

Student Retention & Success Newsletter

Issue 4

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Responding to Troubling Students: How Do We Do It (More) Successfully?

Ken Garni, Director, Counseling Center



This column will attempt to "set the scene" for subsequent articles on what faculty and administrators can do to respond more effectively to students whose behaviors are either disruptive or threatening, or both.

First, the good news. In spite of the horrific tragedies at VTU, our campuses remain quite safe. Employees at colleges and universities have a violent crime victimization rate of 1.6 per 1000, compared to 16.2 for physicians, 54.2 for junior high teachers, 68.2 for mental health professionals, and 260.8 for police officers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). The murder rate on college campuses is 0.28 per 100,000 people, compared with 5.5 per 100,000 nationally. Finally, college students commit suicide at half the rate of their non-student peers; 7.5 per 100,000 compared to the national average of 15 per 100,000, matched for age, race, and gender (Silverman et al, 2003).

Partially because of the reverberating shock of the VTU tragedies, climates of fear have developed on many campuses, creating distancing and often adversarial interactions with students, particularly those described as being odd, eccentric or erratic in their behaviors. We look for quick solutions and/or to blame others for our discomfort when we react out of fear. Research has consistently shown that "...the risk of violence pre-

sented by mental disorder is modest....and that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses' (American Psychiatric Association, Fact Sheet on Violence and Mental Illness, 1994). Nevertheless, it is also important to remember that mental health and medical problems are not legitimate excuses for disruptive and threatening behaviors.

As we respond to students that challenge us, it is important to consider the following:

Students generally are not attempting to be malicious and often are not even aware that they are being discourteous or disruptive.

Students tend to exhibit behaviors that were either accepted or overlooked in high school and were rarely challenged.

Try to view each conflict as a "teachable" moment.

Try to deal with significant issues of disruption or disagreement in private, where feasible.

Use "I statements" to address developing concerns. By doing so, you can "own" the problem and provide students with

opportunities to save face and to avoid their personalizing the conflict.

Try to focus on the possible intent and motivation(s) behind the disruptive and challenging behaviors.

Think win-win. Ask students how they would resolve the issue if they were in your place.

Listen carefully. Frequently ask clarifying questions that help define and contain the issue at hand.

Make certain that your position is clearly defensible and consistent with established policies and procedures.

Be as consistent as possible in how you handle conflicts. Students tend to become even more uncomfortable if our behaviors are unpredictable and difficult to anticipate.

Maintain and update an on- and off-campus referral resource list for your use in such situations. Read "*Dealing with Distressed Students: A Guide for Faculty and Staff*" (www.suffolk.edu/offices.989.html)

More to follow ... Happy Holidays!

First Year Experience Student Issues

December Happenings

December Celebrations

Finals Quiet Hours

Closing Information

Possible Issues/Concerns

Increasing thoughts/deliberation about suicide occur from inability to cope with the pressure of academic and social expectations.

Final exam pressures including anxiety, fear and guilt increase as exams approach and papers become due. Increased use of alcohol and drugs is related.

Extracurricular time strains—seasonal parties, concerts, social service projects and religious activities drain student energies.

Financial worries occur with the thought of Christmas/holiday gifts and travel costs.

Pre-holiday blues emerge especially for those who have concerns for family, those who have no home because of family conflicts.

Friendship tensions become high with the onset of final exams.

Pressures increase to perform sexually because of the approach of vacation and the extended separation.

Differences Between High School and College

from University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Below are some of the adjustments between high school and college our first year students face.

High School

Teacher/Student Contact—Contact closer and more frequent (5 days a week).

Competition/Grades—Academic competition is not as strong; good grades can often be obtained with minimum effort.

Status—Students establish a personal status in academic and social activities based upon family and community factors.

Counseling/Dependence—Students can rely on parents, teachers, and counselors to help make decisions and give advice. Students must abide by parents boundaries and restrictions.

Motivation—Students get stimulation to achieve or participate from parents, teachers, and counselors.

