

First year blues: Colleges start targeting freshmen angst

by Tim Madigan
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As a college freshman a quarter-century ago, my first-semester housing assignment was a dorm room in the basement, next to a janitor's closet, and away from almost everyone else. I didn't care for my roommate. On long treks across campus, to and from my classes, I passed thousands of anonymous fellow students, all of whom seemed to have eons of friends. In late afternoons of my first term, I began to dread mealtime and the prospect of eating alone once again in a crowded dormitory cafeteria.

Needless to say, the first semester of my freshman year was among the loneliest, most miserable times of my life, misery compounded by the fact that I was certain I was the only loser at the University of North Dakota who spent his Friday nights alone in his room.

All these years later, I find that this might not have been the case after all. If statistics from recent years hold, nearly one in three freshmen enrolling this fall at American colleges and universities will not return for their sophomore year. And a leading cause of that attrition, experts say, is that same loneliness, that same sense of isolation I felt in my first year.

"This issue of isolation, or lack of involvement with their peers, with faculty, with staff, is a significant predictor of dropout," says Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University, author of "Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition" (University of Chicago, 1993). "That is why, when talking about the

issue, so many people talk about building communities of engagement or communities of involvement."

Wes Habley, of ACT, the Iowa-based education-information clearinghouse, puts it another way. By joining study groups, the marching band, student government or the chess club, etc., college freshmen can "reduce the psychological size of the campus, establish a community within a community," Habley says. Students who fail to find that niche, more so than those who are too social (i.e., party too much), are more likely to disappear from school during their freshman year, or not return as sophomores, he says.

Not that this phenomenon is particularly new. Statistics on this point have held fairly steady for decades. Traditionally, only 40 percent of the students entering higher education in any given year go on to earn degrees, and most of the dropouts occur during or soon after the freshman year.

In the most recent ACT statistics, for the year 2000, 32.9 percent of students at two- and four-year colleges and universities did not re-enroll as sophomores, though the numbers vary greatly depending on the type of institution. The dropout rate at two-year, community-based colleges is nearly half, for example, while freshman attrition at the most prestigious private schools is 16 percent. (Ivy League schools lose fewer than 10 percent of their students every year.)

Despite those perennially high attrition rates, student retention strategies have only recently become hot topics on college campuses, Habley

says. In the mid-1980s, hanging onto students became a concern when the number of college-age Americans dropped by 400,000. More recently, state and federal governments have grumbled about tax dollars wasted when students don't come back.

Not that there are simple solutions to what has proved to be a complex problem. "Everybody has an opinion. Let's put it that way," Habley says. "It's almost impossible to say with any assurance what causes the failure to complete college."

But anyone who has been a college freshman and had to confront the daunting cocktail of transition that is the first year has a good idea. Tom Kading, a class of 2000 graduate from Arlington, Texas, High School, expected a college lark until he walked into his freshman psychology class at the University of Texas. Five hundred other students had joined him in the classroom.

"In high school, I never had to put in much effort to get good grades," says Kading, who did not re-enroll at UT this fall, though he plans to attend college again in 2002. "I had a 4.0 in high school and didn't have to do anything. At college, you have to be reading all the time, studying all the time, and the commitment level was a lot higher. It was overwhelming at times. I wasn't ready."

The average student also faces homesickness, potential for alcohol abuse, problems with money management - to name just a few of the first year's challenges. Millions of new college students, isolated as I was in the 1970s, try to contend with these problems alone, suffering in their dorm rooms. Too often, truncated college experiences are the re-

sult, experts say.

The solution for college freshmen seems simple. Join something. But that can be asking too much of many college freshmen, for whom creating a study group or signing up for intramural football can be highly daunting tasks, experts say.

"If you come from a small town in Texas, and you're going to the University of Texas, your skills for reaching out and interacting are probably dwarfed," Habley says.

Which puts the onus for reaching out on the colleges and universities, Habley and other experts insist. The word they often use when describing the programs needed to help college freshman is "intrusive." New students need to get involved with their peers, with the faculty, with an adviser, whether they feel comfortable doing so or not.

"It's too important to leave to chance," says Lana Low, a consultant who helps universities develop student-retention programs. "With these programs, what we're saying to the new students is that we're serious about your success. We're going to put some structure to this, and give you less and less an opportunity to fail."

Among the most popular programs are "learning communities" in which college freshmen co-register with several others with similar academic interests and attend multiple classes with the same students. They are also required to interact with one another both in and out of the classroom. Kading says one of the best parts of his University of Texas experience was meeting the 13 students with whom he attended all of his classes during his first semester.

"I found out about that program during freshman orientation, and I'm glad I signed up for it," Kading says. "I wish you could do it every year, not just in your first semester as a freshman. We met once a week to talk about classes and stuff. There was always someone to talk to, and we became good friends."

Increasing numbers of colleges and universities arrange dormitories by academic area, another attempt to promote community. Some schools, such as Syracuse, train residence hall staffers to intervene if they see a student is isolated. Universities also increasingly urge faculty and staff members to cultivate mentoring relationships with students. Research shows that a student with at least one such relationship is at a reduced risk of dropping out.

"I don't believe that faculty know how important they are to students," says Low, the student-retention consultant. "A student's relationship with faculty via instruction and advising is one of the most important things that happen to them on campus."

I can attest to that, too. It was a creative writing teacher who took me under his wing. I also joined the staff of the student newspaper. I made the baseball team. By the second semester of my freshman year, I had greatly reduced the "psychological size" of the University of North Dakota. By then the challenge was squeezing classes and study-into a social life. Trust me. Compared with the anguish of my first semester, that was no challenge at all.

And somewhere, in a dusty corner of my attic, a college diploma sits as evidence.

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