EXAMINING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR FIRST-SEMESTER EXPERIENCE AT A MAJOR LAND-GRANT INSTITUTION

This study examined the perceptions of freshmen students regarding their first-semester experiences at a major land-grant institution. A questionnaire was developed based on a review of the literature related to factors that influence students' success. Factors that influence students' success included time management/goal setting, academic advising, stress, and institutional fit/integration. These data provide insights on perceptions of student's early experiences on campus.

The perceptions of freshmen students are of particular importance for student recruitment and retention. The attention both issues have drawn is due to the fluctuating number of college applicants and the decreased level of funding for institutions of higher education (Braunstein & McGrath, 1997). Students are faced with more options than ever before for postsecondary learning. As a result, competition to recruit these students escalates. In addition, nearly 57% of all college dropouts from four-year institutions leave before the start of their second year, and 40% of the students who begin college in America will not earn a degree (Tinto, 1993). Their reasons for departure vary from adjustment difficulties to feelings of isolation (Tinto, n.d.).

To address the issues of recruitment and retention, student perceptions should be assessed regularly. Students' perceptions of the college experience influence their grades, degree completion, satisfaction and other positive student outcomes (Gilbert, Chapman, Dietsche, Grayson & Gardner, 1997). Many factors have an affect on the perceptions themselves, including place of residence, finances, familial support, campus environment, and involvement in the campus community. Though some of these factors are beyond the control or scope of the institution, universities cannot afford to lose even one student because they do not address pertinent issues and concerns.

Braunstein and McGrath (1997) suggest that because every college and university has its own admission standards and policies, research should be conducted on individual campuses. In this way, administrators and faculty can develop a better understanding of their own students, as well as their institution's culture. A profile of the freshmen student population is distinctive to any university, as well as the schools and colleges within it, but many universities know little about that population. The majority of information collected by universities is demographic in nature, such as grade point average and ACT scores. However, other aspects of the first semester experience can be examined such as student's goal-setting behaviors, their views concerning relationships with faculty, staff and other students, and integration into campus life.

Tinto's (1987) model of departure depicts how the process of dropout from college is a longitudinal one. As the individual interacts with the academic and social systems of the college, his goals and commitments are continually modified, leading to persistence or departure. He observes that the consequences of high rates of departure from an institution may be severe, and that no longer will marketing campaigns and recruitment efforts be appropriate as the sole means for buttressing low enrollment.
Gardner (2001) points out that as enrollment soared, so did the number of students dropping out between the first and second years of college. The alarming rate of attrition focused attention on the first-year experience.

Beginning in the mid-eighties, recognition grew that colleges and universities are at least partially responsible for student retention. The number of institutions taking steps to respond to the situation more than doubled, and by 1995, 82% of institutions of higher education reported attempts to address retention (Gardner, 2001). Many colleges and universities term this movement "The First-Year Experience."

The First-Year Experience is a philosophy for providing an underlying basis for an educational reform movement and a response to a set of structural problems inherent in the organization of the collegiate first year; that is, problems that may have a negative impact on the learning, success, satisfaction, and retention of first-year students (Gardner, 1997, p. 5).

Some of these organizational problems include the low priority of undergraduate teaching and the fact that little opportunity exists on most campuses for freshmen and faculty to interact informally. This is due to faculty issues such as class size, faculty workloads, lack of rewards for such interaction, and the increasing existence of adjunct faculty. Issues that affect retention include the loss of a sense of community on campus, and lack of consensus about the primary mission or missions of the institutions (Gardner, 1997).

Common initiatives to combat these organizational problems include advising and first-year seminars (Gardner, 2001). Currently, first-year seminars are offered at more than 71% of U.S. colleges and universities. The most successful programs involve outstanding faculty members, last a full academic term or longer, and are challenging, credit-bearing courses (Gardner, 2001).

Generally, freshman seminars are small classes, carrying one to three hours of academic credit. Nearly half of institutions conducting such courses require them of all entering freshmen. Typically, faculty members or student affairs professionals teach the courses, and they are increasingly co-taught by upper-level students or mentors (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993).

Extended research on freshman seminars has focused primarily on freshman-to-sophomore-year retention rates, academic performance, knowledge and use of campus resources, and personality development (Keenan & Gabovitch, 1995). One of the most widely recognized studies is that of Fidler (1993), who found a significant relationship between participation in a freshman seminar and first- to second-year retention rates.

Sidle and McReynolds (1999) carried out a study on the relationship between a freshman seminar and student retention and success. Results revealed that following completion of the semester-long course, return rates for the spring semester were higher for participants than for nonparticipants, and participants earned higher cumulative grade point averages. Similarly, Williford, Chapman and Kahrig (2000-2001) reported that in eight years of a ten-year study, participants of a freshman seminar course returned at a higher rate than non-participants. Graduation rates were also higher for participants than non-participants in the last five years of their study.
Purpose of the Study

To be more responsive to the needs and desires of freshmen, institutions must become familiar with students' perceptions concerning their early experiences on campus. This study identified those factors, which might affect student success by examining the perceptions of freshmen students regarding their first-semester experience at the University of Arkansas.