Freedom—Students' freedom is limited. Parents will often help students out of a crisis should one arise.

Distractions—There are distractions from school, but these are partial controlled by school and home.

Value Judgment—Students often make value judgments based on parental values; thus, many of their value judgments are made for them.

College

Teacher/Student Contact—Faculty are available during office hours (only a few a week) and by appointment.

Competition/Grades—Academic competition is much stronger, minimum effort may produce poor grades.

Status—Students can build their status as they wish, high school status can be repeated or changed.

Counseling/Dependence—Students rely on themselves; they see the results of making their own decision. It is their responsibility to seek advice as needed. Students set their own restrictions.

Motivation—Students apply their own motivation to their work and activities as they wish.

Freedom—Students have much more freedom. Students must accept responsibility for their own actions.

Distractions—The opportunity for more distractions exists. Time management to students will become more important.

Value Judgments—Students have the opportunity to see the world through their own eyes and develop their own opinions and values.

Save A Student

Susan Leyva writes:

I would like to nominate Wes Savick from the Theatre Department. Recently one of his students had a medical emergency that required hospitalization. The student's roommate told Wes about the medical issue. Wes went to the hospital to visit with



the student and told the student not to worry about the course work—just concentrate on getting well. It was nice to hear that a faculty member cared so much to actually go to the hospital and stay with the student and his family.

If you have another story to tell about one of our colleagues, please send your nominations for this award to Judy Benson, Director of Retention, at jbenson@suffolk.edu.

Navigating the Hill

submitted by Olena Savvytska

In making class selections for the spring semester, a freshman faces a number of often challenging choices. Is it time to take that math class now, or would it be better to take a science course? Should I be taking a course or two in my major? What *do* I want to major in? Such questions, coupled with the wide array of courses the university offers, can leave freshmen confused and frustrated to an extent where the advising process no longer seems helpful, and course selection is a nightmare.

Perhaps the best course of action for a student trying to select courses is to settle on a major. Some students opt for a double major or a major/minor combination; these, although they require good planning, allow a student to explore two fields rather than one. Those who are not ready to make the "major decision" can avoid roadblocks ahead by filling general requirements.

Retention Goals

By Vice President Marguerite Dennis

I have just been informed by the Registrar that approximately 500 students have applied to graduate in January, 2008. Typically we enroll 500 new undergraduate and graduate students in the Spring semester. So the new students will replace the students who graduate.

We have set a goal of a 2% increase in retained students for the Spring. Many faculty and staff have been working creatively and tirelessly to achieve that goal and the members of the Retention Management and Student Success Committee are grateful for your help and support.

Our next newsletter will be published in February, 2008. I hope to be able to report to you at that time the percentage of students successfully retained. We are also working on the profile of the persister and I will also share that information with you.

My best wishes to you and to your family for a happy and healthy holiday season and the best in the new year.

Students Take AIM for Success

by Mike Dickinson, Director, Ballotti Learning Center

Have you heard about AIM? The Academic Improvement (AIM) Program, in its pilot stages, is a program offered by the Ballotti Learning Center for students on academic probation. The program consists of a combination of weekly small seminar style classes and individual meetings with staff from the BLC.

AIM covers more than the traditional study skills topics and addresses important personal success strategies. For example, students discuss their struggles with asking for help. They are introduced to the concept of interdependence and learn how successful people utilize resources and how they can be a resource to others. Another topic covered is personal responsibility. Students discuss the difference between being a victim – “I missed class because my alarm clock didn’t go off” and a creator – “I set two alarms each morning to make sure I get to class.” For the first time some students begin to recognize that their success is their choice. In line with the course topics, students are given assignments to reinforce the success strategies. One assignment includes visiting each of their professors during office hours. Every semester initial complaints about this assignment turn into notes of appreciation as students learn that their professors are approachable and want them to succeed. Finally, in addition to the seminar discussions and assignments, success strategies are reinforced as students discuss their individual challenges and plans for success.

