

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

### I. Response to Research Questions

#### A. What factors influence the persistence of first-year students at Evergreen?

##### Year One Retention

- T2S participants had a higher retention from fall to spring than the control group students. (Control group: 83.8%; T2S participants: 95.3%).
- Retention from fall to fall showed no significant difference between participant and control groups.

##### Year Two Retention

- T2S participants had a higher retention from fall to spring than the control group students. (Control group: 75.3%; T2S participants: 90.2%).
- Retention to the fall of the second year showed no significant difference between participant and control groups.
- Retention to fall of the third year was significantly higher for the T2S participants compared to the control group.
- Students who were retained to the second year had *higher* mean ratings than non-retained students in the following areas:
  - ◆ Stress about health and medical issues (fall and winter quarters)
  - ◆ Stress about gaining the skills they need for their future (winter quarter)
  - ◆ Confidence about making class presentations (fall, winter, and spring)
  - ◆ Confidence about their academic skills overall (fall, winter, and spring)
  - ◆ Confidence in seminar participation (fall quarter)
  - ◆ Confidence that they have what it takes to succeed at Evergreen (fall quarter)
  - ◆ Connectedness to the Evergreen learning community (fall and spring quarters)
  - ◆ Progress in gaining a broad general education
  - ◆ Progress in writing clearly and effectively
  - ◆ Progress in understanding other people and how to get along with different kinds of people
  - ◆ Progress in ability to function as a team member
  - ◆ Progress in ability to learn on their own, pursue ideas, and find information
  - ◆ Overall Life-long Learning Index Score
  - ◆ Satisfaction with opportunities for personal involvement in campus activities
- Students who were retained to the second year had *lower* mean ratings than non-retained students in the following areas:
  - ◆ Stress in keeping up with academic responsibilities (fall quarter)
  - ◆ Stress in participating in seminar (fall quarter)
  - ◆ Stress about getting the information they needed (winter quarter)

- ◆ Stress about making new friends (spring quarter)
- Student who lived on campus their first year were retained to the second year at a higher rate than those living off campus. (On campus 73%; off campus 36%)

## **B. What causes students to leave?**

Students' reasons for leaving were unique to each of their lives. Several students found a long-term focus that they determined could be better met elsewhere, for example engineering, restaurant management, more specialized area of study or a major. Some students took time off to establish residency, travel, work, or attend to family responsibilities but reported they plan to return later.

Other unique reasons: a scholarship to another college, not happy in Olympia, death, joining the military.

## **C. What causes students to stay?**

We focused on this issue throughout our interviews by asking students directly about their intentions to stay at Evergreen as well as posing open-ended question about their future plans. In both years of the project, common themes were clear from students definitely planning to return for a second year. These common themes were: interest and engagement in their programs, finding a sense of community, looking forward to future academic ventures, satisfaction with Evergreen's approach to teaching and learning, and engagement in campus activities.

## **D. What interventions did the students experience?**

### **Year One**

- ◆ The New Student Advising Session which includes Mapping Your Education I and Evergreen 101.
- ◆ Ten different types of workshops presented by faculty and staff. The workshops were typically offered in both afternoon and evening sessions to accommodate students' varying schedules. Sample topics included how to write for college, learning styles, writing self-evaluations, studying abroad and portfolio development.
- ◆ Comprehensive individual interview/advising sessions – two fall quarter and one each winter and spring quarters for a total of four for most participants.
- ◆ Individual writing assessments and follow-up

### **Year Two**

- ◆ The New Student Advising Session which includes Mapping Your Education I and Evergreen 101.
- ◆ Comprehensive individual interview/advising sessions – one each quarter for a total of three for most participants.

- ◆ Focus group participation (conducted with first-year students in three programs)
- ◆ Mapping Your Education II Academic Planning Workshop

## **E. Were the interventions the students received effective?**

### **Both Years**

- ◆ This project increased student retention from fall to spring of their first year.
- ◆ In both years, students immediately made more use of campus resources as a result of interventions. Further, in a follow up interview with students from Year One, all respondents reported they were better able to find the information and resources due to their participation in the project.
- ◆ Students reported they found the one-on-one conversations with the advisors the most useful activity.
- ◆ Students reported they had shared information they learned in the T2S program with students outside the project.
- ◆ Students were more connected to the Evergreen learning community through participation in T2S.
- ◆ Student evaluations were positive about participating in the T2S program.

