There has been an enormous body of research conducted over the last four decades regarding college student attrition/student retention. Researchers and educators such as Tinto, Astin, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Noel have explored reasons why students stay at an institution, why they leave, and what makes the difference. Others, such as the Rouches, Boylan, Bonham, and the Kuliks focus more on student characteristics and instructional programs/approaches that can increase the chances of success for at-risk students. Generally speaking, studies link student persistence to motivation level, academic ability, and general satisfaction with the college experience. College students who are underprepared, undecided, and fail to form attachments are less apt to persevere.

To talk about retention, then, we need to know which students we are talking about. Who comes through the open door of a community college?

One segment of the community college population is certainly attracted by the low tuition and/or the fact that there is no need to leave home. These students have been “college bound” throughout high school and are anticipating this first, exciting step toward a fairly well-established career goal. They are likely to have above-average academic skills and a background of participation in school activities. A second group needs skills and training to enter a specific field of work or for job advancement. They are individuals looking for a short, straight route to employment or promotion. Many of these students will have part-time jobs and/or family responsibilities. A large number of students enroll at their local community college in response to parental pressure or lack of an attractive alternative. They are “trying out” college, to see if they like it and if it helps them make some decisions about their future. Growing numbers of students who have never considered college (housewives, high-school drop-outs, those with various physical and learning disabilities) are now encouraged to pursue a two-year degree to increase their earning potential.

Beyond the obvious differences in their motivation for attending school, community college students are an unbelievably diverse group in terms of age, race and ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and—that variable that is harder to define but absolutely essential—self-regulation. How does a community college even begin to create an environment that will meet the needs and expectations of all these students?

Do we have an environment of student retention at Hudson Valley Community College? Do we know how many of our students are underprepared, undecided, and without the time or inclination to form attachments to the institution? If we (Continued on page 5)
I could stand on my head, and they still wouldn’t come!

Reasons why students choose to attend class...or not.

Student absenteeism is one of the more perplexing and frustrating problems that instructors deal with. Students who seem to casually miss classes can push the buttons of even the most empathetic, nurturing instructors. Often these students show up later, and, demonstrating little in the way of diplomacy skills, ask, “Did I miss anything important?” Instructors often pay an emotional price for absenteeism, questioning their methods, styles, and abilities to engage students in the content areas that they themselves find fascinating. Although absenteeism is extremely bothersome and often disruptive, it is not uncommon. Research on absenteeism indicates that 20-25% of college students are absent from classes on any given day.

There is a growing body of educational research that is attempting to demystify some of the reasons behind student absenteeism. In Fall 2001, researchers/teachers from the University of Kansas (Friedman, Rodrigues, and McComb) published a study entitled “Why Students Do and Do Not Attend Classes.” The researchers developed a survey instrument and administered it to 350 students in an attempt to find patterns between student demographics, personal characteristics, and class attendance.

Students in the abovementioned research study reported that the following circumstances made it more likely for them to attend class:

- The class was an elective versus a requirement;
- Attendance was regularly taken and absences were noted;
- Poor attendance could negatively impact their grade;
- Class size was small.

When students were asked to give their most common reasons for attending their classes, 75% indicated that it was because they felt that they should be there and that not attending made them feel guilty. A heartening 70% of students attended because they felt that the course content presented was something they needed to know; 65% said that information about course procedures and test expectations further motivated them to attend. Researchers concluded that the “expectation of interesting and important content” clearly influenced the students’ decisions to attend or not (Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb, 2001).

One thing is crystal clear from this and other pieces of research: class attendance is positively correlated with both grade point average and student retention. Friedman, et.al. (2001) suggests that instructors can promote attendance by making it a priority: check it each class period, and create real consequences for absences. Often instructors imply that attendance is important by allotting a certain percentage of the final grade to “participation.” But the expectation of attendance could be made more explicit to students, not only through punishment, but also by talking to students openly about what absences feel like from the “other side” of the podium. Instructors might consider asking students to contact them when they will be absent. This small request lets students know that the instructor is attentive to absences, and it also sets a tone of respect for each other.


If you are interested in reading this piece of research, please contact Lynne Johns (johnslyn@hvcc.edu) to obtain a copy of the article.
Educational Issues Panel Discusses the Underprepared Student

Hudson Valley faculty and administrators concerned with issues surrounding underprepared college students gathered together for the Educational Issues Panel during Faculty Workshop Day. The panel was moderated by Ron Mulson, Assistant Professor, History and Social Sciences, and the panel members included: Carolyn Clark, Business Instructor—EOC; Donald Frament, Learning Assistance Center; Leslie Grout, Instructor—History and Social Sciences; Lynne Johns, Instructional Support Services and Retention; Anthony Kossman, Instructor-Automotive; and Maria Palmara, Assistant Professor—English/ESL.

