Designing and Implementing the “Perfect” First-Year Experience

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Research-Based Principles of Student Retention, Learning, &
Academic Achievement

1. PERSONAL VALIDATION
College success is fostered when students feel personally significant—i.e., when they are recognized as individuals, feel like they matter to the institution, and believe that the institution cares about them as whole persons (Rendón, 1994; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Terenzini, et al., 1996).

2. SELF-EFFICACY
Students are more likely to be successful when they believe that their personal effort matters—when they think they can exert significant influence or control over the outcomes of their education, their life, and their future (Bandura, 1997; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Elias, & Loomis, 2002; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991).

3. MEANING & PURPOSE
Students are more likely to succeed when they find meaning, purpose, and relevance in their college experience—i.e., when they see connections between what they’re learning in college, their current life, and their future goals (Ausubel, 1978; Fink, 2002; Mezirow, 2000; Nash & Murray, 2010; Palmer, 2000; Parks, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wlodkowski, 1998).

4. ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT (ENGAGEMENT)
Student success increases proportionately with the depth of student involvement in the learning process—i.e., the amount of time and energy they invest in the college experience—both inside and outside the classroom (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2001; Kuh, et al., 2005; McKeachie, et al., 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

5. REFLECTION
Students are more likely to be successful when they reflect on their college and life experiences, elaborate on them and transform them into a form that connects with what they already know or have previously experienced (Bruner, 1990; Ewell, 1997; Flavell, 1985; Svinicki, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978).

6. SOCIAL INTEGRATION
Student retention and learning are enhanced through social interaction, collaboration, and the formation of interpersonal relationships between students and other members of the college community—peers, faculty, staff, and administrators (Astin, 1993; Bruffee, 1993; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Slavin, 1996; Tinto, 1993).

7. SELF-AWARENESS
Students are more likely to experience success when they gain deeper awareness of themselves and become more mindful of their learning strategies, styles, habits, and modes of thinking (Brooks, 2009; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Langer, 1997; Pintrich, 1995; Weinstein & Meyer, 1991; Weinstein & Underwood, 1985).
Key Properties/Principles of Effective Student-Support Programs & Student-Success Initiatives

1. **INTENTIONAL (PURPOSEFUL):** They are deliberately designed and delivered with research-based principles of student success in mind, namely:
   * Personal Validation,
   * Self-Efficacy,
   * Meaning & Purpose,
   * Active Involvement (Engagement),
   * Reflection,
   * Social Integration, and
   * Self-Awareness.

2. **STUDENT-CENTERED:** They are centered on and driven by the educational needs and personal welfare of students, rather than by institutional habit or convenience, or by the self-serving needs and preferences of faculty, administrators, or staff.

3. **MISSION-DRIVEN:** They are grounded in and guided by a well-articulated program mission that is consistent with the college or university mission.

4. **INTRUSIVE:** They are not offered on a come-find-and-use basis, i.e., “passive programming” that relies on students discovering the program and its value; instead, supportive action is initiated by the institution by actively reaching out to students and bringing the service to them, thereby increasing the likelihood that support reaches those students who are unlikely or unassertive enough to seek it out on their own.

5. **PROACTIVE:** They take early, preventative action that address students’ learning needs and developmental adjustments in an anticipatory fashion—before they eventuate in problems that require reactive (after-the-fact) intervention.

6. **DIVERSIFIED:** They are tailored or customized to meet the distinctive needs of different student subpopulations (first-year students, underrepresented students, transfer students, etc.)

7. **COMPREHENSIVE (HOLISTIC):** They focus on the student as a “whole person,” addressing the multiple dimensions of self that affect student success (social, emotional, physical, etc.).

8. **DEVELOPMENTAL:** They are delivered in a timely, stage-sensitive sequence that helps students accommodate challenges which emerge at different phases or stages of the college experience; in so doing, they promote student growth by providing a “scaffold” that balances challenge with just-in-time support.

9. **COLLABORATIVE:** They involve cooperative alliances or partnerships between different organizational units of the college/university that work together in a complementary and interdependent manner, harnessing their collective power to exert synergistic (multiplicative) effects on student success.

10. **SYSTEMIC:** They occupy a central (rather than a peripheral or marginal) place on campus, placing them in a position to produce pervasive effects on the student body and giving them the potential to exert a transformative effect on the institution itself.

11. **DURABLE:** They are institutionalized—i.e., they’re built or weaved into the fabric of the institution (e.g. its table of organization and annual budget process), thus ensuring the program’s longevity and its capacity to exert perennial impact on successive cohorts of students.

12. **EMPIRICAL (EVIDENTIARY):** They are supported by assessment and collection of data (both quantitative and qualitative) that are used for: (a) summative evaluation—to “sum up” and prove the program’s value or impact, and (b) formative evaluation—to “shape up” and continually improve program quality.
**Timeline** of Educational Initiatives for Promoting Student Persistence through the First Year to the Second Year of College

**PROACTIVE**

1. Summer Transition/Summer Bridge Programming

2. Summer Orientation/Registration

3. New-Student Orientation

4. Convocation/Matriculation Ceremony

5. Student-Entry Assessment & First-Term Course Placement

6. Early Administration of Assessment Instruments Designed to Identify At-Risk Students (e.g., MAP Works, College Student Inventory)

7. *First-Year Experience Course* (First-Year Seminar) (College Transition Course)

8. *Curricular* Support Programs (e.g., learning communities; supplemental instruction)

9. *Co-Curricular* Support Programs (e.g., student success workshops; leadership workshops for first-year students to prepare them for sophomore leadership roles)

10. *Early-Alert/Early-Warning* System (e.g., absenteeism reports during first few weeks of the term)
11. *Midterm-Grade* Reports (e.g., at midpoint of the term)

12. “*Red Flag*” procedures initiated to identify student behaviors indicating intent to leave (e.g., failure to pre-register or renew financial aid)

13. *Second-Term/Spring Term Support Programs* (e.g., second-term academic success/recovery course for students placed on academic probation for first-term performance)

14. *Exit Interviews/Questionnaires* (administered to departing students during the withdrawal process)

15. *Already-Withdrawn/Departed-Student Surveys* (administered by mail or phone after students have withdrawn)

16. *End-of-First-Year Student Satisfaction* and/or *Needs-Assessment Survey* (followed by comparing the responses of students who return vs. fail to return for their sophomore year)

17. End-of-first-year Celebratory Event & Preview of the Sophomore Year Experience

18. Summer Transition Programming between the First & Second Year (e.g., post-first-year students contacted during the summer by peer mentors or sent a summer newsletter)


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*REACTIVE*
References


Nash, R. J., & Murray, M. C. (2010). *Helping college students find purpose: The campus guide to meaning-making*. San Francisco


