

The Case for a *Holistic* Approach to Promoting Student Success

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Promoting student success, such as persistence to graduation and academic achievement, requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond strictly the academic or intellectual dimension of student development to address the student in a holistic (whole-person) fashion. An early clarion call for such a holistic approach to student success appeared in Upcraft and Gardner's (1989) seminal text, *The Freshman Year Experience*, in which they argue that "freshmen succeed when they make progress toward fulfilling [the following] educational and personal goals: (1) developing academic and intellectual competence; (2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; (3) developing an identity; (4) deciding on a career and life-style; (5) maintaining personal health and wellness; and (6) developing an integrated philosophy of life" (p. 2). This holistic approach to student success is also consistent with the goals of the FYE course offered at the University of Carolina (University 101), which has served as a national model for more than a quarter of a century: "University 101 subscribes to the belief that development is not a one-dimensional affair but must reach far beyond the intellect and into emotional, spiritual, occupational, physical and social areas" (Jewler, 1989, p. 201). Indeed, the entire "freshman year experience" movement emerged from the concerns of a former president of the University of South Carolina, Tom Jones, who thought that the university needed to offer a course that would address the student as a whole person, rather than just their intellect (Watts, 1999). The president was strongly influenced by Nevitt Sanford's (1967) classic, *Where Colleges Fail*, in which Sanford argues that colleges fail whenever they treat students as less than a total person and ignore the fact that effective learning depends on the whole being, not only their "abstracted intelligence."

The following arguments and research findings support the value of taking a holistic approach to student success in the first year of college and beyond.

Student retention and persistence to degree completion are strongly influenced by factors that are not strictly cognitive or academic in nature. Less than half of student attrition from higher education can be predicted by academic indicators such as SAT/ACT scores and high school GPA (Mattern & Shaw, 2010). Furthermore, the vast majority of students who withdraw from college are in good academic standing at the time of their withdrawal (estimates range between 75-85%), and they do withdraw, they do so for reasons that are not strictly academic or cognitive in nature (Carey, 2004; Gardiner, 1994; Levitz, 1994; Noel, 1985; Rummel, et al., 1999; Tinto, 1988, 1993; Willingham, 1985). This also holds true at open-access community colleges that serve the least academically prepared students. In a recent national survey of community college students, only 19% reported that "being academically unprepared" would cause them to withdraw from college, ranking behind such factors as "caring for dependents" (29%), "working full-time" (38%) and "lack of finances" (45%) (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). Even students who are academically prepared for college

still struggle to complete college (Roska, et al., 2009). For instance, first-generation college remain at greater risk for attrition than other students, regardless of their level of academic preparation for college (e.g., entering SAT scores and the rigor of course work required by their high school) (Glenn, 2008). “Indeed, because of the powerful effect of adjustment on retention and because of the relative independence of academic preparedness from many types of adjustment, it may worthwhile to consider almost all first-year students to be underprepared” (Perzadian & Credé, 2015, p. 40).

One meta-analysis of studies revealed that adjustment to college is a multidimensional phenomenon, and when these multiple dimensions are taken into consideration, they provide an effective predictor of college grades and a particularly potent predictor of college retention (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). These findings underscore the importance of providing support programs that address the first-year student as a “whole person.” This recommendation is reinforced by the experience of Indiana University, Bloomington, which launched a broad range of initiatives to enhance the quality of the first-year experience and improve student retention. The results of their first-year initiatives pointed to the conclusion that strict concentration on academic matters is unlikely to increase retention without equal concentration on non-academic elements of student life (Smith, 2003).

These campus-specific findings are reinforced by the cross-institutional work of Kuh, et al. (2005), who identified campuses that had substantially higher-than-predicted rates of student engagement and graduation than would be expected based on their student and institutional characteristics (e.g., admissions selectivity and percentage of commuting students). The research team made multiple site visits to the high-performing campuses to identify what these institutions had in common that may be accounting for their unusually high rates of student success. The visiting research team noted that one common theme traversing these campuses was “an emphasis on holistic student learning [that] runs broad and deep in institutional policies and practices” (p. 65).

