

Chapter 1: Introduction

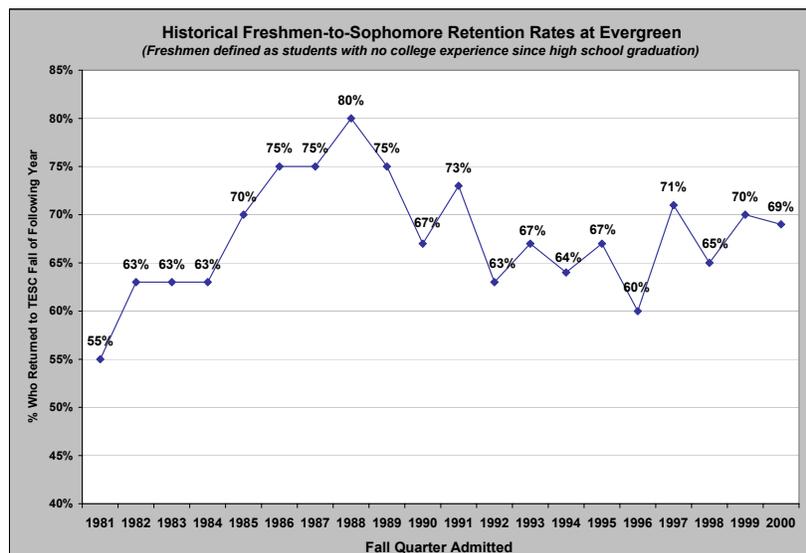
I. The Transitions to Success Project

This report chronicles the history of the Transitions to Success (T2S) program sponsored by the Vice President for Student Affairs and conducted by the Academic Advising Office at The Evergreen State College. This project was a highly collaborative effort between Academic Advising and the Office of Institutional Research with significant support from Career Development and the Writing Center on activities and preliminary design. A one-year intrusive advising pilot project was developed in December 1998 in response to a request from the Vice President of Student Affairs who had concerns about declining freshman retention. The pilot ran for the academic year 1999-2000 and was subsequently funded for a second academic year, 2000-2001. The project was designed to supplement outreach activities already being carried out by Student Affairs offices, including Academic Advising, the Learning Resource Center, Career Development, and others. Our goal was to investigate models of advising that we hoped would reveal some key methods of increasing the effectiveness of Academic Advising activities in order to improve retention among first year students.

II. Background and Definition of Issues

A. Freshmen Retention History at Evergreen

Evergreen's freshman-to-sophomore retention has varied over the years, but remained in the 70% to 80% range from 1986 to 1990. When freshmen retention dipped to 67% in 1991, the Office of Institutional Research notified academic deans and student support staff. When a second decline followed in the mid-90's, the college began to take additional steps to address the situation. Several curricular models were tested, and student support services fine-tuned their services to help reverse this trend.

