Project Details

Title	Promoting Student Success in Gateway Courses	Status	REVIEWED
Category	1-Helping Students Learn	Updated	11-07-2013
Timeline		Reviewed	04-03-2014
Planned Project Kickoff 08-21-2012		Created	11-03-2012
Target Completion 05-31-2013		Last Modified	04-03-2014

- 1: **CURRENT PROJECT STATUS SUMMARY**

VU Answer: The Action Project consists of four different projects designed to improve success and retention in gateway courses: (1) supplemental instruction offered to students in General Psychology and Intro. to Sociology, two social science general education courses with heavy enrollment; (2) supplemental instruction offered in Financial Accounting; (3) a trio of linked courses, developmental reading, developmental writing, and Intro. to Business; and (4) thematically focused Composition II sections, offering themes such as "ModerNOMonsters," "American Values in Contemporary Popular Culture," and "Health Care," general education basic skills courses that students select based on their interest.

 Each of the projects has produced positive results:

(1) The work in multiple sections of Psychology and Sociology uses Education majors who previously completed the Psychology or Sociology courses as peer tutors. The tutors offer study sessions, which students attend voluntarily. Attendance at the sessions has ranged from highs of 67% of students per section attending to lows of 10%, but 63% of all students surveyed attended at least one session, and 92% of the students said they would recommend the sessions to other students. The impact of the sessions is seen in test score improvements, and as word has grown about the attendees' success on tests, session attendance has increased. Students attending the SI sessions typically average 10-15% higher exam grades. Besides the student scores improvement, the tutors, who work closely with the faculty, have gained valuable experience to add to their resumes. Reflections completed by the peer tutors last academic year indicate that they grew from the experience of being in front of the students and leading the discussions of course material. The activity also engaged them creatively. For instance, they developed a Facebook page called "REMIND 101" and are using it to reach out to students and encourage them to attend sessions.

(2) Accounting 201, Financial Accounting, has been a traditional barrier course for both accounting and business majors. Accounting faculty found that successful students do about 2-3 hours of homework for every hour of class; unfortunately, not enough students are doing that amount of homework on their own. To improve success, the instructors set up structured homework hours and required students to attend 2 hours per week. Faculty,

a business lab tutor, and two students from the previous semester help with the study sessions, where current students discuss and work on both homework problems and chapter note taking. The results have been significant: exam averages have increased (18% for the first exam, 1% for the second, 11% for the third, 14% for the fourth, and 15% for the final exam). Faculty assumed that the required extra hours would create student grumbling and resistance; instead, students often bring lunch, work collaboratively to solve problems, and help each other understand key concepts. 76% of the students responded in a survey that the sessions helped them complete homework that they could not have completed on their own. 84% thought they would have had a lower grade for the course if it had not been for the sessions. The student tutors, not surprisingly, found the activity very rewarding and beneficial for the students. They thought the help with note taking was especially constructive since even they recognized what a challenge it is to take notes in Accounting.

(3) The trio of linked courses was developed for business majors who were all placed in the same linked sections of ENGL 009, READ 009, and MGMT 100, Intro. to Business. The developmental courses represent the lowest level of basic skills taught at VU, and this section of MGMT 100 pulled together all the students required to take the two lowest levels of remedial writing and reading. The group consisted almost entirely of minority students with the lowest levels of developmental skills. Students of this profile are traditionally very difficult to retain in the Business program or move towards degree completion of any sort. Three faculty members collaborated to share business related reading and writing assignments, and the business faculty member served as the academic advisor for all the students. The faculty shared information about the students and worked jointly to ensure attendance in all three courses. A special feature of the program was the presentations from outside business professionals. Students had to maintain a minimum of a "C" grade in all courses to participate. The activities included lunch and a chance to talk to people who had "made it" in the business world. While the group of students in the project is a small number (thirteen students initially enrolled), the retention numbers are promising given the student demographics and skill levels, especially when compared to students in other sections of MGMT 100. Students in other sections might have been required to take a single developmental writing or reading course, but this section pulled together all the MGMT students who were required to take the two lowest level writing and reading courses. A final grade comparison (transferrable grades, A through C in MGMT 100) shows that 77% of the students in this project section achieved a "C" or better; this number represents the 3rd highest percentage of final grade section averages in the seven MGMT 100 sections. (The seven sections had section averages of A-C final grades ranging from a high of 83% of students with A-C to a low average of 70% with final grades ranging from A-C.) In addition, ten of the thirteen students successfully completed all three courses; ten of the students registered for the following Spring '13 semester, and eight registered and returned for the Fall '13 semester. Four students even enrolled during the Summer '13 sessions. A summary of student reflection results indicates the students would strongly recommend the linked courses to other students because they liked the complementary material offered in all three courses. They felt they learned better in all three and enjoyed the community of same students. They also looked forward to the professional presentation days, saying

they learned the realistic challenges of starting a business and the keys to being a professional. All of the reflections indicated the experience was very positive for the participants.

