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NSSE and The Pace University Sophomore-Experience Survey

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Pace University has long provided special programs for first-year students. These efforts seemed successful as evidenced by a stabilized first-year retention rate of 76 to 77% for first-year student cohorts beginning with the 2000 fall cohort. However, there were no special initiatives or programs that addressed the needs of students in their sophomore year. This student population's retention rate after two years dropped by more than 9%. In the spring of 2004, a group of more than 50 faculty, academic administrators, advisors, student affairs professionals, and students initiated a collaborative, grass-roots effort to improve student success and retention by focusing on the sophomore year. Through coordinated curricular and co-curricular efforts, this group sought to extend first-year momentum into the sophomore year and beyond. The Sophomore-Experience Working Group wanted to develop a special "experience" for sophomores.

To help identify needs of the sophomore population, a sub-committee was formed within the Sophomore Experience Working Group to look at the responses of second-semester first-year students to the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In reviewing NSSE results, the group wished to learn more about the students' relationships with faculty, other students, administrators, and staff. It was reasoned that the responses of these first-year students might provide some insight into what ought to be incorporated in a sophomore experience.

The sub-committee also read the monograph, *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students* (Schreiner & Pattengale, 2000), which addressed issues and needs of college sophomores. In particular, the monograph addressed factors influencing the sophomore slump. These factors dovetailed nicely

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PACE UNIVERSITY DEMOGRAPHICS

Pace University is a private, multi-campus urban/suburban university of 14,177 students located in New York City and Westchester County, New York. The undergraduate full-time equivalent is 7,585, and the total number of undergraduate students is 8,928. Pace's undergraduate population is 35% residential and 65% commuter. Undergraduate enrollment is 60% female and 40% male. Of the undergraduate students, 21.7% are over age 25. The demographic makeup of the undergraduate population, calculated using the total of all undergraduate students who reported ethnicity, is White (non-Hispanic) 44%, Asian 10%, Black 10%, Hispanic 11%, American Indian/Alaskan Native 0.2%, other 4%, and international 5%.

Students at Pace University. Courtesy, Pace University

Students at Pace University. Courtesy, Pace University

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with the NSSE questions and results. For example, the NSSE results raised some concerns about academic advising, including the need for integration between advising and career planning; the level of academic and social integration; and intellectual engagement—all issues that Schreiner and Pattengale explored in relation to the sophomore slump.

In order to learn more about both the NSSE responses and the degree to which Pace sophomores might be experiencing a sophomore slump, the sub-committee created a Sophomore Survey. It included Likert-type and open-ended questions that asked about students' expectations and aspirations and how the University might better meet students' personal and academic goals. Students who took the NSSE survey in 2003-2004 as first-year students were contacted the following year and invited to take our in-house Sophomore Survey in 2004-2005.

The survey was sent to two different sets of sophomores in the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters. In all, the survey was e-mailed to 2,008 students; 367 responded for an 18% response rate. There were 219 responses from the New York campus and 148 responses from the Westchester campus.

Despite the low response rate, important information was gleaned from the survey:

- Relationships with faculty and other students played a critical role in how students assessed their experiences, academic achievements, and decision to stay at Pace.
- Specific bureaucratic procedures for registration, financial aid, and fee payment were a source of frustration for many students.
- Students valued opportunities provided by the diverse student body, co-op internships, and study abroad.

In addition, Sophomore Focus Groups were conducted on each campus to further investigate NSSE responses. Focus group questions addressed quality of life issues, academic challenge, the quality of teaching, relationships with faculty, and interactions with administrative personnel and offices. The findings were consistent with previous focus groups conducted among a broader range of the Pace student population:

- Students were generally pleased with the quality of their professors and believed their professors cared about their success.
- Students cited diversity as one of the key reasons they chose to attend Pace.
- Students' social networks strongly influenced their decision to remain at Pace.
- Students were interested in programs that enhanced their career development.
- Students wanted to feel more pride in their school and would like Pace to take better advantage of its New York and Westchester locations.

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Students at Pace University. Courtesy, Pace University

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- Students desired a better perceived balance between freedom and safety.
- Because of the high percentage of commuter students, students wanted a space for "accidental social interaction."
- Students were unhappy with interactions with administrative offices and staff, particularly those offices involved with registration and billing.

