

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

STUDENTS

A Third of Your Freshmen Disappear. How Can You Keep Them?

By *Kelly Field* | JUNE 03, 2018

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Kim Raff for The Chronicle

Cassidy Nelson (left), a peer mentor at Southern Utah U., introduces Abby Geddes, an incoming freshman, and her mother, Shelly, to Jodi Lee Simmons, the university's coordinator for parent and family services.

When the first-year retention rate at Southern Utah University fell five percentage points over five years, college administrators there knew they had a problem. They just weren't sure what to do about it.

"They were at a loss, and frankly, we were, too," recalls Jared N. Tippets, who was hired three years ago to reverse the trend.

The institution had tried several of the "high impact" practices that are supposed to help with retention — learning communities, common reading programs — but students kept leaving. By 2015, only 64 percent of freshmen were returning for their sophomore year.

So Tippets, the chief retention officer and vice president for student affairs, and his team started from scratch, building a comprehensive "first-year experience" that combined financial support with enhanced advising, earlier identification of struggling students, and a focus on fostering a sense of belonging. They overhauled orientation, redesigned the first-year seminar, and created a new peer-mentoring program, among other changes.

How to Curb Freshman Attrition

In a time of declining enrollments and shrinking high-school classes, you can't afford to lose a third of your first-year class. A holistic approach that combines financial support with enhanced advising, earlier identification of struggling students, and a focus on fostering a sense of belonging has proven successful at one college. Could it work for yours?



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The holistic approach seems to have worked. First-to-second year retention is up 7 percent over 2015, and is on track to reach 74 percent this year, a gain of 10 percentage points in three years.

Southern Utah's turnaround comes as **a growing number of colleges are reimagining and revamping the first-year experience**, hoping to hold on to the students they have in a time of declining enrollments and shrinking high-school classes.

While institutions may have once relied on a single program to promote first-year success — a seminar, say, or an orientation — they're now stitching together multiple solutions, says Suzanne Walsh, deputy director for postsecondary success at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is financing a project in which 44 regional state colleges are redesigning the first-year experience.

First-year retention rates haven't changed much in the past decade, and they're worse for low-income, first-generation, and minority students. **Nationwide, just 61 percent of students who started college in the fall of 2015 returned to their starting institution in 2016, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.** One in eight transferred to another college. Black students had the lowest retention rate, with just 55 percent returning for a second year.

High attrition rates among freshmen are due to a variety of factors. First-year students drop out because they aren't prepared for college-level work, because they're working long hours to cover tuition, because they face a family crisis. Some leave because they don't feel that they fit in.

Efforts to ease the transition from high school to college aren't new. Colleges have offered freshman seminars for more than a century, and supplemental instruction since the 1970s.

What's new is the range of approaches colleges are trying, and the sense of urgency they're bringing to their work.



Kim Raff for The Chronicle

Tevita Loamanu, a Southern Utah student who serves as a peer mentor for freshmen, speaks during a workshop on "Understanding our LGBTQIA+ Community."

In past decades, "institutions had the luxury to take a 'fail all you want, there will be more' approach" to their students, says Drew Koch, president of the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. Many colleges "measured prestige by the percentage of students they flunked out," says Betsy O. Barefoot, a senior scholar there.

No longer. A combination of pressures — financial and political — has forced colleges to pay closer attention to student success. Policy makers and the public no longer tolerate high failure rates, and institutions, faced with dwindling state support, have discovered that "it's substantially cheaper to keep the students you have than go find new ones," says George L. Mahaffy, vice president for academic leadership and change at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

In a 2010 survey by the nonprofit education group ACT, almost two-thirds of chief academic officers at public four-year colleges, and half of those at private four-year colleges, said they had set specific first-to-second year retention goals. Seventy percent said they had designated an individual to lead retention efforts.

