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Partnering for Success: A Collaborative Approach to Student Persistence

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If one of our goals when we successfully recruit a student to our institution is to see them persist through to graduation (the obvious measure of success), then we must not only understand access barriers to postsecondary education (PSE) but also understand persistence barriers. Further, we must use this research to inform our student success initiatives. Research into the barriers that prevent students from accessing PSE is vast. This research has informed recruitment efforts in both Canada and the United States to improve access to PSE. As a result, our institutions have seen increases to our nontraditional student populations such as those requiring financial aid, first generation students, visible minorities and those with disabilities, just to name a few. Yet we know far less about why students persist, perhaps because persistence is “a dynamic process, and studying it is much more demanding in terms of the data requirements” (Finnie & Qiu 2008, p. 9).

According to Finnie and Qiu (2008), vanguard research into student persistence falls into two theoretical arenas: Tinto’s model of “student integration” and Bean and Metzger’s “student attrition model.” These models both claim that “persistence decisions are affected by both pre-entry characteristics and post-entry experiences, but differ in what they include in the latter and their interpretation of some of the related effects” (Finnie & Qiu 2008, p. 12).

More recent research into student persistence by Kuh et al. (2007) reveals a number of propositions about student success that inform the services and programming we deliver to prevent students from stopping out. According to Kuh et al. (2007), “[t]he trajectory for

academic success in college is established long before students matriculate” (p. 106). In other words, students who are underprepared in both English and mathematics even by grade eight will struggle to attain the necessary skills in high school, which results in academic underpreparedness by the time they reach university (Kuh et al. 2007). Although this points to the significance of pre-university programs such as “Weekend U” for high school students, it also demonstrates the importance of comprehensive student learning centers when students arrive at the institution so that they can gain the necessary skills to succeed. The next proposition suggests that the degree of “family and community support” (Kuh et al. 2007, p. 109) a student experiences along with the “right amount and kind of money” (Kuh *et al.* 2007, p. 113) will impact student success. As tuition continues to rise at our institutions, we must ensure financial aid is aligned with actual student needs (Kuh et al. 2007). Further, many institutions involve parents and other family members in certain aspects of a student’s PSE experience. Financial aid programs and services that promote financial literacy to both students and their parents are critical steps in ensuring family support and in turn student persistence.

Students who present themselves at university with many of the pre-entry characteristics of risk such as being a first-generation student, being academically underprepared and working while attending university “benefit from early interventions and sustained attention at various transition points” during their time in PSE (Kuh et al. 2007, p. 115). Many institutions have launched early alert referral systems in response to the need for timely intervention. Further, “students who find something or someone worthwhile to connect with” are less likely to stop out (Kuh et al. 2007, p. 117). Academic clubs, student mentorship programs and learning communities are a few examples of how institutions are connecting students to something broader than the classroom. Finally, students are more likely to persist at institutions that “focus on student success ... and create a student-centered culture” (Kuh et al. 2007, p. 119) and at institutions that commit to a culture of evidence where measurement, assessment and reflection are iterative processes within the delivery of student success initiatives.

Understanding Student Persistence at Kwantlen Polytechnic University

As Parkin and Baldwin (2009) point out from their review of persistence in PSE in Canada:

The proportion of post-secondary students who are from families with no previous history of post-secondary education, from families with moderate or low incomes and of average or even below-average academic achievement has grown.

So, too, has the number of post-secondary students who are Aboriginal. These types of students not only face greater barriers to access but potentially are also more likely, for academic, financial or cultural reasons, to abandon their studies before graduation (p. 1).

Now more than ever services and programs that focus on student success are needed. A comprehensive strategy for student persistence requires not only a “cradle to grave” approach but also an integration among the units responsible for the delivery of student success initiatives. These units must operate in harmony, maximizing their individual expertise to deliver services and programs that meet the needs of all student populations at our institutions.

A robust student success plan rests with an understanding of the types of populations we serve. As a new university with open access admission to many of its programs, Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), Surrey, B.C., has some first-year students who arrive underprepared, while at the same time we continue to see an increase in transfer students directly into our third year. KPU, located in the lower mainland of Vancouver, British Columbia, desires to grow its international student and Aboriginal student populations. And with a new continuing education/professional studies mandate, we anticipate an increase in mature learners. These are just a few of the student populations KPU serves. Others include students in need of financial assistance, student athletes, students with mental health challenges, students as leaders, students as mentors and students with disabilities.

The typical student at KPU studies part time (nine credits), lives at home, studies in the Faculty of Arts (with the Faculty of Business as the second-most popular choice), is a first-generation PSE attendee, is aged 19–21, attends directly after completing high school, is a commuter student and works outside of university 11–25 hours per week. On the first day of class, the typical KPU student is already faced with several barriers to persistence.

