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A Strategy to Improve Retention

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"The most dramatic feature of the next twenty years, as far as we now know, is the prospect of declining enrollments after more than three centuries of fairly steady increase. . . ."

Student retention is a major issue in higher education today. Declining enrollment numbers are causing university administrators to carefully evaluate existing programs, and to be creative in developing new programs designed to improve retention.

The American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management System reported in Spring, 1979, a steady decline in retention of students at colleges and universities throughout the country. Four-year public institutions responding to the survey indicated a retention rate of 66 percent after one year (1977-78), and 54 percent after two years (1976-78)!

There are several approaches to improving retention at colleges and universities, such as improvements in advising, and increasing the level of personalized faculty-student interaction. These actions would have a positive impact on the retention of college students.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The retention of students is an important issue, and will become more important in the future: it is an issue of survival. Student retention is closely linked to the quality of academic advising, and healthy institutions, by placing a high value on meeting the diverse needs of their students, will increase the importance of good academic advising!

Academic advising plays a major role in students' feelings of identification and perception of "fit" with the institution. Making personally satisfying decisions is also an impor-

¹Charles T. Lanning, Phillip E. Beal and Ken Sauer, Colorado, National Center for Higher Ed. Mgmt. Systems, (1980) 1.

²P.E. Beal and Lee Hugel, *What Works in Student Retention*. Report of the ACT Program and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, (1980), 37.

³David Holmen and TOTL Trombley, *Defining the Role of Academic Advising in the Institutional Setting: The Next Phase*, *NACADA Journal*, 1 (1981) p. 1.

tant aspect of students' development and growth. Students need the opportunity to take personal risks and to hold an element of control over the development of their academic programs. When given the opportunity and guidance through academic advising to shape aspects of their academic lives, they find their personal relationship with the institution enhanced, and their desire to persist strengthened.

Advising has traditionally not demanded much personal contact between the student and advisor, and was primarily an exercise in one-way communication. Advising today, however, is a much broader concept. It is developmental in nature and helps students define educational interests and goals, and make decisions that are consistent with their values, aptitudes, and personality characteristics.

There is growing recognition that advising, interaction between student and mentor, is important in helping students define and realize personal and professional goals. Also, if institutions are truly concerned about their stability and survival, there must be an awareness of students' frustrations, career choice anxieties, and the need to feel that education is worth the high price!

Although faculty are considered the heart of academic advising, many faculty members often feel that advising is peripheral to teaching. However, faculty alone cannot be held accountable for achieving institutional objectives, they must have administrative assistance: that is, current academic records, advising handbooks, forms/procedures, and training!

Students, being more affective than cognitive, usually look for people to whom they may relate. They usually make subconscious decisions about staying in college during the first six to eight weeks of school, and a perceptive faculty may become aware of students' feelings about remaining in college. A sensitive faculty especially needs to be involved in retention programs, because students need to feel comfortable in the classroom if they are going to remain in school. Faculty members should guide students to programs that match their intellect, be aware of students' non-academic problems, and carefully monitor students' progress toward graduation. The personal individual attention of a faculty member brings students closer to the faculty member, and lets the student know someone really cares. The faculty member can also serve as a positive role model for students!

Astin, after completing a study of student satisfaction, concluded:

"Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty are more satisfied with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even administration of the institution, finding ways to encourage greater personal contact between faculty and students might increase students' satisfaction with their college experiences."

¹Holmes and Trombley, p. 5.

²Holmes and Trombley, p. 6.

³Sr. M.A. Landry, The Necessity for a Comprehensive Advising System. NACADA Journal, 1 (1981) p. 29.

⁴Landry, 1981:30.

⁵Landry, 1981:31.

⁶A.W. Astin, Four Critical Years. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Limited, 1977). p. 223.

Academic advising today is described as a decision-making process during which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication with an advisor. The advisor facilitates communication, coordinates learning experiences, and acts as a referral agent?

Noel listed four basic causes for attrition as: 1) isolation, 2) boredom, 3) dissonance, 4) irrelevance! Brown said a strong reason for attrition was inadequate academic and career progress, which could be related to academic ability, achievement, adjustment, or attitudes! Several studies showed that a lack of involvement in campus life also influences students to leave college!

Smith found that students need a "bond" with the institution. A personal relationship with a faculty member, through academic advising, is an important bond. Noel and Shulman cited the presence of a "significant adult" on campus as a strong influence for students to stay! Newman found that students who dropped out of school perceived their advisors as unavailable, disinterested, and unhelpful twice as much as students who graduated! The Retention Committee at Tusculum College increased retention by arranging personal contacts with students who considered leaving!

