Literacy: Practice Makes Perfect

Literacy: the ability to purposefully access information from a variety of sources, analyze and evaluate the information, and integrate the information to construct a personal knowledge base from which to interact with others, make intelligent decisions, and participate effectively in a free and democratic society.

Contemporary definitions of literacy go far beyond the ability to read and write. The basic tools of literacy development are taught in the home and in the elementary school. The basic use for information is demonstrated by assignments requiring students to hunt, gather, and display information in middle school. The importance of information is learned through standardized testing in high school. But where do students learn to locate rich and reliable resources, connect information from multiple sources, examine the concepts and issues that spring from facts, create new opinions, use evidence to back their assertions, and practice those skills?

Some Hudson Valley freshmen bring these skills with them. Most of our students, however, are just reaching the stage of development whereby they are capable of conducting the level of thinking that defines a college-educated and literate person. Cognitively, with prompting (remember “dissonance?”), they can weigh both sides of an argument, question the authority of experts, and utilize information to form personal points of view. However, if we don’t structure our classes and assignments to require them to stretch their old cognitive limits, test new learning habits, and hone their reading and writing skills, most of them will be content to collect their credits and move on. (“And he had such potential!”)

If we have a role in preparing students to participate fully and effectively—not merely functionally—at their Baccalaureate institutions, in the workforce and as citizens, what can we do, given the facts that we’re not reading teachers and have content to cover?

♦ Require reading and make students accountable for content; otherwise, why should they believe it’s important?
♦ Include an explicit statement of the cognitive purpose for reading assignments; otherwise, why should students struggle when the going gets tough?
♦ Model methods for tackling difficult reading assignments.
♦ Include a list of additional sources of text and media at various levels for students who may need background knowledge to understand a reading assignment.
♦ Allow time for class reactions to readings, lectures, group work and assignments.
♦ Require students to write: to ask questions, to express confusion, to share insights, to express opinions.
♦ Allow opportunities for students to work with partners during stages of assignments: state and defend reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with an author’s point of view, compare lists of main ideas within a chapter, evaluate resources for a term paper.
♦ Create a research assignment with a librarian to assure that students go beyond the information to original thought and insights.
♦ Share articles and resources that we discover, the ones that reinforce information that we know to be accurate and the ones that challenge our own current knowledge and opinions.

Contributed by Kathleen E. Quirk, associate dean for instructional support services and retention (k.quirk@hvcc.edu)
Early Alert Update

Faculty participation in the Early Alert process—identifying student before the end of the fifth week for an Alert letter—rose in 2009-10. In Fall 2009, 19.7 percent of faculty participated, compared to 17.5 percent the year before. In Spring 2010, 21.4 percent of all faculty identified students by the fifth week, compared to 17.1 percent in Spring 2009.

While these increases are encouraging, the results are well below the highest participation rate (35.0 percent in Fall 2006) when faculty were restricted to identifying students on paper rosters by the fifth week. Indeed, by the fourteenth week of Fall 2009, when the identification process was closed, only 27.6 percent of all faculty had participated. Many faculty members prefer to wait until later in the term to send a letter. While feedback from the instructor is valuable at all times, earlier intervention, has the greater chance of having an impact on student behavior. Why? In the third week, students have not been discouraged by low grades resulting from their poor academic behaviors and have an opportunity to try suggested learning strategies for classes before midterms. As the term progresses, a letter pointing out an instructor’s concerns is just one of many cues the student receives. Early in the term, when students are just learning what is required of them, it may be the only cue.

Upcoming Student Outreach and Support Call Center Sessions:

**Continuing Students without Schedules for Fall 2010:** Monday, April 26 to Wednesday, April 28

**New Students with Incomplete Applications:** Thursday, April 29

**New Students Who Haven’t Tested & New Students without Schedules:** Monday, May 3 to Thursday, May 6

**Distance Learning Students Summer 2010:** Thursday, May 27

**Accepted Students Who Didn’t Enroll, TAP Decertified Students & Non-Returning Students:** Monday, June 7 to Thursday, June 10

**Commitment Purge Warning:** Monday, June 15 and Thursday, June 17
Exploring Non-Traditional Careers in Today’s Economy

On March 2, 2010 an event specifically for students who are interested in or currently enrolled in careers that are non-traditional for their gender (e.g., women in technologies and engineering sciences) was held. The keynote speaker was Sandra McGarraugh, deputy director of the Center for Women in Government & Civil Society. Her office is housed in the New York State Department of Education.

