Spalding University Student Retention and Persistence Summit

Notes from Dr. Elizabeth Dyer on her experience serving as Music Program Head for 9 years.

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At the start of my tenure, 30% of freshmen majors persisted to graduation; 50% of first year majors dropped out or transferred before their sophomore year. Another 20% dropped out between their junior and senior years or did not complete their final semester.

At the end of my tenure, the program for 5 years had achieved 100% retention of majors, all years, and 100% persistence to graduation, including those students who changed majors to another program. Moreover, the rate of 4 year graduation increased to become the norm, whereas previously 5-6 years was typical.

1. **My Program Demographics**

**Faculty and Staff**

* 1 full time faculty member with a 4:4 teaching load and Program Head admin, faculty advisor for the student organization. One course required significant additional time commitment (choir)
* 17 adjuncts. 4 adjuncts taught 2-3 courses in the core. 13 taught 1 weekly voice/instrumental lessons to individual students or small groups of students
* 4 student workstudies. I did not hire my own majors (they needed experience working for other people) but hired the most skilled and capable of the students from the Music Appreciation general education courses. Hired 1 new student per year who the senior workstudies trained.
* 1 Student Organization, whose functionality depended upon the quality of the student leadership

**Size of Program**

* # of majors, avg. 20
* # of minors: avg. 10

**Student Quality**

* Students with GPAs as low as 1.9 were accepted by the university
* Most unusually, music majors were accepted by the university without audition; no aptitude test. This generally meant that our music majors could/would not be accepted anywhere else. Guess what, though? The quality of aptitude and the achievements of graduates was about the same or better than the schools who required auditions.
* Students from rural, private, academies and small high schools had no formal music knowledge or experience because only the large high schools had musical ensembles (band, choir, mariachi, orchestra)
* Overall college readiness among incoming freshmen majors & minors: 30% college ready, 70% with moderate to severe readiness skill gaps

**Student Demographics**

* + 95% minority (75% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, chiefly Mexican-American, Mexican and Central American; 20% African-American; 5% white non-Hispanic). During my nine years as Program Head, we did not have a major or minor from an Asian culture, such as India, China, Japan, Phillippines, Singapore.
  + 95% were under the age of 25
  + 80% first generation; often also they and their siblings were the first in their family to complete high school
  + 80% lower- and lower middle-income family background
  + 50% diagnosed with a disability (dyslexia, dysgraphic, autism spectrum most common)
  + 60% displayed moderate but with counseling manageable mental health issues; during my nine-year tenure, 5% of students displayed acute mental illness symptoms, unmanaged
  + 0% of the music majors and minors had a physical disability or required physical accommodations
  + 50% had at least one parent, sibling or relation in jail (typically drug-related offenses) during their college years
  + 25% experienced the death of a parent, sibling or caregiver relation from disease or violence during their college years
  + Approx 50% had medical issues whose disease and medical appointments affected their studies: diabetes (3-4 students per year), kidney disease (1-2 students per year), severe obesity (when I first came 12 of the 20 majors were severely obese and when I left there were 0), HIV/AIDS (2 students), traumatic brain injury (1 student)

