

Don't Drop Out, Drop In: A Workshop for At-Risk Students

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This article describes a workshop that is targeted at students overcoming academic difficulties after a one-semester suspension. Participants are encouraged to use campus resources, empowered to make better personal and academic decisions, and given an opportunity to connect with other students and the university as a whole. This workshop represents an efficient intervention method that can increase retention and is easily transferable to other universities.

Introduction

Interest in student retention has increased over the past 10 years. As universities have become increasingly tuition driven, both practitioners and administrators are becoming more concerned with those factors that lead to student failure or success. An increase in multicultural, nontraditional, and part-time student enrollments creates a changing undergraduate population that has compounded this concern. Academic advisors serve a crucial role in creating a welcoming and supportive environment for university students, and they are key players in developing strategies for student retention (Russell, 1981).

Characteristics of student attrition or retention are no longer described in a simple list of persistence attributes. Educators now understand that student success or failure must be studied using complex models of interactions between the student and the campus environment over time. Tinto (1996) reported that 40% of all students who enroll at 4-year institutions fail to earn bachelor's degrees, and nearly 57% of this group leave before the start of their second year. He identified six major causes for attrition: a) unclear or new goals; b) difficulty in making the transition from high school to college; c) low commitment to earning a 4-year degree; d) external commitments that interfere with school; e) financial difficulties; and f) feelings of isolation. To successfully increase retention, all of these interrelated factors

should be considered. While Tinto (1996) reported that poor academic performance accounts for only 30–35% of student attrition, struggling students are often the hardest to reach and tend to be the most time-consuming group for academic advisors to support. This article describes an intervention to enhance the retention of students overcoming academic difficulties after being suspended for a semester.

Success Workshop: An Intervention Method for At-Risk Students

The University of Hawai'i at Manoa (UHM) is a large public, Research I institution (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1994) with an undergraduate population of approximately 13,000 students, 8,000 of whom study in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences. The overall rate for students who reenroll after the first year is 83% at UHM (University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Institutional Research Office, 1997). Between Fall 1995 and Spring 1997, approximately 2% of the total student population in Arts and Sciences was suspended and less than 1% was dismissed in any given semester; 140 to 300 students each semester failed to achieve a cumulative grade-point ratio of 2.0 and were placed on academic suspension. Slightly more than one half of these students returned to campus after the semester of suspension (University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Student Academic Services, various dates).

Although letters, which highly recommended that students meet with advisors, were sent, suspended students rarely followed up with appointments. The student to advisor ratio was close to 1,000:1, which ruled out mandatory, individual advising appointments. In 1994, approximately 50% of the readmitted students failed to achieve the minimum 2.0 semester grade-point average and were dismissed the following semester (University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Student Academic Services, vari-

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ous dates) prompting advisors to consider ways to reach out to the suspended student population.

In Spring 1994, Brooks-Harris and Mori piloted a workshop for suspended students, the primary focus of which was the development of a cost-effective intervention strategy that would decrease the high dismissal rate for readmitted students. A workshop format was chosen for several reasons:

1. Sufficient resources to engage in mandatory one-on-one advising were unavailable.

2. On a large campus such as UHM, students are more apt to be successful if they learn how to take advantage of campus resources rather than expecting the institution to continually provide intrusive intervention.

3. Brooks-Harris and Mori believed that students empowered with accurate information and provided with appropriate guidance will make good decisions and work toward success in both academic and life areas.

4. Dialogue could be generated between the suspended students who could exchange ideas, see commonalities, and reduce their sense of isolation.

At the end of every semester, the Department of Student Academic Services, Colleges of Arts and Sciences office identifies suspended students and informs them by mail that they are required to attend a mandatory 90-minute workshop if they are planning to return to campus. Students are warned that only those who attend the workshop will be cleared for registration. The letter highlights key topics to be covered: a) strategies for making positive changes in students' approaches to school, b) resources available on campus, and c) strategies for planning a balanced academic schedule in the semester of reenrollment. The students are given a choice of several workshop dates throughout the semester of their suspensions, with each workshop accommodating 10 to 25 students. Approximately 200 students attended a Success Workshop from 1995 through 1998.

The design of the Success Workshop is based on a strategy described by Jeff Brooks-Harris and Susan Stock-Ward (1999) and utilizes four distinct types of activities that accommodate different learning styles and create a complete experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The learning activities described in this workshop model are referred to as a) reflecting on experience, b) assimilating and conceptualizing, c) experimenting and practicing, and d) planning for application.

The facilitator begins the workshop by congratulating the students on their decision to return to school. He or she acknowledges that returning to school is a hard decision and they should be proud of giving themselves another opportunity to succeed.