Emotional needs of students usually supersede intellectual ones, and those involved with the academic development of students must also be aware of their social, personal, and emotional development. Academic advisors, though they cannot be expected to act as therapists, should be alert to certain behaviors and conditions that suggest student psychological concerns, and know about appropriate referral sources. Crockett found that advisors can easily learn to identify over and under-activity, emotional variability, changes in attitude, and physical discomforts in college students! Advisors can also learn basic counseling skills of listening, nonverbal communication, and referral!

Information on retention reveals that institutions must organize for the improvement of retention and develop specific intervention strategies. The American College Testing Program (ACT) and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) conducted a national survey entitled, "What Works in Student Retention" (WWISR), in spring, 1979. The survey's purpose was to identify, analyze, and compile information about campus action programs and efforts to improve retention in higher education. Presidents from 1600 institutions (from 2459 who were solicited), indicated a

⁷T.J. Gries, Academic Advising: Getting Us Through the Eighties. (AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Report #7) (1979) 8-9.

⁸Lee, Noel, "College Students Retention: A Campus-Wide Responsibility," The National ACAC Journal 21 (July 1976), 33-36.

⁹Brown, (1977).

¹⁰Gries, T.J., p. 24.

¹¹Lac Noel, p. 64, Carol H. Shulman, "Recent Trends in Student Retention" AAHE/ERIC Higher Education Research Currents Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, (May 1976); Norman R. Smith, "Institutional Environment," Philadelphia: Paper presented at the Invitational Conference on Student Retention, 1978.

¹²Mary A. Newman, "The Student and the College Community: A Study of Attrition and Persistence in a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College." (1965).

¹³Gries, p. 24.

¹⁴David Crockett, "Making Advising Work: Basic Elements in Developing and Implementing a Successful Academic Advising Program." Presented at the Second Annual Conference on Academic Advising, Memphis, Tenn. (October 1978) (unpublished).

desire to participate in the WWISR study. More than 990 completed questionnaires were returned, and 947 were used in the study."

Respondents to the WWISR were asked to share information about action programs that had been implemented at their institutions to improve retention. Only 17 percent of the institutions showed that there were no action programs to improve retention on their campuses. The improvement of academic advising, (checked by 53 percent of the institutions that responded) was the program cited most often. After the improvement of academic advising, the next most common action programs listed were:

- special orientation activities
- exit interviews
- special counseling programs
- early warning systems, and
- academic support/learning services."

Respondents were then asked to describe in detail, actual retention programs and their impact on student retention. The program which occurred most frequently on the forms involved learning skills and academic support systems. Advising, orientation, and early warning programs were the next most frequent type of action programs described on the forms."

"New students" (freshmen and transfers) was the target group most often addressed by retention action programs. The target groups that benefitted the most, in terms of retention improvement, were dropouts, resident students, high-risk students, multiple target groups, and new students. In varying degrees retention improvement took place for all target groups."

Emphasis on programs involving new policies and structures for retention (advising) showed the greatest improvement in retention, followed by new learning/academic support systems, orientation, early warning systems, and curricular developments. Programs emphasizing student peer involvement ranked low on retention improvement, but first in general campus impact."

AN ACTION PROGRAM FOR RETENTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN

Kapraun and Coldren believed that higher education, in the 1980's, will continue to be concerned about implementing the most cost-effective programs possible. The retention of students, through use of scarce resources, will be an activity receiving much attention during a decade of stabilizing and declining enrollments."

A declining rate of student persistence was evident, in the late '70's, at the University of

"P.E. Beal and L. Noel, What works in student retention. Report of the ACT Program and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, (1980). 37.

"Beal and Noel, 1980:21.

"Beal and Noel, 37.

"Beal and Noel, 1980:23-24.