The initial Sophomore Survey at Pace University had some limitations in its design. The instruction and rating scale for questions were not always clear; and in several cases, the wording of individual questions could be improved. The Sophomore-Experience Working Group plans to revise the sophomore survey by refining and adding questions to allow a better assessment of the sophomore experience. This new survey will be pilot tested with a sample population before fielding. The survey will also be conducted on a cyclical basis so that the working group can gauge how the sophomore experience might be changing. Focus groups may be used to supplement the Sophomore Survey in the years that it is not administered.

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Reconceptualizing At Risk: A Discussion of Findings

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When considering the at-risk college student, many images come to mind. For some, at risk conjures the unfocused student, one who may be clueless about why he or she is in college. For others, it is the student who may have been academically marginal in high school. Not surprisingly, we seldom, if ever, think of the goal-oriented, academically talented student (i.e., those with highly competitive high school grade point averages) as being at risk.

Increasingly, however, universities are contending with a new reality: Students who are high-achievers in high school may not necessarily succeed academically in college. What is more, these students are often overlooked when it comes to academic support efforts simply because they are expected to do well. Interest in this new group of at-risk students evolved from observations at an Academic Success Center in an urban, research, and largely commuter university. The Center serves as a resource to help bridge the gap between high school and college and aims to increase undergraduate academic success through a variety of interventions.

The focus of this study is a select group of very promising students who were admitted to the university as part of a merit-based scholarship

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program. The typical student in this program is African American, goal-oriented, and high-achieving in terms of their admission grade point average. Upon admission to the university, students receive a full-tuition scholarship, renewable on the condition that they maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.5.

The academic histories of students who had received a merit-based scholarship revealed a disturbing trend. Across multiple cohort years, 35% were clearly successful, 28% struggled, and 37% dropped out. Struggling was defined as a grade point average below 2.5 and/or one or more withdrawals from one or more academic class(es). As these figures suggest, over half of those identified in their first year as high-achieving and academically talented were not meeting their potential.

These findings prompted several questions: (a) Why are these high-achieving students not performing to their potential? (b) What factors might account for this achievement gap? and (c) What interventions should be considered to reverse this trend?

In an effort to answer these questions, interviews were conducted with those scholars who were academically successful (the 35% defined earlier). There were two factors driving our decision to include the academically successful students over the 28% who were struggling. We first considered the literature on resiliency. This literature suggested we look to those excelling academically as models for new cohorts. Secondly, we were interested in identifying a pool of peer mentors. Here, too, the literature was helpful. Students faring well (i.e., exhibiting behaviors conducive to college success) are the best candidates.

Each participant was asked to respond to the following: Reflecting back on your first-year experience, discuss areas for which you felt least prepared/most prepared? An analysis of their responses revealed five themes:

1. *Autonomy*. Students needed practice making decisions on their own.
2. *Navigation*. Students needed specific advice about offices that serve students.
3. *Quantity of work*. Students needed to be warned to not over-commit themselves in terms of work and other obligations until they adjusted.
4. *Rigor of coursework*. Students needed to learn about workshops, free tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction courses available for difficult classes and to be prepared to seek help when needed.
5. *Time/Task management*. Courses met less frequently than in high school, and there was more unstructured time. Students needed exposure to time-management and goal-setting strategies to help them stay on course.

Further analysis of the responses of these academically successful students indicated that they were able to adapt to these academic challenges by (a) setting goals at the beginning of the semester and effectively managing their time; (b) joining a student organization and becoming involved in campus life; (c) seeking help from the Academic Success Center and other support services; (d) frequently meeting with professors and forming study groups; and (e) staying motivated by rewarding themselves with short vacations, such as going somewhere fun for spring break.

These findings have several implications for higher education professionals. To begin with, indicators of success in high school are not insurance against attrition in college. As such, we can no longer equate academic success in high school with academic success in college. Additionally, we must be mindful when designing interventions for this group. Approaches that work for students admitted with academically marginal records may not necessarily work with these more academically talented students. Finally, effective interventions are ones that address issues high-achievers have deemed salient, such as autonomy, navigating the college environment, quantity/quality of coursework, and time/task management.

