

Problems Relating to Retention of High-Risk Students

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Retention

When a faculty of an open-admissions college, such as the University of Minnesota Technical College of Waseca, concerns itself with the issue of student retention, the focal point of that concern has to be the student characteristics that argue against successful completion of college work. There is more involved than class rank or GPA. These less obvious characteristics creating an academically-disadvantaged or high-risk situation might include the lack of academic courses taken in high school, a measure of poverty, a degree of rural isolation, and the difficulties inherent in being a first-generation college student.

Academics

Students at UMW, a college with a single agricultural mission, run the whole range of class rank, show an overall grade mean of 2.79, yet arrive with transcripts showing only 4.08 academic classes completed for their three years of high school work. This compares with an average of 10.4 classes for students entering all colleges of the University of Minnesota. Further compounding the problem, 40 percent have had no math courses during those three years, and 39 percent have had no science courses. They have had only 1.45 classes in English.² The lack of background knowledge for college courses in these academic areas then is obvious. What is not so immediately apparent, but what may become even more meaningful to the issue of retention, is that these same students may not have picked up the study habits that will enable them to cope with college courses. Students report to their instructors that they realize something is wrong when test scores first come back. They confide that they have always had good grades before, without ever having had to study. Of course that may be precisely what is wrong: **they didn't have to study**. Consequently, they have never learned how and may need to be reminded that it is "all right" to ask for academic help if they need it.

Finances

Poverty, a term usually not associated with *Minnesota* students, does exist. Sixty-eight percent of UMW's students received financial aid ranging from \$200-\$3100, with the average award being \$2230 for an academic year. Students frequently voice their concern over the rising college costs. They also are worried about money going out, rather than coming in. For example, some of them have had to store corn because of low prices and borrow against it while hoping for a higher price later, and now they are worrying over whether they have done the right thing. Perhaps more

than other college students, UMW students have previously measured their progress and achievement by money made or dollars ahead. Now for a while they may have to be content with a measure of poverty. Seventy-one percent of our students report only \$15 or less per week uncommitted money for spending as they wish. Perhaps they need to be reminded from time to time that it is "all right" for students to be poor. And it is also "all right" for students to ask for financial help. The students may need to know that many others are also feeling financial constraints and that it is a temporary condition.

Rural Isolation

Many of UMW's students have grown up in rural isolation. The term is difficult to define with any precision, but many UMW students have experienced it. The often heavy workload at home or the need for special transportation may have cut them out of activities at their high schools, making it more *difficult* for them to initiate such activities now. The increased time spent with their own families and their consequent interdependence may create more loneliness and homesickness for these students than for others. Some have had so little time to develop outside friendships that they may even have difficulty relating to their own roommates. College clubs and activities, as well as classroom and laboratory situations, may be the key to retention in this situation. The sensitive instructor can sometimes bring even the most determined "wall-watchers" through the barrier of shyness to student leadership positions with careful prodding and a little plotting. This aids not only in retaining students but in enriching their lives. Goals then have a chance of being met. Many students through the press of their own and their families' work have not had a chance to travel much at all. Through different, college-sponsored activities this too can be remedied, not only providing more knowledge and experience, but also making college life more interesting, thus keeping students "on track" to meet their personal and vocational goals.

First-Generation College Student

The final characteristic of being first-generation college students may bring the most subtle, yet the most negative forces of all into play in the retention struggle. To show the scope of the problem, "first-generation college student" is usually meant to describe a student who has neither parent having completed a four-year degree, but for UMW, over ninety percent of its students have **neither** parent completing even **one** year of college work. Not only the students, but the parents also do not have a realistic knowledge of what is involved in college work. They both may not understand the difference between college load and overload. Perhaps they do not believe that going to