### **Year One**

- ◆ The highest rated workshop was the fall self and faculty evaluation writing workshop. This workshop seemed to diffuse the anxiety students had about the process in their first quarter at Evergreen.
- ◆ Advisors noted that the extra-curricular nature of the workshops created an additional time burden for students who already struggled with competing schedule priorities. Despite efforts to make workshops more accessible by offering each twice, students still perceived the workshops as too time-consuming to attend. Students recommended that if workshops were to be offered as part of Year Two, they should be shortened, allow a balance of seminar time and interactive content, and be front-loaded during fall quarter when students need the most support.
- ◆ Those students who took advantage of the individual writing assessment found it very helpful.

### **Year Two**

- ◆ Students reported that Mapping Your Education II Academic Planning Workshop was helpful in that it provided them with new insights into the academic planning process. The workshop met its goals as demonstrated by student feedback indicating they appreciated hearing about how other students had done their academic planning. They reported increased flexibility and a commitment to breadth as well as depth in their planning. More than half changed their ideas about what activities they would consider to be part of their education – for example considering extra-curricular activities as part of an academic plan. Over half indicated they would be more likely to talk plans over with faculty.

## **F. What challenges do first-year students experience at Evergreen?**

The ongoing challenge for nearly all students was time management, especially balancing academic workload with social life – this issue appeared every quarter with all groups reporting it as a major challenge.

Some challenges were specific to a particular quarter. In fall quarter, unique challenges included adjusting to a different learning structure, evaluation process, new living arrangements, roommates, and being on one's own. New academic challenges and personal relationship issues were most frequently mentioned by students in spring quarter.

Other challenges that were frequently mentioned throughout the year were academic program issues (e.g. program fit and content, faculty conflict, presentation of material), peer relationships and adjusting to a new social environment.

## **G. When do students make decisions about when to stay at or leave Evergreen?**

Some students knew when they enrolled at Evergreen that they were not intending to stay until completion of their degree. Some of these students arrived at Evergreen with a plan to transfer already in place. Others revealed that they did not come to Evergreen to pursue a degree, but were only attending to take a full-time program they were interested in. Some students wanted to explore a liberal arts education for their first year with a plan to attend a more specialized school afterwards.

Other students decided to leave after they enrolled at Evergreen. Some discover what they wanted to do while at Evergreen and found another college that would meet their goals. Others experienced challenges either in or out of the classroom that influenced their decisions to leave. We also worked with some students whose life circumstances handed them surprises (such as the opportunity to buy a new house) and one student in our sample died.

Students who know they will stay have had a good first-year experience and have made connections and plans. They typically indicate they have registered into a program in which they feel a strong sense of commitment, and are engaged on campus.

### **Year One**

Students who mentioned there was a critical moment where they were deciding whether to leave or stay at college most frequently mentioned difficult faculty interactions, particularly when they felt the faculty were inaccessible.

### **Year Two**

Two students decided to leave during fall quarter. One didn't like the way classes were set up and going to school with the same people. The other student had a combination of financial and residency concerns with a plan to come back upon receiving residency.

Two students decided to leave during winter quarter. One student decided to leave college to buy a house and planned to return to study film. The other student told an advisor he was going to join the Marines so they could pay for his education.

## **H. How do students “do” Evergreen (e.g. navigate curriculum, academic planning, find supports)?**

### **Year One**

In the Year One follow-up survey during fall quarter of their sophomore year, we asked how they selected their programs. The top three answers were the catalog, input from faculty, and input from academic advisor. Students were also asked with whom they discussed their academic plans with Academic Advisors and faculty being the most commonly mentioned consultants.

### **Year Two**

Fall quarter, students were asked who they would feel comfortable asking for advice or assistance with academic matters. Students selected an average of eight different support categories, with the top four being classmates, current faculty, friends, and Academic Advising. When asked if there was someone in the Evergreen community that they would feel comfortable asking about non-academic concerns, the great majority indicated they had made a connection with someone on campus with who they felt comfortable.

When focus group participants were asked during their first quarter at Evergreen what resources on campus they had already taken advantage of, they mentioned the Computer Center, Learning Resource Center, Academic Advising, Health Center, and S&A student groups.

## **I. What are the characteristics that help students succeed at Evergreen?**

Students report that the following characteristics helped them succeed at Evergreen: being a self-motivated learner, confidence in their presentation skills, open-mindedness, strong academic skills, good people skills, good work habits and perseverance.

## **J. How does a student’s sense of connectedness to Evergreen affect first-year retention?**

The average sense of connectedness to the Evergreen community is significantly higher for students who are retained to the second year. This difference is strong in fall but even more pronounced by spring quarter. This is the strongest retention-related variable in this study.