An intervention was planned for the fall semester in order to address the issues earlier cohorts suggested were the hardest part of adapting to their new role at our university. It consisted of a welcome program for new and continuing cohorts and featured panel discussions on the following topics: (a) getting involved in student life; (b) academic

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programs (e.g., honors), internships, and research opportunities; (c) essential study skills for college success; and (d) mentoring. The intervention was designed to help students learn about available university services, encourage them to take advantage of academic services and leadership opportunities, and warn them about the difficulties they might face. In addition, students were given a calendar and encouraged to use it. As a capstone to the program, scholars from earlier cohorts offered advice and fielded questions regarding the first-year experience. The intervention also involved a post-midterm conversation with first-year students. Learning specialists contacted students to discuss any concerns, thoughts, or questions they had regarding their first-semester experience.

Though all activities were well-received, students found meeting with older cohorts, the student leadership and research opportunities panel, and having a mentoring session to be most useful. As a result, these components will continue to be a part of any intervention program for this group. Data suggest that students respond better to study skills training during class because concepts and strategies seem more relevant to them. Thus, the study skills session, though considered helpful as an orientation program, would become part of a fall semester program.

Our evaluation of the program also suggested a few areas for improvement. For example, sessions could have been more interactive and hands on. In addition, having an academic advisor present to review fall course schedules and a financial aid officer to answer questions pertaining to student grants would have been helpful.

In an effort to address these and other concerns, a program coordinator has been employed to offer continuing support over the course of the academic year. This person is responsible for developing the peer-mentoring initiative and meeting individually with students. Additionally, future interventions will include programs where students are presented with opportunities to practice autonomy, navigation, and time/task management, such as scheduling an appointment with a university advisor or devising a personalized time-management system and setting short-term and long-term goals. Regarding quantity/quality of coursework, programs will include role-playing with scenarios typical of the first college year, such as "what to do when a course proves overwhelming." Role-playing will not only give students a hint of what they can expect in their first year, but it will also provide them with effective strategies for dealing with situations they are likely to encounter as first-year students. Interventions are also likely to be effective if they occur early, such as during the senior year of high school or immediately following graduation. This would provide incoming cohorts with sufficient time to make the mental and emotional adjustments necessary to be successful.

Data are still being analyzed, but the preliminary findings are quite encouraging. A full report will be available in December 2006.

Academically gifted students enjoying a discussion group. Courtesy, Wayne State University

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Pooling Our Resources: Developing Student Research Strategies in a Learning Community

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For the past two years, Grand View College has offered a learning community in U.S. history and first-year composition. A research component is a standard objective for each course. As instructors of these courses, we have both been disappointed with the outcomes of the research projects in our individual courses. Students did not participate much, and the final papers were superficial and of spotty quality. When we first linked our courses, we shared only three writing assignments, including the research paper. However, simply sharing a research project between composition and history did not allow students to see the links between the goals and methods of each discipline as explicitly as we wanted.

Our goals were for students to connect rhetorical skills and historic content, find evidence, practice critical analysis, and realize that scholarly process is something that transcends individual disciplinary values—and is, therefore, useful to them even if they are not an English or history major. The design of the research component had to take into account that the student body at Grand View College is drawn primarily from working and lower-middle class families, with first-generation college students as the overwhelming majority. Thus, we have found ourselves having to focus as much on the basic "nuts and bolts" of the research process (e.g., "This is what an online card catalogue does…") as on the actual process of composing the research essay.

Over the semesters, we have expanded the research component. Its current incarnation is something we call the "Research Trail," which requires a semester-long commitment by students to both the process and product of original scholarly research. As opposed to previous terms, where the research project was relegated to the final four weeks, last fall, we started with an intentional focus on research (process and product) by the second week of classes. We distributed a research packet (also posted on the course web page) that contained every step of our Research Trail: brainstorming, informal proposal, initial library visit, source evaluation (particularly online sources), annotated bibliography, works-cited page, and an overall discussion of the drafting process. We also made sure that the research essay was a required element of the students' final writing portfolio, which we used in lieu of a traditional in-class final examination. The students' research paper asked them to place themselves into

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a period of history we were covering in the history course and write a first-person narrative from the perspective of someone who was not a prominent historical figure (e.g., an ordinary soldier, *not* George Washington; a slave woman, *not* Harriet Tubman). The finished product, then, could look like a diary, a newspaper column, a collection of letters—all of which needed to contain the required elements of documentation, sound research, and good composition skills.

A key strength of the Research Trail is that it allows students to focus intently on its various assignments as applied research. The emphasis is not only on the specific rhetorical exercise of producing a term paper, but also on developing the skills to make an original contribution to the scholarship of a discipline. For example, students were asked to produce a proposal for their project, a standard, rhetorical exercise for the process of research writing. Because their work was connected to the history component of the learning community and they had to present a historical perspective, students were compelled to think about purpose and audience, often articulated by this sort of prospectus and one of the many skills needed by writers in a variety of careers.

