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Student Retention Initiatives at Trinity College
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There is no specific initiative that increases student retention for all groups of students at Trinity College, because there are different factors that affect student retention. Some of the factors are academic, culture, and/or social. However, there are initiatives that are more successful and effective than others. Generally, it is unfair to pin point to a specific initiative or program that helps increase student retention at Trinity. Several initiatives have contributed to the growing rates of retention, which is clearly evident in the statistics. Thus, it is not just one initiative contributing. It is clear that the initiatives and programs that are available, have for the most part, made a great and positive impact on students, faculty, and the college as a whole.

Methodology:

Concerning my research project process, I did both qualitative and quantitative research. I talked to/interviewed members of administration on several occasions. I talked to Dean Reuman, Dean Spurlock-Evans and Dean Herzberger. They were very helpful by giving me statistics, and information on specific initiatives and programs. Deans Spurlock-Evans, and Herzberger, and Jim Hughes who is the Director of Institutional Research and Planning, gave me packets, statistics and charts to analyze. Dean Spurlock-Evans gave me an informative packet that was designed for the new President James Jones called, "Examples of Projects Underway" (September 4, 2004)

which included general descriptions of initiatives and programs that exist on campus. Dean Herzberger gave me charts and statistics of graduation and retention rates in a condensed handout called, “Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity’s Challenges” (Herzberger, February 2004). She gave me useful information concerning the SI sessions as well (Trinity College SI Pilot Program (Chem 111 and 112), 2003). Director Hughes gave me a lengthy packet called, “A Statistical Picture of Trinity and Its Curriculum” (May, 2003).

Literature:

The issue of student retention is very important! One article, “Who Really Cares About Retention?” from, *Black Issues in Higher Education*, focused on how it is important for colleges to have a commitment to student retention, while also providing strategies to help students accomplish their academic goals. A college needs to provide a place for students to progress regardless of color and class. Colleges must also have a campus-wide awareness of importance of retaining students

The first step is to deal with retention even during the first week students are in college. During the first week, students are vulnerable and nervous, so it is important for faculty and other students to be friendly and enthusiastic. For example, orientation activities and sessions can be helpful.

The faculty is one of the most important aspects of one’s college experience. They have a huge effect on retention and one’s success. They must be understanding and sensitive. Before classes begin, it is important for faculty and the administration to understand one’s learning style(s) and education plans and goals. This is beneficial

because students can then become quickly acquainted with the faculty. It is also important for students to meet with their advisor weekly. Tutors can be helpful as well. (“Who Really Cares About Retention?” From, *Black Issues in Higher Education: 16 no19*, 1999). Many questions need to be considered and addressed: Is there a retention committee? Is there a college retention plan? Fortunately, at Trinity College, there is a retention committee full with faculty and members of the administration.

In the Encyclopedia of Higher Education, there is a section that deals with minorities and retention. Studies show that if minority students participate in activities such as orientation activities, and student organizations, their bonds to their institution will be strengthened and there will be an increase in retention. Studies also show that when students become more involved in student organizations like clubs, they feel less alienated from their institution. These organizations allow students to become better acquainted with their school, make friends, and get to know the faculty. It is evident at Trinity, that there are effective programs/organizations, and orientation activities for minority students. A couple examples are PRIDE and MOCA. Because of these student programs/organizations, minorities feel more comfortable and develop new friendships. These kinds of programs contribute to the increasing rate of student retention. (The Encyclopedia of Higher Education: Vol. 3, pgs. 1663-1664. 1992)

Also concerning minority students, an article called, “Leave No College Student Behind,” in *Multicultural Education*, focuses on how there is a need to rethink strategies for improving the retention of minority students. Even though there have been a steady increase of the percentage of non-white students being admitted to colleges, only 58% Blacks and only 46% Hispanics graduate within 6 years of enrolling. These are lower

percentages when compared to Whites. Trinity does want to improve the minority student retention rate, but our statistics are much higher than the general percentages (80%).

This article also emphasizes how faculty and administration need to address the issue of hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is unwritten and unspoken values, social and behavior expectations that lead interaction between students and faculty. More simply, it is the unaddressed rules of how to successfully make it through college, and to learn the academic culture (*Multicultural Education*, p. 48). For example, there is a certain way how to conduct oneself when interacting with a teacher about grades, or there is a certain way how to engage in class discussion. These “rules” may not seem obvious and apparent to students. Thus, these rules about academic culture need to be addressed. No one should be excluded from having academic cultural knowledge.