Administrators may soon have an even bigger financial incentive to focus on first-year retention. Right now colleges and students can keep all the federal aid they receive if a student stays at least 60 percent of the term. **Under the Republican plan to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, colleges would have to return all the money for students who withdrew in the first quarter of the term, and at least a portion of the money if they left at any time during the semester.**

Here are five of the most popular programs and initiatives to improve first-year retention — some well-established and some relatively new.

First-Year Seminar and Freshman Orientation

The first first-year seminar was offered at Boston University 130 years ago, according to Dallin G. Young, assistant director for research, grants, and assessment of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. Freshman orientation followed 35 years later, with "freshman week" at the University of Maine.

The programs were copied by other colleges, and by 2012, nearly 90 percent of institutions offered a freshman seminar, according to a triennial survey by the resource center.

Today the percentage stands at 74 percent, a decline that Young attributes to a drop in the number of colleges offering "extended orientation" seminars, in which students are taught study skills and how to navigate the campus. **"Academic seminars," which are centered on a subject or theme, are actually rising in number.** Roughly three-quarters of colleges offer pre-term orientation.

As first-year seminars and orientations have aged, they've also evolved. The traditional orientation, with parents dropping off their children for a daylong crash course, is disappearing, replaced by a broader, more inclusive experience. Colleges still cover the basics — course registration, placement exams, meetings with academic advisers — but many have added a healthy dose of community-building, along with discussions of mental health, diversity, and social justice. More than 80 percent of four-year colleges now offer sessions for family members, according to the resource center's survey. Many offer sessions in Spanish.

A growing number of colleges, including Southern Utah, now offer separate orientations for subgroups of students, such as older adults, veterans, international and multicultural students, and honors-program participants.

Joyce Holl, executive director of NODA — the Association for Orientation, Transition & Retention in Higher Education, says colleges have learned that "they can't have an out-of-the box orientation anymore."

"They need to create programs that are specific to the students who are coming to their campus," she says.

It's in that spirit that some colleges are tailoring their freshman seminars, too. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the two-credit seminar is limited to high-need students. There is also a transition course and a half-day retreat specifically for men, who have lagged behind women in terms of retention.

But while seminars remain popular, their quality varies, says Barefoot, of the Gardner institute, who has studied the courses for years.

"They tend to be low-status and taught by the unwilling," she says. "It's not to say that there aren't many excellent courses, but there are even more that are not excellent."

Building a Sense of Belonging

A growing body of research suggests that students who feel they belong at their college are more likely to remain there. The same research shows that first-generation and minority students are less likely to feel a connection to their colleges, and more likely to struggle with self-doubt and impostor syndrome — feeling like an intellectual fraud.

Those findings have prompted colleges to seek new ways to build community and a sense of belonging among their students, often even before they set foot on campus.

At Southern Utah, peer mentors and academic advisers reach out to students an average of 38 times from when they pay their admissions deposit to when they move in. During summer orientation, students take a personality assessment that identifies them as extroverts or introverts. When classes start, the shy students are invited to small-group gatherings based on their hobbies and interests. Peer mentors offer to take them to their first club or organization meeting so they don't have to go alone.

Other institutions have created courses and programs aimed at building students' confidence and coping skills. **At Indiana University at Kokomo, a quarter of this year's freshmen chose to take a student-success seminar, at which they discussed impostor syndrome and growth mind-set — the idea that intelligence is malleable rather than fixed.** Last year eight faculty members took part in a student-success academy, where they studied stereotype threat (the risk of confirming a negative group stereotype) and other psychological barriers to learning; this year they shared their findings with colleagues.

At the University of Texas at Austin, an online pre-orientation session includes messages from current students describing how they overcame their own feelings that they didn't belong or weren't smart enough. Prior research by David Yeager, an associate professor of psychology, showed **that disadvantaged students who heard the messages were likelier to complete 12 credit hours than were those who got only the usual, practical information about the college transition.**

The most at-risk students at Austin — the most economically disadvantaged and the least likely to graduate — are invited to an intensive leadership-training program that provides scholarships and on-campus internships, so that participants, many of them commuter students, spend more time on campus.