Students’ responses to the program have been extremely positive as have the results. Last spring, 88% of the participants earned a semester GPA above a 2.0. This fall the number of participants has doubled to 40 students and an additional 20 students are expected to participate in the spring. As this semester comes to a close and you learn about students’ grades, please encourage students you know who will likely be on probation to participate in the AIM program. Students who are on probation will receive information about participating in the program during or after the winter break.

What if I am Asked?

I heard there is a snow storm headed our way during finals week. What happens if school is closed on Wednesday when our final is scheduled?

If the University is closed on any day during exam week, Friday, December 14 is sched-

uled as the makeup date. Information will be updated on the University home page. Students, faculty and staff who provided the University with their emergency numbers will receive a phone and text notification. Please encourage any student

who has not updated this information to access SAIL and click on Update My Address Information.

I need a printed copy of my final grades for tuition reimbursement. What do I need to do?

Grade mailers are sent automatically to all students who are on file as tuition reim-

bursement with the Student Accounts office. Students will receive an email from the Registrar’s Office this month with instructions on how to request a grade mailer. Otherwise, grade mailers are only sent to students on reimbursement or in academic difficulty. All other grades are accessed via SAIL.

Chalk Talk

Excerpts printed from Chalk Talk with permission of author Donna Qualters, Director of Suffolk University Center for Teaching Excellence

Helping Students Prepare for and Take Exams

One situation that causes troubles for students is poor time management during the exam. The following suggestions may help better prepare your students for their final exam:

Read all problems before writing anything. Jot notes for yourself next

to problems/questions regarding relevant equations or definitions. This will help when you return to those problems, and show you the information now that you may need if you start to run out of time before finishing the exam.

Attack the questions you find easiest first.

Note the point value of problems to decide where to spend more time.

Be aware of time passing.

After completing each question, reassess the time remaining.

If you have time left, use the last minutes to double check your answers.

Quick tip: Consider discussing your grading system with the class before the exams so students understand your expectations.

Quick tip: Even if students don’t ask about preparing for exams, you could spark a discussion by asking them about the difference between solving a homework problem and solving a problem on an exam. You could talk briefly about the six points on an exam taking “prior” to exam day, since students are more likely to “hear” you under less stressful conditions. Finally you might consider offering a verbal and/or written time check through the duration of the exam to keep students on track.

Entering the Maze (part 4)

By Mike Siegel, Director, Higher Education Program

The most important step institutions can take in developing a retention program is to understand their own student demographics and determine what structures and resources exist on campus to support student success. Too often, colleges and universities “don’t know what they don’t know” about their current students. It is necessary, therefore, to audit or inventory current practices, policies, and structures on campus that support retention efforts and identify areas on campus where information is lacking. Engaging in a campus-wide inventory of practices reaffirms the notion that each campus has its own set of unique retention concerns, and as a result, schools must tailor their efforts accordingly to fit the campus culture and the student population. To close this newsletter series on retention, I would like to suggest three methods for enhancing retention on campus, namely engaging faculty in the process, focusing on effective advising, and fostering communication about local and national retention trends.

Engaging Faculty in the Process: An effective method for engaging faculty in the retention process is to support and reward cross-disciplinary collaborative work structures. In addition, institutions should promote the design of creative and innovative pedagogies in the classroom, and provide the necessary resources to incorporate them. Another powerful strategy is to integrate joint student/faculty research opportunities and activities into the curriculum. Students who are invested in research projects are more likely to take their academic work seriously. Institutions might similarly offer competitive grant stipends to student/faculty teams for conducting classroom-based research. Finally, institutions interested in effective retention strategies should take advantage of teaching laboratories (like Suffolk’s Center for Teaching Excellence), which might serve as incubator for entrepreneurial teaching and learning activities to be tested.

