Exploring the Recruiting & Retention Paradigm:
What Works & What Doesn’t

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges associated with recruitment and retention of students. It describes a unique program at Missouri Western State College. It is called Access Plus. It is a program designed to enhance the mission of Missouri Western State College. The purpose of Access Plus is to increase retention and graduation rates. The Freshman Year Experience Office coordinates Access Plus. During the first two years of the program, research shows a seven percent increase in freshman to sophomore retention rates; a 12.6 percent decrease in the number of freshmen on academic probation; and, a 42 percent increase in the number of hours students utilized the Center for Academic Support. Indirectly, Access Plus is an excellent tool for recruitment as it sends a very positive message to prospective students.

I. Introduction

Recruitment means new business for a school, and greater numbers reflect successful recruitment strategies. Every Fall, institutions of higher education are engaged in recruitment activities. These activities require people from the admissions office to participate in college fairs in and out-of-state to attract high school students. Schools also buy several mailing lists, and attract prospective students via direct mailings. Students and their parents are also invited and given campus tours all year round to "recruit" new students. In this effort, individual departments play a key role in attracting students. Depending upon their Mission statement, some schools have open door policies for admission while others are more selective and restrict admissions based on ACT and SAT scores. Once the students are on board, some students make it through the freshman year, and go on to graduate. Those who don’t make it, become a concern for institutions; ‘Retention’ becomes a significant issue. In other words, "Recruitment is just not enough; we must retain students as well," becomes the slogan. This paradigm, not exactly in these words, has been in existence forever and ever. It is only recently, though, in the last 15 to 20 years that some institutions have started making real positive efforts to retain students by offering academic support services. This shift in paradigm through the offering of freshman year experience courses, supplemental instruction, and providing free tutorial services by institutions of higher education, is addressed in this paper.

A program labeled, “Access Plus” at Missouri Western State College, is discussed, which in its third year, has increased freshman retention from 54% in 1995-96 to 61% in 1997-98. “This program keeps students in college by giving them support in what could be their most critical year in college. That support can range from mentoring to peer group discussions, from faculty advisors to special events to ease student transition into college life.”1 In this paper,
recommendations are made to illustrate how Missouri Western’s Access Plus program can be applied at other institutions to attract and retain students.

II. Marketing Strategies for Recruitment: The New vs the Old

I graduated from high school in 1961 with distinction in mathematics. Before I graduated, I knew I was heading for an engineering career. I applied to only one school for admission. It was one of the top-notch schools in the country, and the acceptance rate for admission at this school was one in ten. I was admitted, and graduated successfully. The school did not recruit me but I recruited them in my academic plans. The school had an excellent reputation, and their reputation was well known in the country. Therefore, the reason for recruiting the school of my choice was simple: This is where I wanted to go, and I had the grades to be accepted.

The true and the real life scenario that I have described above, applies to a small percentage of the population. My fellow classmates applied to several schools, and they went wherever they were accepted. In the final analysis, we all became engineers, some of us by going to schools where we wanted to go, and others by going to schools where we were accepted. Admissions were highly restrictive and selective. All along, during our school years, we were aware of what we wanted to do. When we joined college, we were motivated to succeed; so retention was not a problem for the college.

The times have changed, and the level of preparation of high school students for college varies from school to school, district to district, and state to state all across the country. Colleges and universities, including community colleges, are recruiting from a diverse body of students; some students are better prepared than others. Colleges and universities are operating like businesses. Under the current system of operation, schools must go out and seek students. Students are their clients, and a source of revenue. Schools with less restrictive policies for entrance, what has come to be known as the open-admissions policy, have an advantage in recruitment. They also have a challenge, in that the quality of incoming students may be compromised.

The old paradigm of students recruiting schools has changed to schools recruiting students; therefore, schools are now competing for students and for quality among students. Because of the variation in quality in the incoming students, the dropout rate of students has become a major concern for institutions of higher education. By devising good retention programs, some schools are experiencing good retention rates. The dropout rate has gone down and graduation rates have gone up.

III. Retention: The How and Why

A few years ago, I had the good fortune of listening to a speaker who had been invited to our campus to speak about the advantages of good advising. He said that once he was a D-student, but later through the wonderful help and advisement he received at his school, he was able to turn it around and graduate with a degree. He said that he began to enjoy his studies, and ultimately became a professor. Now that he had become a success, he wanted to help others. In the mid 1980s, on our campus, faculty got actively involved in the advisement process. Our
institution won a national Advisement award. In the early 1990s, we started a 2-hour College Orientation course, and the objective of the course was to help students gradually transition into college life. By slowly exposing students to the rigors of a college life, and providing academic support in the areas of mathematics, reading, writing, library skills, and computing skills, the situation started improving and these positive retention programs became an accepted practice. The evolutionary process led us to the realm of Freshman Year Experience, and Freshman Seminars. We introduced a new program called Access Plus which enabled us to enhance our college mission, and help students in the areas where they needed help.

Retention is not a unique problem of a single institution. It is a universal problem. To solve this problem, many institutions have introduced Centers for Supplemental Instruction, Centers for Academic Support, and College Orientation courses—all with one objective—to help incoming college students succeed. Their success becomes an institution’s success story of retention.