(4) English Composition II has historically had a 40 to 50% withdrawal or failure rate. Student attendance begins to drop when the course gives serious attention to writing the long research paper. The themed ENGL 102 project asked faculty to identify section themes that they knew or thought students would be attracted to, hoping that attractive themes would keep students engaged for the duration of the course. The courses include thematic reading materials and all the writing projects directly or indirectly address the themes. During the 2013 Spring semester, seven different themes were introduced into twelve sections of ENGL 102 (including those identified in the introduction above). While the retention numbers for themed sections were similar to the traditional sections, two factors have to be included in the evaluation: (1) the newness of this approach (including the limited promotion of the themes) and (2) the student survey results, which suggest the thematic approach increased student engagement in the course. While, ultimately, retention is the goal, the success of the experiment cannot be determined strictly by comparing final grades. A survey of the students indicates a need for better promotion: Only 40% of the students in the themed courses selected the section based on their awareness of the themed focus. However, other numbers indicate that despite not knowing about the themes, students were positively affected by them. 69% of the respondents reported being either "highly involved" or "involved" in the course and activities, and 81% reported that the theme sustained their interest for the entire semester. 87% of the students also reported that they felt the themed focus helped them improve their writing skills, and 84% of the students said the English Dept. ought to expand the project with even more thematic options. Based on the positive survey results, including the fact that students who didn't select the themes seemed to be more engaged, the English Department believes that better promotion, surveys of both themed and non-themed sections, and a comparison of the assessment results from both traditional and themed sections will produce much better evidence of the impact of the themed courses, and ultimately, evidence of better retention.

VU elected to continue this Action Project for an additional year because the activties seemed to have merit and needed at least a second year of data to better determine the retention merits of the methods. The institution is also reviewing its developmental course offerings and looking at ways to move students through more successfully. These projects offer curriculum design ideas and evidence for methods that might improve student retention in developmental courses. Further results will be used to confirm the value of these approaches.

- **Reviewer Response:** Vincennes has taken on quite a project with this endeavor. The initial results indicate that the course specific initiatives are resulting in positive results related to student grades and course retention. Clearly grades are an important metric; however, student learning at a more granular level may be more informative in the long run. Are their specific trends in achievement of students who participate in these classes? Although it isn't part of the scope of this project, Vincennes may want to further consider

how students who participate transfer their learning skills and specific content knowledge to other courses as they continue their academic progress. Is there a logical bridge between these courses and the next courses students take? Will these students continue to have opportunities for support as they move out of these courses into other courses?

- 2: **INSTITUTIONAL INVOLVEMENT**

  VU Answer: In all of the subcategories of this Action Project, engaged faculty self-selected once the call was put out for projects that might improve retention. The "call" came from two sources. First, an Action Project completed in 2007 explored the possibility of adding some supplemental instruction; a recommendation to pilot SI led to a strategic plan objective, and so faculty were encouraged to think of ways to begin using SI. That led to the second source of engagement in the process. VU has a Continuous Quality Improvement Committee that makes a grassroots call for Action Project proposals. All of the projects arose out of proposals or discussions of proposals during the proposal evaluation process. Participating faculty are committed to finding ways to help students succeed. Several participating faculty members have presented their work to the CQI Committee or have invited members to view the students in the classroom. Additionally, this Action Project and its subcategories were presented to all University members during the 2012 opening University convocation.

- **Reviewer Response**: As expected, this action project had significant faculty involvement. The push for this concept started in 2007 as the result of a previous Action Project. In addition, institutional involvement is demonstrated through the action project evaluation process.

- 3: **PLANNED NEXT STEPS AND TIMELINE**

  VU Answer: All of the projects are continuing for the 2013-14 academic year. Funding for the projects has been extended for the reasons noted in #1 above—the data is viewed as baseline and VU would like some confirmation of the value of these approaches so the institution can make informed decisions about how to impact other curricula, especially developmental education. Most of the weak spots in the data have been identified, and one part of this year's plan is to improve the data. Last year, each of the projects included surveys or reflections to identify course or delivery improvements (such as better promotion and the expansion of themes in the ENGL 102 project), and faculty are implementing them this year. VU will take the data from the two year's activities and analyze it to determine beneficial approaches to improving retention. Some of the projects might be sustained further; however, the Action Project will probably be closed early next Fall 2014, after all the data is turned in for analysis and use.

