

BENEFITS OF A SUCCESSFUL RETENTION PROGRAM

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I. Introduction

Colleges and universities have long known the importance of integrating the student into the institution both socially and academically. Institutions design activities that attempt to increase the likelihood of this integration occurring. The greater the integration between the student's values, goals and attitudes with those of the institution, the more likely the student will persist (Tinto, 1975,1987).

University faculty and administrators have had concern over retention and attrition rates for quite some time. The statistics remain quite consistent; approximately 50 percent of the freshman who enroll in the nation's colleges and universities do not persist. Programs of intervention aimed at identifying and treating these potential dropouts have grown dramatically.

II. Background

The reasons students fail to persist in their matriculation are varied and complex. The following are some of the more commonly cited causes:

1. Students may lack the basic academic skills necessary to be successful in a college program.
2. Students may have received poor advising during their initial semester and were not able to recover from an unsuccessful early attempt.
3. A lack of institutional support and interest in the student leads to a feeling of rejection or apathy.
4. Students may experience academic problems in their initial major courses that lead to doubts concerning whether college was a good choice for them. This decision is often made before considering other career or academic majors.
5. Financial problems and problems managing money cause anxiety that lead to personal and academic failure.
6. Students may lack goals or objectives when they enter as undeclared majors and they lack the persistence that is required when problems develop. When future goals are not clear students may drop out of school even when they are having academic success.

III. Murray State's Retention Program

In an attempt to develop a program that would increase student retention, the philosophy emerged that the program should benefit all students. There exists an opportunity to impact all of the ideals of what a Murray State University (MSU) graduate should possess in an intentional rather than an accidental manner. The First Year Experience (FYE) offers a student retention program that will allow the university to address the needs of students who are persisters as well as nonpersisters.

Why should MSU implement a retention program? Basically the university could assume the morally correct position and determine that it needs to care for and about all its students. In addition to the moral position there exists real dangers and concerns on most campuses about financial pressure from declining enrollments. Improved retention becomes a mechanism for the university to keep enrollments at a respectable level while accepting lower freshmen enrollments.

Generally students do not start off knowing the institution's expectations of them. Murray State publishes an official statement on "What every MSU graduate should know." This statement is very comprehensive in delineating the attributes of the model MSU graduate. However, as expected, first year students do not respond positively to this document. Therefore, we need to be more assertive in helping to create an environment where they can become more like the model.

Many of our students do not enroll with all of the skills required to survive and be successful in their first year. We need to assess and teach them these necessary skills for success and create through special contact with the students the kinds of attitudes and values we desire our students and graduates to attain.

Additionally, there has been a drastic change in the profile of the first year student. More are the non-traditional, placebound, older type. These students are much less like their instructors were when they were first-year students.

IV. On-Going Orientation

The concept of orientation can be defined as an awareness of one's environment as to time, space, objects and persons. It can also mean a period or process of introduction and adjustment. There is a need to immerse and engage the students in both the expectations the university has of them and to teach these new students the appropriate skills, attitudes, and values to be able to meet those expectations.

The FYE attempts to accomplish simultaneously initiating the students into the institution and while providing appropriated training and support services to optimize the opportunity for success. The program attacks the issue of student attrition at the very beginning of a student's college career.

The concept of On-Going Orientation bridges the needs of all students as they enter while providing appropriate attention to students admitted with low success profiles. The program involves four phases:

- Phase 1 Recruitment and Summer Orientation

- Phase 2 Pre-School Advance Transition Training

- Phase 3 Freshmen Orientation Classes

- Phase 4 Spring First Year Seminar Programs

V. Recruitment and Summer Orientation

Recruitment and summer orientation programs have a long and successful history at Murray State. The Office of School Relations, the faculty and student counselors all play an active and integral part in this phase.

The social and cultural aspects of summer orientation are exceptional and an excellent job is done in a short amount of time. The cornerstone of summer orientation has long been the excellent staff of student peer counselors. Recruited, trained and working out the Office of School Relations the Summer O counselors provide an invaluable service. Using these same counselors throughout the FYE program provides essential continuity that new students need.

This initial phase is also the time to begin selecting and using faculty and staff in the academic advising process. A training program for these select faculty and staff is completed in conjunction with the training of the peer leaders.

In addition to academic advising, Phase I activities would include assessment activities to identify students who have a “low success profile.” A low success profile identifies not only those students with academic skill deficiencies, but poses a liability to their potential first year success. This information would then be used in planning and preparing instructional groups developed for the next phase, Phase 2.

VI. Pre-School Advance Transition Training

A critical time for most first year students is the first two weeks of class. New experiences and relationships are happening in a very short time period. It is a time when a first year student can begin to feel comfortable at MSU, or experience anxiety and begin to look for “excuses”.