In order to gain this kind of cultural knowledge, or to learn about the hidden curriculum, faculty and administration need to improve on, and change existing retention programs, like mentoring programs. A major problem concerning mentoring programs is that faculty and administration do not properly teach students how to recognize the hidden curriculum. Another problem about these programs is that there is only one-on-one interaction; a mentor and a mentee. Instead of one-on-ones, there should be a network mentoring model. A student should learn cultural knowledge not just by one mentor, but by other students and faculty as well. There is a need to develop policies that would provide all students access to cultural knowledge. (“Leave No College Student Behind.” From, *Multicultural Education: 11 no3*, pgs. 48-49. 2004). One example of a mentor program at Trinity which is effective, but still could be improved, is PRIDE. It

could be improved by having PRIDE leaders not just work with students of color, but with the entire (dorm) hall and RA as well.

Concerning college freshmen, literature emphasizes how social support is crucial towards a successful transition into a college environment. A freshman's year of college is a stressful one. He or she is away from home, and is now in a new setting. Because students feel uncomfortable, and haven't found their niche, or place within their school, students decide to leave during or after freshman year. Statistics show that 40% of college students will leave college without a degree. Thus, support from others like peers, faculty and administration is essential ("Predictors of Academic Achievement and Retention among College Freshman." From, the *College Student Journal*. 2004). Trinity does an excellent job providing support for freshmen and all students. For example, if a student is thinking about leaving or transferring, the Dean(s) will talk to the student, and provide opportunities (social, cultural, academic) that the student may not be aware of.

Reasons Why Students Transfer or Voluntarily Withdraw:

As part of the withdrawal process, students must fill out a satisfactory form, rating categories with 1 = very dissatisfied, and 4 = very satisfied. In general, students are more satisfied with the academic life than the social life at Trinity. The lowest levels of satisfaction have been under the categories: "Quality of social life," "Overall impression of Trinity Students," and "Intellectual life outside class." It is important to note that "social life is an ambiguous term, but students often characterize social life by drinking and partying, with little emphasis on intellectual and community matters. (*A Statistical*

Picture of Trinity and its Curriculum, from the office of Institutional Research and Planning, Trinity College. Prepared by Kent Smith and James Hughes, May 2003.)

	1996-1998	1999-2000	2001-2002
Total:	238	170	91
Academic Categories:			
Quality of courses	3.4	3.4	3.4
Impressions of Faculty	3.3	3.3	3.3
Quality of major/acad. Prog.	3.2	3.2	3.2
Distribution requirements	3.1	3.1	3.1
Quality of acad. Advisor	3.0	3.0	3.0
Social Categories:			
Adequacy of extrac. Opport.	2.8	2.8	2.8
Residential environment	2.8	2.6	2.8
Quality of social life	2.6	2.4	2.4
Overall impress. Of trin stud.	2.5	2.4	2.4
Intell. Life outside class	2.4	2.5	2.4

(A Statistical Picture of Trinity and Its Curriculum, p.

21)

Other reasons why students leave:

- Students feel disenchanting, uncomfortable, or haven't found their niche/group of friends.
- Students interests change – don't want to be at a liberal arts school – ie: 9/11; people become more interested in international studies (NY).
- Students don't like the size of the school
- Hartford is perceived in a negative and dangerous light by the students
- The party scene is too much for students

(Interviews with Deans Reuman, Spurlock-Evans, and Herzberger)

Students also rate their satisfaction level concerning the urban location that Trinity is in. In general, the students who have to travel more, or live further away from Trinity, are less satisfied with the location. These statistics are from students who applied to transfer in 2003. Again, 1 = very dissatisfied, and 4 = very satisfied.

(*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges*, February 2004. Sharon Herzberger.)

	Not Black or Hispanic	Black or Hispanic
Trinity's Neighborhood	1.8	2.8
Hartford and Metro Area	2.0	2.6
Urban Location	2.2	2.6
School in an Urban Env.	2.7	3.5

(*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges*, p. 5)

Statistics:

Graduation Rates and Projections 1998-2001

- Bold = Projected numbers (not the actual percentage)

	Total Students (#)	4 years	5 years	6 years
1998	508	76.8%	85.8%	87.8%
1999	565	78.2%	83.9%	85.0%
2000	489	80.6%	87.5%	88.7%
2001	492	81.0%	88.0%	89.3%

(From Sharon Herzberger talk to Trinity Faculty April, 2004: Prepared by Kent Smith. – *Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity Challenges*, p.7)

6 Year Graduation Rates among 415 Colleges and Universities

- 68% - Highly Selective
- 55% - Selective
- 44% - Moderately Selective
- 35% - Less Selective

(*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges*, p. 1)

The Colleges and Universities who were highly selective, or selective, had higher rates compared to moderately selective or less selective schools. However, Trinity in particular, had a far better rate than other highly selective schools with a rate of no less than 85% (1998-2001). This is a great accomplishment even though Trinity still wants to

improve their retention rates. (*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges.*)

2 Year Retention Rates for Whites, Asians, Hispanics and Blacks

	Whites	Asians	Hispanics	Blacks
1998	89%	87%	74%	79%
1999	89%	92%	86%	88%
2000	85%	90%	96%	96%
2001	89%	91%	85%	96%

(*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges*, p. 3-4)

Percentages of those with high GPA's (B+ or better) VS other students who voluntarily withdraw during the first year (Jan 2003)

	High GPA	Other GPA
1997	10%	6%
1998	7%	5%
1999	12%	7.5%
2000	10%	7.5%

(*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges*, p. 6)

It is important to not that Trinity loses a lot of good academic students. These are the kinds of student's that Trinity wants to keep.