The University of Arkansas is the flagship campus of the University of Arkansas System and is the primary land grant campus in the state. It is a four-year institution serving over 16,000 students. The University is classified as a research institution.

Methodology

Instrumentation

The questionnaire for this study was developed using the results of a pilot study of an initial questionnaire administered to 100 students in their first year in the College of Education and Health Professions. The data were factor analyzed to identify factors and items to be included on the revised questionnaire. These six factors were identified as goal setting, campus resources, stress, relationships, racial sensitivity, and belonging/identity.

The final survey was administered during the fall semester to 220 students representing five of the six schools and colleges on campus. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement (strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) with 30 statements related to the six factors. It also contained five demographic items including gender, age, ethnicity, place of residence and family financial standing, and six questions related to experiential factors of stimulation with courses/academic boredom, satisfaction with experience at the University of Arkansas, plans to return for the spring semester, ease of transition from high school to the University of Arkansas, who encouraged students to attend and difficulty of high school.

Results

Factor Analysis

The 30 statements related to goal setting, campus resources, stress, relationships, racial sensitivity, and belonging/identity were factor analyzed to look at the relationship between the statements and describe any underlying factor structure. The factor analysis of the data did not support the six areas identified. However, the analysis did suggest alternative factors. Four factors emerged which were labeled as time management/goal setting (13.06% of the variance), academic advising (11.749% of the variance), stress (11.152% of the variance), and institutional fit/integration (9.823% of the variance).

One-way ANOVA was used to compare the four factors with the demographic and experiential factors. A significant difference was found on two of the demographic items and four of the experiential items.

Demographics
Gender, Age and Ethnicity. Most (205, 95.8%) of the students were 18 or 19 years old. Almost half (115, 52.3%) were female and half (96, 43.6%) were male. Most of the students responding to the questionnaire were white, non Hispanic (190, 86.4%).

A one-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores on the factors and the gender, age and ethnicity of students. No significant differences were found for these demographic items.

Residence. Most students (166, 75.5%) lived in residence halls. Others lived in apartments (10, 4.5%), Greek housing (8, 3.6%), and situations such as at home or with relatives (33, 15%).

A one-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores on the factors for the living arrangements of the participants. A significant difference was found among student's perceptions of belonging/integration to their living arrangements (F (3, 213) = 6.94, p < .01). Tukey's HSD was used to determine the nature of the differences. This analysis revealed that students who lived in Greek housing (mean = 4.32, sd = 0.35) and residence halls (mean = 3.89, sd = 0.65) rated belonging/integration higher than students who lived in apartments (mean = 3.20, sd = 0.52). The other factors did not differ significantly at the .05 level for living arrangements of participants.

Financial Status. One hundred thirty-six (61.8%) indicated that their family was financially average in comparison to the financial status of other University of Arkansas students. Forty-eight (21.8%) felt they were above average, and 30 (13.6%) felt they were below average.

A one-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores on the factors to students' reported financial status. A significant difference was found among student's perceptions of stress to their financial status (F (2, 211) = 4.61, p < .05). Tukey's HSD revealed that students who rated their financial status above average (mean = 2.55, sd = 0.72) and average (mean = 2.56, sd = 0.65) rated stress lower than students who rated their financial status below average (mean = 2.96, sd = 0.72). The other factors did not differ significantly at the .05 level for financial status of participants.

Experiential

Stimulation with Courses/Academic Boredom

One hundred ninety eight (92.1%) of the students indicated that they were extremely or somewhat stimulated by their coursework. One-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores of students' stimulation with courses with the four factors. A significant difference was found for all four factors--management, advising, stress and belonging (see Table 1).

Tukey's HSD revealed that students who were stimulated with their coursework rated their time management skills higher, were satisfied with academic advising, experienced less stress, and felt a greater sense of belonging and institutional fit.

Satisfaction with Experience at University of Arkansas

Two hundred seven (96.3%) students were satisfied with their experience at the University of Arkansas. One-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores of students' satisfaction with their
experience at the University of Arkansas with the four factors. A significant difference was found for all four factors--management, advising, stress and belonging (see Table 2).

Tukey's HSD revealed that students who were extremely satisfied with their first semester at the University of Arkansas rated their time management skills higher, were satisfied with academic advising, experienced less stress, and felt a greater sense of belonging and institutional fit.

**Plans to Return for Spring Semester**

Two hundred ten (97.7%) of the respondents planned to return to the University of Arkansas for the following semester. Because of the small number of students who reported that they were not returning for the spring semester (2.3%), this data was not analyzed.

**Ease of Transition from High School**

Ninety-eight (44.5%) ranked their transition to the University of Arkansas as average, 76 (34.5%) rated it as easy, and 42 (19.1%) rated it as difficult. One-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores of students' ease of transition from high school with the four factors. A significant difference was found for two factors--advising and stress (see Table 3).

Tukey's HSD indicated students who had difficulty with advising and those who rated their stress higher had a more difficult transition from high school to the University of Arkansas.

