

VERNON COLLEGE

Student Retention Task Force Final Assessment

March 1, 2011

The Retention Task Force, appointed by Dr. Dusty R. Johnston, was composed of the following members: Mark Holcomb, Michelle A. Alexander, Larry Jordan, Kristin Harris, Teresa Ramos, Jessica Sutherland, LeAnn Jordan, Jeff Feix, Brandi Ballard, Brad Beauchamp, Mike Ruhl, and Jeanne Ballard. The Task Force met from September 1, 2010 through December 1, 2010 to review College policies, procedures, processes, practices and programs which might create barriers to student retention.

As a starting point, each member participated in a literature review about student retention to aid meeting discussions. Utilizing the knowledge gained from the literature review, along with personal experiences, the committee created a cause and effect diagram demonstrating possible barriers that a student could face in completing courses, certificates and degrees at Vernon College. The diagram examined the following College areas and their policies, procedures, processes, practices and programs that might lead to causes for unsuccessful student retention:

Instructional Services

1. Advising
2. Faculty Engagement
3. Course Offerings
4. Customer Service

Student Services

1. Staffing
2. Customer Service
3. Processes
4. Programs

Admissions and Records

1. Registration
2. Customer Service
3. Staffing
4. Processes

Funding – Financial Aid and Scholarship Support

1. Timing
2. Limited Funding

3. Awareness
4. Staffing

The task force investigated several of the identified effects on student course completion. Not only was the literature review used to develop findings and recommendations, the committee conducted a benchmarking interview with South Plains Community College's retention director, analyzed data from the Poise System prepared by Admission Specialists, and used personal knowledge of committee members to develop their recommendations for Vernon College.

Finding 1: Instructional Services and Admission and Records – Late Registration

Using data from the Admission and Records Department, statistics showed that the College's late registration process produced twice the percentage of students dropping courses than those that either registered on-line or through the regular on-site registration process. This data was verified from research conducted by the Gate's Foundation showing a significant decline of course completions among students registering after the beginning of course meetings either in the classroom or online. Through committee brainstorming and discussion, it was determined that the 30 % of students dropping or being dropped by instructors was caused by underprepared readiness and students not prepared for online delivery.

Recommendation 1: Admissions

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that the Vernon College Late Registration at the beginning of the semester be eliminated. Instead, On-site Registration should serve as late registration to offer first time and non-first time students advising opportunities.

Finding 2: Instructional Services and Student Services – Online Course Delivery

Through group discussion, the committee felt many of the students registering for online courses were not prepared for this type of delivery. Although no data could be produced to validate the committee's opinion, it is the hypothesis that if first term students were better prepared for online delivery they would be more successful in this instructional format. Further, the committee determined that because of the large offering of online courses, students wishing face to face delivery settled for online courses just to get into courses.

Recommendation 2: Instructional Services and Student Services

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that an assessment procedure be developed to measure first time online students' capabilities, to see if they are prepared to take an online prior to enrollment in online courses.

Recommendation 3: Instructional Services/Student Services

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that new and returning students should not enroll in more than two internet courses per semester. Exceptions should be allowed if a returning student's faculty advisor has advised the student and/or in programs that may use distance learning as the main avenue of curriculum delivery. The advising should be noted in the early alert system to allow cross communication through departments and advisors.

Recommendation 4: Instructional Services

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that the offering of face to face courses be increased and that on-line courses be eliminated to the same ratio as more space becomes available through the renovation of both Wichita Falls learning centers.

Finding 3: Vernon College Office of the President -- Student Engagement

After a committee review of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) Report, it was found that Vernon College scored lower in several areas compared to both consortium and cohort colleges in the area of student engagement. It was noticed that students felt less engaged with both faculty and staff both in and outside the classroom. It also indicated a lack of peer engagement within the student population at Vernon College.

In 1975, Vincent Tinto developed a theoretical model of the dropout. The model shows interaction between the individual and academic and social systems of the college. This interaction can strengthen the students' goals and institutional commitments to maintain persistence; the lack of it can lead to various forms of dropout (Drew, 1990).

Drew, C. (1990). We can longer love 'em and leave em: A paper on freshman retention. *Community College Review*, 17(4), 54. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.

Recommendation 5: Vernon College Office of the President

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that all Vernon College employees, especially faculty, should expand their student engagement opportunities to include both on and off campus activities. Vernon College administration leaders, faculty and staff should attempt to participate in college sponsored events to engage students out of the classroom.

Finding 4: Student Services -- Multiculturalism

In a study provided by Task Force Chair, Mark Holcomb, a Multicultural Organization Development (MCO) template indicated a lack of commitment through an absence of Multiculturalism and diverse population awareness, training, and the creation of clubs for peer engagement. All three areas are a critical parts of student retention according to Tinto. Tinto observed that a student's successful completion of educational goals included the successful integration into a social college environment.

Recommendation 6: Student Services

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that Student Services create a policy for promoting the awareness of multiculturalism and training for all Vernon College employees about diverse population issues. Student Services is also recommended to create opportunities for the assembly of diverse population clubs.

