

Retention Strategies for High-Risk Students at a Four-Year University

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Intrusive retention strategies were implemented in an attempt to better the chances for success of high-risk students at Henderson State University. The author describes the origin, development, and results of Students in Retention, a program for probationary and first-time suspended students.

"Less than 15% of all institutional departures on the national average take the form of academic dismissal" (Tinto, 1987, p. 53); therefore, it is understandable that the primary foci of retention efforts have been bonding students with the institution, counseling them about careers, orienting them to the institution, and engaging them in other activities designed to help students feel better about their choice of institution (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989). Although linking the individual's goals and needs with the institutional mission is an important factor in persistence, groups of students still exist on any campus who will suffer institutionally imposed departure (Tinto, 1987) unless intrusive retention strategies are implemented. In most four-year institutions, programs to assist high-risk students do not exist; they must be created.

Background

This paper will discuss one aspect of a campus-wide retention program at Henderson State University, an open-door public liberal arts institution in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, with an enrollment of slightly more than three thousand students.

In 1984, almost 10% of Henderson's students were placed on probation each semester, 6% were suspended, and entering freshmen with an ACT composite of seven or less were admitted on academic condition, a probationary status imposed on approximately 4% of first-time freshmen. Because these three groups represented 20% of the total enrollment, they became the focus of the retention effort.

Development of Students in Retention Program

To devise a program to meet the needs of first-time suspension students, it is necessary to

understand how even bright students often fail. One theory asserts that students have difficulty realizing that "the first year in college is not grade 13 of high school" (Brown & Holtzman, 1987, p. 75). Academically talented high school students sometimes finish most of their graduation requirements at the end of the junior year and "coast" through the senior year. They may have lost the discipline of study and been lulled into a false sense of security when entering college. At Henderson, for example, an internal study of one hundred honors scholarship freshmen selected at random revealed that 21% lost their scholarships and ended the second semester on probation or suspension.

Another theory suggests that "the single greatest problem college students face is the problem of freedom—too much freedom" (Gardner & Jewler, 1985, p. 4). Indeed, freshmen often suffer the illusion of free time in college compared to their highly structured high school experiences.

Probation students sometimes need structure in their lives to bring about discipline and increase their chances of success. Moreover, high-risk students or students with intellectual promise who are in academic difficulty may need to make a commitment to academics. Perhaps a way to understand the concept is to draw a comparison from athletics, in which the individual must commit to a program of training. Schlossberg (1989) contends:

People train for sports by developing a rational plan of action. First they figure out the level of challenge they're trying to meet. Next they size up their particular areas of strength and weakness as they try to work toward that goal. Then they develop a strategy—a personalized training plan—to help in building up their net abilities so they're better organized to meet the challenge and prepare for future demands. (p. xv)

To assist students in acquiring structure and making a commitment to academics, Students in Retention (SIR) was conceived.

SIR requires the student to sign an agreement to fulfill each component of the program. The agreement is signed during a personal ad-

vising session in which the rationale for each requirement is explained to the student. The meeting is crucial in creating motivating the student and should be handled by an individual trained to interpret the program for the student.

SIR participants must (a) visit the Counseling Center at least twice during the semester, (b) have a conference early in the semester with each instructor with whom the student is enrolled, (c) meet with an academic advisor at least three times in the semester, (d) engage in at least two hours of supervised study each week, and (e) submit a report each week for ten weeks, detailing the activities completed during that week. Although the requirements are minimal, the importance of SIR is in the pattern or routine that is established. The pattern will develop discipline and responsibility.

Once the students surmount the barrier of the initial visit to a Counseling Center, they tend to be much more willing to return on their own to seek services. One student admitted that he had passed by the Counseling Center numerous times during his freshman year, thinking he might benefit from the services, but refused to enter because of the stereotypes of "crazy" or "weak" that he attached to people who sought out counseling. In his mind, he knew he was neither, just a smart student who needed to study harder. Once that student met the SIR requirement to visit a counselor, he went on his own regularly. His grade point average for his first semester in SIR was 3.25.

Requiring students to admit to an instructor that they are on academic probation imposes a difficult and awkward assignment on these students. Usually, students in academic trouble try to pretend they are the same as the other students in the class. When the SIR students got beyond the false pride, a dialogue with the teacher developed that often resulted in changes in attitude and improved academic achievement. By admitting they are on probation, students demonstrate to the instructor a level of maturity that can change the chemistry of the learning environment for both. Research in student and teacher expectations reveals the importance of conversations such as are required in SIR (Feldman, 1976; Feldman & Prohaska, 1979). This research suggests that teachers' expectations about students affect the students' performance and students' expectations about teachers affect teachers' performance. Requiring early interactions between the

teacher and the student may result in more accurate expectations in the learning environment.