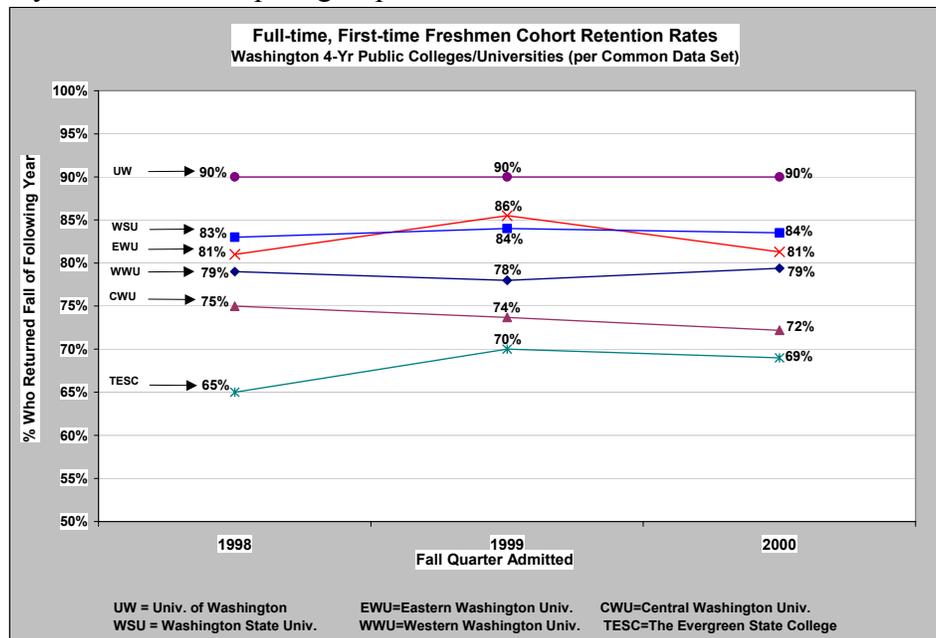


B. Washington State Accountability

Undergraduate retention has been a Washington State mandated accountability measure since 1997. The Washington State Legislature set a long-term target of 90% undergraduate retention for Evergreen, and we report our progress on an annual basis to the Higher Education Coordinating Board (Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000). While continuing to report our overall undergraduate retention rate, Evergreen has elected to focus specifically on freshmen-to-sophomore retention, because retention is historically lowest for this group of students.

Freshmen retention rates also affect another accountability measure: five-year freshmen cohort graduation rates. When the number of entering freshmen who return to the college for their sophomore year is low, the college is negatively impacted five years later when graduation rates are calculated for that group. Thus, Evergreen focuses on strategies to improve freshmen retention in order to positively influence five-year graduation rates and overall undergraduate retention. Strategies employed during the last biennium (1999-01) included the following: implementation of the “First-Year Experience” program in college housing, summer workshops for faculty planning to teach freshmen programs, hiring a student recruitment consultant to evaluate “student match” with the college, and a variety of efforts by Academic Advising (Core Connectors, Advising and Study Skills Center in campus housing, improved orientation activities, targeted interventions with attrition prone students, and the Transitions to Success pilot project) (The Evergreen State College, 2001).

Freshmen retention data from each of the six public four-year colleges and universities in Washington State were collected from each institution’s web site or institutional research office as reported to the Common Data Set (see Bibliography for web site references). The comparison of Evergreen to the other public four-year colleges finds Evergreen’s freshmen retention rate to be consistently lower than this peer group.



C. Comparison to National Freshmen Retention Measures

Evergreen participates in an ongoing national retention project through the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE). Based on their 2000-01 report, the average freshmen retention rate for all 344 participating institutions was 79.8%; this rate is the same as the rate for all of the public schools in the study (Center for Institutional Data Exchange, 2001). Evergreen's freshmen retention rate has only reached 80% in one of the past 20 years, so there is room for improvement to bring the college closer to the national average. Evergreen's history reveals the same pattern of retention by class level as the national research suggests. The study found that at a national level "Freshman year is the most crucial period in student retention... more than half of the dropouts happen during the freshmen year" (Center for Institutional Data Exchange, 2001).

D. Evergreen-specific Research Questions

We started the first year of Transitions to Success (T2S) with broad questions about what new intrusive advising strategies could make a difference in first year student retention. The primary strategies included connectedness, academic skills, thorough individual advising and social engagement. New questions emerged as the project progressed, based on experiences with the students, reviewing the literature in the field, and the preliminary results of our pilot. Even without extensive analysis, themes that emerged in the first year allowed us to respond to the easily visible patterns in the areas of: sense of agency (later termed self-efficacy), stress patterns, and confidence issues. Advisors felt these were themes that seemed crucial enough to explore in more depth for the second year of the pilot.

Following Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure, the T2S project asked students specifically about their own perceptions of skills and abilities (pre-entry attributes), their intentions, their confidence in Evergreen as the place where they could achieve their goals (goals and commitments). We listened to their stories about their experiences in the academic system – characterized by their academic performance and experiences, co-curricular activities, and interactions with faculty, staff, and peer groups. We monitored this information and its impact on departure decisions.

Following is a list of questions we developed and used to guide our research:

- What factors influence the persistence of first-year students at Evergreen?
- What causes students to leave?
- What causes students to stay?
- What interventions did the students experience?
- Were the interventions the students received effective?
- What challenges do first-year students experience at Evergreen?
- What can Academic Advising do to increase first-year student retention?
- When do students make decisions about when to stay at or leave Evergreen?

- How do students “do” Evergreen (e.g. navigate curriculum, academic planning, find supports)?
- What are the characteristics that help students succeed at Evergreen?
- How does a student’s sense of connectedness to Evergreen affect first-year retention?
- How confident are first-year students that they can get the education they want at Evergreen?
- Does students’ institutional confidence affect their retention?
- Does students’ confidence in their own academic skills affect their success?