Percentage of Students Voluntarily withdrawing (1996-2003 cohorts): The Importance of Learning Communities

Enrolled in Gateway Programs (ISP, Cities, Interarts)	9.1%
Not Enrolled	14.8%
Enrolled in Gateway or Tutorial College	8.8%
Not Enrolled in either of them	15.6%

(*Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity's Challenges*, p. 8)

If a student was a part of the learning community/component, a half would leave compared to those not enrolled. There are positive effects for being involved with these

types of programs: Learning by doing, connecting to the school and with others, thinking creatively and analytically.

Initiatives:

Concerning initiatives and programs, it is important to note that because there is a disproportionate number of minority students leaving compared to their white counterparts, faculty and students of particular initiatives are mindful that they might need to focus more on them. Thus, while it seems like initiatives are only geared towards minority students, in reality, initiatives are designed for every student, and they are designed for everyone's benefit (Dean Herzberger).

Even though it is unfair to pinpoint one particular initiative that increases student retention at Trinity, there are initiatives that are more successful and effective than others. A very successful academic project is the Gateway Course Project. Part of this project is the "Supplemental Instruction" sessions (SI) for students who take introductory science courses (biology and chemistry) which developed in the 2001-2002 year. Faculty in chemistry and biology departments, work with administrators and students to help students who are earning D's, F's or W's (withdrawals). The SI sessions are student led (SI leaders), and they are highly interactive. During these sessions, SI leaders find out *how* students learn, and discover *how* students come to a particular answer, rather than just finding out what to learn. These sessions are also very beneficial because students develop great relationships with other students, and they teach and learn from one another. It is important to note that because many students of color are the first generation of their family to go to college, they are interested in the science field. Thus,

there are a higher number of students of color taking introductory classes, even though there are still more White students in these classes. Nevertheless, the results of those who participate in the SI sessions are quite remarkable (Dean Herzberger).

In the fall of 2001, the average Chem 111 grade for all students without SI, was 2.54, and in the fall of 2003 with SI, the average grade rose to 2.86. Concerning students of color, the results are more remarkable. In the fall of 2001, the average Chem 111 grade without SI was 1.77 and in the fall of 2003 with SI, the average grade was 2.58. 60% of students of color who took Chem 111 completed Chem 112, compared to 45-55% (without SI existing). Also, 50% completed organic chemistry compared to 25% (“Examples of Projects Underway.” A letter to President Jones, from Deans Spurlock-Evans and Herzberger. Sept. 2004.)

Other statistics and results concerning SI are quite remarkable as well. *None* of the students who participated SI in the fall of 2001 earned D’s, F’s or W’s. More specifically, 23.5% earned A’s, 52.9% earned B’s, and 23.5% earned C’s. However, 25% of the students who did not participate in SI (in fall of 2001) earned D’s, F’s or W’s. Again, more specifically, only 10% earned A’s, 40% earned B’s and 25% earned C’s. It is evident that even after the first semester that SI was developed, students are doing significantly better (academically), in introductory science courses. Thus, the SI sessions are extremely helpful and beneficial! (*Trinity College SI Pilot Program* (Chem 111 and 112), Fall 2001 and Spring 2002. CHAS, 2003).

Another successful and effective initiative is the Early Intervention TEAM which is organized by Dean Reuman. Many other faculty members and administration are involved with it as well. They reach out and help students who show signs of academic

or personal troubles. They are alert to any warning signs a student might show. They are focused on first year students who are having difficulty transitioning into a new environment. For example, if a student has problems affording books for the semester, they might give him or her a loan. They also focus on students of color, but the intervention program is really designed for every student (“Examples of Projects Underway”, p. 3).

How does Dean Reuman (or any other faculty or administration member) know that a student is in academic trouble? One way in finding out is that Dean Reuman sends notices via email or telephone to faculty, and asks/sees if any of their students are not coming to class, doing poorly on exams, and so on. Also, first year mentors, TA’s, and RA’s, are trained to go or at least let Dean Reuman know that a student is not doing well academically. These students know that she is a good resource, and can help students greatly (Dean Herzberger).