The goal of the panel was to introduce discussion on the following questions:

1. How do underprepared students get placed in classes that may be too difficult for them at that time?
2. How can teachers find a balance between high academic standards and the needs and initial abilities of underprepared students?
3. What can we do for students who are weak in reading and writing in an English-speaking environment?
4. What resources are available campus wide that would provide support for the underprepared student in achieving success?

Due to limited time the questions could not be discussed in-depth or to the degree each deserved. Time constraints notwithstanding, many important themes emerged during the session. Some of those themes include:

A broader definition and understanding of “underprepared” is needed.

A majority of Hudson Valley students are traditional age (18-19 years old) and 75% enter with a high school average between 60-80%. A great number of Hudson Valley students lack the academic coping skills and learning strategies necessary to be successful in a college environment. The reality is that most of our students come to us underprepared in one way or another. Most first-time students that come to Hudson Valley are not ready for what they will find in the college environment: the shift from teacher to student responsibility, instructors’ high expectations, more freedom (less teacher/parent intervention), and rigorous academic requirements that may include tasks that have never been asked of them before (i.e. research papers, critical thinking assignments, etc.)

Underprepared/At-risk students tend to have erroneous beliefs about the learning process, and themselves as learners.

Each student, whether he or she is aware of it or not, comes to us with a belief system about knowledge and learning. Research shows us that underprepared students have beliefs that can become barriers to academic success. These beliefs include:

• Knowledge is certain and unchanging (i.e. there is only one way answer to a problem, things have absolute truths, etc.);
• People are born good learners, or not;
• Learning is a quick, one-time process and that which isn’t understood the first time, probably won’t be understood;
• Teachers are all-knowing;
• Learning is best when it happens in a rigid, structured way (Cole, Goetz, and Willson, 2000).

The implications for students with these and other erroneous beliefs may ultimately be a lower sense of self-efficacy when faced with the challenges that college presents. Students who enter our doors with these kinds of beliefs, regardless of their skill level, are going to struggle with expectations to think critically, broaden their outlooks, persevere when they don’t understand the material the first time, and see themselves as agents of their own learning.

Teachers can have a positive impact on underprepared students without lowering standards.

Teachers, rightfully so, get irritable when they believe they are being asked to “dumb down” a course so that all

(Continued on page 5)
Planning for a pilot project is now underway to help 24-credit hour students make that transition into college. Suzanne Garhart, an academic advisor in the Individual Studies department, has been working closely with Retention Specialist Ryan Stadler and INS Secretary Cathy Madden to create a program to provide supplementary support to students in the 24-credit hour program.

A Personal Profile form was created to capture, in one location, the past academic histories, personal concerns, and career goals of these students. The advisor and student will fill out the form collaboratively during the first advisement appointment. One main goal of the profile is to proactively identify concerns and potential difficulties and be responsive in a variety of ways. Questions include the following:

- What were some reasons for not completing high school?
- What are your motivations for attending college?
- Do your family and employer support your decision to attend college?
- Do you have any career aspirations?
- Can you think of any obstacles that would prevent you from being successful at Hudson Valley?

The Personal Profile forms are then passed on to the Retention Specialist. During the third week of the term, Ryan makes phone calls to individual students in this group coaching them on problem solving techniques, praising accomplishments, motivating, demonstrating enthusiasm, and making them aware of impending responsibilities and deadlines.

As students gear up for midterms in the sixth week, Ryan calls each student again to map out expectations, build a rapport, reiterate a time line of events, and encourage the use of student support services. A third call is made in the twelfth week of classes for the purpose of focusing on final exams and reviewing any challenges and obstacles that are still apparent. After each call, the Retention Specialist lists any concerns, accomplishments, and student support referrals. These notes are passed on to the advisor who can refer to them when sculpting a conversation specific to the student’s needs. A final call is made after the 1st term to review and acknowledge accomplishments, and discuss expectations for the 2nd term.

During their first semester, students will be invited to a workshop created in collaboration with Donald Fra-ment, Learning Strategies Specialist from the Learning Assistance Center. Academic Survival: Using the Tools to Achieve engages students in the self-regulation process by providing activities and discussion on the value of education, balancing life roles, managing time, and achieving goals. This workshop provides students with the resources to explore self-motivational tactics to sustain them from one task to the next as they pursue their educational goal.

One overarching goal of this pilot is to identify group traits to develop long term, systematic approaches to retention, while providing students with a short term individualized plan of action.

