Can an Hour Make a Difference? Yes it can!

Kudos to the Human Services Department for participating in a pilot study to investigate the effect of an extra hour of student contact on student success in a high risk freshman course!

This model—an alternative to non-credit, remedial courses—springs from a program at Rutgers University, where “Gateway” or bridge versions of traditional freshman courses are offered to students identified as having basic skill deficiencies. To help students succeed in traditionally high-risk freshman courses, departments extend the contact hours (but not the earned credit) of some course sections and build in learning strategies and skills that are relevant to the content area. In the Rutgers model, class sizes are smaller, class time is extended by one or two hours, weekly, and instructors use alternative instructional methods to cover the same content as that in the traditional sections. With extended class time, there is opportunity for the instructor to say, “I see that you haven’t had great success with this type of assignment/activity, so I will take the time to show you some strategies that we will practice for the next time.” The academic course outline, student behavioral goals, and final examination for the course remain the same.

During the summer of 2003, after a series of spring planning meetings, instructor Maria Markovics revised the course syllabus for a section of Introduction to Social Service Systems (HUSV 100), adding a debate activity to introduce students to the critical thinking skills they would need to complete class assignments. In an extra hour per week, she provided direct instruction regarding critical reading, evaluating sources, and organizing information to present or defend a particular point of view.

In her summary report of the pilot experience, Ms. Markovics states that many students benefited from the additional time. She notes a marked improvement in the quality of student critiques from the beginning to the end of the course and attributes some of the improvement to extra class discussions about writing techniques and critical analysis.

Unfortunately, a student evaluation was not included as part of the pilot, and calls to students’ home had limited results. Students who were reached had only positive feedback about the experience, including that the class was “wonderful” and the extra time ensured a “great learning experience” and that “the extra time spent discussing how to approach assignments helped with other classes, as well.”

This type of embedded intervention addresses many components of what retention researchers identify as productive retention programs:

- Highly structured;
- Connected with programs/services—not stand-alone activities;
- Includes extended, intensive student contact;
- Predicts academic difficulty before it occurs.

Freshman high-risk courses, such as Psychology, Sociology, and many of the basic science courses are fertile ground for this type of bridge programming. If your department is interested in discussing bridge courses for under-prepared freshmen, please call Kathy Quirk at #7234.

Contributors:

Lynne Johns, Editor
Kathleen Quirk
Ryan Stadler

Guest Contributor:
Jamey Thompson
“Getting the Rhythm”: Retention Strategies in Online Courses

Every semester, students in my online astronomy course begin by introducing themselves on the discussion board. One of the most common comments I get in those introductions is something like, “Wow, I love astronomy... I once saw a comet/meteor/UFO/etc.” Taken at face value, this is much more enthusiasm than I normally hear in my on-campus classroom! And this emotion is shared by the majority of the class. To be fair, that kind of enthusiasm is interspersed with the more traditional, “I am taking this because I have to take one science to graduate.”

Let’s fast forward to the fourth week of the term: by this point, we have had our first unit test, turned in a lab, and completed 3 chapters. Enthusiasm at this point is definitely waning and not surprisingly, I have lost a sizable portion of my students. Of the students who will not complete the course, 90% leave in the first three weeks.

What does this tell me? “Lost” students never really get into the course rhythm. The bright side: if students can get into the rhythm of the first two-week unit – they have an 80% chance of passing the course with a C or better. 80%! I could talk for several hours about why I think that this occurs, but I am going to talk instead about ways that I try to maximize my chances of getting those students into the rhythm.

Who’s Enrolling? “Virtually” Know Your Students

During the first week, I ask the students to introduce themselves with several things, most importantly what they are majoring in and why they took this particular course. When I examine this data longitudinally I can see patterns in the students who persevere and those who do not. For instance, I am most likely to lose students that say “I am in this major, but I don’t know what I want to do.” Sound familiar? Personal goals and motivation appear to be one of the most important factors for student success.

I also ask if my current students have ever taken a course online. Students that answer “yes” do better in the class overall, but among the students that are taking their first course (60-70% of most terms), motivation still seems to be the key factor in course success.