KPU began as a college and by 1995 evolved into a university college—a hybrid between offering college-level programming and applied undergraduate degrees. In 2008, KPU became a university with the ability to offer all types of undergraduate and now graduate-level programming. As an institution whose main focus for most of our history was on two-year programming with many of our students transferring elsewhere to complete a degree, our attrition rates continue to be high. When taking into consideration graduation rates, our average fall-to-fall persistence rate across the institution is 61 percent. Persistence in some faculties is as high as 91 percent (Design) and in others as low as 57 percent (Science). Although the

proportion of students graduating from KPU continues to increase, losing on average 39 percent of our students from one year to the next is a grave concern.

Over the past four years, the student services portfolio at KPU expanded to include a number of departments whose direction is to provide services and programming to retain students. These departments include Educational Advising, Financial Aid/Awards, Personal and Career Counselling, Student Life, Learning Centres and Services for Students with Disabilities. Bringing these units together under the strategic vision of student persistence and success has yielded many benefits for our students. Programs such as the Early Alert Referral System and Academic Boost Camps are showing early success in student retention. The strength of these programs rests with the collaboration between the student affairs units, drawing on the expertise of each area to increase student success. Student success is defined as “academic achievement; engagement in educationally purposeful activities; satisfaction; acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies; persistence; and attainment of educational objectives” (Kuh et al. 2007, p. 10). This definition forms the foundation upon which many of our student persistence programs were designed. What follows is a summary of three initiatives at KPU to address our student attrition rates: the Early Alert Referral System, Academic Boost Camp and the Required to Withdraw pilot project.

The Early Alert Referral System

KPU’s early alert referral system had been conceived of three to four years ahead of its launch in January 2009. Work on the system began in earnest after the reorganization of the student affairs units at KPU, as described earlier. The development of an early alert referral system had never been prevented by KPU’s previous organizational structure; however, reorganization facilitated a more coordinated implementation.

As a university with an open access admission policy, one of KPU’s greatest challenges is the balancing act between student access and educational quality. Caught in the middle is the integrity of our programs and the potential for success with students who are oftentimes underprepared for university life. With this in mind, our objectives for the early alert referral system were threefold:

- to enhance students’ knowledge and use of learning support services

- to improve the quality of the student learning experience
- to increase student persistence and progression

The implementation of the early alert referral system also represented a fundamental shift for KPU: it marks our initial foray into interventionist student success and retention strategies.

As an institution with 17,000 students (9,500 full-time equivalents) and approximately 1,000 faculty spread across four campuses, the design of the system was important, with ease of use being paramount. As a result, the system was “built” in the faculty portal of our student information system alongside other Web-based resources that faculty regularly use for items such as accessing their class lists and grade submission. Information regarding the early alert referral system can be viewed online, at www.kwantlen.ca/earlyalert, and includes screen shots and instructions for the early alert submission process.

The early alert referral system provides faculty with the opportunity to make an immediate referral for intervention when students exhibit characteristics that put them at risk for success in a class. The risk factors include:

- being inattentive or sleeping in class
- struggling with course content to the point of failing tests and assignments
- attending class without required materials or textbooks
- frequently missing class

Faculty have the opportunity to provide additional “free-text” information and are also asked to indicate whether they informed the student of the early alert referral before submission.

Early alerts are received in a dedicated e-mail account that is accessed and managed by a team of representatives from Educational Advising, Counselling, the Learning Centres and Student Awards and Financial Assistance. Each referral is reviewed by a case manager, each student is individually contacted, and the faculty member is notified that the early alert referral has been received and is being acted on. Each early alert referral is assessed individually and is uniquely designed to address the specific concerns about and needs of the student. Typical supports can include any combination of

- meeting with an educational adviser for program planning or testing

- locating an appropriate tutor to work with the student
- connecting the student with a peer mentor
- arranging for a counseling appointment to address career counseling or personal counseling issues
- meeting with a financial awards adviser for emergency financial assistance or general financial planning

Given its recent implementation, the program is still undergoing initial reviews. Indications so far, however, are positive. The launch in January 2009 was a soft-launch with little fanfare or promotion. Rather, specific faculty were targeted and agreed to participate in a pilot. Thirty-six students were referred between January and August. Based on initially positive feedback from the January 2009 group, the early alert program was aggressively promoted for fall 2009. As of mid-December 2009, 107 students had been referred. Overall, the launch of the program has been well received and supported by faculty. To quote one faculty member: “I’m actually really excited about this, and I think other faculty will be as well. I’ve attended numerous conferences/workshops on student retention, and the ‘early warning system’ always comes up. I never dreamed KPU would have the budget for this. Thanks!!”