Research on developmental education also indicates that academic remediation that’s offered in the context of a broader (more holistic) set of student success strategies is the most effective strategy for increasing students’ persistence and timely completion of postsecondary credentials (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

Institutional efforts at promoting student retention are more effective when academic and student affairs professionals collaborate in the delivery of educational and support programs. In a study involving a consortium of twelve colleges formed to implement and assess practices explicitly designed to promote student retention, it was found that strategies developed collaboratively through the joint efforts of Academic and Student Affairs proved more effective than programs previously developed independently by these two administrative units (Stodt & Klepper, 1987). More recently, a research project designed to document effective educational practices (Project DEEP) revealed that one key characteristic of institutions with higher-than-predicted graduation rates was a high degree of respect and collaboration between academic and student affairs (Kuh, et al., 2005). Similarly, an in-depth study of state universities with higher-than-average graduation rates (given their institutional characteristics and student population) revealed that one of the distinctive features of high-performing institutions was campus-wide

coordination of retention efforts that stimulated communication and cooperation between academic and student affairs (AASC&U, 2005).

Programs with a comprehensive, holistic focus lend themselves to collaboration between Academic and Student Affairs, giving them the potential to promote cross-divisional partnerships and create a heightened sense of campus community. The joining together of faculty and student development professionals in the design and delivery of a holistic student-support programs may also be an effective vehicle for reducing the historic “schism” or “persistent gap” between academic and student affairs, which creates a deleterious “disconnect” between undergraduates’ curricular and co-curricular learning experiences (Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Miller & Prince, 1976; ACPA, 1994; ACPA & NASPA, 1997, 2004). The partnership-building potential of the first-year experience course was originally noted in one of John Gardner’s earliest reports on the University 101 program at South Carolina: “The program integrates faculty and professional staff at the university in a joint undertaking [which] tends to reduce the barriers between the faculty and staff camps, reduces stereotyping and has promoted better relationships between faculty and especially student affairs staff” (1980, pp. 6 & 7).

Collectively, these findings point strongly to the conclusion that it is important for educational interventions to focus not only on strictly academic-success strategies, but also on “non-academic” adjustments to college and development of the student as a “whole person.”

Research strongly suggests that first-year seminars with a holistic focus are the most effective type of seminar for promoting student persistence, academic performance, and personal development. Working under the auspices of the Policy Center for the First Year of College (Brevard, NC), Swing (2002) conducted a large-scale comparative study of outcomes associated with different types of first-year seminars. Based on self-reported student outcomes from over 31,000 students attending 62 institutions, he found that *college transition* seminars, which focus on academic and non-academic (holistic) topics, “performed best overall across the ten learning outcomes investigated” (p. 1). College transition seminars with a holistic focus were especially more effective than *discipline-based* seminars housed in academic departments and focused exclusively on introducing first-year students to an academic discipline or major field of study.

Consistent with these findings is the conclusion reached by Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot (2005) upon their national experience with first-year experience courses: the most effective first-year seminars are those that are designed to facilitate first-year student success in both academic and non-academic facets of college life. Supporting this conclusion are the findings of a meta-analytic review of close to 200 published studies of first-year seminars conducted by Permzadian and Credé (2016). They found that first-year seminars with a holistic focus—i.e., whose main objective is facilitating students’ academic and personal adjustment as well as fostering an attachment to the institution—had a more significant impact on students’ persistence and overall academic performance than seminars focusing strictly on the development of specific academic competencies.

It’s noteworthy that despite the consistently strong research support for holistic first-year seminars, the percentage of campuses reporting that they offer this type of seminar has declined from almost 75% in the early 1990s (Hunter & Linder, 2005) to about 40% in 2012; in contrast, academic seminars have increased to the point where they are nearly

as prevalent as holistically-focused seminars (Young & Hopp, 2014). Although it may be politically easier to persuade faculty-driven curriculum committees to approve of academic seminars, if we're really serious about making "data-driven decisions" and improving college-completion rates, campuses should be mindful of research pointing to the positive impact of first-year seminars that take a comprehensive, whole-student approach to student success. If first-year seminars focus exclusively on academic or cognitive skill development, they will "miss the boat" with respect to addressing the full range of factors responsible for student attrition.

Brain research indicates that the impact of cognitive and emotional experiences on human learning cannot be separated. In their book, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*, Caine and Caine argue forcefully "the brain does not separate emotions from cognition, either anatomically or perceptually. Such artificial categorization may be helpful in designing research projects, but it can actually distort our understanding of learning" (1991, p. vii). Furthermore, information is processed through emotional centers of the brain *before* it is passed on to parts of the brain that specialize in cognition and reasoning (LeDoux, 1998).