Making Text Communication Personal

Think of how many emails you never read because you realize that the text isn’t written for you at all (for instance emails addressed to “all employees”). That is what it is like to be an online student - much of the prepared lectures, labs, and other activities feel sterile without the verbal cues and body language that we are used to in the classroom.
Retention and transfer are terms used to describe cognitive processes associated with learning, and they are the outcomes that every college instructor hopes for when teaching their students. A recently published article entitled “Applying the Science of Learning to University and Beyond: Teaching for Long-Term Retention and Transfer” proposes that retention and transfer is the one main goal of all teaching, and that there are ten basic principles that can help promote those processes (Halpern and Hakel, 2003). While the purpose of the article was to outline some general practices that would foster the cognitive processes of retention and transfer, it is not a far leap to consider how fostering the cognitive process of retention may help encourage the other kind of retention as well.

The basic principles described in the article reaffirm that what students learn, as well as how much they learn and how well they are able to retrieve, depends on teaching that is deliberate, focused, and concerned with long-term gains in knowledge and understanding. The principles centralize the importance of allowing students to:

Practice the content and the act of remembering;
Construct meaning through the “re-representation” of content in different formats;
Apply what they are learning to authentic, relevant contexts;
Learn by doing—not just listening;
Consider what prior knowledge they possess fits with what is currently being discussed;
Develop awareness of their beliefs knowledge and themselves as learners.

Implicit in these suggestions are the very things that help students engage, become and stay motivated, and connect with the academic environment (teachers, peers, etc.).

Halpern and Hakel (2003) support the notion that teachers who take time to understand the science of learning will be more adept instructional designers. Teachers who learn about learning will be able to: more clearly develop realistic goals for how much content can and should be covered in a given day, week, and semester; decide whether to engage students in deep or surface learning depending on the importance of the content; and create learning activities that match the purpose and goals of the course.

Learning about learning is of critical importance for those who are making (or have made) education their career, whether they be instructors or administrators. Learning critical skills is not confined solely to the classroom; students learn through interactions with campus personnel other than faculty. Understanding the processes associated with learning is important for those who work with students on a regular basis outside of the classroom as well.


If you are interested in reading the article that is summarized here, please contact Lynne Johns via email at johnslyn@hvcc.edu
To counter this, I send out a template email reminder at the end of each unit listing any work that was not turned in. This often helps to catch assignments that weren’t correctly submitted, and it helps remind those students who are in danger of slipping behind that I am watching their progress closely. I make a template of the text of the email so I can paste that into the email and personalize it to their situation. Saves me a lot of time and since the students don’t compare emails, it is perceived as a personal touch. This goes a long way to decreasing the communication gap online.

“Sticky Frosting”

A common tip for web designers is “Make your online website ‘sticky’ by giving your users (students) reasons to come back often. There is a great correlation between students’ activity on my course and their overall grade. So I set out to make the course website sticky by enticing them to explore other websites often.

I also try to tap the excitement that many students have for astronomy. I send an email or two per week that contains links to online stories about astronomy in the news. This can work for almost every subject we teach – find websites that summarize and post information about your subject and then relay that to your students. I emphasize that this is “frosting” and is not required, but I find that many students read at least some of those stories. This excitement helps reinforce the sense they are in a course with a subject that is current and exciting.

Maybe you are saying: “but my subject is boring, there are no news stories or fun things to link to.” Creativity is key! You can post a series of questions of historical accounts or breakthrough moments from when the field was exciting, for example “On this date in Calculus…” or something like that. You might be giggling, but honestly, I once saw a series of emails that explored the discovery of calculus. Exploring the personal side of a field that can be seen as tough or dry (sorry Calculus!) can give the subject more life and the student more motivation to stick with it.

Let Students Know You Are Watching

In addition to the template and frosting emails, I also send out two others: one at midterm and one right before finals. Not surprising, these are the two times that my students are most anxious about the course. Again, these are templates that are personalized to their situation, but the students don’t know that.

These emails give an overall idea of their grade and my impression of their strengths and weaknesses. I try to be very encouraging here because many students need to read this since they are not hearing this like they would in the classroom. I also tell my students I will always be very honest with them with respect to the course. It takes about 2 minutes per student to do, but it feels like time well-spent.

