Background
When I took over the Freshman Intensive Studies program as director in 2006, I began to look at all of the unique elements of the program that had defined FIS for more than 20 years. Some of these features included the use of a 4th hour of in-class time for FIS classes in English, math and social sciences; the support given by a full-time Learning Specialist, whose purpose is to assist students in developing academic strategies needed for college; a midterm grading and probation system that allows students to monitor their progress early in the semester—and the list goes on.

I knew from my years of experience with the FIS program that it was a model program of academic support for an at-risk population. However, as the program grew in numbers with more under-prepared students coming in, I felt that the program needed some adjustments. Before I could begin to make necessary changes, I needed to develop methods of assessment that would help me determine which aspects of FIS were working and which needed modification.

The timing of my inquiry merged perfectly with the University’s overall goal of outcomes assessment. In 2006-2007, I was a member of the University’s Outcomes Assessment Committee. It further reinforced the idea that program assessment MUST occur to determine if what we THINK is working actually has merit!

Method
In the first year of program assessment, I felt it was important to get students’ opinions of the FIS program. In fall 2006, Becton College convened the Academic Excellence Committee. The committee, led by faculty in Becton College, was seeking to create focus groups of students to find out what they think of their academic experience at FDU. I asked them to use FIS students as a pilot for this inquiry. Subsequently, members of the committee polled our students in two sections of FIS-Psychology, without the presence of the instructor or the program administrators, to ensure that the answers would be honest.

Findings
Students expressed concern that the required extra hour for their FIS classes was being used to teach more material, not help clarify lecture. They also felt that the additional support should only be given for areas of weakness, not where they exhibit strength. Also, they were concerned that midterm probation was determined based on FIS courses only, not all courses. The results of the survey raised the following questions: how were the instructors using the 4th hour? Should all students be given the same type of support or should the assistance be more targeted based on need? Is the midterm probation program giving us the desired results?
Use of Findings
1. The Learning Specialist in our program created a document clearly outlining for instructors the philosophy behind the intent of the 4th hour, which follows a model of supplemental instruction. The results have been tremendous. Complaints from students have been virtually eliminated, as the classroom time is spent assisting students with their understanding of lecture, not giving them additional lecture.

In addition, we piloted a targeted “mainstreaming” of students into non-FIS classes. We chose ENGW 1101 College Writing and MATH 1104 Intermediate Algebra. In both cases, assistance was provided outside of the classroom by FIS or the instructor, respectively. Again, the results were astounding. In both cases, the average grade achieved was a “B.” In 2008-2009, we will expand the mainstreaming to include an American Government class.

2. The midterm probation program has been revamped. Whereas we used to have our own academic standards and GPA requirements for probation, we now are fully aligned with the university’s standards so that our students do not feel that they are treated differently. We also now use a comprehensive learning assessment inventory developed by the Learning Specialist that helps students pinpoint their areas of weakness. We do a structured goal-setting activity with them, and follow-up appointments that are meant to see if the plans students make are enacted. At the end of the semester, 13 of the 16 students targeted for midterm probation had increased their GPAs to above a 2.0. In 2008, we will drop the term “probation” and adopt the word “alert,” which is far less punitive in nature. We will also “widen the net” to include students who might be in compliance at midterms, but whom we suspect might falter.

3. Finally, the Academic Advising system has been modified to put the locus of control into the hands of students. In the past, students’ schedules were mostly pre-determined by FIS staff. In the new model, students attend a general advising workshop in the fall, are taught to understand their curricular requirements and the web tools available for course selection, and are given more latitude in their choices.

Conclusion
In summation, assessing the FIS program has resulted in a number of profound and meaningful changes to the delivery of our services. The shape and scope of the program are evolving. We are becoming more rigorous, giving students more responsibility for their actions, and providing support that is pointed and specific to each student’s needs. In the coming year, we will look at the impact our learning assistance program is having on students. It is obvious that continued assessment and reflection must occur for this, and any academic support program, to flourish and grow.