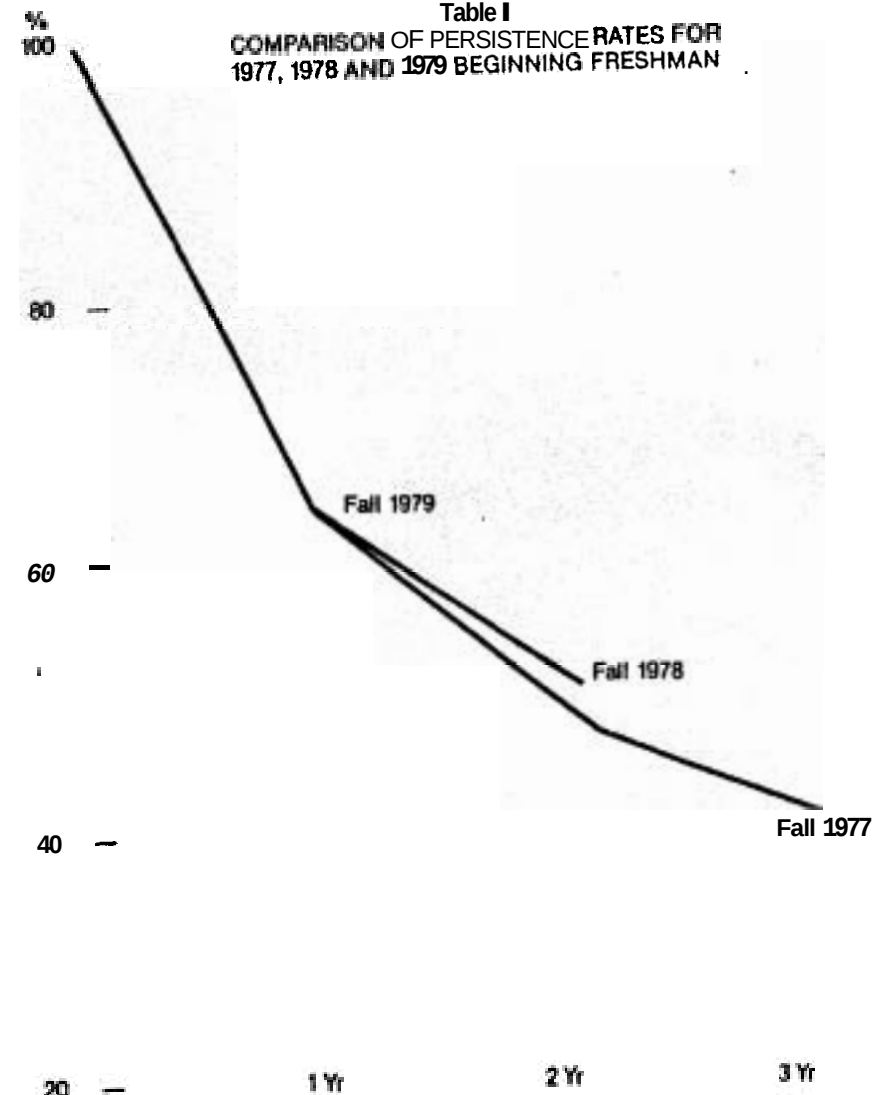
"Beal and Noel, 1980:25.

"E. Kapraun and D. Coldren, Academic advising to facilitate student retention. (Uniontown, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1981). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 191614)

Tennessee at Martin. Brasher, Jones and Blom compared the persistence rates of beginning freshmen for 1977, 1978, and 1979.

After three years, 40% of the 1977 beginning freshmen returned; after two years, 50% of the 1978 beginning freshmen returned; after one year, 63% of the 1979 beginning freshmen returned." (Refer to Table I)

Table I
COMPARISON OF PERSISTENCE RATES FOR
1977, 1978 AND 1979 BEGINNING FRESHMAN



"D.E. Brasher, J.A. Jones, D.I. Blom, Attrition and Retention. Proceedings of the Southern Association of Institutional Research. (1980).

The Freshman Counseling Program was implemented at UTM fall, 1981; its main purpose was to improve retention, a major problem at the institution. There was a campus wide effort to give entering freshmen personalized attention, to help them adjust to college and discover the value of college experience.

A group of forty-four faculty members from all disciplines were asked by their Academic Deans to participate in the Freshman Counseling Program. Each Freshman Counselor was responsible for twenty-seven freshmen during Freshman Studies Week (Orientation) and throughout fall, 1981. Freshman Counselors helped the new students establish a "bond" with the University. Freshmen were given an opportunity to communicate with faculty members on an individual basis, to discuss personal, academic, and social concerns. The Freshman Counselors had a desire to show the Freshmen they cared about them, and were available to help, or refer them to proper sources that would also be of assistance to them. The Freshman Counselors were very perceptive of their students' feelings about remaining in school, and assisted them in developing positive attitudes towards their college experiences.

Freshman Counselors taught a Study Skills class to their group of freshmen, during Freshman Studies Week. The Study Skills classes met every day for two hours. A student leader was also assigned to each group of freshman. The Freshman Counselors, along with teaching the study skills classes, attended other Freshman Studies Week activities that were directed by the student leaders.

Once classes began, Freshman Counselors then allowed time to meet with their group members individually, at least twice during the quarter. Students were to meet with their Freshman Counselor at least once before mid-term or fall quarter, and then again after mid-term. The Freshman Counselors discussed academic, career, and personal development with each student. Advising for class schedules was not a responsibility of the Freshman Counselors. Students met with academic advisors in their respective departments for class scheduling.

RESULTS

An analysis was done to determine the impact the Freshman Counseling Program had on the retention of freshmen who entered fall, 1981. The data reflects an improvement in the retention of freshmen at the University, without a sacrifice in students' academic standing (G.P.A.). (Refer to Tables II and III)

TABLE II
RETENTION AND GPA AVERAGE OF ENTERING FRESHMEN,
FALL TO WINTER, 1980-1982.