Can I Save Them All?

At the end of the day you can do everything humanly possible to retain students and the fact is, you will still lose them. Retention is always a two-way street often dependent upon the motivations and abilities of the student, as well as the expertise of the instructor. Do the things I do make a difference to my students? Honestly, I can’t really be sure. I do, however, feel like these extra efforts parallel the more personal communication I automatically have with my traditional classroom students, so in that alone, the extra effort will always be worth it to me.
Thirty students finished the Smart Start program in August of 2003—96% percent of those students who completed the program are still here.

Advisors, we need your help!

Even though spring has barely sprung, recruitment for the summer 2004 Smart Start program has begun and will continue until the end of July. Academic Advisors play a significant role in identifying students who can benefit from the Smart Start Experience.

The Smart Start program is designed for students who may not be confident about their preparedness for college. Learning Assistance Center faculty will review basic academic skills as well as introduce students to campus support staff. Students who participate will become familiar with the campus and make some friends before classes begin.

Classes will be held Monday through Thursday, August 9 - 12, 16-19, and Monday through Wednesday, August 23-25, from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. There also will be an optional study group time from 1 - 2 p.m. on each day classes are held. The program will include classes in college writing, math, and a daily study skills workshop or orientation to a specific campus service.

If you have any questions about the Smart Start program please contact Ryan Stadler, Retention Specialist at x7638 or go to www.hvcc.edu/smart.

What are you doing on June 18th?

3rd Annual Retention Symposium

“Putting Together Your Gold Medal Team”

June 18, 2004 from 9-3:30pm

Sullivan Community College—Loch Sheldrake, NY

Please consider attending this one day event dedicated to bringing together faculty and administrators interested in issues related to student success and retention. Registration fee for the day is $15 which includes a continental breakfast and lunch.

The retention symposium began here at Hudson Valley Community College and the “torch” is now being passed to other campuses around New York State!

For more information, please go to www.hvcc.edu/retention

The symposium is co-sponsored by Sullivan Community College, Hudson Valley Community College, and the SUNY Community College Consortium for Student Retention
The majority of student retention initiatives begin with means to measure success based on a number. While the statistic may lead a project, the endless variables to human behavior ask us to include qualitative results to help determine the success of a project. Many student retention theories in higher education support the idea that retention is not just about the number. Instead, there is a focus on proactive approaches to identifying learning habits of individuals and student populations that put them at high risk and providing an environment that is supportive. John E. Roueche’s book *Practical Magic on the Front Lines of Teaching Excellence*, is the compilation and distillation of five years of research conducted by Roueche and colleagues with community college professors from around the country. The book shares insights, ideas, and issues shared by award-winning teachers on what it takes to teach and retain the students who attend community colleges.

“Respondents identified the strategy of holding high expectations of their students as critical to making a difference in students’ lives; some referred to the potential of the ‘Pygmalion effect’- a powerful motivator that has been found to encourage students to believe in and outperform themselves. They warned, however, that pairing high expectations with high standards could test the resolve of insecure students or those more academically under prepared; pairing expectations and standards at high levels, particularly with these students, will be successful in only the most supportive climates for learning.” (p 86)

Roueche continues to highlight respondents' belief that high expectations motivate students, and low expectations net below average results. Roueche admits that the tips of the trade offered in this chapter are not new information, but still serve as excellent suggestions to consider for implementation:

- Believe in students even before they believe in themselves and share that belief with them.
- Remind students that the grade they “get” is the grade they “earn.”
- Require—yes require--- students to remain open to new ideas and different personalities.
- Challenge students preconceptions and biases.
- Encourage personal responsibility and independent thinking.

Although retention efforts are often times created based on a statistic, the true core of enhancing an educational community begins with increasing the quality of interaction; this is something that can not be directly measured but should always be valued.

Practical Magic celebrates the teachers and teaching that makes community colleges the special, “magical” places that they are. Consider making this book part of your summer reading!

To read more about Practical Magic, please click on the book!

Or go to http://www.nisod.org/downloads/celebrations.pdf