Positive emotions, such as those associated with optimism and excitement, have been found to facilitate learning by enhancing the brain's ability to process, store, and retrieve information (Rosenfield, 1988). In contrast, feelings of anxiety and personal threat have been found to interfere with the brain's ability to (a) store new information (Jacobs and Nadel, 1985), (b) retrieve already-stored memories (O'Keefe & Nadel, 1978), (c) engage in deep learning (Numella & Rosengren, 1986), and (d) think at a higher level (Caine & Caine, 1991). For instance, students who experience higher levels of academic stress or anxiety are more likely to use ineffective "surface" approaches to learning that rely merely on memorization (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981)—as opposed to using "deep" learning strategies that seek meaning and understanding.

Collectively, these brain-based findings lend strong support to an argument made long ago by a taskforce report that influenced the creation of University 101 at the University of South Carolina: "Cognitive growth which is separated from the development of other aspects of the human personality is illusory and distorted" (Committee on the Student in Higher Education, cited in Barefoot & Fidler, 1992, p. 63).

Students' self-related level of emotional health at the time of college entry is positively related to degree completion, and students who experience psychological problems in college that remain untreated are more likely to withdraw from college (Choy, 2002; Schuh, 2005; Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997). The first year of college, in particular, can be a very stressful stage of the college experience because it involves a major life transition that involves not only academic adjustments, but also significant changes in social relationships, emotional experiences, and personal identity. Studies reveal that college students report higher levels of stress and lower levels of emotional health at the end of their first year of college than they did before beginning college (Bartlett, 2002; Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2004).

The confluence of these findings strongly suggests that any program that purports to promote new students' success must address the affective aspects of the first-year experience. Failure to do so may allow unresolved emotional issues to foment and

subvert students' academic performance, as well as undermine their ability to persist to degree completion.

Viewing this topic from a more positive psychological perspective, students' level of optimism or hope for success during their first term on campus is a more accurate predictor of their college grades than are their SAT scores or high school grade-point average (Snyder, 1994; Snyder, et al., 1991). Students who score higher on tests of emotional intelligence—the ability to identify, monitor and manage one's own emotions (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997)—have been found to achieve higher grade-point averages of the end of their first year of college (Schutte, et al., 1998). Additional research shows that new college students who take first-year seminars or college success courses, which include information on emotional control and emotional-skill development, are more likely to be successful during their first year of college (Schutte & Malouff, 2002). Further connections between emotional intelligence and successful performance is demonstrated by studies showing that people who can control their emotions, and who can harness or direct their emotions in a positive way, are more likely to persist longer at challenging tasks (Simunek, et al., 2000) and achieve professional success (Goleman, 1995; Saarni, 1999). In fact, social and emotional intelligence (“EQ”) have been found to be better predictors of personal and professional success than intellectual ability (IQ) (Goleman, 1995).

A holistic approach to promoting student success is the only way to realize the full range of educational goals expressed in college mission statements, the vast majority of which involve student outcomes that are not strictly academic or cognitive in nature. A cursory review of college catalogues will reveal that the majority of institutional mission statements embrace educational goals that are much broader and diverse than knowledge acquisition and cognition. Formal research on the goals of higher education institutions indicates that they go well beyond intellectual outcomes, encompassing psychosocial, experiential, and personal development outcomes as well (Astin, 1991; Kuh, Shedd, & Witt, 1987; Lenning, 1988). In a study of faculty at 2- and 4-year institutions who received outstanding teaching awards and distinctions, these instructors reported that they didn't believe that learning course content was all that mattered in the classroom. Instead, they identified personal (holistic) development to be equally important, and often more important, than subject-matter outcomes. Although these award-winning faculty members valued intellectual development, they took a holistic approach to the teaching-and learning process (Rendón, 2006).

Promoting students' holistic development is consistent with the goals of liberal (general) education. Historically, liberal or general education has been viewed almost exclusively in terms of the content of courses that comprise the liberal arts curriculum. However, the goals of liberal education (traditionally perceived to be the domain of Academic Affairs) and the goals of holistic development (traditionally to be the domain of Student Affairs) are strikingly similar and mutually reinforcing (Astin, 1991; Grandy, 1988; Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1987; Meacham & Gaff, 2006). As Berg (1983) notes, “To educate liberally, learning experiences must be offered which facilitate the maturity of the whole person and enhance development of intellectual maturity. These are the goals of student development and clearly they are consistent with the mission and goals of

liberal education” (p. 12). Based on an exhaustive review of studies on how college affects, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reached the following conclusion: “The evidence strongly suggests that these [college] outcomes are interdependent, that learning is holistic rather than segmented, and that multiple forces operate in multiple setting to shape student learning in ways that cross the ‘cognitive-affective’ divide” (p. 269). Together, the interdependent outcomes of liberal (general) education and student development form the “twin towers” of a college education and define what it means to be a well-educated, well-rounded person.

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