point where, after 9 years and 375 essays, I felt like I had said it all. I was hopeful that I could think of some way to bring my own passion and whatever individuality and uniqueness I have to this task in a new way.

I knew about podcasts. I knew about the power of an interview because I was an interviewer for my tour of active duty in the United States Air Force. I interviewed 8–10 patients a day. I decided to create a podcast around the discovery of people who had personal

journeys as innovators. “Who are these people? How did they get to be an innovator? What is it that they do? And what are their practices as innovators? Are they replicable? Could we get others to learn them? And, you know, emulate those?” When you are an interviewer, you have a kind of professional license to pursue certain questions and to draw from people their stories.

J-CASP: Despite the numerous challenges in bringing the FYE concept to nationwide prominence and consolidation, such as in 1994, when you anticipated a political shift in South Carolina that prompted you to relocate the FYE Annual Conference from Columbia, you successfully pioneered a movement that has transformed the way institutions support first-year students. Given your history of pushing boundaries and foreseeing unexpected events to enhance student success. What do you see as the next significant challenge facing higher education?

Gardner: I think the biggest challenge right now to higher education is how it is going to adapt to the changing role of the federal government in the way the federal government is setting its priorities for higher education, and what it is or is not willing to fund for higher education. Now this is a dynamic matter. The government has always had goals for its investments in higher education. But those goals are changing.

There are many other challenges to the students in terms of getting the kinds of education that will going to make them employable. That is a concern that many of them have. I think it is a legitimate concern. Related to that is, how do we adapt our practices, our teaching methods, the way we talk to students, the language we use, the extent of support we give them? All of those have been under great examination frankly since 1965, when the Higher Education Act made it possible for millions of Americans to go to college, for whom college was never designed.

I am going to continue to think of ways to support educators and provide people with insights and information to enable all of us to serve all students; that has always been my goal. I see this as being a part of the unfinished civil rights movement, and I see myself as being a part of that unfinished civil rights movement. I want to see more Americans get more opportunities and privilege.

There’s a particular area of higher education that I’m increasingly focused on, and that is graduate education. Why has this student success movement that we have been developing over 6 decades since 1965 not included a focus on graduate students? I think that is discriminatory. There are four million graduate students, and we are not giving them the concern, care, support, and attention they need. Now, that is not to say that I am giving up on my focus on the first year. If I had to pick the one thing that we absolutely cannot step back from, it is the beginning college experience. That is

where we are losing the most students.

So, for whatever life and brain power and energy I continue to have, that is going to be my overriding focus. But I am complementing it with this goal of extending this focus on student success to graduate students, graduate faculty, and graduate staff.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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