## **K. How confident are first-year students that they can get the education they want at Evergreen?**

First year student confidence was rated on a seven point scale. In fall quarter, only 10% of the sample rated their confidence below moderate (the midpoint of the scale). By spring quarter 16%

were less than moderately confident. Institutional confidence for the year two T2S sample increased fall to winter, but slipped to its lowest point in spring.

#### **L. Does students' institutional confidence affect their retention?**

Of the T2S Year Two students who were retained to the second year, the average spring rating of institutional confidence was 4.96 on a 7-point scale. This compares to 4.50 for non-retained students. However, this difference is not statistically significant at  $p=.10$ . This factor, identified by Tinto, does not appear to be significantly related to retention of the Evergreen first-time, first-year students in the T2S project.

It was interesting, however, that the institutional confidence gap between retained and non-retained widened as the year progressed. Unfortunately the sample is too small to confirm this pattern.

One puzzling finding is that while both retained and non-retained students' confidence in their academic abilities increased from fall to spring, their confidence in the institution waned. At the same time students' connectedness with the institution increased from fall to spring.

#### **M. Does students' confidence in their own academic skills affect their success?**

Students who were retained felt significantly more confident that they had what it takes to succeed at Evergreen. Specifically, those students with higher confidence in seminar participation and class presentations were more likely to be retained.

## **II. Implications for Practice**

### **A. Introduction**

Among the most critical issues identified by our T2S students over two years of research were connectedness, confidence (both personal and institutional), time management, and stress. These factors were the basis of our thinking about future implications for Academic Advising and other areas of the college.

Included below is a list of implications for practice the project team has discussed as a result of the findings of this project. In some instances, practices have already been revised due to an ongoing campus commitment to improving the first-year experience at Evergreen.

## **B. Implications for Academic Advising**

### **1. One-on-one Advising**

Students responded positively to the individualized semi-structured advising sessions. Inviting students to participate in advising conversations may have attracted students to advising who would not have otherwise sought out these services. T2S Advisors also found the instruments to be useful to guide conversations and to track individual student issues for future advising contacts.

During the 2001-2002 Academic Year, we instituted outreach activities by our more seasoned Peer Advisors who conducted telephone and e-mail contacts with some first-year students. Each Peer Advisor was given a group of students to contact, as well as a scripted set of questions. The peers reported that when contact did take place, they were able to either answer basic questions or refer to advisors when appropriate. The Peers reported that the contacts were very time-intensive for the number of students they were able to reach.

During Fall 2002, we piloted a one-on-one advising project for conditionally admitted and first-year students using an intake form as well as a scripted set of questions. One Academic Advisor was able to reach most of the conditionally admitted students and reported this to be a useful format that is being carried into Winter Quarter 2003. The first-year group included students from two Core programs, all of the First Year Experience students in A&B Dorms in Housing, as well as all first-year students in all-level programs. For students in the two Core programs, appointments were scheduled in-program and there was a relatively high level of contact. In Housing, we had a peer advisor going door-to-door scheduling appointments; for the rest of the students, we had an advisor coordinating calling and appointment scheduling with minimal success for the amount of effort. Advisors reported the new interview methodology was successful in allowing them to feel that they were able to be thorough, thoughtful, and sensitive, and the data collection did not interfere with that procedure – in some cases may have enhanced it. We believe this would be important work to follow-up in spring quarter 2003 to make contact with students prior to their departure for the summer.

Advising has been developing processes to provide more consistent follow-up with students who need it. Where a crisis situation is clear, the need for follow-up is obvious. However, there are some situations in which a follow-up contact could help avert a crisis and increase a sense of connection to a concerned individual. Currently, Advising only keeps files on international students and students doing internships. Advisors do not have a formal caseload except with these two groups and other specifically identified projects (e.g., conditional admits). We need to further review our priorities for follow-up and determine a consistent way to achieve it.

Another Advising practice intended to increase a student's likelihood to follow through with resources and to demonstrate the accessibility of resources is to walk students directly to the referred services (e.g., Financial Aid, KEY, First Peoples, etc.) whenever possible. Depending on the situation, Advisors will often remain present and participate in resolving the situation.

## 2. Group Advising

During Year Two of the T2S project, a Mapping Your Education II workshop was developed and piloted. The workshop included a video with a panel of seniors talking about how they navigated their education at Evergreen and small group work on the Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate. The workshop was designed to incorporate Bandura's theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). We learned that students' own confidence and self-efficacy can increase by seeing the success of other students to whom they can relate. We are continuing to conduct the Mapping II workshop within Core programs, and it is also available to other programs across the curriculum.