The results have been impressive. Only a third of the students in the 2013 cohort were expected to graduate in four years, but 55 percent did.

"Building this sense of community and belonging had a remarkable effect on their ability to say this is a place they can call home," says David Laude, the chemistry professor who created the program.

St. Cloud State University, meanwhile, has created a 20-item survey on students' sense of belonging, which found that those with a low sense of social belonging were 17 percentage points likelier to drop out than those with a high sense. The Minnesota college plans to use the tool to better identify students at risk of leaving and to measure the impact of institutional efforts to improve student belonging.

"The academic indices we were using to drive outreach — high-school GPA, test scores, demographics — are part of the picture, but they're not sufficient" to find students who are struggling, says Glenn Davis, interim assistant provost of University

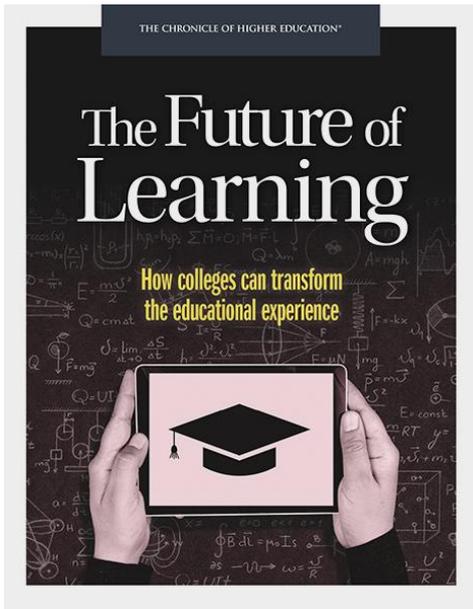
College at St. Cloud.

Redesigning Gateway Courses

Among the biggest stumbling blocks for many freshmen are gateway courses — those high-enrollment, lecture-heavy classes that are popularly known as "weed-out courses."

For years, colleges have used gateway courses to limit the number of students pursuing pre-med and other challenging majors. Lately, though, some have started paying closer attention to whom they're failing. Turns out, it's disproportionately minorities and low-income students — the very groups who make up a growing share of the undergraduate population.

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So some colleges have started remaking their gateway courses, aiming to reduce the number of failing grades and withdrawals.

Some of the fixes have been simple. Lansing Community College, in Michigan, moved a key chapter in its introductory accounting course from the middle to the start of the semester, so that students who struggled with the foundational material could get support sooner. Another class, "Introduction to Sociology," moved to an open-source textbook, so that all students would have the material on the first day of class.

Other institutions, including the New Jersey Institute of Technology, have tried deeper reforms, trading the time-honored lecture for a student-centered, active-learning approach in some classrooms.

The key, regardless of scale, is to secure faculty buy-in, says Koch, of the Gardner institute. "Faculty are the gatekeepers of gateway courses. If you try to impose a structure on them, good luck."

But persuading faculty members to abandon old mind-sets and longstanding lectures isn't always easy, as Gordon A. Thomas, a physics professor at NJIT, discovered when he set about overhauling his section of introductory physics three years ago.

At the time, he was failing about half of his students, and so were most of the other professors who taught the class, he recalled. He decided to test a variety of active-learning techniques and urged his colleagues to join him. Many refused.

"I kept preaching this idea that our job was to help students do better," Thomas says. "They say our job is to weed them out."

Some professors and administrators have started to come around, he says, as they've seen the results. This semester, 90 percent of his students are on target to pass the course.

"I've learned to be patient and keep talking it up," he says. "If you force people to do it, and they're unhappy, it's not going to be effective."

Northern Arizona University lets faculty members craft their own gateway-course redesign plans, in consultation with staff members at its **First-Year Learning Initiative**. The plans must address certain key objectives to become certified by the staff, but faculty members are given discretion in how they meet them.