Also, students were taught standard MLA citation format—always a chore when the assignment seems to lack wider connections to their other academic activities. Through the Research Trail, though, students were able to recognize MLA documentation as a necessary ingredient in the presentation of their historical argument and as one example of a spectrum of methods across the disciplines for crediting source material. In this manner, our first-year students saw MLA formatting—indeed, all principles of formal research—as more immediately relevant to their experiences, which does not always happen when research projects are confined to one class only.

Finally, the part of the Research Trail that drove home the connection between rhetorical skills and historical content—as well as addressing the larger goals of critical analysis of and engagement with evidence—was the Internet Source Evaluation. We began by asking students to look at two selected web sites (one scholarly, one dubious) on the Civil War and evaluate them from the perspective of a history professor deciding which one to use in class. This exercise prompted students to look beyond appearance, form, structure, and "neat" HTML tricks to actually evaluate the site's content, bias, and overall scholarly quality. Students then moved on to web sites directly pertaining to their research projects armed with a greater awareness of the need to engage critically with online material. As a result of their work all along the Research Trail, our students were able to produce research papers that were more thoughtful and scholarly, and that possessed an analytical depth that had been missing in previous terms with this assignment.

Our students reported that they appreciated the learning community because it not only drove home the connections between English and history as disciplines, but also presented the world of scholarly research in a meaningful and accessible manner. This experience in turn heightened their sense of academic self-confidence, as they could point to a significant piece of scholarship that they had created, developed, and polished over an entire semester. With the Research Trail as the framework for our entire learning community, we have discovered not only that student scholarship has markedly improved, but also that students are able to make connections between the quality of their research endeavors

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How Do Peer Programs Benefit Student Leaders?

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Despite extensive evidence supporting the positive effect of peer leaders on the students with whom they work, we know almost nothing about the impact of the experience on the peer leaders themselves aside from anecdotal reports. A study was designed to explore the peer-leader experience to help fill this knowledge gap. In particular, the study examined how peers described their experience and the usefulness of social interdependence theory in predicting the kind of experience peer leaders have.

The study used a qualitative, multi-site case study design to examine the experiences of peer leaders in first-year seminars at three universities in different geographic locations of the United States. Data were collected from questionnaire responses from 83 peer leaders and from interviews with 16 peer leaders and 5 program directors at these institutions. The data were analyzed to arrive at the themes and categories that characterized the peer-leader experience at each site and were used to develop case reports. The individual case analyses were then compared to identify the themes common to the experiences of peer leaders across sites.

Social interdependence theory served as the conceptual framework for the study, influencing the framing of the questionnaire and as a means for analyzing the data. Based on the work of Koffka (1935), Lewin (1948, 1951), and Deutsch (1949), social interdependence theory states that groups are dynamic units where interdependence exists among members sharing common goals. Moreover, the way interdependence among goals is structured determines how group members interact with each other and thus, to a greater extent, predicts the outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Two types of interdependence are posited: (a) positive interdependence or cooperation, which promotes interactions where individuals support each other's efforts to succeed and (b) negative interdependence or competition, which leads to oppositional interaction where individuals focus on increasing their own success while hindering the efforts of others in the group to achieve success. Both types of interdependence describe the role of peer leaders in first-year seminars, as co-teachers and interpreters for students. Conceptually, then, one should be able to describe the impact of the experience on peer leaders by the way they characterize the type of interaction that occurred within their group.

Five themes emerged from the data analysis that were consistent across all three institutions. Peers described (a) positive interactions with students and staff; (b) a belief that they helped their students in their capacity as a peer leader; (c) a desire

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Peer leading other students as part of a team-building activity. Courtesy, Lee University

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to be liked by their students, which generally was realized; (d) confronting and overcoming obstacles in terms of time management, conflict resolution, and setting boundaries; and (e) a positive impact on their own development in terms of gaining personal, social, and career skills. These themes were then analyzed, using the social interdependence theory.

Cooperative interdependence promotes three broad and interrelated areas: (a) effort to achieve, (b) positive relationships, and (c) psychological adjustment and social competence (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Interactions between peer leaders and students were characterized by mutual care and assistance, healthy communication, ability to manage conflict, trust, and respect, suggesting that peers were engaged in positive or cooperative interactions with first-year students in their seminars. These interactions shaped peer leaders' experiences in terms of the three outcomes identified by Johnson and Johnson.