The T2S project helped Academic Advising focus on the timing of various interventions. We continue to revise our New Student Advising Workshop with more attention to the kinds of information that students need as they join Evergreen's learning community. We have structured and formalized our Core Connector Curriculum to address issues of institutional and personal confidence, as well as stress. For instance, Core Connectors offer a campus tour during week one; an "Evergreen 102" Q&A session during week 3; an advisor-led program assessment of how the programs helps students learn during week 5 or 6; the Mapping II workshop prior to registration during the last quarter of the program, etc. Advising offered Talking Catalog panels (i.e. faculty, alumni, and other professionals that work in a field related to students' interests) and Co-curricular Involvement panels (i.e. community members discussing ways that students can get connected with activities and resources) to the three Core programs involved in the T2S focus groups, but faculty were not able to incorporate these activities into their curriculum on such short notice. Core Connectors now work with faculty earlier in their planning processes to increase the opportunity for faculty to embed these activities into their syllabi. By clarifying the Core Connector offerings, faculty gain a better understanding of the tools that first-year students need.

Since the literature and our research indicate that students make decisions on whether or not they will stay or leave college early on, we have been more intentional in working with Core faculty to do some work in the program in preparation for Thanksgiving break. Most recently, efforts have focused on a pre-evaluation workshop to help students articulate what they are learning during their first quarter of college. Clearly, this also assists students in writing their first self-evaluation, another source of stress for students in their first quarter that was identified in the analysis of T2S students' experiences.

Juggling social and academic activities and keeping up with program workload were issues that many T2S students struggled with during their first year. Academic Advising has begun to gather information from various practitioners who conduct time and/or project management workshops and work with first-year programs to explore strategies for encouraging student success.

Since the New Student Advising Workshop is the only advising that is billed as "required" to the students (although there is no penalty for not attending), the findings support a greater push to increase attendance. Not only do these workshops provide information that aids the transition to Evergreen, but students who attend report a greater sense of confidence in their new learning

community. Evergreen should explore some strategies to increase participation in these important transition workshops.

### **3. Assessing Advising Practices**

At the annual Washington State Assessment conference in May 2000, members of the T2S project team presented a model of collaboration between Academic Advising and the Office of Institutional Research. This model was a way of simultaneously advising students and collecting data for research of project outcomes. The presentation was well-received, and Advising continues to employ some of the ideas generated through this collaboration. It makes a positive difference when designing a project to seek input from colleagues familiar with research design.

Advising currently tracks workshop attendance and the numbers of students coming in for both drop-ins and quick intake. We would like to get a clearer picture of who our students are, who comes in for repeat advising, what kind of advising are we conducting, etc. The Writing Center has a model we would like to consider. It may also be possible to record some of this information on our student tracking system.

### **C. Recommendations for First-Year Academic Offerings**

Students with low confidence in their ability to give class presentations were considerably less likely to return for a second year at Evergreen. It is possible that skill-building strategies in this area could increase students' confidence in their own abilities. We recommend Core faculty embed workshops on giving presentations into their curriculum.

One of the areas that detracted from institutional confidence was some students' inability to understand the structure of some Evergreen programs. Most of them are used to a competitive model of evaluation, where their grades are assigned in comparison to their peers instead of an evaluation based on their own achievements. They do not understand how to go beyond the minimum requirements and actively participate to create challenges for themselves. We think it would help students transition to Evergreen's learning structure if we provided some scaffolding to help students understand the value of learning activities such as seminars, field trips, and other unique Evergreen learning approaches. Too often, students see seminar as a place to sit around and chat, field trips as a vacation, and it takes them a while to recognize that learning takes many different forms. As one Year Two T2S student described this phenomenon, "I didn't understand what would happen and why it was important – it took me most of the year to understand why seminar matters."

In addition, many freshmen do not understand what is expected of them and are not well-prepared for the amount of self-direction that Evergreen expects. Most incoming Evergreen freshmen are used to having daily or weekly assignments and due dates. They need some support in making the transition to completing more extensive projects with longer timelines. Although first-year students appreciate being challenged by academic programs, having too many weeks without a deadline leads to procrastination and stress for many of our students. We

recommend that Core faculty in particular provide interim deadlines for smaller pieces of larger projects.

Core Preview takes place during orientation week and is many students' first exposure to their faculty and academic program syllabus. This would be a good time to provide information about program structure (e.g. how much lecture, workshops, seminar, fieldwork, independent work), workload expectations, meeting times, etc. so that students can select a program that will be the best fit.