Ironically, the division did not receive any additional budget to design, develop and deliver this service. We simply drew upon the collective expertise of an integrated service division.

Although data are limited at this point, we observed the following:

- As we note in the observations for one of the initiatives described later in this article, students enrolled in certificate or diploma programs appear to be generally at a higher level of risk for success at KPU. Only 4 of the 36 students referred during the program’s initial launch were degree-level students, whereas all others were enrolled in certificate or diploma programs.
- Additional supports for nonscience students pursuing science courses should be considered. Twenty of the 36 students referred during the program’s initial launch were Arts or Business students reported by a faculty member from a science course that they were taking to fulfill breadth or elective requirements.

- There appears to be a correlation between a student's response to the early alert case manager and their prospects for success. Fifteen of the 36 students referred during the program's initial launch did not respond to e-mail or phone inquiries from the early alert case manager. Of those, 11 students failed the course from which the faculty member referred them.

Academic Boost Camp

As a pilot project, KPU targeted undergraduate students who were at risk of becoming early "exiters" (students who fail to complete their desired credential) with a two-day intensive workshop focused on raising awareness and developing fundamental skills associated with academic success. Research has demonstrated that early intervention that addresses multiple barriers to success can improve performance leading to successful graduation. As a result, KPU students who, after completion of the spring 2008 semester (January–April 2008), were on Academic Warning or Academic Probation or who had been Required to Withdraw were invited to participate in one of two two-day Academic Boost Camp workshops being held in June and August.

The focus of the workshop was on improving students' skills in balancing school with other responsibilities, study habits, course planning and group dynamics, as well as on financial planning, budgeting, literacy and a career aptitude assessment. Students moved through a set schedule over two days, including social team-building activities disbursed throughout the program. The workshops were jointly delivered by staff and faculty in Student Awards and Financial Assistance, the Learning Centres, Counselling Services and Educational Advising, in addition to support from a local credit counseling agency. More information regarding the Academic Boost Camp can be found online at <http://www.kwantlen.ca/boostcamp>

We were initially quite pleased to see 104 students register for the June and August Boost Camps, which exceeded our original projection of 80 participants; however, actual attendance was only 39 percent (42) of those students who registered.

Each participant was asked to complete a short questionnaire before the start of their Boost Camp. Participants were asked how they felt about the outlook of their academic situation, how they felt about their level of anxiety associated with their academic situation and whether they knew what they could do to improve their academic situation. The majority of participants indicated that they

were unsure, pessimistic and anxious about their academic future. At the same time, a majority of participants also indicated that they had some ideas about what they could do to improve their academic situation.

A review of the qualitative and quantitative responses from participants after day 1 and again on day 2 of the Boost Camp suggests that they enjoyed the experience and that they felt as though they had acquired new strategies for balancing the demands of PSE. The information in Table 1 suggests that this newfound confidence on the part of Boost Camp participants is deserved. The performance of Academic Boost Camp participants was measured against a control cohort of 100 students who, following the completion of the spring 2008 semester, had also been placed on Academic Warning or Academic Probation or had been Required to Withdraw.

Overall, Academic Boost Camp participants fared considerably better with respect to both academic performance and persistence in future semesters of study compared with the control cohort.

Table 1. Academic Boost Camp (ABC) Attendee Performance

Academic Performance Effect	Participants	Comparators
Increase in overall GPA after the first term after ABC	65%	32%
Increase in overall GPA after the second term after ABC	50%	34%
Increase in term GPA of the first term after ABC	53%	28%
Increase in term GPA of the second term after ABC	38%	26%
Retention Effect	Participants	Comparators
Did not attend first term after ABC	13%	52%
Did not attend second term after ABC	30%	54%

GPA = grade point average.

The initial goal of this project was to target students who were at risk for not completing their credential. An initial analysis of the academic performance of at-risk students who

participated in the Academic Boost Camp demonstrates that, one year out, these students are outperforming nonparticipants in both academic performance and persistence with their studies.

Although the sample groups for this pilot are too small to be conclusive, the data gathered to date appear to indicate that a voluntary intervention of this nature has had a positive impact for those who participated. The success of Academic Boost Camp participants compared with the control cohort students has led to the extension of this pilot at KPU. Additional Academic Boost Camp offerings were made available in February 2009 and in the summer of 2009.

What is less clear is whether a mandatory intervention that requires at-risk students to participate in an Academic Boost Camp will yield similar student feedback, academic performance and persistence. One of the very clear challenges associated with the Academic Boost Camp is student attendance. This issue has played out similarly in subsequent Boost Camp offerings. Issues related to student participation aside, the Academic Boost Camps offered at KPU have emerged as an important resource for students who choose to attend.