The importance of developmental advising is well documented (Winston, R. B., Miller, T. K., Ender, S. C., Grites, T. J., & Associates, 1984). As SIR participants experienced scheduled advising sessions with faculty or professional staff, they began to develop greater understanding of their own academic needs and the requirements for their degree. The weekly reports reflected gradual growth toward becoming independent learners more responsible for their own decisions. Volunteer faculty were trained to meet the needs of high-risk students.

SIR necessitated a minimum of two hours per week in a supervised study area. The SIR study hall was located in the university's dining facility and operated four evenings a week. Academic advisors and tutors were there to assist students. As requested, study skills and test-taking workshops for groups of students were conducted. Once they discovered the learning atmosphere that existed in the study hall, some students developed the habit of returning each evening. One athletic study hall was rescheduled in the SIR environment in order to take advantage of the tutors, advisors, and workshops.

The weekly report was designed to increase regular contact with the Office of Retention. As students found their way to the office, they frequently stopped long enough to report on academic progress or to make an appointment with a professional advisor.

Suspended students represent a forgotten population for many colleges. "Out of sight, out of mind" seems to be the attitude of some administrators or advisors. Often listed among suspended students are bright minds who become bored. They experience what Tinto (1987) calls "incongruence" (or lack of fit with the institution), encounter personal problems, and suffer from prolonged immaturity.

Leaving college, or "moving out," to use Schlossberg's phrase, particularly for suspended students, is a difficult transition that requires grieving (Schlossberg, 1989). Similarly, Bridges (1980) writes, "Considering that we have to deal with endings all our lives, most of us handle them very badly. This is in part because we misunderstand them and take them either too seriously or not seriously enough" (p. 90).

At Henderson, suspended students are a retention target whose academic background and social history are reviewed to determine **wheth-**

er or not to encourage them to return. All are notified of the length of the suspension and encouraged to seek academic counseling to determine when they should return to the university. Students with academic promise are given self-help approaches to improve study habits, time management, or other identified needs. They are encouraged to use the time away from college in a productive manner that will strengthen their basic skills and improve their probabilities of success when they return. Whenever practical, parents are involved during the university-imposed hiatus to work with the Counseling Center or Office of Retention staff to help the student establish long-range goals.

Students admitted on probation represent the greatest retention challenge at Henderson. In the fall of 1986, 3.8% of the freshmen entered on probation, with ACT composite scores of seven or lower and a predicted grade point average of 1.50 or below. Assigned to the Office of Retention for advising, they are encouraged to enroll in Study Skills and Major Decisions (SSMD), a freshman success course. Research in progress comparing probationally admitted students entering in the fall of 1986 who took SSMD with similar students who did not take the course revealed some interesting preliminary results (Garnett & Loyd, 1987). The hypothesis that students enrolled in SSMD would do better than students who did not complete such a course was supported by higher grade point averages for the students completing SSMD, in spite of the fact that predicted grade point averages for the control group were significantly higher. Although the gap narrowed by the end of the second semester, a retention rate of 61% for the experimental group, compared to 50% for the control group, persisted through the fall of 1987.

Success of Students in Retention Program

The success of SIR was immediate. Compared to a success rate of 20% among first-time suspension students readmitted on probation at Henderson prior to the fall of 1984, 50% of the SIR participants at the end of the first semester of the program achieved the 2.00 semester average necessary to remain in college. At the end of the second semester, the rate rose to 61%.

Based on the promising statistics of two semesters, Henderson's Academic Council approved a request to require every student on probation to participate in SIR (approximately

250 per semester including probationary admissions). Students on probation at Henderson now must have Office of Retention clearance before they can register.

In four years the probation rate at Henderson has fallen from 10.2% to 8.2%, and the suspension rate has been reduced from 5.8% to 4.7%. The percentage of students removed from probation has increased from 2.4% to 4.0%. Begun in the fall of 1984, the retention program has contributed significantly to a five-year 22% enrollment increase. During the same period the senior class increased by 30.3%. Figure 1 compares persistence rates over the period prior to 1984 and the first four years of the SIR program.

Although persistence rates in all classes are encouraging, the most promising numbers are those for the freshman to sophomore classes, a 21.8% increase since the fall of 1986. If retention in these classes continues at a similar rate, enrollment should rise significantly.

Conclusion

Specific, deliberately created retention strategies appropriate for particular target groups may not exist on a given campus, particularly among four-year schools that have not had a history of effective academic advising and other academic services. This paper has attempted to explain the origin, development, and the results of SIR, an effort for probationary and first-time suspended students begun at Henderson State University in 1984.

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Erratum

Volume 9(1 & 2) of the *NACADA Journal* omitted the names of Editorial Board members whose terms run from 1989 through 1991. Ed Danis, the former editor, offers his apologies for this inadvertent omission to Karen Godwin, Gregory Hall, Patricia Jones, David Martin, and Sr. Catherine Ann Tauer, and he expresses his gratitude for their dedicated professional assistance in making the *Journal* a visible sign of the growing status of NACADA and academic advising.