"We don't dictate what they do — we try not to be top-down," says Rachel L. Koch, interim director of the initiative. "Disciplinary needs differ, and different strategies work best for math versus English."

Supplemental Instruction

Supplemental instruction, which puts peer coaches in challenging courses, was developed by the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1973 and owes its growth largely to that institution. Over the past 45 years, the university has trained representatives from about 1,500 colleges in the United States and 30 other countries in the technique.

In these courses, "SI leaders" — undergraduate and graduate students who previously excelled in the course — hold regularly scheduled study sessions in which students review the material, discuss readings, and learn study skills. The technique focuses on "high-risk courses," including many offered during the first year.

Research by the university has found that students who take advantage of supplemental instruction are much less likely to fail or withdraw from high-risk courses than those who don't — 18 percent versus 31 percent. Their final grades are higher, too.

But SI does have one drawback — it's completely voluntary. That makes it difficult to determine if the achievement gains are due to the intervention or to student self-selection. If more motivated and academically able students are opting in to supplemental education, then that might explain their superior outcomes.

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Julie Collins, director of the International Center for Supplemental Instruction, at Kansas City, has seen the studies questioning whether "this method is supporting students who would have already done well." The university's own research, she says, shows that every student benefits from supplemental instruction, performing a half-grade better than students who don't use it.

"D students can become C students, and even an A student is going to strengthen their study skills and learn from others," she says.

Some colleges are bringing peer coaches into the classroom, so students don't have to commit to outside sessions. At Nevada State College, "course assistants" — students who earned at least a B-plus in the course — sit in on classes and model good habits, such as note-taking and asking respectful questions. For an hourly wage, they facilitate small-group discussions, demonstrate problem-solving strategies, and observe students to identify individuals who could benefit from additional support.

Tony Scinta, executive vice provost, says the program has reached students on the commuter campus who weren't using the college's other mentoring and tutoring services.

"We saw that academic support was strongly associated with students' success, but we also noted that very few students actually relied on those services," he says. "We decided to bring the support to students where we knew we would find them: in the classroom."

Early Alerts and Intrusive Advising

Early-alert systems, which use data about academic performance to flag students who need extra help, aren't exactly new, says Charlie Nutt, executive director of Nacada: the Global Community of Academic Advising. Professors have been sharing students' midterm grades with academic advisers for decades.

But the advent of new technologies has made tracking students much easier, and more sophisticated. With input from multiple faculty and staff members, today's early-alert systems let colleges predict which students are likeliest to struggle, based on individual risk factors, and identify those who need attention and resources early in the semester, before it's too late.

"We have gone from reactive to proactive, which is so much more beneficial for students," says Nutt.

At the same time, academic advisers have become more "intrusive," asking students not just about their coursework but also about their social and emotional well-being: How are things going in the residence hall? Are you able to balance work and studying?

Reflecting this change, Southern Utah changed the title of its academic advisers to "student success coaches." The coaches now offer to meet students on their own turf — in coffee shops, the library, or the student center.

At Austin, staff members use early exam results to identify STEM majors who are failing two or more key courses and give them the option to change their major and switch to a nonmajor section of the course. In the past, students were stuck in their major and their courses for the semester or even the academic year.

Results from the first three years of the Major Switch program show that students who opt in are more likely to pass their science course and to persist in college.

So which intervention works best?

Though many retention strategies have been studied in isolation, there's been little research on the relative effectiveness of different approaches, Barefoot says.

One thing everyone agrees on is that colleges need to think broadly about first-year retention, and not relegate the work to a single day or a single department.

As NODA's Holl puts it, "We can't wipe our hands and say, 'We've done orientation, our job is done.' "

At Southern Utah, administrators have distilled success into four C's, saying retention efforts have to be **campuswide, comprehensive, collaborative, and coordinated.**

"There's so much territoriality in higher ed, and lots of silos," Tippets says. "It takes a village to really get to where we want to be."

This article is part of:

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