The Freshman Experience Meets Log Cabins: The Freshman Retreat at the George Washington University School of Engineering and Applied Science

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Abstract

The multitude of opportunities available at The George Washington University, and in the city of Washington, DC itself, the School of Engineering and Applied Science (SEAS) can be a daunting experience for many new engineering students. This paper will investigate how the freshman retention programs have let students know about opportunities at SEAS and have fostered a dynamic community among students, faculty, administrators and staff.

Specifically, this paper will examine the effectiveness of one of these freshman programs, the Freshman Retreat. This paper will discuss and review the surveys and interviews from the retreat, both objective and subjective comments, as well as ancillary data such as survey data from graduating seniors surveys.

Recognition of the Problem

In 1998 several problems were identified in the undergraduate program. While the general retention to the engineering field was within the US norm, the retention rate lagged as compared to other schools within the University. SEAS was having difficulty retaining students, as a large number were transferring to other schools within GW and to other universities. This follows the national trend where more than half of all engineering students do not graduate as engineers, with freshmen comprising half of that number. For some students, transferring is the best option. Clearly, many students who start out in engineering find that their calling is elsewhere, and the first two years especially can be seen as a weeding out period as students find their niche. However, there was concern that SEAS was losing students who could be successful and happy in their curriculum if had received more attention or more information about the field. A Colorado study found that students lost to attrition were not academically different than students who remained in the engineering program.

The retention problem reflected a greater problem at SEAS: a lack of a feeling of community. In the 2000 “SEAS Senior Exit Interview” barely half (53%) felt that the SEAS administration was committed to providing a good academic environment for their

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study. In survey after survey, students commented on the deficiencies of the freshman orientation programs and the need for more community within SEAS. There are many causes of this apathy towards SEAS. SEAS is often billed as a “small school in a medium size university in a big town.” This statement reflects all the distractions that are present in a downtown university. The number one reason students come to DC is for the location. At this past year’s Freshman Retreat students were asked what they expected while attending SEAS and why they chose GW, and the number one answer was the DC location. The nightlife was mentioned more often than academics as a reason for choosing to attend SEAS. A survey conducted by the Princeton Review in the mid-90s found that GW students spent less time on homework than any other university except one. In fact, GW was sandwiched right between Florida and Florida State. The reason for this, it was discovered, was not because GW students party any more than the average student, rather they seek opportunities in the city such as internships, volunteer positions and all the constructive distractions DC has to offer. The average SEAS student is no different than other GW students. It is clear that this school attracts the kind of students that look beyond the classroom and outside of the engineering school for community. Even within the University, there are over one hundred clubs and societies in which engineering students can participate, while in SEAS, there are only about ten active clubs.

While it is a healthy sign that SEAS students are so involved in internships and their community outside of SEAS, it is the responsibility of the school to make sure that the opportunity to participate in the engineering school is available. Many inspired students and dedicated faculty and staff have provided opportunities over the years, but it became clear that a top-down focus on building community and relationships within SEAS was required.

**Freshman Orientation**

The logical place to start building community is with incoming freshmen who have not yet had extensive exposure to SEAS. The School of Engineering has long had a summer pre-registration orientation program, as well as an orientation course for freshman students. Three years ago the course was revamped and renamed, and included the addition of a major-specific one-credit orientation course. Each department now holds its own course that works in conjunction with the SEAS orientation course to provide information about opportunities in each department.

Other, less-visible, but very important programs have been initiated over the last few years. The tutoring program has become more structured in recent years, and with a more formalized system, students have been able to request and receive tutoring much more easily than before. More recently, an ambitious mentoring program, Student Peer Advising Network (or SEAS SPAN), has been implemented for all SEAS freshmen. Through SEAS SPAN an older student leader is paired up with several incoming freshmen to provide another support resource for the freshmen.
The most visible change has been in how SEAS introduces its students to life at SEAS and GW. GW’s award-winning summer orientation program, Colonial Inauguration (CI) (run by the GW administration), is in its 11th year and has achieved incredible success. CI was recently profiled by the *New York Times* for its effectiveness at acclimating nervous freshmen into GW life.\(^3\) SEAS has been able to piggyback off this success and offers many programs during CI to inform SEAS freshmen about the opportunities here in SEAS and in DC, and to excite them about being a part of the SEAS community.

**A Retreat is Born**

The crux of the SEAS orientation is not achieved at CI, however, but rather at the SEAS Freshman Retreat. This annual retreat, which started in 1999, has grown in scope and popularity with each successive year. The retreat is a two-day excursion to Camp Letts, a rustic YMCA retreat center on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. The retreat usually takes place during the first or second weekend of school, and participation rates are generally high, with 70 percent of each class (between 120 and 150 freshmen) attending.

The Freshman Retreat is intended to provide a forum for SEAS freshmen to meet the administrators, faculty, staff, upperclassmen, and fellow freshmen and develop relationships. The purpose of the retreat is also to expose the students to all aspects of the SEAS community. The retreat is an orientation with information sessions and programs to foster teambuilding. Professors are invited, as well as the administration, so that students can interact with them on an informal basis. Student leaders of the various engineering organizations and student projects attend, as well, and are integral to providing a fun and exciting atmosphere.

