

Transitions to Success Outreach Advising Project Summary

Introduction

The Transitions to Success (T2S) project was created in response to a request from the Vice President of Student Affairs who had concerns about declining freshman retention. The project ran for two consecutive academic years during 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 with 43 new freshman participants each year. T2S was designed to promote connectedness to a staff member, academic skills support, individualized advising, and social engagement with other students. The model was based primarily on findings by 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.

The primary activity of the T2S project was a series of individualized advising interviews with students. In addition, the participants were offered workshops in both years of the project. In the first year of the project, the students were also encouraged to complete writing assessments through the Writing Center. In each year, a control group of students was randomly selected in order to explore the impact of the project.

T2S Project Outcomes

A consistent finding during both years of the project was that student participants were better retained from Fall to Spring of their first year. Participants reported a positive impact from the following T2S activities.

- ◆ Students were more connected to the Evergreen learning community through participation in T2S.
- ◆ Students reported they found the one-on-one conversations with the advisors the most useful activity.
- ◆ 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 had shared information they learned in the T2S program with students outside the project.
- ◆ In Year One, the highest rated workshop was the fall quarter self and faculty evaluation writing workshop. This workshop seemed to diffuse the anxiety students had about the process in their first quarter at Evergreen.
- ◆ Those students who took advantage of the individual writing assessment offered in Year One found it very helpful.
- ◆ In 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, including increased flexibility and a commitment to breadth as well as depth in their planning.

- ◆ Student evaluations were positive about participating in the T2S program.

Student Characteristics

The Year One T2S students revealed that referral from a family member or friend was the most common reason for choosing to attend Evergreen, followed by an attraction to Evergreen's unique teaching and learning environment. The Year Two T2S students identified the Evergreen catalog (85%) and friends or family members (77%) as the strongest influences on their expectations of Evergreen. They had the strongest expectations of the College in regards to Evergreen's non-traditional approach to teaching and learning and other academic endeavors.

T2S students reported the most stress about finances and budget during each quarter. Another ongoing challenge for nearly all T2S 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. Students also grappled with academic program issues (e.g. program fit and content, faculty conflict, presentation of material), peer relationships, and adjusting to a new social environment throughout their first year.

Some of the T2S students' challenges were specific to a particular quarter. In fall quarter, students were adjusting to a different learning structure, evaluation process, new living arrangements, roommates, and being on their own. By spring quarter, students most frequently mentioned new academic expectations (such as large projects, presentations, and collaborative work) and personal relationship issues as major challenges.

T2S students reported the following characteristics that 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.

T2S students' confidence in their own academic abilities and their connectedness to the learning community increased from fall to spring. However, T2S students' confidence that they could get the education they want at Evergreen increased fall to winter, but slipped to its lowest point in spring.

Retention Findings

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.

We found several statistical differences between T2S students who were retained to their second year versus students who were not retained. Students who were retained to the second year had *higher* average ratings than non-retained students did in the following areas:

- ◆ Stress about gaining the skills they need for their future (winter)
- ◆ Confidence about making class presentations (fall, winter, and spring)
- ◆ Confidence about their academic skills overall (fall, winter, and spring)
- ◆ Confidence in seminar participation (fall)
- ◆ Confidence that they have what it takes to succeed at Evergreen (fall)
- ◆ Connectedness to the Evergreen learning community (fall and spring)
- ◆ 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
- ◆ Satisfaction with opportunities for personal involvement in campus activities

Students who were retained to the second year had *lower* average ratings than non-retained students did in the following areas:

- ◆ Stress in keeping up with academic responsibilities (fall)
- ◆ Stress in participating in seminar (fall)
- ◆ Stress about getting the information they needed (winter)
- ◆ Stress about making new friends (spring)

No differences in retention were found based on gender, ethnicity, or employment status. Students 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%).

The T2S students who identified a critical moment when they were deciding whether to leave or stay at college most frequently mentioned difficult faculty interactions, particularly when they felt the faculty were inaccessible. Yet when students who left Evergreen were asked why, they reported reasons such as having a long-term academic focus that could be better met elsewhere, establishing residency, traveling, working, or attending to family responsibilities. Many of the students reported they planned to continue their studies at Evergreen. In fact, of 30 T2S students who were not retained to their second fall, nine have since re-enrolled at Evergreen.

Implications for Practice

At the end of the T2S project, students provided feedback and ideas about how Evergreen can help first-year students feel successful and persist in their education at Evergreen. Students most appreciated the one-on-one advising, and they also wanted 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

programs that make it more difficult to procrastinate, more hands on learning, and more curricular options. They would appreciate hearing from more upper division students about their Evergreen experiences.

In response to our findings from the T2S project, we have identified several implications for advising practices and first-year programs as well as areas for further investigation. In some instances, practices have already been revised due to an ongoing campus commitment to improving the first-year experience at Evergreen.

Academic Advising has examined the sequencing of our advising interventions to better correspond to the needs of students. We have instituted one-on-one outreach activities that we continue to fine-tune. We have also been developing processes to provide more consistent follow-up with students who need it.

We have created a Mapping Your Education II workshop that includes 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. We have structured and formalized our Core Connector Curriculum to address issues of institutional and personal confidence, as well as stress. Core Connectors now work with faculty earlier in their planning processes to increase the opportunity for faculty to embed these activities into their syllabi. 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, a source of stress for students in their first quarter that was identified in the analysis of T2S students' experiences.

Since the New Student Advising Workshop (NSAW) 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 also students who attend report a greater sense of confidence in their new learning community.

Advising currently tracks workshop attendance and the number of students coming in for drop-ins and quick intake. We would like to get improve our tracking system by collecting and using more information about who our students are, who comes in for repeat advising, and what kind of advising are we conducting. The Writing Center has a model we would like to consider. It may also be possible to record some of this information in our current student tracking system.

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 students with 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.

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 that 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 in some Evergreen programs. 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."

Most incoming Evergreen freshmen are used to having daily or weekly assignments and due dates. 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.

Based on the relationship of confidence and connectedness to the retention of first-year students, the T2S project team members encouraged the inclusion of these factors in Evergreen's biannual surveys of new students and student experiences.

Finally, since the T2S sample was so small, we recommend some additional study be conducted with administrative records to further explore the relationships among student characteristics, retention, use of services, credit ratios, and campus housing. Analysis of the whole first-year student population would provide a clearer picture of these relationships and allow us to more appropriately direct our intervention strategies.