- **Reviewer Response**: The university has plans in place for the 2013-2014 and many activities are in progress. Quality data is key to evaluating and interpreting success of the initiative.

- 4: **BEST PRACTICES**

  VU Answer: As a project focused on helping students be successful in gateway courses, most of the effective practices have to do with identifying ways to engage students. One practice that helped engage students in the Psychology/Sociology project was the development of a Facebook page, REMIND 101. Students tend to use email less and less, and so using social media seems to be a better way to contact students. While students are now beginning to move away from Facebook, the point is to identify social media that can be used successfully to connect with students. In the Accounting project, much attention is given to proper note taking and reviewing notes as part of the study sessions. Students found a value in being better note takers so they can help themselves learn by identifying key chapter ideas. The supplemental homework periods allowed time to enhance students' skills without taking away from regular class time. One of the keys to success in the linked courses project is having the business course instructor (1) serve as the advisor and (2) use certain elements of intrusive advising. The faculty/advisor consulted with the faculty teaching the developmental courses and asked about student performance. The business faculty/advisor put pressure on the students for a commitment to all the courses, even texting students who were absent and going to the dorms at times to get them into class. She also used the outside speaker events as leverage on the students to keep their grades at "C" or better in the linked developmental courses. The themed ENGL 102 sections were successful because of the themes that allowed students to take ownership of the topics of their papers. By selecting the themes (when they did) and by letting students take control of how they wanted to address the theme in different writing tasks, students reported greater engagement.

  Another effective practice was the intensive use of reflections and surveys. All of these courses represent creative faculty's efforts to improve retention, but taking feedback from students helped to drive changes and improvements for this upcoming year, and in the case of the themed English, they helped to give a perspective on the final grade results. While there was not a significant improvement in the final grade results, as noted above, the reflective and survey responses made it clear that the themes had a positive impact on students' interest in the course and their perception was the themes improved their learning about writing. Letting students have more ownership of their content is not a new idea, but the survey results suggest that the themes did improve learning by keeping students engaged. Collecting this qualitative data helps faculty gain insight into the impact of their creative curriculum efforts. Faculty and peer tutors are also doing reflection as a part of the data being collected for the activities. These results "round out" the analysis of the experience for others, helping to give a more complete view of these activities, which, in turn, helps to determine application possibilities and methods in other situations.

- **Reviewer Response**: Vincennes has opportunities to share best practices either as a whole project or individual targeted elements of the action project. Some best practices might also be shared in discipline specific venues, such as best practices for English composition or best practices for Accounting pedagogy. Reflection is become more and

more common as a teaching and learning tool so it would also be interesting to hear student stories regarding their experiences.

- 5: **ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES TO PROJECT SUCCESS**

  VU Answer: The major challenge that this project faced was how to generate the subpopulation data from our SIS without over-burdening our already taxed institutional research and management information centers with demands for more ad hoc reports. The data that has been collected for this project is less than our original data plans. For instance, it is not easy for faculty to compare attendance in their course sections with student attendance in other sections. It is difficult to compare final results or consider demographics or placement testing scores of student in their sections, and the data challenges make it even more difficult to establish control groups. This experience, along with a few other recent "data-challenged" projects, has led VU to work on a data-access project during the Strategy Forum. The focus of that project is collecting data on key retention metrics and developing data blocks and cubes of key student data, along with empowering a larger set of users. The institution is beginning with blocks of data reflecting student retention risk factors, and it believes that once the project is up and running, the experience of having greater access to actionable data will engender greater demand for access to and use of other data, which should drive further development of data sets and tools. VU sees this as part of building a culture of evidence, a goal it has set for itself by establishing assessment as its number one strategic plan goal.

  The other challenge with this project is the departure of some of the faculty involved. Some faculty took jobs elsewhere and some faculty had to leave the projects during the second year in order to work on other projects or courses. Some data was lost with people leaving, and some extra meetings were required to ensure continuity of goals and approaches. The extra meetings and planning seem to have the projects on the right track.

- **Reviewer Response:** Time just seems to be a continuing issue for everyone! Is it possible to allow a staff person or faculty person release time to allow for more targeted efforts at coordinating data? Also, rather than having individual faculty maintain data, perhaps it would be more effective to dedicate a sharepoint, google docs, or dropbox, etc. location for data collection and storage. Start small with the data analysis by identifying and prioritizing the most important metrics/outcomes. Focus on the data that are available.