

TO: President Neil Murphy
CC: Provost Bill Tully
Retention Team Members: Janine DeBaise, Theodore Endreny, Maureen Fellows,
Thomas Fletcher, Carmen McCoy Harrison, Robin Hoffman, Steven Keller, Roy Norton,
George Kyanka, Thomas Slocum, Mark Teece, John View
FROM: Julie R. White, Associate Dean
RE: Retention Team Recommendations
DATE: April 18, 2002

On January 7, 2002 you commissioned the above group of individuals to examine the attrition of our students and to propose interventions to increase retention. On behalf of members of the Retention Team, I submit the following recommendations. We believe these suggested interventions not only will enhance ESF's retention, but they will also lead to greater student satisfaction. The recommendations presented were informed by quantitative data, qualitative information received directly from students, and the years of experience represented by members of the retention team.

Overview of Recommendations (explained in more detail later in document):

- ❖ Smaller class sizes in Botany, Calculus, and Chemistry
- ❖ Break up the currently required freshman "triad" of Botany, Calculus and Chemistry
- ❖ Formalize a Freshman Year Experience (therefore increasing the sense of connection)
- ❖ Enhance ESF 132 with "student success" sections
- ❖ Provide Hands-On/Field Experience in the first year
- ❖ Develop an "Early Alert" System for student in academic jeopardy
- ❖ Improve academic advising and information sharing
- ❖ Increase opportunities for student success
- ❖ Provide more flexibility for elective courses
- ❖ Address issues of incongruence in messages students hear versus what they experience
- ❖ Create a formalized opportunity for maintaining a dialog about student satisfaction

Process

Upon review of the data, we focused our attention on the lower division. The attrition of upper division students 1996-1999 was just under 17%. In addition to our focus on the lower division, we also addressed the issues of retention and attrition at the college level. While we did examine the data by program, we decided that there was enough variance of numbers and possible reasons for attrition, that each faculty should examine their individual data and identify appropriate interventions. We do believe that our examination of the issues college-wide could serve as a useful model for the Faculties to replicate.

Bottom line: In assessing our current mode of operation, we asked a simple question: Is ESF a "sink or swim" or a nurturing place? The answer is "yes" to both. We believe that lower division students are often subjected to academic Darwinism while juniors and seniors are actively engaged while their skills and interests are cultivated.

Overview of Quantitative Data

- ❖ As enrollment of first year students has grown, so has the rate of attrition.
- ❖ An average of nearly 30% of students who entered as freshmen 1997-2000 departed.
- ❖ Students who enter ESF as freshmen and depart, primarily do so within the first four semesters: ~40% after first year; ~ 35% after second year (data: 1990-1996).
- ❖ About 35% of the freshmen that departed 1997-2000 were academically dismissed (though may have appealed).
- ❖ While the attrition of students of color is a concern at the college level, the numbers are too small in any given program (except EFB) for this to be statistically significant.

Entering Freshman Year	Overall Attrition	Minority Attrition
1995	30%	63%
1996	29%	38%
1997	36%	50%
1998	41%	28%
1999	41%	47%

- ❖ Performance by first year students in botany, calculus, and chemistry is a concern. We examined this performance relative to admissions tiers and SAT scores and found nothing surprising in this comparison. Essentially, students who performed better in high school, performed better in these courses. While this is the case however, overall performance in these courses, especially botany is troublesome.

Course	Total Freshman Enrollment	Number of Freshmen Receiving Grades D-F
Botany	176	76 (43%)
Calculus	92	23 (25%)
Chemistry	123	34 (27%)

Overview of Qualitative Data

- ❖ While we found the quantitative data to be quite informative, we also decided to talk to students. We conducted two focus group meetings with students varying in class standing, program of study, and ethnicity. We also used the notes from the February 21 "Meal with Neil" to inform our recommendations. Findings are outlined below.
 - Learning communities are viewed positively
 - Need help with time management and study skills
 - Taking Botany, Calculus and Chemistry at the same time is too much
 - Botany is too big/no personal attention
 - TA's inconsistent / Lab needs to be better linked with Botany
 - Need for formalized peer tutoring
 - Expectations need to be communicated more clearly
 - Marshall Auditorium is inadequate as a learning/ teaching environment.
 - Need more homework assignments and graded projects. Just two exams = no opportunity to improve grade
 - Chemistry II is not going well
 - More hands-on/field experience wanted in lower division
 - Smaller classes
 - Student life/social reasons often cited as reasons why students stay
 - Connection's with faculty, staff, and student colleagues is very important