The typical schedule consists of an introductory meeting and ice-breaking session, a student-groups fair, an informational session with faculty from each department, a ropes course, team building sessions, a campfire, and free time to use the camp’s recreational facilities. The main activities of the weekend are team-building exercises that allow students to get to know one another and build bonds of trust that will be essential during their undergraduate studies.

The first retreat in 1999 was very successful. Ninety-three percent of the freshmen surveyed felt the retreat was a rewarding experience. A survey was conducted to determine student reaction to various programmatic aspects, and this assessment led to minor changes over the next two retreats. It was found that students had more fun in the team-related activities, such as the ropes course, and disliked some of the icebreakers.

In 2000 the second annual retreat was conducted with some adjustments, including more time for students to interact with one another in recreational activities. This change was met with enthusiasm. The problem that arose in 2000 was a lack of upperclassman involvement, which portrayed the image that there was no SEAS community.

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In 2001, it was decided that the team-building aspect of the retreat should be emphasized. To accomplish this, the group of 100 freshmen was divided into nine groups and each group was assigned an older student as a Team Leader. The nine Team Leaders and eight other student assistants were selected and briefly trained on their responsibilities. These students ran the retreat, and the small group format was very effective in providing a forum for the freshmen to get to know their fellow students well, in addition to an older student.

More team-building activities were introduced with the addition of a team activity on leadership run by GW’s School of Business and Public Management. Sixty percent of the students stated that they enjoyed the Business School’s team-building activities and 76 percent liked the ropes course, another group-based activity. This confirmed that the group activities were the more popular programs. It was during these events that students had most interaction with each other and were more likely to develop friendships. Overall, 83 percent of freshmen from 2001 enjoyed the retreat, continuing the retreat’s success.

Many improvements are still being made, as the retreat is a program in its infancy. Feedback was sought from all the student leaders and faculty who attended, as well as the freshmen. Many suggestions came out of this process. A problem at every retreat has been the level of faculty involvement. The retreat has struggled to create excitement with the overall faculty. About six or seven faculty (or about 10% of the faculty and 100% of the Academic leadership – deans and department chairmen) attend each year, and many students have commented on how it was rewarding to meet their professors in a more informal setting. More work must be done to encourage faculty to attend the retreat. One approach that is being tried is to encourage families of the professors to attend as well so they can use the camp’s facilities. This also enhances the SEAS community as it expands it beyond the traditional student-professor relationship. Students will not feel that there is a family of SEAS unless the professors believe it as well.

The other recurring comment deals with the structure of the program. The informational sessions many times overlap with what students have learned at the pre-college summer orientation and in the SEAS-orientation class that is held in the fall of their freshman year. This redundancy has led the students to find the informational sessions boring. There has been a tendency to try to fit too much information in one weekend. The solution is to have a clear objective from the beginning and ensure that all programming promotes that objective. To achieve this goal, the planning process will begin several months earlier than in the past, and more student input will be sought, especially from freshmen who have recent experience with the retreat.

Conclusion

It is hard to truly measure the effectiveness of the program in meeting the stated goal of enhancing the community of SEAS. Measuring a feeling of community is highly subjective, and a sense of teamwork in a school is something intangible that one can feel, but not fully quantify. However, recent surveys have shown some measure of progress.
While the first class to attend the retreat is not due to graduate until 2003, the sense that
the school cares about its students can permeate through other related programs and
through the student leaders who have participated in the retreat. In 2001, there was a 16
percent increase in the number of graduating seniors who felt that SEAS had provided
them with a good engineering education over the previous year. Anecdotally, student
leaders have noticed a large increase in the number of freshmen who have become
involved in student clubs and student projects, with the majority having learned of the
clubs at the Freshman Retreat. Since it is rare that students are involved in any
engineering activities their first year or two, this has been seen as a very positive sign.

There is much room for improvement in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences,
and a lot of work to be done on the Freshman Retreat. However, it is clear that in only
three years the retreat has had an impact in developing relationships between engineering
students, and enhancing the community of SEAS and pride in the school. As author
Anthony D’Angelo said, “Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of
community.” If we do not give our students a reason to care about their school, they will
never desire a community. With the continued success of our retention programs such as
the Freshman Retreat, and the dedication of faculty, staff and most importantly, students,
the SEAS community will keep on flourishing.

References

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Author Biography

Nathan Campeau is currently serving as the Dean’s Fellow for Undergraduate Relations
at the School of Engineering and Applied Science at The George Washington University.
In this role, Nathan planned and executed the Freshman Retreat in September 2001. He
also served on the retreat leadership team in 2000, in addition to numerous student
leadership positions over the past five years that he has attended GW. Nathan is also
responsible for the assessment programs, as well as continuing to encourage retention
through leadership of the Student Peer Advising Network, a student group of peer
mentors who advise the freshman class. He is pursuing his masters degree in Civil
Engineering with a concentration in Geo-Spatial Engineering.

Rachelle Heller is the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and a professor of computer
science. The retreat was developed under her leadership.