E. History of the Transitions to Success Project

1. Year One

Late in 1998, the Vice President of Student Affairs identified resources to support a one-year pilot program to develop an intrusive advising project. We hoped to learn from a group of first-year students what activities might make a difference in their persistence at Evergreen. Activities for the first year of the program envisioned as a kind of “second curriculum” that would focus on the following areas:

- Connectedness to at least one individual adult at the college
- Academic skills support
- Thorough and individualized advising
- Social engagement with other students to help create a deeper sense of connectedness

The model was based primarily on findings by Alexander Astin (1993) that connection with an adult at a college is a considerable influence on persistence, and the Tinto model (1993) that identifies preparedness and connectedness as major retention influences.

A randomly-selected group of 43 first-year students was advised and interviewed four times over the year, offered approximately 10 workshops on study and academic skills, and participated in developing additional workshops that were specific to their interests. Students evaluated each activity and provided feedback about the overall program. Their lives were followed closely, and an enormous amount of data was produced, although a design flaw in the first year was that the data collected was not easily quantifiable. However, themes and trends in students’ lives and activities were visible and permitted us to draw a number of conclusions.

2. Year Two

In late summer of 2000, the project was supported to continue into a second year. As we refined our approach for Year Two, we continued to focus on helping students build a connection with a college representative. We sought to build this sense of integration at the same time we were collecting more specific and quantifiable data about the lives of our sample group of students. We held advising interviews each quarter, using a revised script that included a new method of collecting quantifiable data. In the course of the interview, the advisor was able to offer interventions tailored to the individual student’s needs.

The set of skill-building workshops offered in Year One was discarded, because student participation was poor despite monetary incentives and reminders. These workshops were a huge amount of staff work for what students reported getting out of them. After a review of Bandura's theories, a spring quarter academic planning workshop (*Mapping Your Education II*) was developed to support students as they prepared to make plans for their second year at Evergreen (Bandura, 1997). The workshop was designed to increase students' confidence in Evergreen and included stories told by successful Evergreen seniors. Group work emphasized the need for breadth in academic planning.

The second year of the pilot was influenced by the preliminary work of the General Education Disappearing Task Force, as that group attempted to re-envision the nature of advising and the importance of breadth and depth in a system that has no requirements. Work within the T2S project for the second year focused more directly on breadth. This was particularly evident in the workshop *Mapping Your Education II*. Advising interviews also supported students in exploration within the curriculum and other aspects of breadth.

III. Review of Literature

The following literature review is by no means a comprehensive review of all issues impacting first-year students, but it touches on the key factors that prior research has found to be related to student persistence. These key factors influenced the design of the project and the questions we asked students. The major factors we looked at included demographics, engagement in community, non-academic transition factors, and self-efficacy.

A. Demographic Impact on Persistence

According to Tinto (1995), college students make a series of transitions when they begin college that are similar to the stages that individuals pass through in becoming incorporated into human communities. A student's ability to negotiate these stages will directly affect his or her persistence in college. The process of becoming integrated in a community is complex, and while the process can be defined in stages, not all individuals experience the same stages or in the same way. In particular, first generation college students, students who are from disadvantaged communities, international students, students from rural areas, or distinct social, ethnic or religious communities may find the separation stage particularly challenging. Tinto's work suggests that students who are particularly at risk of not connecting with a new college community may benefit from assistance with clarifying goals for their work in the new community. Goal setting can help students handle the stress that comes with making adjustments to a new community (Tinto, 1995).

Strage (1999) reports that the confidence level for entering freshmen is at an all time high, however, the percentage of students graduating from college is declining. Additionally, there is a distinct correlation "between academic and social integration and student outcomes across ethnic groups and for first and later generation college students" (Strage, 1999). Over the last decade, the college population has changed dramatically. Non-traditional students are increasing in proportion on college campuses. The models for success that were developed in the 1980s

and based on the “traditional college student” do not address the needs of a growing, diverse student body. This study suggests that students that represent non-traditional college populations have strengths and weaknesses that are unique to their population; therefore, it is essential that assumptions are not made about these students based on assumptions that we have made about traditional students. Furthermore, Strage cautions campuses to avoid generalizing about students of color, because in her study, differences were revealed between ethnic sub-groups in the areas of motivation and college integration. Finally, Strage reminds colleges “to consider the multiple worlds our students come from” (Strage, 1999).

B. Engagement in Community

The impact of engagement in the community is noted in nearly all the literature on retention. Authors such as Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991), Astin (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (1999) all highlighted the importance of community engagement for students, both personally and academically. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted, "In learning to care about each other as friends, to learn with each other in groups, and to realize the connections between content and process, theory and application, disagreement and compromise, students move through autonomy toward interdependence" (p. 424). The personal effects of engagement in the community are positively echoed in the effects on academics as well.