Peer leaders and faculty members serve as orientation hosts on Welcome Day. Courtesy, Lee University

Effort to achieve. Johnson and Johnson (1989) contended, "No matter how intellectually capable or skilled individuals are, if they do not exert considerable effort and seek to achieve challenging goals, their productivity will be low" (p. 6). Peer leaders at all three institutions reported expending both physical and psychological energy to successfully fulfill their roles. They willingly confronted and overcame these hurdles by successfully managing their time and finding a balance between being a student and a leader. Moreover, they worked hard at creating caring, healthy relationships with their students. This was evident in how they conducted themselves during their tenure as a peer leader and in the numerous relationships that continued after their roles as a peer leader ended.

Peer leaders working on a Habitat for Humanity project. Courtesy, Lee University

Positive relationships. According to the social interdependence theory, committed efforts to achieve tend to engender positive relationships and cohesiveness among the group as the members work together (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Moreover, cohesiveness in a group is determined by how well members like each other and how well conflict is managed (Johnson & Johnson). The peer leaders worked hard to achieve positive relationships with their students and with the instructors. Not only was it important that their students liked them, but the peer leaders also cared deeply about their students, were committed to them, and wanted to make a difference in their lives.

Psychological adjustment and social competence. Another outcome of positive social interdependence is "the ability (cognitive capacities, motivational orientations, and social skills) to develop, maintain, and appropriately modify interdependent relationships with others to succeed in achieving goals" (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, p. 139). Psychological adjustment and social competence

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and the larger skill sets they will need throughout their college careers.

With all these benefits in mind, we plan to revise the Research Trail slightly in the upcoming fall semester. One issue that the Trail did not address was the selection of the same topic by a majority of our students. This is not necessarily a problem unless one wants to read multiple narratives on the same subject at the end of the term. However, the course objectives for the history component of the learning community are better served by students pursuing a wider range of topics. To this end, we have decided to add topic selection as a step on the Research Trail, so that we can encourage students to move beyond the first thing to pop into their heads. Having the topics determined further in advance will also allow us to tailor the Internet Source Evaluation assignment to web sites that bear directly on each student's topic, as opposed to just general sites on history. We will also add some questions to our course evaluation to elicit students' opinions specifically about the Research Trail component. We believe that the core strengths, the pedagogical appeal, and student assessment of the Research Trail will be enhanced by these changes.

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Related Articles in *E-Source*

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tend to increase positive relationships, perspective-taking ability, sense of direction and purpose, and sense of identity (Johnson & Johnson). Self-actualization and the acquisition of an array of personal and professional skills were noted outcomes of the peer leadership experience. Of all respondents, 90% said they were changed by the experience. For example, they report improvement in their social and speaking skills and a clearer sense of direction and purpose in terms of life goals. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the experience promoted greater psychological adjustment and social competence as predicted by the theory.

These results may not be typical for all peer leaders at all institutions. The institutions in this study were nationally recognized and well-established. It may be that the highly positive nature of the peer-leader experience owes more to the institutions than to the experience itself. Despite the limited scope of this study, these findings offer some insights into the peer-leader experience that have previously been undocumented. Serving as a peer leader appears to be an overwhelmingly positive experience for those who choose to do so. Peer leaders gain personal, social, and career-building benefits from serving in this role. Finally, social interdependence theory would appear to be a useful model for predicting the kind of experiences that peer leaders have with their students.

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Increasing Retention Rates Through Academic Early Intervention Programs

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Many institutions establish interventions and support systems to improve academic performance and retention during the first college year. However, some choose to intervene at the first sign of trouble, or even before students report to class, instead of waiting until after midterms to target those students who are struggling academically. Through early intervention programs, colleges improve academic performance during the first year, increase retention to the sophomore year and, ultimately, raise the graduation rate. A recent flurry of postings on The First-Year Experience listserv highlights the interest in these programs.

The Academic Support Services' Department at Florida Southern College begins its early intervention process at the start of the semester. They identify academically at-risk students (those entering with SATs of 980 or less, ACTs of 20 or less, or a predicted GPA of 2.3 or less) and call these students the first week of the semester. If students are found struggling academically, Academic Support Services present an array of available resources, including tutoring options and study-skills workshops. The primary goal is establishing a relationship with the at-risk students so those students will know where to turn if they encounter academic difficulty. Essentially, Marcie Pospichal, director of Academic Support Services, wants students to feel comfortable using the academic resources that her office provides and for students to realize that Support Services is not a scary place.