- ❖ We also examined academic appeal letters of students who were academically dismissed. We summarized the reasons given by students for their poor performance.
 - Totally Overwhelmed (scope and sense of needing to go it alone)
 - New Situations (change in environment; first time away from home)
 - Residence Hall Living (drugs/alcohol; noisy/inconsiderate neighbors; SU/ESF differences)
 - Lack of Program Engagement (lecture v. field experience; disheartened; no connection; no interest)
 - Immaturity/Lack of Discipline (break up of a relationship; family death; medical; psychological)
 - Academic Reasons (too heavy a course load; weak in subject; un-communicated learning disability; lack of timely feedback from instructors)
- ❖ We also examined exit interview notes compiled by Tom Stocum and the reasons given for voluntary departures mirror those listed above for academic dismissals.

Recommendations

- ❖ **Smaller class sizes** in Botany, Calculus, General Chemistry I & II, and Zoology and appropriately assigned teachers. We recognize this suggestion has budgetary implications but believe it to be among our most powerful recommendations. It could provide a more solid start especially for first semester freshmen.
- ❖ **Break up Botany, Calculus, and Chemistry**. These three requirements for first semester freshmen is too much. This workload coupled with other significant transition issues often results in poor academic performance and deflated self esteem (and therefore college satisfaction).
- ❖ **Formalize a Freshman Year Experience (and therefore increase sense of connection and community)**. The learning communities are approaching this suggestion, but efforts need to be broadened to include all first-year students. This would begin with orientation and continue through the learning communities and a suggested enhanced ESF 132.
- ❖ **Enhance ESF 132** (orientation course). This course would continue to serve as a brief introduction to each individual field of study, but it would also serve a more universal purpose. This course is ideally place to address students' transition issues, needed skill development, and introduction to possible careers. It should also incorporate interaction with upper-class students (a la peer advisors). Suggested topics in addition to faculty specific sections: Time Management and Study Skills (week 4-6); Alcohol and Other Drugs (week 4-6); Community and Diversity (any time during semester); Civic Participation and Service (any time during semester); and 2-3 field trips.
- ❖ **Early Hands-On Field Experience**. Many students come to ESF with the expectation that they will be out in the field learning their lessons. In some cases this doesn't happen until the junior year. We can begin this experiential learning in the enhanced ESF 132 but each faculty should be encouraged to incorporate this component into more lower division courses.
- ❖ **Early Alert System**. While a few of ESF's traditional first year classes participate in SU's Mid-Semester Progress Report program, these results are not received in a timely manner such that students can turn their grades around. We propose a reporting of grades 1/3 of the way through the first semester. Along with these reports, we can provide students with resource information, study tips, and contact information for assistance.

- ❖ **Improve Active Advising and Information Sharing.**
 - Many students come to ESF “at risk” of not performing to their potential. Academic advisors should be made aware of this information and act on accordingly. For example, many students could take summer courses to better prepare them for calculus. Math deficiency appears to be a concern, with active advising prior to their arrival, students could ESF’s ground running rather than lagging behind.
 - Required advisor training to include specific how-to information and academic requirements and policies. Dr. Tully has already begun this with the initiation of advisor handbooks for each faculty.

- ❖ **Increase Opportunities for Student Success.** First year students have not previously experienced the rigor of college study. It would be helpful for them to clearly understand the expectations of courses including suggested time commitments for given assignments. Also, it is suggested that instructors consider the incorporation of more graded “assignments” rather than giving 2-3 “sink or swim” exams. Again, this issue of study skills could be incorporated into the enhanced ESF 132.

- ❖ **Provide More Flexibility for Elective Courses.**

- ❖ **Address Issues of Incongruence in Message Students Hear Versus What They Experience.**
 - Ability to take courses at SU
 - Class size

- ❖ **Create a Formalized Opportunity for Maintaining a Dialog About Student Satisfaction.**
 - Students were very pleased to be asked about their opinions and experiences
 - Could institute some sort of “Freshman Challenge” to improve the campus community—make them part of the solution so they then have ownership in ESF’s success

In addition to these recommendations, I have enclosed an interesting book (and executive summary) that details a qualitative study regarding students’ perceptions of the college experience. The findings of this research support many of the interventions we’ve suggested. Also included here are notes from John Gardner’s presentation at recent SUNY Retention Symposium.

Neil, this was a great team with which to work. Each individual is dedicated to student success and is invested in providing the best educational experience possible. The charge given to this team has been completed and I stand ready to assist in the implementation of the recommendations presented.