

Will Improved Advisement Help Student Retention?

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The 1980's has been a period in which student enrollments have declined in colleges of agriculture. Student enrollment at Land Grant Universities declined 24 percent during the ten year period ending in 1988 (Manderscheid). Agricultural enrollment in non-land grant schools declined 13 percent. The largest declines occurred in such traditional fields of study as general agriculture, agricultural engineering, crop science, and animal science. Alternatively, colleges of agriculture that offered undergraduate degrees in physical and biological sciences realized significant increases in enrollment.

The enrollment in the College of Agriculture at the University of Nevada-Reno declined 34 percent from 1980 through 1987. In 1988, enrollment increased for the first time during the 1980's. Most of the increase was accounted for by the increase in graduate students, although undergraduate student enrollment did increase slightly. Enrollment in the Agricultural Economics Department declined by 36 percent from 1980 through 1987. Biochemistry was the only department that had an increasing enrollment during the 1980's.

Reduced enrollment will, at some point, be reflected in reduced budgets, therefore, colleges have reacted with numerous programs directed at increasing enrollment. For example, based on demographics of declining numbers of ranch families, many colleges increased recruiting efforts in urban high schools in order to explain that agriculture is more than just growing wheat and cows, but includes a large and varied industry beyond the farm gate. The idea is to emphasize career jobs in agribusiness. The justification for recruitment is the assumption of an increasing population pool of students and/or reducing the number of students that select out-of-state universities. Otherwise, recruitment results in shifting students among colleges. Another common program is the modernization of curriculum based on the belief that curriculum in colleges of agriculture emphasizes careers on the ranch and farm, whereas student careers are not on ranches and farms, which has been the case for many decades. There is also the concern that current curriculum does not provide breadth necessary to develop the educated person (Erven). Then, there have been changes that usually involve changing names of courses, departments, and at least discussions of changing college names. Other programs include increased scholarship activity, increased emphasis on the teaching program, increased emphasis on quality teaching, and increased emphasis on student retention. All of these demand enhancing activities are probably effective to some degree but whether they result in the most efficient use of university resources has yet to be addressed, given that enrollment declines in agriculture is probably a result of

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students selecting majors in other colleges rather than not attending school.

Starting fall 1986, the Agricultural Economics Department initiated a retention program. Motivation for the program resulted from data that indicated that student retention level was dismal. Data were gathered so that a student could be tracked and it was found that of the freshmen starting in fall 1982, 80 percent had dropped out by the end of the first year. The record showed that of the freshman starting in fall 1983, 36 percent had dropped out by the end of the first year. Freshmen enrolling in fall 1984 had a dropout rate of 78 percent and 67 percent of the fall 1985 freshmen dropped out. We were aware that the dropout rate was high, but certainly did not appreciate how high. Studies within our college, as well as elsewhere, indicate that students dropout for reasons varying from health problems to career change to financial reasons to low grades. The fact that we did not recognize or appreciate the level of our dropout rate, and that we did not know why students were leaving, led faculty to believe that more emphasis should be placed on the advisement process as a major part of our retention program.

The retention program concentrated on improving student advisement efforts. The program started by assigning one person responsibility for coordinating undergraduate advisement. This person did not handle all the individual student advisement work, but was responsible for coordinating all advisement and initiating an intrusive advisement program. The coordinator began tracking all of the new students and made sure that the students would make contact with an advisor. If a new student did not make contact with an advisor, the coordinator would contact the student either by telephone or track them down in a classroom. Every effort would be made to set up a meeting between student and advisor. The person coordinating advisement would meet with other advisors and counsel them in terms of advisement procedures. The emphasis was placed on getting to know the students and identifying problems before they developed into a crisis.

Advisors were made aware of available student services and scholarship programs. Instructors were asked to be cognizant of potential student problems and inform advisors of any problems. Instructors would inform the advisor coordinator if students missed classes and the coordinator would make contact with the student to find out if there was a problem.

The dropout rate for freshman starting in fall 1986 continued at the high rate of 71 percent. But, the dropout rate for fall 1987 freshman was 40 percent. Preliminary figures for fall 1988 freshmen indicate that the dropout rate will be considerably down.

The majority of our majors are transfer students. The

analysis showed that the dropout rate for fall 1983 new transfer students was 30 percent, fall 1984 was 42 percent and 33 percent for fall 1985. After initiating the intrusive advisement program, there were no dropouts for new fall 1986 transfer students.

While only two years of data is available for evaluating the program, the figures indicate that dropout rates are declining and discussions with students indicate that the advisement program is appreciated and having a positive impact. While the effort appears to be providing positive results, we cannot explicitly say that the program is reducing dropout rates or that dropout rates will continue to decline in the future. Undoubtedly, many variables besides advisement effect dropout rates.

References

Erven, Bernard L. "Reforming Curricula: Challenge and Change for Agricultural economists." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 69(5): 1037-1042.

Manderscheid, Lester V. "Undergraduate Educational Opportunities in the Face of Declining Enrollments." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 70(5): 985-993.

NACTA Membership Survey Results

You may recall that a survey of the membership was sent out with the Fall/Winter annual membership dues notice to ascertain certain features of the membership of NACTA and the nature of their response to services the organization makes available. Below you will find a summary of the results of that survey based upon the 85 responses Murray Brown had received as of mid-January.

I have been a NACTA member for:

Response	N	%
2 years or less	8	9.41
3-5 years	28	32.94
6-10 years	33	38.82
11-15 years	5	5.88
over 15 years	11	12.94
	85	

I was influenced to join NACTA by (mark all that apply):

Response	N	%
A friend who was a NACTA member	48	36.63
A campus recruiter for NACTA	16	12.21
Attendance at a NACTA conference	16	12.21
NACTA Journal	37	28.24
State affiliate of NACTA	5	3.82
A state coordinator of NACTA	7	5.34
Other (please specify)	4	3.05
	131	

Other responses listed included:
former member and national DTA President;
institutional membership;
support for improvement of teaching.

The most important benefit to me of being a NACTA member is (rate in order 1 to 5, 1 being highest):

Item	Score*
Journal	399
Teaching Awards	200
National Conferences	197
State Affiliate Conferences	123
Other (please specify)	27

*Not being a golfer, I have difficulty with "low score wins," so I valued a response of 1 (= most important) at 5 points, 2 (= second most important) at 4 points, etc.

Other responses listed included:

- Sharing with others
- NACTA's objectives
- Meeting and working with other ag professionals
- Professional affiliation with a teaching-focused organization (N=2)
- Support for improvement of (my) teaching

Comments:

While this sample is limited (representing less than 10% of the membership?) we might point out that:

- (1) If this is a reasonable cross-section of the membership we are not, perhaps, as gray as we might worry we are!
- (2) Personal contact and the *Journal* are what sell memberships!
- (3) While the *Journal* is clearly the top "benefit" of membership, both the Annual Conference and the Teaching Awards program are also important features to our membership! (the "value" of state affiliate conferences is distorted by this survey since many of the members are in states where there is no state affiliate!)

Recommendation: Take a friend to lunch, hand him/her a copy of the *Journal* and invite membership on your personal recommendation!

John C. Mertz
NACTA Vice President

June 17 - 20

NACTA

36th Annual Conference
Morrisville College SUNY
Morrisville, NY