Chapter 7

They're Here, Now How Do You Keep Them?
Lessons Learned with First Year College Students

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of a class of first year traditional college-age students enrolled in a class that assessed measures to orient new students and enlist them in becoming committed to completing their degrees. The motivation of the university that designed the course was two-fold: to help students develop good time management and study skills; and to nurture student loyalty to retain them through graduation at this university. The study followed a small class of 18-20 year old first year students through their first semester at a mid-sized western public university. The results of the study indicated that while many factors affect students' attitudes and retention throughout their college years, simple measures of enlistment and peer-mentoring fared best to positively influence student attitudes and responses in the college-orientation class; and, peer involvement offered the most promise of future brand commitment to student retention at the university.

INTRODUCTION

The study was conducted to assess whether a freshman orientation course achieved its' objectives of orienting and engaging freshman students at a mid-sized western public university. The university created this course in an effort to provide a college orientation, to enlist students to enhance their study skills, and to engage them so as to embed their college completion goals at this university and maximize the students' opportunities for degree completion (Chambers, 2004; Martin, 2008; Molnar, Boninger, Wilkinson, & Fogarty, 2008). There had been extensive university focus groups that looked at which factors seemed to invite and enlist students to attend this university; there

had also been extensive meetings with College of Education faculty to determine which approach might best meet new students' needs. These activities resulted in the design of a college-orientation course with a curriculum offering a broad brush-stroke approach to cover all of the potential pitfalls of the first year student, namely fear of something new, poor study and time management skills, lack of focus on a major, and lack of knowledge of available university resources.

The course was offered to all entering freshman students across all academic disciplines and students were partitioned into small sub-sections categorized by their majors (if they had declared one); undeclared students were placed in two sections of generalized classes. At the end of the semester, the students were asked to reflect on their experiences in the course and also were asked two additional questions: did they find the course helpful to get them acquainted with the requirements of college? And, did they think the course should be offered as a required course? Their responses are reported and further discussed in the Analysis section of this study.

A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON SUCCESSFUL MARKETING AND RETENTION

Research on marketing to pre-college students varied extensively, but what seemed to be predominant was the extensive research conducted on Internet marketing geared to the 16-18 year old, junior-senior high school, age base (Bonnema & Van der Waldt, 2008; Fong, 2009; Ho & Hung, 2008; Bonnema & Van der Waldt, 2008; Johnstone, Ewell, & Paulson, 2002; Taylor, Behherer, & Halstead, 2003; Jones, 2003; Molnar, Boninger, Wilkinson, & Fogarty, 2008; Noel-Levitz, 2007; Shaik, 2006; Yang, 2006). Once the

students arrived, there were the usual welcome and orientation activities, but there were also freshman events and informal activities that were thoughtfully planned to enlist students to become involved in campus life. In addition, the university administration and faculty decided to offer a course that was offered over an entire semester, one that would address not only how to develop good study habits, but also how to become more aware of moral and ethical decisions, how to become better at communicating with others, and how to develop better personal saving and social habits. They chose a comprehensive textbook that included all of those components (Sherfield & Moody, 2011), and in addition, developed an extensive array of assignments geared to require students' participation (Appendix B).

Marketing

In pursuing data on first-time traditional age college students, there were some assumptions that needed to be clarified. There needed to be an explanation of the term "traditional student" because it had become so widely used that it was seldom defined any longer, even in National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) studies. It took some delving to find a definition for that term, but what the researcher found as the accepted description of a traditional student was a person enrolled in the university that was in the age range from 17-19 years old, had graduated from high school, and had gone straight to college. "Traditional students are those who enroll in college immediately after graduation from high school, pursue their studies on a full-time basis, and complete their bachelor's degrees in 4 or 5 years at a young age of 22 or 23" (Center for Institutional Effectiveness, 2004, p. 5).

Statistics indicated that those students who directly went to college (average age 18) and remained in that same college had a better chance

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