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college is **hard work**, involving not only the actual time spent in classrooms and laboratories, but also the reading, thinking, reviewing, and assimilation time that goes into the studying process. Combining a possible misunderstanding of the work load involved in being a college student with a tradition of hard work and long hours spent at tasks at home, many students have a tendency to overload on classes. Some students confess to feelings of guilt because they had been up at 5:00 a.m. before to milk cows at home, and now they may not have a class until 10:00 a.m. They may worry about "gaps" in their days, not knowing how to manage their time nor even to plan for recreation as well as study and review times in their daily schedules. They may not even realize the joy, as well as the value, of taking electives or leaving room for club and other college activities. Their parents may add to this burden of guilt by teasing them about all that "free time." At UMW, faculty and administration work toward building-in parental support, but they must not assume that they have it. Some parents view college as frivolous or needlessly expensive and act as if they are eager for students to abandon what they may see as "this foolishness." Even neighbors, unfortunately, sometimes enter into the situation by regaling the students with stories of how hard their parents are working to make up for the students' lost labor and manage to imply that the students should hurry home where they belong before their fathers wear themselves out. Once again students assume an extra weight of guilt just for being college students. The message needs to be repeated that "going to college is **doing something**." Faculty may be of some direct help in coping with this problem. At the least, they can understand it.

Frustrations

Occasionally, too, the students generate terrific excitement about new programs and new directions to take in agriculture, only to meet total resistance as they try to implement any projects. The frustrations that follows the initial enthusiasm may be so hard to deal with that dropping out might seem to be the only answer. Faculty can provide some guidance in presentation of new ideas and evaluation procedures to document improvement. They may be helpful in suggesting ways of coping or compromising when such resistant opposition is met. Just the faculty's listening may serve the purpose of lessening the strain. The students still need to believe in the value of seeing things through, in reaching goals set, in persevering in the face of difficulties. Sometimes, more than many members of the faculty may realize, the students may need seemingly off-hand suggestions about study techniques and what amounts to a virtual **giving of permission** to mark books, to concentrate on main points, not trying to absorb nor even necessarily to read every word, and to ask "dumb" questions. Later the

faculty may hear such comments as "I'm so glad you didn't let me give up," or "You're the one who convinced me that I could make it."

Avenues of Assistance

A more direct assault on the obvious academic problems these high-risk students bring to college can be made through the Learning Skills Program in place at UMW. Through screening tests offered at the beginning of the students' work, some identification of high-risk students can be made. Recommendations that the student take the "Improvement" courses follow, but they are only recommendations. These courses offer help in mathematics, writing, reading, and study skills. Mini-courses are offered also in improvement of spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, and reading speed and comprehension. Study skills seminars, requiring no registration, are offered in October of each year, and math anxiety groups meet each quarter. A strong peer tutoring program is available which comprises the basic or compensatory portion of UMW's effort on behalf of the under-prepared student. There are several forms available: intensive, one-to-one assistance over an extended period of time; occasional, immediate help for any student through an in-house program designed to cover the courses most likely to present problems; tutor-led study groups for help in reviewing, especially before tests; and a satellite program that provides a tutor who can work with the instructor on reinforcement in the classroom or laboratory. But these are only helpful as use is made of them. Concerned faculty, counselors, administrators, and the students themselves can assist in bringing news of possible help to needy students. Retention must be a cooperative effort. It is an effort worth the making for everyone concerned.

Summary

Retention of students is a problem to all institutions of higher learning, but some aspects of this problem seem particularly related to the students of agricultural colleges. Among these may be a lack of academic subjects taken in high school and the study techniques needed to master them, financial difficulties, a life spent in rural isolation, the difficulties inherent in being a first-generation college student, attitudes that preclude seeking help, and even the frustrations of learning new programs and directions for agriculture that they are unable to implement. **They** are bright, hardworking, highly skilled, and well worth the effort to keep them in school until they reach their own personal and vocational goals. College programs and faculty sensitive to their problems can help in retention of these high-risk students.

Notes

¹ Taken from "New Student Characteristics, Fall Quarter 1981, University of Minnesota," Admissions and Records Office, Leo D. Abbott, Director of Admissions, Office of Student Affairs, Twin Cities Campus.