IV. What is Missouri Western’s Access Plus Program?

The Access Plus program at Missouri Western is a program designed to enhance its mission. The freshman year experience program is a part of Access Plus. Legislation authorizing Access Plus was approved by the Missouri General Assembly and signed by the Governor into law in 1995. Funding by the legislature for Access Plus was set at $2.4 million spread out over four years. The purpose of Access Plus is:

- To increase retention rates, particularly between the freshman and sophomore years
- To improve graduation rates
- To enhance students’ ability to meet the standards required for entrance into major fields of study
- To enable students to more successfully navigate the academic curriculum
- To provide an intelligent, skilled work force for the State of Missouri

V. The Freshman Year Experience

Access Plus provides for several programs focusing on the freshman year. These are coordinated under the Director of the Freshman Year Experience. The Director and her staff coordinate a variety of activities including: freshman academic advising, the freshman seminar course and orientation programs for first-time students. Research on Access Plus is directed by a full-time Research Analyst.

VI. Freshman Academic Advising

A goal of the freshman year experience program is to ensure that all first-time students are assigned to highly-trained academic advisors. The advisors work closely with their students to assist them in their adjustment to college, developing short and long range goals and in the selection of courses.

During the summer of 1996, a pilot program was initiated that included 250 students and 20 academic advisors. Today 80 volunteer faculty and staff advisors along with three new fulltime
freshman advisors work with over 1,300 freshmen. The advisors are specially trained, often meet their students at the summer registration/orientation programs and follow up with their advisees throughout the Fall and Spring semesters. Communication between advisors and advisees is often done in person, but e-mail, phone calls and written notes are also used.

VII. Freshman Seminar Course

Access Plus allowed us to expand the traditional College 101 course to a more in-depth COL101: Freshman Seminar. The course expanded to a full semester three-credit course and focuses on topics, which are critical for student success in college. Faculty and staff recruited to teach this course were specially selected and trained. Instructors were chosen because of their ability to communicate well with students and to ensure that first-time students were introduced in a positive manner to Missouri Western. An important component to the Freshman Seminar course is the utilization of the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory, which provides significant information for advisors regarding the potential dropout proneness of the student.

Nearly 450 students enrolled in the Freshman Seminar course during the 1996-97 year. There was an eight percent increase in enrollments during 1997-98 and a projected 13 percent increase during 1998-99.

VIII. Other Elements of Access Plus

An additional 21 faculty and 16 staff were hired through Access Plus in order to support initiatives, such as, Freshman Interest Groups, Academic Support Services, and the Center for Excellence in Teaching. Also, introductory courses in the College’s Division of Professional Studies were specifically designed and staffed. Additional lecturers and courses were added in both English and Mathematics to ensure that Missouri Western students will have the background necessary to be successful throughout their college career and beyond. Access Plus has provided additional services for the diverse populations on campus including a new special needs coordinator and the Unity Services Center.

IX. What Works and What Doesn’t in Recruitment/Retention Game Plan?

In the January 4, 1993 issue of Time magazine, it was stated, “America periodically reinvents itself. That is the secret, the way Americans dig out of their deepest problems. It is the way they save themselves from decline, stagnation, and other dangers -- including themselves.”³ At our institution, we saw the problem of retention, and did something about it. We determined that it was not sufficient to just recruit; instead it was essential to give full and solid academic and social support to students to help them succeed. As an example, 250 students participated in the Freshman Interest Groups during 1996-97. Over 400 participated in 1997-98, a 58 percent increase with a projected 35 percent increase during 1998-99. In simple words, the Access Plus program is doing what it was envisioned to do. Retention is up, and so is enrollment. Now when we go to recruit, we recruit with confidence, and deliver our recruitment message with conviction.
X. Some Major Research Results of “Access Plus”

The following is the summary of twelve areas of research investigation into the wide-ranging aspects of the “Access Plus” program.

1. Freshman to sophomore year retention rate has increased 7% in two years.

![Retention Rate Chart]

2. The freshman success rate (achieving 24 credit hours with a GPA of 2.0 or better in two semesters) has increased nearly 10%.

![Success Rate Chart]

3. The number of freshmen on probation after one semester has decreased 12.6% since Fall 1995.

![Probation Rate Chart]
4. The number of freshmen suspended after two semesters has decreased 3.2% since 1995.

5. The participation in success courses (College 101 & Griffon Edge) has increased significantly.

6. Participation in the Freshman Interest Groups has more than doubled.

7. The number of hours students used the services provided by the Center for Academic Support increased over 42%.
8. The Center for Academic Support provided a content tutoring program which covered increasing numbers of courses from developmental through advanced levels.

9. The one-year retention rate increased 14.3% for under-prepared students.

10. The probation rate for under-prepared freshmen decreased 30%.

11a. Fifty-five percent of the Fall 1996 freshmen who responded to the "Two Year Non-Return Survey" had transferred to another institution.
XI. Conclusion

The virtues of our Access Plus program are basically applicable to any institution of higher education. There are similar instances of Freshman Year Experience programs, College 101 courses, Freshman Interest Groups, and intrusive academic advising, etc. in existence at other institutions; they are, however, not universal. The content of these initiatives should be adjusted to take into consideration the diversity of the student body. For example, engineering students do not need help in computing skills, nor do they need to be seriously instructed in how to study. But engineering technology students may need help in mathematics in their freshman year. Under such circumstances, programs such as Access Plus should be designed to enable students to more successfully navigate the academic curriculum. If the goal of increasing the retention rates, particularly between the freshman and sophomore years, is achieved, the program can be unquestionably considered a success. The Access Plus program at Missouri Western is a success, and continues to show promise in terms of retention. It is also serving as an excellent marketing tool for recruitment. Above all, this program continues to excel.

References

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