**Who Encouraged Students to Attend the University of Arkansas**

Students were encouraged to attend the University of Arkansas by parents (65.1%), friends (45%), high school counselors (24.8%) and high school teachers (19.7%). Another group of students (19.5%) indicated that they were encouraged by others. Several of these respondents indicated that they had self-selected the University of Arkansas. A one-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores on the factors and who encouraged students to attend the University of Arkansas. No significant differences were found for this experiential factor.

**How Hard was High School**

Fifty percent (110) of the students ranked difficulty of high school as easy, while 77 (35%) ranked it average. Only 12% of students ranked high school as difficult. A one-way ANOVA was computed to compare scores on the factors and how students rated their high school experience. A significant difference was found among student's perceptions of time management to difficulty of high school (F (2,212)=3.74, p <.05). Tukey's HSD revealed that students who had difficulty with high school (mean=3.66, sd=0.59) rated management lower than students who rated high school easy (mean=3.32, sd=0.54) and those who rated it average (mean=3.45, sd=0.69). The other factors did not differ significantly at the .05 level for how difficult high school was.

**Discussion**
The limitation of this study was that only students at one major institution were surveyed. However, students from five different colleges participated. This study should be replicated by other institutions of similar size. Also, an investigation of institutions that offer a dedicated advising center to students for the freshman-sophomore year should be studied.

Students who feel that they belong at the University of Arkansas are more likely to be retained. In this study, we found that students living on campus in Greek houses or residence halls, those stimulated by their courses and satisfied with their experience at the University of Arkansas felt a greater sense of belonging.

This study found that the majority of freshmen surveyed were living on campus. It is possible that students living off campus have responsibilities that existed before they started classes, such as a job where working numerous hours, or family or community activities that other students may have left behind when they moved to college. Less time spent on campus may suggest that their levels of social and academic integration are not high; hence, the lower scores on belonging.

Students from families of lower socioeconomic status are possibly more likely to be the first in their family to attend college, and cannot draw on parents' knowledge of college life, either social or academic. They may also be working more to finance their education and are focused on issues that differentiate them from students who are not concerned with their financial situation, thus creating more stress.

The question as to whether students are not stimulated by their coursework because they find their instructor boring, class work is not sufficiently challenging, there is a mismatch between the content and the student's interests, or because the student is not committed to their education not answered by this research. The findings from this research might provide some insight into this issue. For example, students who said they were extremely stimulated by their courses rated advising higher than those who were not stimulated at all. This may speak to the quality of advising the student received. If the student works with an advisor who is sensitive to the interests and skills of the student and selects classes accordingly, the student may be more engaged academically. Students who reported that they were extremely stimulated or somewhat stimulated by their courses rated time management/goal setting higher than students who said they were not stimulated at all. This might indicate that students who set goals, use effective study strategies, and practice time management get more from their courses because they put forth the appropriate amount of effort and are well-prepared for class. One interesting finding was that students who reported that they were not stimulated at all by their coursework also reported the highest levels of stress; which may indicate that it is not the level of difficulty or amount of work required by the class that is the source of stress but that they do not have the time or energy to become fully integrated into their coursework.

Most students appear to have had an easy or average transition to the University. However, students who said that their transition was difficult also rated time management/goal setting and belonging lower than other students, and rated stress higher. Although the findings were not significant, students who reported that their transition was difficult also rated advising lower, so the overall experience of those reporting a difficult transition appears to be less positive than for
the others. The changes that accompany a transition may prove to be very stressful for some students, although this research does not answer the question of whether it was the transition that caused higher levels of stress or if stress was already an issue for the student before school began. Since many students are separated from home for the first time, time management/goal setting may prove difficult, causing even more stress.

If student satisfaction and success are of utmost importance to the university, understanding the freshmen population is crucial. Without gaining an understanding of student perspectives the university is unable to structure meaningful practices aimed at improving the student experience. The results of this study will be useful to university administration, faculty, staff and ultimately, the students themselves by adding to the body of knowledge concerning freshmen on campus. Data must be collected from institutions to determine why students leave. Through this information, recruitment and retention systems and procedures must be evaluated and modified. Policies and procedures should be developed to ensure that student support services meet the needs of all of the student population. Colleges/Institutions must expand advising services to include mentoring of freshman-sophomore students and consider mandatory mentoring for those students considered at-risk of leaving.

**Table 1 Analysis of Variance for Stimulation with Coursework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>F</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Management/Goal Setting</td>
<td>13.98(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advising</td>
<td>7.39(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>6.14(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Fit/Integration</td>
<td>4.80(*)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. df 2, 212

(*) p < .01

**Table 2 Analysis of Variance for Satisfaction with Experience at University of Arkansas**

<table>
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<th>F</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advising</td>
<td>6.18(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>11.10(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Fit/Integration</td>
<td>15.41(*)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. df 2, 212

(*) p < .01

**Table 3 Analysis of Variance for Transition from High School**
Factor                        F

Academic Advising      3.47(*)
Stress                14.33(**)

Note. df 2, 213

(*) p < .05. (**) p < .01

References


Tinto, V. (n.d.). Student success and the building of involving educational communities. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from Syracuse University, School of Education web site: http://soeweb.syr.edu/Faculty/Vtinto/Files


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