One initiative that began in Fall 2002 appears to address some of the primary issues identified through the T2S project. Beginning the Journey is a two-credit offering for first-year students that from its inception has been a collaboration between Student Affairs practitioners and faculty members. The format provides first-year students an opportunity outside of their primary academic program to establish social connections and learn about college-level strategies for success. For 2003-04, the teaching teams have agreed that the curriculum should begin with greater emphasis on community building, an approach that is confirmed by the findings of the T2S research.

#### **D. T2S Participant Suggestions**

Students were asked for feedback and ideas about how Academic Advising can help first-year students feel successful and persist in their education at Evergreen. By far the most common responses demonstrated that they greatly appreciated the opportunities provided through the T2S program, especially the one-on-one advisor time, but also more workshops (with food!), and more opportunities to hear from upper division students. Several students requested better information about available advising options, including getting “students to promote student services”. As one student pointed out, “I thought I should have clear goals before I went to Academic Advising. I didn't think I could walk in completely confused and expect help, but that's what they do!”

In this feedback, student reiterated wanting assistance with money issues, transitioning to independence, program selection, seminar, how to talk to faculty, and long-range planning. Students also had suggestions for the academic program structure in general, for example, more accessible faculty, more follow through with academic demands, more structured program that make it more difficult to procrastinate, more hands on learning, and more curricular options.

Some students made specific Orientation Week suggestions. Among their suggestions were adding an Orientation Week seminar, organizing students into small groups, two days of T2S-like mandatory activities, a block party in Housing, presentations by different student groups in the Housing Community Center, more community events in Red Square, and a three-week blitz of advising activities in A-dorm at the beginning of the quarter – including cooking classes.

#### **E. Assessment of Student Writing**

In reflection on the Year One writing assessment meetings with T2S students, the Learning Resource Center (LRC) director of 99-00 recommended that if Evergreen attempts a future assessment of first-year student writing, that entire programs should participate, as opposed to a random sample of students. “Working with one to two teams of faculty would allow for program support of the project, a necessary ingredient based on ... intensive efforts to recruit students to project activities.”

From the LRC Director’s Report:

Through the conferences with students, the LRC director [1999-00] found that writing is not systematically planned nor successfully integrated within Core and all-level themes. Of the eight Core programs, five of them did not teach or rarely taught or used a portion of one quarter to teach writing. Only four programs considered revision as part of their instruction. Writing within a few Core programs often seemed limited to pieces that required little more than just a place to explore ideas.

A number of changes have already been instituted in the LRC. Beginning in 2000-2001, individual writing assessment of first-year students was institutionalized within the new LRC reconfiguration providing more direct feedback to more students as well as early writing assessment and appropriate intervention. This includes a writing tutor assigned to every Core program.

## **F. Future Research Questions**

The T2S research identified some issues that were important in understanding the retention of first-year students. The T2S project team has identified some important relationships between retention and students’ confidence in their abilities (especially participation in seminar and class presentations) and sense of connectedness to the community. With the collaboration of the campus community, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment is in the process of redesigning Evergreen’s biannual incoming student surveys and surveys of student experiences. The T2S project team members encouraged the inclusion of questions that assess confidence and connectedness into these regular student surveys.

Several research questions emerged from the analysis conducted during the T2S project which warrant further exploration. Relationships between various factors that are available from administrative records should be explored for the whole first-year student population, since the small random samples available through the T2S project did not always allow for adequate analysis. For example, further analysis of credit ratios (credits earned of those attempted) is recommended. In the small T2S student group, there were some indications of gender and ethnicity differences with regards to credit ratios; however, the samples were too small to have confidence in those results. Credit ratios also showed a minor relationship to retention, but this issue should be explored further with a larger population, especially for those students falling below the level of satisfactory academic progress.

Participation in the New Student Advising Workshop (NSAW) is also tracked through administrative records, and further comparison of the demographics and outcomes for students

who attend this workshop is encouraged by T2S analysis. Within the T2S population, students' residency status and high school grade point averages were significantly related to their likelihood of participation in NSAW. In Year Two, students who attended the NSAW showed some differences in a few of the stress inventory items and in their sources of funding for college. There was also some indication for the T2S group that students who completed the NSAW had higher credit ratios in their first year and were retained at a higher rate to their sophomore year. Most of these NSAW relationships can be explored with all freshmen via administrative records to see if the trends hold true for the larger population.

Finally, the much higher retention rates for first-year students who lived in campus housing should be validated using a larger sample, since this relationship can be explored without requiring additional student surveys.