Another successful and effective program is the Tutorial College program, which started in the 2001-2002 year. It is a 2 semester, integrated and educational program. Each year, the program accepts 40-50 students, and there are 5 faculty members as well. These students end up living in Summit Suites East. Thus, it is like a tight-knit, learning community within Trinity College. The program is based on readings and discussions, and students are encouraged to think creatively and analytically. Guest lecturers and visitors like authors; come to speak to the students as well. Students are able to open and enrich their minds with challenging readings of Einstein and Faust (“A Special Pedagogical Universe,” *Mosaic*. May, 2001).

Because Tutorial is a small, yet close community, the students feel very comfortable. They are able to make new friends with other students and the faculty, and they also become independent learners. The ‘Overview’ of Tutorial College on the Trinity College’s website sums it up nicely when it says,

Through diligent inquiry, relentless dialogue and creative thought, the minds in residence at Tutorial College hope to earn the chance to see at least part of the landscape whole (“Tutorial College,” Trinity College website. www.Trincoll.edu).

Concerning retention specifically, it is important to note that students who are enrolled in Gateway Programs or Tutorial College (not part of Gateway), compared to students who are not enrolled (in either), are more likely to stay. The average percentage (1996-2002 cohorts) of students who withdrew and were enrolled in either Gateway Programs or Tutorial College was 8.8%. Whereas, the average percentage of students who withdrew and were not enrolled in either was 15.6%. (Promoting Success and Satisfaction: Trinity’s Challenges, p. 8).

Another initiative that is successful and effective is the Men of Color Alliance (MOCA) which started 6 years ago. Even though the title includes “Men of Color”, it really appeals to men and *women* of all ethnicities, nationalities and backgrounds. MOCA involves a group of students whose main message is explicitly about retention. It is not so much of an academic initiative, but a social one. For example, they create non-alcoholic social opportunities for students such as step shows. MOCA has been very successful by reaching out to the community, like mentoring children at the Boys and Girls Club. It also has great connections with other colleges like Vassar (conferences). Plus, University of Hartford created MOCA on their campus because they were so

influences and intrigued by MOCA at Trinity. Thus, not only does MOCA have an impact at Trinity, but other colleges and universities as well! (Dean Spurlock-Evans).

One interesting and effective initiative which only started 2 years ago was the Athletic Connection. This program was developed because the Dean(s) and the athletic department realized and recognized the difficulties of being both a student and athlete, especially with game and practice schedules. Thus, the Dean and the athletic department worked together to provide academic support and intervention if a student had difficulty in class(es) (“Examples of Projects Underway”, p. 2). Today, each athletic team has a faculty advisor whether it is faculty or members of the administration. This program is also beneficial to the coaches. They now have assistance, and a partner in helping their athletes academically. A couple examples of the advisors “duties” to the students are mentoring/tutoring, and bringing them to the library to help them with research (Dean Herzberger). It is also interesting to note that athletes might take classes that the advisors teach. For example, Professor Woldu, a music professor is the advisor for the men’s ice hockey team. I have taken several classes with her, and she has said many times that the team has taken her classes like “Women in Music”! (Professor, Woldu).

One program which is effective, but can still be improved is the PRIDE program. This program is for any student, but it mainly attracts minority students. It is a mentoring program where there are PRIDE leaders who are students (sophomores-seniors). PRIDE leaders live in first year halls, and they support students from diverse and racial backgrounds that are not well represented at Trinity College. A major goal is to promote cultural awareness and receptivity among members of the Trinity community

as a whole. They want to increase exposure and understanding of cultural differences. Throughout the years, the program has increased in the number of students, especially Latinos and Asians.

One way the program can improve is by having better communication and interaction with the RA's and PRIDE leaders. PRIDE leaders and students who are involved with PRIDE do not have to be restricted to each other. These students can work, and interact with the *entire* floor (non PRIDE students, RA). By doing this, students will make new friends, have a better awareness and be more open minded. Another issue concerning PRIDE is that many PRIDE leaders feel like they aren't appreciated from students and their fellow mentors. Because they put a lot of effort and work into this program, they sometimes feel underappreciated and don't get anything in return which is unfortunate (Dean Spurlock-Evans). Therefore, PRIDE is an effective program, but it still can be improved.

Conclusion:

I had a lot of trouble deciding on a research topic. I knew that I wanted to do something that dealt specifically with Trinity College and academics, and not with the outside community. I also knew that I wanted to qualitative research, such as interviewing students and faculty. When the topic of initiatives and student retention came up, I was very excited and interested. I looked forward to finding retention statistics, information about specific initiatives, and reasons why students were leaving. I did not end up interviewing students, but rather only faculty and administration. Thus, I did not need an IRB form, which honestly was a relief to me, seeing how other students

had difficulties with the form. Overall, even though this project was a challenging and tiresome process, it was also very interesting and exciting as well.

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