The Required to Withdraw Pilot

As with most other universities, KPU's academic standing policy contains a provision requiring students to be withdrawn from studies in which they have not demonstrated satisfactory academic progress. There are two stages that precede Required to Withdraw: Academic Warning and Academic Probation. KPU operates on a 4.33 grade point average scale and satisfactory academic progress is defined as maintaining an institutional GPA of 2.00 or higher. Students who are Required to Withdraw must take a break from studies at KPU for a minimum of six months before applying for readmission.

As a pilot project, Required to Withdraw students were given the opportunity for continued enrollment as a student continuing on Academic Probation provided they were willing to enter into a performance contract. The terms and conditions of the contract specified that participating students must:

- meet with an educational adviser at the start of the semester for a review of their academic plan and again before the withdrawal deadline for the semester
- participate in an upcoming Academic Boost Camp
- register in KPU's UNIV 1100
- visit KPU's Learning Centre for tutoring and academic support

Three semester-based cohorts of students participated in the pilot project during the fall 2008 (September–December), spring 2009 (January–April) and summer 2009 (May–August) semesters. Participation was voluntary. Students who achieved a term GPA of 2.00 or higher were permitted to carry on with their studies. Students who failed to achieve a term GPA of 2.00 in any term after their agreement to participate in the project and who had not managed to raise their cumulative GPA to 2.00 or higher would again be Required to Withdraw.

As Table 2 indicates, although the program appears to have helped some students, a majority of participating students were Required to Withdraw one or two semesters after signing on.

Table 2. Required to Withdraw Pilot Results

	Fall 2008 Cohort		Spring 2009 Cohort		Summer 2009 Cohort	
	Participating Students	Required to Withdraw	Participating Students	Required to Withdraw	Participating Students	Required to Withdraw
Total Eligible Students	35		103		35	
1st Semester Results	26	15	82	46	34	22
2nd Semester Results	16*	6	22	8		
3rd Semester Results	10*	3				

* Some students who were eligible to participate as part of the 1st semester, fall 2008 cohort, but chose not to, were allowed to enter into the pilot program at the 2nd semester. This practice was discontinued for the spring 2009 and summer 2009 cohorts.

Although further analysis is required, initial results are helpful with respect to informing how we may need to focus our resources with future retention efforts. Of particular interest is the fact that only 1 student of the 173 students eligible to participate in the program was a degree-level student. All other students were in diploma, certificate and citation-level programs that generally have a lower admission threshold than our degree programs. Also, more than 75

percent of participating students who were admitted to KPU on the basis of their high school grades received a grade of “C+” or lower in English 12 and Math 11. As we look at which groups to target with support during the transition from high school to university, this is important information.

Despite the very useful information resulting from initial analyses of this pilot program and of Required to Withdraw students generally during the period described above, the decision to cancel the program was made. The consensus among the departments involved in the administration of the program was that the support services were being delivered too late and that earlier and more invasive strategies needed to be explored.

Conclusions

Our faculty and our support services are partners in student success. Student persistence initiatives must be designed with this partnership in mind. Early alert systems are an important part of student persistence strategies because our faculty are a necessary link to detecting when a student is at risk of failing. Academic boost camps bring students in line with their career aspirations, study habits and personal academic skill set. This awareness is necessary for students to succeed in the classroom.

Beyond the faculty–service partnership, there must be collaboration across student service units. In keeping with our model of partnering with our faculty and collaborating across service units, KPU’s student persistence model, in addition to offering the programs discussed here, also includes tutoring programs, student leadership engagement opportunities, supplemental instruction and learning communities.

According to MacFadgen’s review of research on student persistence, “academic advising and student support services is positively associated with student persistence and graduation rates” (2008, p. 71). Two of the three persistence programs at KPU support this finding. Given KPU’s student population, it appears that early intervention is necessary. Waiting to intervene after a student has been academically unsuccessful for several semesters in a row has had a minimal impact on their persistence. A stop-out for these students may be necessary before they return to PSE. Although the value of PSE has been openly questioned in op-ed columns in recent years, Berger and Parkin (2009, p. 23) demonstrate that “(a)lthough a post secondary credential is currently less scarce in Canada than at any time in its history, individual

degree- and diploma-holders are financially better off now relative to non-graduates than they were 25 years ago.” As Berger and Parkin rightly posit, the attainment of a postsecondary credential “matters” a great deal. Although some students may need to stop out for a period of time, to the extent that we can prevent this from occurring by providing timely and coordinated support, we are facilitating the most singularly impactful process on the future of students’ lives.

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