At McPherson College in Kansas, an early academic alert system and online attendance database assist faculty and staff in tracking first-year students. The Center for Academic Development coordinates the attendance project and collects any academic alerts, which professors fill out when a student is not succeeding in class. The Center passes this information to faculty advisors who then contact the students, help them identify problems, and offer constructive suggestions. Faculty are strongly encouraged to use the attendance database, and approximately 80% did so in their 100- and 200-level courses during the fall of 2005.

McPherson students earning a D or F after five weeks also receive a grade report as do their faculty advisors. With this data in hand before midterms, the Center has an idea which students are at risk and can assist them for the final two thirds of the semester. The retention committee at McPherson also uses the information collected through the alert system and attendance database in collaboration with other data such as students' GPAs and whether they have been placed on academic probation to gain greater insight into what types of students persist. Kevin Hadduck, the Center's director and member of the retention committee, indicated that the data not only helps with retention but also with recruitment. He said, "We're able to recruit students more likely to stay." Such efforts seem to be paying off for McPherson as Hadduck indicated that overall retention rates have increased by approximately 35% over the past four years.

At Gannon University in Pennsylvania, faculty and resident directors initiate the early intervention process. When a resident director notices a student who does not attend class or who expresses concern about choosing a major, he or she fills out a form detailing these actions and forwards it to the counseling center. Staff members at the counseling center contact the students and invite them to discuss any problems they may be having and, when necessary, refer them to other offices such as the tutoring center or academic advising center. When faculty members notice that a student is struggling in class, they file a report through Gannon's Early Alert Referral System, which is also directed to the counseling center. Even though the Gannon counseling center does not conduct in-depth tracking to determine how students respond to the intervention, the center continues to receive a substantial number of referrals each

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semester both from resident directors and faculty members, which suggests that the campus community regards the process as beneficial.

Mississippi State University stresses class attendance as the major tenet of Pathfinders, its early intervention program. Believing that the first six weeks of the fall semester are a critical period for reaching first-year students, Pathfinders focuses on the beginning of the semester. During that time, the president of the University sends a letter to all first-year students' parents reiterating the importance of class attendance. Faculty also play an important role in the process. They maintain strict attendance records and notify the Pathfinders' staff through e-mail or their web site when a student misses two or more classes within the first six weeks.

The Pathfinders program looks to academic assistants within the residence halls as a way to reach out to students struggling with class attendance. These assistants encourage students to attend class by remaining positive during the brief intervention and not badgering students if they fail to take their advice. Ty Abernathy, a research associate at the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University, who works with the Pathfinders program, stressed that, in the end, the student must decide if he or she wants to go to class. Speaking of first-year students with attendance problems, he said, "We're going to start off holding their hands, but we're not going to lead them around campus." Ultimately, Mississippi State tries to maintain high attendance and wants students to feel that even though their university is large, individual attention still exists. Assessment results for 2005 first-year class will be available in September 2006.

Both Kevin Hadduck of McPherson and David McMillen (director of Pathfinders) of Mississippi State stressed that their programs worked at their institutions and fit their campus cultures. They noted that other campuses would need to modify these programs according to their individual traditions. Regardless, the general message is clear: Pro-active and early intervention is possible and will likely have a positive effect on retaining students.

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Turning Assessment Results Into Improvements in First-Year Programs and Services

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In order to refine first-year practices, systematic and ongoing assessment is necessary. A regular cycle of assessment should lead to the development of an improvement plan based on the findings, and follow-up assessment should show if the changes worked. This article highlights four steps for conducting a successful assessment and using results more effectively.