In his 1995 publication about learning communities, Tinto talks about a research project where his team explored whether collaborative learning programs affected student learning and persistence. The study looked at academic and social behaviors and experiences of first-year students. The research team found that students who participated in collaborative learning and coordinated studies programs were more involved in school activities, learned more, and persisted at a higher rate than did other students in traditional higher education settings. Tinto believes that the implications for collaborative learning are many. Students get to know each other better in collaborative programs due to the thinking and rethinking they do together. Tinto believes learning communities promote a respect for diversity and encourage inter-group affiliations (Tinto, 1995).

C. Non-Academic Transition Factors

William Perry (1970) began a study in the mid-1950's that looked at the intellectual and ethical development of college students. He found that students moved through a series of developmental stages. The first stage, which he called “dualism,” is a typical one for entering college students. In the stages of dualism students have very little tolerance for ambiguity and believe that those who are in a position of authority are the bearers of truth. If two authorities are in disagreement with one another, one is perceived as good and the other as bad. In later works, Widick and Simpson (1978) described characteristics of the dualistic developmental stage as “stressful when uncertainty is encountered; difficulty in resolving interpretative tasks such as essays; instructors seen as knowing the truth; and a disproportionate importance is attached to evaluations” (Bliming, 1995). Belenky, et al. (1986) added pertinent ideas to this thinking that made the model more inclusive of women and other ways of knowing. The Perry model is a useful tool in helping advisors understand what students may be struggling with – especially in

the Evergreen atmosphere that requires a quick adaptation to later stages of relativity where ambiguity and complexity of understanding are necessary.

In their book, *How College Affects Students* (1999), Pascarella and Terenzini reported that “the transition from high school to college appears to be as hard on students’ social self-concepts (popularity, popularity with the opposite sex, leadership ability, social self-confidence, understanding others, and the like) as it is on their academic self-images.” Pascarella and Terenzini report that the work of Lokitz and Sprandel (1976) discovered that students feel stripped of their social identities by the move to college, having lost the social identity moorings afforded by parents’ place in the community and by their own place in high schools and among their peers. By the end of the sophomore year, self-concept typically starts to rise again.

Involving Colleges (Kuh et al., 1991) sites Evergreen as one of its examples of colleges that create rich out-of-class learning environments. These opportunities are important for helping students transition to and become connected to the college, as well as promoting a greater overall learning experience. “The impact of the college experience on students is increased when they are more actively engaged in various aspects of college life” (Kuh, p.5). The authors of this book stated that colleges that successfully promoted involvement in college life have a “clear mission, kept plainly in view” (p.341), “recognize and respond to the total student experience” (p.347), and “provide small, human-scale environments and multiple subcommunities” (p.351).

D. Self-efficacy

In their book *Education and Identity* (1993), Chickering and Reisser report that college students continually think about and evaluate their competencies. Students who are given support, suggestions, or guidelines for assessing their development in concrete ways are more inclined to have a strong sense of competence.

Bandura defines self-efficacy as “people’s judgement of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p.391). In his book, *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies*, Bandura mentions studies by Meece, Wigfield, and Eccles (1990) and Randhawa, Beamer, and Lundberg, (1993) in which attitudes and anxiety about mathematics were compared to efficacy beliefs about math. Those researchers found that self-efficacy was the dominant factor in learning outcomes. In fact, self-efficacy beliefs were a better predictor of college students’ choice of a major than prior mathematical achievement (Bandura, 1995).

How capable a student judges himself or herself to be is a factor in how smoothly they will transition to college level work. A student’s self-confidence in their skills will affect the academic goals they set and the level of commitment to the goals they will maintain.

Writing instruction has been shown to increase perceived self-efficacy in regards to writing as well as to improve the structure of compositions. Bandura (1995) points to a study of college freshmen in regards to their ability to set academic goals and self-standards in the development of their writing proficiency. Perceived self-efficacy was measured in relation to their ability to regulate their writing and academic attainment in the writing course. At the end of the study,

perceived academic self-efficacy was found to directly influence writing achievements and goal setting (Bandura 1995).

Self-efficacy beliefs affect many arenas in students' lives, including ability to manage their time. The stronger the belief that a student is in control of his/her own time, the greater the ability to predict and manage life events. Students' ability to manage and direct their time greatly contributes to their academic self-development (Bandura, 1995).