Ms. McGarraugh provided an overview specific not only to the state, but also to our local area, using recent graduation statistics from Schenectady County Community College and Hudson Valley. Both schools demonstrate the same approximate levels of graduates in non-traditional programs as they did over 20 years ago. It is striking to see that things have remained so stagnant.

The participants in the panel discussion which followed the keynote presentation included: Carol Bosco, Christine LaPlante, Rich Porter and Elaine Reinhart, all department chairs at Hudson Valley. They were joined by Adele Ferranti from NYSERDA as well as our keynote speaker.

There are several highlights from the subsequent panel discussion which bear noting.

The first is the positive role mentoring played in the panelists’ personal experience as students and later employees in non-traditional careers. Hudson Valley is fortunate to have a number of department chairs, advisors and faculty members whose non-traditional careers serve as models for the college’s students. Panelists encouraged students to reach out to instructors or other employee who can serve in this role.

Second, it quickly became apparent from both the personal and professional experiences of the panelists that students in non-traditional careers are the most successful when they share certain personal and academic qualities, including: determination, willingness to work hard, self-confidence, a good sense of humor and the ability to tolerate the biases that may still exist (otherwise known as having a “thick skin”). Indeed, women in non-traditional programs at the college have an average 85.6 percent fall-to-spring retention rate, compared to an 81.5 percent rate for men in the same programs.

Third, it is critical to stimulate interest in non-traditional careers at an early age. From 2002-09, only 8.9 percent of the new students in technology, math and engineering programs at Hudson Valley were women. The panelists recommended providing information to grade-school students, since by the time students have reached high school they have already chosen to follow more traditional paths.

Contributed by Debra Kowalski, off campus coordinator and academic counselor (d.kowalski@hvcc.edu)

Hudson Valley and Questar III Collaborate to Improve the Transition from High School to College

Matthew Howe, the Testing Coordinator within the Instructional Support Services and Retention Unit, is collaborating with Ted Hennessy, the Career Development Specialist at Questar III BOCES, on an effort funded by a Perkins II Grant secured by the Greater Capital Region Career Pathways Consortium. Currently in year two of a four-year funding period, the project’s objective is to “better support students transitioning from high school to post-secondary education.” Hudson Valley has been selected to coordinate the process of administering ACT’s COMPASS test to high school juniors in selected schools to determine whether they are on track, in terms of academic skills, to continue their education at a community college.

COMPASS test scores will identify the students who need to incorporate supplemental skill-building courses/activities into their senior year schedule. After students have participated in appropriate interventions, they will take the COMPASS test again. It is anticipated that improved test scores will reduce the number of students who must take non-credit, developmental coursework during their first semesters of college.

Approximately four hundred students taking classes through Questar III BOCES took the pretest at their school in the fall. Hudson Valley has been working with Questar III instructional technology staff, faculty, and counselors to prepare them to administer the test, analyze the scores, and use diagnostic information to inform the development of academic skill interventions.

Matthew has also presented on this topic at the Albany Regional CTE Conference: Career Pathways Showcase in December 2009 and the New York Community College Trustees Annual Spring Conference in March 2010.

For more information, contact Matthew Howe, testing coordinator, at x8069 or m.howe@hvcc.edu.
### College Learning Centers ~ Workshops

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**FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT THE LEARNING CENTERS ON THE LOWER LEVEL OF MARVIN LIBRARY OR ONLINE AT WWW.HVCC.EDU/LAC**

**New Retention Work Group: Veterans of the Armed Services**

This semester, Retention Services has formed a work group to review the academic outcomes of and support services available to students who are veterans of the armed services. Members of the group include the advisors to the Armed Services Club, staff from the Center for Counseling and Transfer and Registrar’s Office, and faculty and advisors who responded to an e-mail invitation to all faculty to participate. This is an exciting time to be reviewing the experiences of our student veterans. Hudson Valley has been exploring ways to partner with New York State’s Division of Veterans Affairs to expand campus services for this population, and the fruits of those efforts should appear by Fall 2010.

The final recommendations of previous retention work groups are available at: [www.hvcc.edu/issr/atrisk](http://www.hvcc.edu/issr/atrisk).

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**What are your best practices for retaining students?**

Contact Kevin McNeelge at (518) 629-7638 or by e-mail at h.mcneelge@hvcc.edu to discuss writing or being interviewed for an article for a future issue of *Retention PIECES.*