The first workshop activity is designed to provide students with the "opportunity to reflect on past experience and apply it to the current learning situation" (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999, pp. 64-65). Students participate in dyadic sharing, indicating two aspects of returning to campus about which they are optimistic and two areas about which they feel apprehensive. The goal of this exercise is to encourage thought about the issues that led to their initial academic difficulties and to balance their concerns with excitement about returning to school. In addition, it encourages participants to talk among themselves so that they will feel comfortable with each other and more inclined to speak in front of the group. This activity addresses the issue of social isolation versus integration (Siryk, 1981; Tinto, 1996).

The second activity is designed to help students assimilate and conceptualize new information. It adds to the knowledge they already have about achieving academic success and then helps them expand their awareness. Working in groups of four or five, the participants are asked to collaboratively brainstorm and develop strategies that will help them overcome the problems that hindered them in the past. The strength of this exercise resides in the students' abilities to learn from within the group; each begins to realize that she or he is not the only one struggling with issues such as time management or study skills. Students can focus on the positive aspects of the changes they will need to make to stay in school.

From 40 completed workshops, compiled qualitative data on the difficulties that students identified in the assimilate-and-conceptualize activity were grouped into five types of variables: a) background/demographics (being a commuter); b) academic variables (poor study skills, unrealistic major choice); c) developmental variables (ineffective time management, too much socializing); d) campus environment (large lectures, class availability); e) other environmental factors (financial constraints or work schedules). The responses of Success Workshop participants were similar to those cited in the literature and provided anecdotal support for many theories of student retention. For example, participating students cited isolation and unclear goals (Tinto,

1996, 1998) as well as lack of preparation for college (Astin, 1993) among the obstacles they face.

The facilitator uses this on-track exercise to generate discussion among the entire group, bounces back issues raised during the exercise, and helps students move toward concrete methods for addressing the strategy items they listed. For example, in every workshop one or more groups listed "going to class" as one of the key ways to stay academically focused. The facilitator reiterated the concept and asked students to specifically state how they will insure class attendance. He or she then tied their responses into broader issues of time management and priority setting. The facilitator uses this feedback format to discuss all of the key variables that students identified, allowing him or her to touch on the underlying issues of academic failure.

The facilitator also discusses important success strategies that were not generated by the group. For example, she or he highlights the importance of using resources and provides the attendees with a list of key services available to them on campus. The on-track exercise allows students to develop tactics and utilize university services to bridge the gap from being academically at-risk (Astin, 1993) to scholastically successful in subsequent semesters.

The third activity encourages students to practice the new knowledge presented in the workshop; a concept referred to as "experimenting and practicing" by Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward (1999). The facilitator provides participants with time-management worksheets, which allow the students to assess individually whether they have realistic approaches to time use. Utilizing a worksheet maximizes active and practical learning in the workshop setting. The worksheet lists weekly activities (classroom attendance, studying, sleeping, working, watching television, socializing, etc.) and asks the student to identify how many hours are spent on each task. The student then identifies whether time is effectively utilized and specifies priorities. The student determines the types of classes desired upon readmittance and designs a balanced schedule. The worksheet is used to generate a discussion of what constitutes a reasonable credit load and class structure for the semester of return to the university.

The exercise allows the facilitator to make the transition from abstract concepts of time management and commitment to realistic objectives students will need to reach in overcoming their academic deficiencies. It relates clarity of goals

and academic versus external commitments explicated by Tinto (1996).

The facilitator ends the session by introducing two planning-for-application activities. First, each student devises an action plan, identifying two strategies that will insure a successful semester, and then he or she shares it with another workshop participant. This exercise addresses commitment and clarity of goals (Tinto, 1996) as well as academic preparation (Astin, 1993). Second, to insure that they take the first step in utilizing campus resources, suspended students are required to attend at least one workshop offered by the Learning Assistance Center. Workshop topics range from time management to taking essay tests to enhancing reading skills.

Summary

Through the Success Workshops, the Department of Student Academic Services, Colleges of Arts and Sciences office has found a useful and efficient intervention method for the retention of suspended students. Advisors recognize that the workshop is just a first, but vital, step for at-risk students. The activities provide students with strategies to overcome their academic difficulties and the push they need to identify and address barriers that have adversely impacted their academic progress. Equally important, the workshops offer advisors a way to reach out to suspended students and bring services to them. Once the initial contact has been made, it is easier to encourage students to seek advising in a proactive, rather than reactive, way. UHM advisors view these workshops as the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership between the advisor and the student.

In the fifth year of the Success Workshops, we are still collecting qualitative and quantitative data. Our follow-up research will be the topic of a future *NACADA Journal* article.

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Authors' Notes

Outlines and worksheets for the workshop, as well as academic policies for the University of Hawai'i at Manoa described in this article, may be downloaded from the Arts and Sciences Student Academic Services Web site at www.cassas.hawaii.edu/success.

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