Effective Academic Advising: Academic advising is perhaps the most critical piece of the retention puzzle as it is the primary tool for promoting the curriculum and enhancing the educational growth of students. Done properly, advising ensures that students progress nicely through the curriculum and select majors in which they will ultimately be successful. Advising done poorly can lead to student dissatisfaction and distrust. Faculty and staff must be properly trained in developmental advising and intrusive advising techniques and provided with necessary resources (advanced registration technology, up-to-date information on programs and services, etc.) to adequately perform their duties.

Communication about National and Local Trends: Not everyone on campus knows or even cares about retention research, and even those who do may not enjoy consuming retention data. It should be the responsibility of the campus retention task force or committee—or the person in charge of retention efforts on campus—to reduce national reports and research to executive summaries and/or make them relevant for campus constituent groups. Retention connotes different things to different constituent groups. Where possible, institutions might consider tailoring retention and persistence reports according to the group they are attempting to reach. For example, faculty might be more interested in the relationship between retention and teaching strategies, whereas the college advancement operation might be more interested in the way retention affects future alumni fund-raising prospects. Members of student life, residence life, campus activities, orientation, student leadership, and other areas of student affairs, for instance, might be more interested in the implications of retention on programming, quality of life issues, and out-of-class experiences.

In sum, institutions are most likely to be effective in their retention activities if they create a culture of intentionality on campus, make informed decisions about programs and policies, conduct ongoing assessment and review, and design and implement educationally purposeful curricular and co-curricular activities.

For additional resources and literature on retention-related issues, please visit the following:

Schilling, K. M., and Schilling, K. L. (1999). Increasing expectations for student effort. *About Campus*, 4(2), 4-10.

The Policy Center on the First Year of College (<http://www.firstyear.org/>)

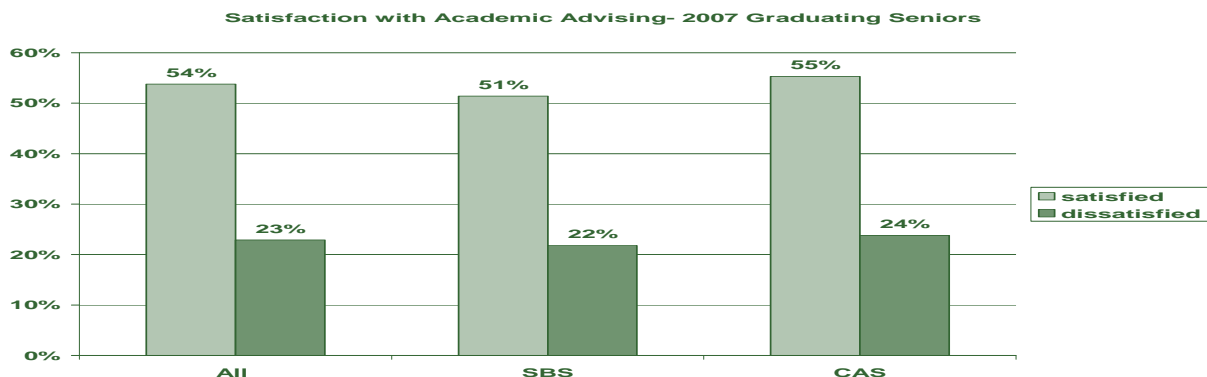
The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (<http://sc.edu/fye/>)

Purdue University Parent Handbook (This Handbook explores the typical month-by-month transitional and emotional issues first-year students experience) (http://www.purdue.edu/SATS/parent_handbook/support/student_transition.html)

“The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal”: (<http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/050713bf.htm>)

Satisfaction with Academic Advising

submitted by Michael Duggan, Director of Enrollment Research and Planning



According to Pascarella and Terenzini in *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, “research consistently indicates that academic advising can play a role in students’ decisions to persist and in their chances of graduating” (p404). In our most recent survey of graduating seniors, 54% of respondents were satisfied with their advising while 23% were dissatisfied. The 2006 results were slightly better with 56% satisfied and 21% dissatisfied.