Now that Spring is finally here, we offer you the Top Five Ways to motivate students to come to class when the weather is nice

5. Tell them if they don’t pass your class this time there is plenty of time to make it up — over the summer.

4. Let them know that being smart is much more enduring than being tan.

3. Hold class at 5 p.m. on the patio of Moscatiello’s

2. Mail your non-attenders job applications for Walmart and encourage them to check the box for “Full-Time, Permanent” employment.

1. Tell them that you will be giving a test in the next class, and then “forget” to show up. Let them find you outside the building playing Frisbee or Hacky Sack with other members of your department.
students, regardless of ability level, have a chance to pass. Teaching methods, not academic standards, can be adapted
to help students not only understand material, but also begin to feel like competent, active learners. Instructors may
want to review their course outlines, materials, and classroom notes to see if they have included activities and assign-
ments that help students develop a greater sense of efficacy in the academic setting.

**ESL students present particular challenges to instructors and the classroom environment.**
Often, ESL students have experienced higher education, possess degrees, or have worked in professional fields in their
native countries. These students already know how to learn, but they are struggling with basic communication skills in
English. Other ESL students are struggling with some of the same challenges of other underprepared students: they
lack a basic understanding of how they learn. For these students, college as an ESL student is going to be twice as diffi-
cult. Employing methods found in Universal Design for Instruction will help all students, including those who are ESL,
for example: making lecture notes available in hard copy or through Blackboard so students can go back and review the
lecture highlights, using textbooks that have cd-rom or web-based enhancements, and offering a variety of assignments
and assessments that allow students to demonstrate what they have learned in a mode suited to their strengths and
learning styles. Instructors can also make themselves aware of the resources available to ESL students on campus that
can help alleviate feelings of disconnectedness and alienation, such as: supplemental advisement available through the
English Department, LAC tutoring, and the International Student Organization.

**Hudson Valley has a variety of academic and support services to assist instructors and students in the pursuit of learning.**
Offices like the Center for Careers and Employment, the Center for Counseling and Transfer, Educational Opportunity
Program, Minority Opportunity Program, and Student Activities all share a common goal of assisting students in getting
connected to campus, clarifying their goals, and supporting their efforts. The Learning Assistance Center not only offers
academic assistance to students, but the LAC Education Specialists also work with faculty to customize workshops to
support the content being taught in the classroom, sharing developmental education strategies, and exploring new
methods to help students learn.

The panel members and the audience were fully engaged in discussion when time ran out, leaving the topic to be picked
up at another time, in another place. If you are interested in viewing the panel discussion, you can borrow the video by
contacting Lynne Johns, 629-8068 or at johnslyn@hvcc.edu

Reading and Learning 31, 66-70.

**Retention at Hudson Valley, Part I**

have a great many students who match the profile of a student drop-out or stop-out, have we built in activities
and programs that academically support them, that take them through the steps of goal and career planning,
and that provide them with opportunities to make friends and build relationships? If we believe that we should
do more, do we have the leadership, the time, the flexibility, and the budget to create the kind of educational
and extracurricular college experience that might change the minds of students who are predisposed to leav-
ing?

Let’s look at this issue piece by piece. In the next issue: “Who Are Our Students?”

**Tell Us...**

Is there a specific topic you would like to see covered in a future issue of Retention PIECES?
Please share your ideas with us! Respond to johnslyn@hvcc.edu.
Do you remember a time when someone was influential in helping you find your way down a career path?

The Center for Careers and Employment is offering a mentoring program that connects students with professionals in their desired career. Students are matched with mentors who have agreed to communicate with them through e-mail. Mentors often give students a new outlook about a career and how their coursework relates to that particular field. Hopefully, students will stay interested and excited about their educational goals and forge relationships with members of the community.

The Center for Careers and Employment is also offering a Brown Bag lunch series to support and encourage students who are in non-traditional fields. This group includes, for example, women who are pursuing degrees in technology fields and men who are pursuing degrees in Nursing, Early Childhood, and Dental Hygiene. Students will meet with speakers who share their experiences working in fields where their gender is in the minority.

Please encourage your students to take advantage of these two innovative programs. For more information on either of these programs, please contact Deborah Spence at 629-7421.

SECOND ANNUAL RETENTION SYMPOSIUM
THE UNDERPREPARED STUDENT

Date: 06/13/03
Time: 8:30 a.m.

Hudson Valley Community College
Troy, N.Y.

Last year professionals from eight community colleges gathered at Hudson Valley to talk retention strategies. This year, the theme of the symposium narrows a bit to focus on the underprepared student population. We hope you will consider joining the discussion!

Co-sponsored by: Hudson Valley’s Office of Instructional Support Service and Retention and Orange County Community College’s Office of Student Success and Retention at Orange County Community College. This event is Funded by Hudson Valley’s Office of The Vice President for Academic Affairs.