



CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RETENTION EXCELLENCE

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Director

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Betsy Barefoot, Vice President of the John N. Gardner Institute on Excellence in Undergraduate Education, brought the state-of-the-art in First-Year Experience to more than 80 representatives of higher education and other, interested parties, at Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport.

Highlights

- A good first-year experience (FYE), including a good course, is foundational for developing positive attitudes toward the school, faculty, peers and the learning process – **and** for the development of long-term relationships that last through and beyond college, **and** for decisions to stay, leave or transfer.
- Importance students feeling included and valued as members of a large learning community.
- Importance of “in” and “out” of class learning experiences.
- Most effective are FYE courses and seminars that are: elective, graded, use peer mentors, for credit, and linked into a learning community.
- Strong anecdotal evidence about the influence of advising, especially “intensive/intrusive advising”, thoughtful planned **and** explained. However, very little statistical evidence.
- Goals for advising need clarity – Retention? Speed of declaring major? Satisfaction? Time to graduation?
- Positive impact of “supplemental instruction” (“embedded support”) on retention, during first year and beyond.
- Impact of developmental (remedial) education on retention is unclear.
- Much of the research that’s been done has been on white males.
- Quality of FYE instructors makes a difference, but this is hard to evaluate.
- Importance of students achieving credits as soon as possible.
- Importance of participating in orientation, not starting late, taking an FYE course, attending class, and following a “set educational path” (as soon as practical).
- Overusing adjuncts can have a negative impact on retention -- however, adjuncts can be better teachers than tenured/tenure-track faculty.

- “Smart” use of current technology (e.g., social media, smart phones, on-line courses)
- Importance of an “early alert” system
- Every freshman should be “known by someone” (e.g., FYE instructor, other instructor, advisor, older peer mentor).
- Correlation between first to second year retention and familiarity with the library
- Importance of faculty (including adjunct) and administrators from all parts of the campus focusing explicitly, cohesively, on such success factors.

Lessons from the Gardner Institute and its Foundations of Excellence (FOE) Program® -- data from Over 260 two and four-year institutions over four years.

- ✓ Implementation of Gardner Institute’s “Foundations of Excellence” increased first to second year retention at those schools with a “high level of implementation” had a much greater impact on retention than those with a “low level of implementation.”
- ✓ Most successful institutions followed the above-named practices “at a high level”.
- ✓ Effective use of research/data program assessment.
- ✓ Diligent focus on core business of first year instruction across the disciplines.
- ✓ Get beyond “Retention” to focus on “Excellence” (avoiding “retention fatigue”)
- ✓ Don’t (by policy or lack of policy) allow students to sabotage their own success through failure to require: orientation, advising (more than just once), class attendance, registering and entering the institution on time.
- ✓ Understand the first year from the perspective of all three key parties: students, faculty and administrators.
- ✓ Faculty/staff perceive more active engagement in first-year evaluation than do students (according to Gardner Institute research).
- ✓ Institutional capacity for change is a critical ingredient in first year effectiveness (e.g., willingness to ask tough questions, willingness to be candid, willingness to use data, trust, consistency of leadership, clarity of mission and vision, adequate resources).

Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year: 2010 Retention Analysis – full report available from Betsy Barefoot: barefoot@jngi.

Highlights of Discussion

- Community colleges have especially challenging retention issues from the start – need to understand and address socio-economic issues.
- Need to analyze, and plan for, differences in FYE among traditional age students, commuters, transfer students and “adult learners”.

- Community service/service learning can positively affect retention – same for exposure to positive aspects of a school’s community (e.g., Capital Community College’s exposure of entering students to plays at The Hartford Stage).
- “Learning communities” – defined as 2-3 linked courses – show positive impact on many campuses, but not a “cure-all” – no solid research.
- “First Year Experience” is often only formally addressed for one semester and not into the second semester or second year. Some challenged students founder in sophomore year as they hit harder courses.
- Incoming students who have been exposed to “college life” during high school, and/or in summer before matriculation, appear to do better in first year – value of “bridge programs” of various types **and** “seamless counseling”, involving counselors who begin working with high school seniors, and continue over the “summer after”, **and** into college for at least one year or, ideally, beyond.
- Too many challenged/under-represented and “first generation” students do not survive “the summer melt”: they get accepted as of high school graduation but do not matriculate – many causes.
- Many high school graduates are likely better off attending a community college, a voc-tech institution, or other less than 4-year program. Good jobs typically result from students who complete 30 and 60 credit programs. High school advising needs to be more inclusive of **all** types of higher education choices.
- Need to better understand the impact of different levels of credit for FYE courses.
- Early exposure to career interests can be an important retention factor.
- State funding constraints are a serious impediment to creative FYE program development.
- Need to understand comparative impact of “basic” vs. “content-oriented” FYE courses. Not all very academic FYE courses are effective.
- Public and private institutions tend to have different issues
- Need to forge more collaboration among “access programs in any given metropolitan area and perhaps statewide.
- We know what to do re. FYE and “retention success” (see above), but implementing success factors “at scale” continues to be a challenge for both financial and “institutional inertia” issues.
- “Let’s keep talking about these issues in these types of forums” (fora).

Respectfully submitted,
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