1. Use a quality assessment instrument. A quality instrument is reliable and valid. In other words, it should provide an accurate understanding of the phenomenon under study. It should also provide a full report of performance in a wide variety of areas and offer clear direction on areas where improvement will increase the overall effectiveness of the course. The instrument should provide responses to help determine program strengths and weaknesses. Some questions an

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assessment might help a program administrator answer include:

- How do students view performance in a wide variety of instruction and curriculum areas? Factor-based assessment (i.e., questions that focus on a larger concept) and individual mean scores can tell the story.
- Do all students perceive the service or experience in the same way? The survey instrument must collect a solid set of demographic data. Reviewing differences by gender, ethnicity, and age allows professionals to see where special efforts may be needed. Statistical tests can determine the degree to which student responses vary.
- In which areas should time and money be invested for improvement? The assessment must show which aspects of the course or program have the largest impact on the overall effectiveness. Based on this information, time and money can be channeled away from low-impact into high-impact areas.
- In assessing courses, how are individual instructors performing? Understanding individual section performance determines appropriate interventions and allows instructors to focus energies where they can be most productive. A solid assessment can determine top performers who can be enlisted to help others improve their teaching skills.
- Is there any evidence of improvement? Assessment is a continuous process. Each follow-up assessment provides a report of progress. With this information, action plans can be altered as needed and accomplishments can be proven.

2. *Benchmark results*. Benchmarking is a process that provides perspective on the meaning of assessment scores by providing comparisons among programs, services, experiences, or courses. There are three major benchmarks to consider: (a) benchmarks comparing similar programs, (b) benchmarks comparing aspirant programs, and (c) longitudinal benchmarks. When comparing similar programs, scores on individual items can identify causes for celebration or areas where improvement is needed. Benchmarks can be used to look at performance compared to peer programs, but institutions can also identify programs whose success they hope to emulate. In this case, aspirant benchmarks allow programs to gauge how closely their performance matches that of their model. Longitudinal benchmarks measure current performance against past performance.

3. *Understand the analysis of results*. High-quality assessment provides meaningful analysis that permits quick understanding of major findings. In the first few minutes of review, it should be obvious where change is needed for improvement. More in-depth review of individual factors, questions, and demographic data will enhance the planning process. What might a more detailed analysis reveal?

- Findings that confirm current beliefs
- Findings that challenge current beliefs
- Issues that are important to student success (e.g., interpersonal interactions, learning, academics, demographic differences)
- Areas where change will improve the effectiveness of the seminar, program, or service
- A focus for celebration (e.g., progress made, improvements worked)

Sharing assessment results with an experienced researcher will lead to deeper understanding. Identifying areas that have the greatest impact on the overall effectiveness of the program or service can be used to guide future plans.

4. *Leverage results for positive change*. Conducting an assessment and simply reviewing the results do little to improve first-year programs. The results must drive change by formulating an improvement plan. The following are some suggestions for using assessment findings for continuous improvement:

- Share the information with faculty, staff, administrators, and students. Offer the findings and ask others to comment on why they believe students responded as they did and how improvement could be made.
- Focus on areas that have the greatest impact on the overall

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effectiveness of the program. Help others understand the need to put effort into those areas. Gain their commitment to support change and enlist their help in developing ideas.

- Use assessment findings to establish specific improvement goals for the coming year. Seek approval of the goals by using the evidence from assessment.
- Combine results with the collected input and advice to develop and implement an improvement plan.
- Work closely with others to put the plan into action. Establish a timeline for progress and check it often.
- Acknowledge the good work of those who contributed to program success.
- Conduct the assessment again to confirm progress and collect additional information for future improvement.

A good assessment should also offer guidance in the allocation of resources. The degree to which each factor impacts the overall effectiveness of the program or service is categorized into one of four action areas: (a) top priority (i.e., factors that have high impact on overall effectiveness and low performance), (b) maintain or improve (i.e., factors that have high impact on overall effectiveness and high performance), (c) monitor (i.e., factors that have little or no impact on overall effectiveness and low performance), and (d) maintain (i.e., factors that have low or no impact on overall effectiveness and high performance).

When making decisions about resource allocation, seminar administrators will want to focus on those factors that have a high impact on overall effectiveness but are not performing at the desired level. At the same time, they will want to allocate resources in such a way that high performance can be maintained in areas of both high and low impact. In some cases, such performance can be maintained without increasing—or even while decreasing—available resources. Low performance in areas of low impact may not be immediate cause for concern. While resources may not need to be allocated in these areas, they should be monitored to ensure that performance does not decline further. In short, seminar administrators should consider moving resources from areas of low impact to areas of high impact, especially if those high-impact areas are low performing.

High-quality assessment dispels myths, provides evidence, and points the way to positive change, yet it is not always easy. Other people and departments are involved, and resources may have to be shifted. In addition, campus politics and the personalities of those involved will remain factors. However, if improvement is desired, professionals need to act on solid, documented evidence.

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