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Enhancing Student Retention through a College-Level First Year Seminar

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Objective(s) of the presentation:

Participants who attend this session will...

- a) Gain a deeper appreciation of the complex issues related to freshmen to sophomore student retention and its impact on program vitality;
- b) Learn specific strategies on how Department Chairs or Deans might augment university student retention efforts within their own departments or units; and,
- c) Understand the importance of institutional leadership involvement, as well as the contribution of faculty and staff.

Description of the session (300-500 words):

Student retention is a pressing issue at college campuses across the nation. Poor retention is attributed to a wide array of complex reasons, including academic difficulties, finances, loneliness, lack of clear academic or career goals, poor integration within the college community and personal reasons. The potential strategies to address retention issues are as varied as the reasons why students do not return.

While a great deal of pressure is often placed upon academic advisors to focus on student retention, we believe that student retention should be a part of everyone's job responsibilities. Clearly no single individual or group can successfully address all of these issues, and it is incumbent upon university administrators to define expectations for faculty and staff, and to allocate the necessary resources and personnel needed to implement the policies and programs aimed at improving student retention.

Although the results differed by class level, Schreiner (2009) found that student satisfaction is strongly linked to student retention. She stated that "the items that were most predictive of students returning for their sophomore year included: satisfaction with being a student, meeting their expectations for advisor availability, feeling a sense of belonging, perceiving their future major to have valuable course content, believing that student fees are used wisely, and feeling that the campus is a safe place" (p. 5). In sum, she found that a "sense of community" and belonging is most crucial for student retention during their first year.

In an attempt to improve student retention within the College of Health and Human Services (CHHS), we initiated and sponsored a one credit hour freshmen seminar for approximately 100 incoming freshmen (who were not enrolled in a university wide freshmen seminar). This unique freshmen seminar was facilitated by five graduate assistants from a variety of disciplines within CHHS, and supervised by the Associate Dean. The graduate assistants served as instructors for the course, as well as academic advisors to the students within their classes. The classes consisted of large bi-weekly presentations by guest lecturers, and smaller group meetings (approximately 20 students) on the alternate weeks. The overall class theme focused on the issue of poverty, and students were encouraged to discuss how the topic(s) resonated with them on a personal level during their small group sessions. Along with the course content, students learned about various support units on campus and were provided opportunities to engage in service

learning and social and educational events on campus, accompanied by their peers and/or their class facilitator.

The goals of the seminar were to enhance student interactions with peers, faculty and staff, increase students' sense of belonging, and help students integrate into the college culture. The instructors met with and advised the students individually, and interacted with them by responding to their personal journal entries and other written assignments. At the same time, the Associate Dean of the College met weekly with the graduate assistants to provide personal and professional support and mentoring, as well as to provide the opportunity for group sharing.