The Advance Transition Training (ATT) phase is a part of the on-going orientation program designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills to deal more effectively with the beginning of the school year. Research in educational psychology and learning theory consistently reveals the value of preparing students for what is about to happen just before it happens. Phase 2 activities occur simultaneous with the beginning of the semester when students need a more intense, focused and personally specific program.

The purposes of Phase 2 activities are two-fold:

1. Assist students in leaving high school behind them by preparing them to be college students. The ATT goal here is to begin to develop a bond between new students and Murray State by being as helpful and positive about their future success at MSU in our actions and not just our words.
2. Use the assessment results from Summer O to identify students with low success profiles. While all new students receive training in time management, note taking and study skills, low success profile students receive additional academic advising by reviewing their class schedules for their appropriateness.

The ATT groups represent a University level effort. These groups are not organized by college or department. This is a time students meet faculty and other students from across campus. It is also an opportunity to impress upon students the importance of the first two weeks and the habits required to succeed in college.

VII. Freshmen Orientation Classes

Murray State University has had some form of fall orientation class for over twenty years. While there have been attempts over the years to standardize the syllabus for this class, it generally remains under the control of the individual departments. This decentralized arrangement creates a wide range in the quality and content. It also fails to ensure that the orientation class will enhance student knowledge of the university and all students' capacity during their first year. No uniform training of orientation class instructors has occurred, nor are there any universal standards for assuring the value and impact of the orientation class.

The orientation classes in the Department of Industrial and Engineering Technology are separated by program. Each class instructor works closely within the concepts of the FYE in developing and incorporating essential components. Each class will include instruction and discussion in the following areas:

1. Registration process: drop-add, pre-registration, academic advising, etc.
2. Murray State Academic Progress Report
3. Time Management
4. Study Skills: note taking, reading, study strategies
5. Test taking strategies and skills
6. Learning styles and personality assessment: MBTI/LASSI
7. Career education and development
8. Stress management and relaxation training
9. Introduction to university academic and personal support services

Departmental classes are used to identify and develop program related needs in regards to orientating new students to their majors and the college environment and expectations. Assisting

faculty in these classes are the Orientation Peer Leaders who initially worked with these new students during recruitment, Summer Orientation and the ATT program. These Peer Leaders assist the orientation instructors in facilitating discussions, provide role models, and provide an additional layer of contact for new students in their transition into being college students.

Additionally, the Peer Leaders assist faculty in maintaining Academic Progress Reports on those new students in their orientation class who were identified during Phase 2-ATT as having low success profiles. They also help monitor students who appear to be struggling academically or socially as reported by faculty on the Student Retention Alert Forms.

VIII. Spring First Year Seminar Programs

The second semester of the first year is the critical time to provide career education and services for students. Students with undeclared majors, or those contemplating a change of major, will register for a series of seminars or workshops that help them decide.

In addition, for those students who did not achieve a 2.00 grade point average, a number of coordinated activities will occur. The Academic Review Committee (ARC) is responsible for much of the activity during this phase. The ARC is made up of faculty and Orientation Peer Leaders from the orientation classes.

Students that are on warning or probationary academic status are required to attend an academic review session before being allowed to complete the registration process. The members of the ARC work with the students in scheduling and counseling concerning what their academic status means and what they can do to obtain good standing. They also explain any financial aid complications that might be involved.

Students on probationary status after their first semester are required to sign up for a class designed to monitor and promote academic success. This class focuses as much on success attitudes as it does on academic skills. Students who were not first year but are on a continuing probation status would also meet with the ARC. Their status needs to be subject to review as long as they remain below good standing. If appropriate, referral to support services or individual counseling should be arranged by the ARC staff member.

IX. Conclusions

The rationale for establishing a retention program that leads to higher retention rates admittedly often begins with financial concerns. In addition to more income, a successful program offers the university the opportunity to enhance the quality of education for all students. While there are more than just financial concerns, the underwriting affect such losses currently have impacts a school's economic condition to such an extent as to cause cutbacks, reductions of faculty and staff, and a reduction in the school's educational mission.

The mission of a higher educational institution is often stated in terms of the "end product" that they expect their graduates to become. The loss of so many students puts to question if schools

are actually actively producing the result of these expectations through programs, services, and activities.

Since this program was initiated in 1996, freshman-to-sophomore retention rates at MSU have risen by 15-20%. Program success can be measured in many ways; however, increases in retention mean increased enrollment during times when depending on recruiting alone is difficult at best. The use of a combined ongoing orientation program with coordinated and integrated retention activities offers an approach to these issues that is both educationally feasible and economically rewarding.

Bibliography

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