Finding 5: Office of Institutional Advancement/Financial Aid Department – Scholarship Availability and Financial Aid Awareness

It was discovered through the literature review and the personal experience of task force members that many students and parents, especially lower income families, were unaware of Financial Aid availability and benefits. Many students will drop out because of work commitments, family obligations or financial constraints.

Recommendation 7: Financial Aid Department

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that the Financial Aid Department be provided with enhanced tools and materials to continue to inform prospective students and their parents about the availability, benefits and ramifications of federal and state financial aid programs. Further, the committee is very aware of the exponential increase in the submission of FASFA applications to the College's Financial Aid Department and strongly recommends that additional staff be added to that department in order to speed up the processing of FASFA forms.

Recommendation 8: Institutional Advancement

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that the Office of Institutional Advancement create more awareness of the Vernon College and Vernon College Foundation scholarships that are available, as well as other potential opportunities that could be available to Vernon College students.

Finding 6: Office of the President

Vernon College, Wichita Falls campus, has a large evening student population. These students represent a non-traditional enrollment which is extremely important to the success of the college's mission. This student base many times finds itself excluded from utilizing the support agencies within the college offered to daytime students. It is critical to this student population not only that they integrate into the college's social environment, but they also should be extended access to all support functions offered to students enrolled in daytime classes.

Recommendation 9: Office of President

It is the recommendation of the Retention Task Force that support functions needed by students be available during evening hours. It is further recommended that a committee consisting of Vernon College employees responsible for such support functions gather to study options to

create an afterhour's schedule. This committee shall present recommendations to the appropriate Deans for analyzing feasibility of implementation.

Finding 7: Office of the President

Student frustration is increased during a negative interaction with Vernon College employees. Lack of consistent information to students, first impressions, perception vs. reality, and employee moral all directly relate to retention of students.

Recommendation 10: Office of the President

The recommendation of the retention task force is that our current staff development includes a customer service component every semester. Social integration between employees and students directly affects retention. All college employees positively influence students through attitudes and interactions.

Finding 8: Office of the President

Best practices for retention at higher education institutions include some type of student success program that is mandatory during the first semester.

Recommendation 11: Office of the President

The recommendation of the retention task force is that the senior administration continues to pursue avenues for development and implementation of a mandatory student success module. This module could be in the form of a class or orientation for full time or at risk students. For example, investigation could include reviewing past QEP proposals that addressed this topic.

Summary

With these findings and recommendations, it is the understanding of the Task Force Chair and its members that the charge from the President of Vernon College has been completed. Several areas identified by the task force were not addressed. However, if it is the President's desire that the Task Force continue its work to complete the other identified areas, the committee will do so.

Finding 1 – The late registration process produced twice the percentage of students dropping courses than those that either registered on-line or through the regular on-site registration process.

Finding 2 – Many of the students registering for online courses are not prepared for this type of delivery.

Finding 3 – Per the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) Report, students felt less engaged with both faculty and staff both in and outside the classroom.

Finding 4 – A Vernon College study indicated a lack of commitment through an absence of Multiculturalism and diverse population awareness, training, and the creation of clubs for peer engagement.

Finding 5 – Through studies of literature reviews many students will drop out because of work commitments, family obligations or financial constraints.

Finding 6 – Non-traditional evening students many times find themselves separated from support agencies within the college offered to daytime students.

Finding 7 - Student frustration is increased during a negative interaction with Vernon College employees. Lack of consistent information to students, first impressions, perception vs. reality, and employee moral all directly relate to retention of students.

Finding 8 - Best practices for retention at higher education institutions include some type of student success program that is mandatory during the first semester.

Recommendation 1 – Late Registration be eliminated has a source of enrollment after the start of the semester.

Recommendation 2 – An assessment procedure be developed to measure first time online students' computer literacy capabilities.

Recommendation 3 – New and returning students should not enroll in more than two internet courses per semester. Exceptions should be allowed if a returning student's faculty advisor has advised the student and/or the program coordinator(s) judge the student capable of successful completion.

Recommendation 4 – Offering of face to face courses be increased as space increased at the Century City campus.

Recommendation 5 – Vernon College employees, especially faculty, should expand their student engagement opportunities to include both on and off campus activities.

Recommendation 6 – Student Services create a policy for promoting multiculturalism awareness and provide training for all Vernon College employees about diverse population issues.

Recommendation 7 – The Financial Aid Department be provided with enhanced tools and materials to continue to inform prospective students and their parents about the availability, benefits and ramifications of federal and state financial aid programs.

Recommendation 8 – The Office of Institutional Advancement create more awareness of the Vernon College and Vernon College Foundation scholarships that are available, as well as other potential opportunities that could be available to Vernon College students.

Recommendation 9 – Support functions needed by students be available during evening hours of operations as well as daytime hours.

Recommendation 10 - Current staff development include a customer service component every semester. Social integration between employees and students directly affects retention. All college employees positively influence students through attitudes and interactions.

Recommendation 11 - Senior administration continues to pursue avenues for development and implementation of a mandatory student success module. This module could be in the form of a class or orientation for full time or at risk students. For example, investigation could include reviewing past QEP proposals that addressed this topic.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark Holcomb
Chair

Revised: June 14, 2011