GROUP	N	%	AVERAGE G.P.A.
Fall, 1980, entering freshmen who returned winter, 1981.	974/1103	88.3%	2.18
Fall, 1981, entering freshmen who returned winter, 1982	938/1023	91.69%	2.20

A chi-square analysis revealed that a significantly larger percentage of the fall, 1981, entering freshmen returned after one quarter than the percentage of fall, 1980, entering freshmen. ($p = .05$, $d.f. = 1$, $X^2 = 5.58$)

TABLE III
RETENTION AND GPA AVERAGE OF ENTERING FRESHMEN,
FALL TO SPRING, 1980-1982.

GROUP	N	%	AVERAGE G.P.A.
Fall, 1980, entering freshmen who returned spring, 1981.	889/1103	80.6%	2.28
Fall, 1981, entering freshmen who returned spring, 1982	851/1023	83.19%	2.27

A larger percentage of the fall, 1981, entering freshmen returned after two quarters than the percentage of fall, 1980, entering freshmen; however, a chi-square analysis revealed that the increase was not statistically significant. ($d.f. = 1$, $X^2 = 2.39$)

Students who participated in the Freshman Counseling Program were given an opportunity to evaluate the program. Surveys were mailed to each student who attended Freshman Studies Week. The students were requested to complete the evaluation survey, and return it to the Freshman Counselor Program Coordinator.

There were 235 (23%) surveys returned, out of 1023 that were mailed to students. The majority of respondents felt that their Freshman Counselors were a help to them during their first quarter of college. Students responded, almost unanimously, that the Freshman Counselors helped make freshmen feel "at home" at the University, and that all incoming freshmen should be involved in the Freshman Counseling Program. (Refer to Table IV)

TABLE IV
STUDENT EVALUATION OF FRESHMAN COUNSELING PROGRAM

N = 235 (23%)	
Do you think it was helpful to meet with your Freshman Counselor this fall (1981) quarter?	
Very helpful 77 (33%)	Helpful 90 (42%)
No Opinion 32 (14%)	
Not very helpful 13 (5%)	No help 14 (6%)
Did your Freshman Counselor help make you feel "at home" at UTM?	
Yes 225 (96%)	No 10 (4%)
Do you think that all incoming freshmen should be involved in the Freshman Counseling Program?	
Yes 224 (95%)	No 11 (5%)

IMPLICATIONS

Retention will be a major concern for many years on college campuses. There is an increasing need to coordinate efforts and develop programs to increase retention. The Freshman Counseling Program, at The University of Tennessee at Martin, is one approach toward retaining more students than in the past. The success of the program, and the favorable responses from the students, supports the notion that institutions can deal with declining enrollments through an effective retention program, without lowering the quality of students' academic performance (G.P.A.).

Stated Reasons for Withdrawal and Degrees of Satisfaction Among Student Persisters and Nonpersisters

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ABSTRACT

Revised questionnaire forms of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems' Confidential Questionnaire for Nonreturning Students, and Student Outcome Questionnaire for Program Completers were given to students enrolled in the Community and Technical College and the General College (renamed University College) during the 1978-1979 academic year at The University of Akron. The response rate of useable questionnaires varied from 22 percent of nonreturning students (485) to 28 percent of the continuing students (485) to 28 percent of the continuing student population (2995). Discriminative analysis of demographic variables were completed to assess selection bias for student nonpersister respondents and nonrespondents. Conflict with job and studies, not enough money for school, and needed temporary break from school were reasons for withdrawal cited by more than 20 percent of the student nonpersister respondents. Student nonpersisters listed the factors of counseling and advising services, financial aid opportunities, and quality of instruction more frequently as the first factors if changed, would have encouraged them to stay at the University. Student persisters listed registration processing, parking availability, and television courses as the most frequent items to be changed first in order to better serve them at the University.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The original problem investigated by the author was to study in a systematic and empirical fashion selected personal, socio-economic, academic, and institutional variables that may be capable of differentiating between student persisters and nonpersisters enrolled in the four-year University College and the two-year Community and Technical College at the University of Akron. The study was a timely endeavor, because most universities are facing declining enrollments, a problem Asin believes was "perhaps the biggest concern of college administrators and faculty members during 1970." Although college administrators and faculty members have traditionally used recruitment as the principal means of keeping enrollments high, an equally promising approach to this problem is to reduce the dropout rate.

The University of Akron, although enjoying continued growth, has experienced unusually high attrition rates, especially with students enrolled in the General College and the

¹A.W. Asin, *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*, San Francisco: (Jossey-Bass, 1975), p. 2.