1. **Program Analysis**

**Identify the Problem to be Solved: Retention and Persistance**

1. Identify when majors & minors drop out through keeping Program records:
   1. 10% of first years drop out before the end of the first semester
   2. 40% of first years do not return for sophomore year
   3. 15% of juniors do not return for senior year
   4. 5% of senior leave before completing their final semester
2. Identify the principal reasons from the students through creating informal opportunities for student engagement and scheduling advising meetings with individual students at least twice a semester with enough time in the session to chat. In no particular order:
   1. Imposter Syndrome: I don’t belong here; it’s an accident; at any moment I’m going to be expelled; everyone’s smarter/better/good-looking/etc. than I am
   2. Financial: Tuition, book costs, food costs, additional fees
   3. Medical: This is a typical age group for the development of adult diseases, including mental illness.
   4. College Readiness
      1. Do not know how to plan, time management
      2. Lack of self-awareness, lack of self-management
      3. Do not know how to be a member of a community; do not know how to be a leader
      4. Lack of basic life care skills
   5. College Readiness
      1. does not have the pre-requisite skills to study the subject
      2. does not know the fundamentals of the subject
      3. doesn’t comprehend that an F grade and/or deciding not to be present for an exam has consequences (Note: For 10 years, San Antonio schools did not allow F as a grade AND ensured that students who were judged liable to perform poorly on standard exams did not take the exams. These actions were unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind law that tied school funding to student performance)
      4. does not know about careers or how to develop a career plan and pathway
3. Other Areas that affected Retention and Persistence
   1. Faculty and Staff: Only 1 full time faculty member. Adjuncts come to teach and depart no engagement with the life of the program unless they donate their time (not ethical) or the program can pay them extra for their time (must find a means other than draining the program budget)
   2. Facilities & Equipment: Old building, old equipment, lack of equipment; Cleanliness at a poor standard due to poor cleaning staff; air quality poor because of mold and mildew in the building; AC and Heat old with frequent malfunctions
4. **Strategies to Address the Problem’s Elements**
5. **Mentoring & Pastoral Care** **Engagement**. Addresses Imposter Syndrome, College Readiness, Identification of Disability or Medical
   1. Assume nothing. Learn about each of them as individuals. Resist grouping.
   2. Program Head engages each individual first year as a mentor during the student’s financial aid and registration process in addition to the Freshmen Advisors, contacting the student to check on them. This continues through the first week of classes.
   3. Faculty members, including adjuncts, agree to mentor majors AND minors by the end of the first week of classes according to positive reactions of students, i.e., who the student naturally seems to get along with. Unless there is a falling-out, these pairings continue to graduation. The mentoring consists of greeting the student when they see then, general pleasantries, asking how they are doing. But chiefly they are observing and noting any changes in the student’s demeanor, attitude, emotion, interactions, etc., engaging in appropriate ways to determine the cause and then arranging an informal meeting of the student, the Program Head and the faculty member to address the issue. The intention is for the student to understand that both the faculty member and the Program Head are there to assist and that the more that is done early on and informally to address the issue, the less likely a consequence requiring formal action is to occur
   4. Program Head/Advisors
      1. Create an atmosphere and space where there are daily informal interactions and formal options. Goal is to lay eyes on every major and minor at least once a week and make your own observations about their state of well-being
         1. such as walking out of their office when students are in the hallways between classes so as to greet them
         2. keeping a treat jar with 2-3 different types of items and changing the contents in rotation weekly
         3. posting a weekly office hour sign-up sheet
         4. a series of appropriate signs to communicate where the Program Head/Advisor is when they are not in their office
         5. keeping their office door open except when engaged in confidential work (and having a sign to post on their door for that)
         6. Cultivate a reputation for confidentiality and willingness to stand with students during difficulties, including course registration, financial aid, Title IX and Honor Code issues.
         7. Cultivate a reputation of knowledge of resources for students (be their Yellow Pages for the institution) and smooth the way with an introductory phone call or email and always follow up with the student.
         8. Encountering a deliberately difficult student? Mantra on the way in to school: “I will love and I refuse to hate.”
   5. Frequent Advising Meetings
      1. For freshmen, meet with each of them before classes start preferably and also during the first and second week for 20 minutes and with them map out an “ideal” four years of courses. This is a degree map that will be updated each semester.
      2. For non-freshmen, formally schedule an advising session twice each semester Week 1 or 2 for 10 minutes; Week 10-12 for 20 minutes), discuss their current semester, plan their next semester and update their degree maps and print them a copy.
      3. If a student comes and says they are failing/need to drop for any reason, take time to discover if there is any way forward without dropping. If they must drop, go through the degree map with them and cooperatively planhow they are going to recover and map out their next steps are (generate a to do list), and follow up with the student
   6. **Caveats and Mistakes to Avoid**
      1. Retreats, both on campus and off campus, did not work. Too many students had jobs and/or lack of transportation. While those that attended bonded, this activity ironically created a division between those who went and those who didn’t
      2. Recognize that a faculty member may be unable or unwilling to engage as advisors or mentors.
      3. Recognize that faculty members, especially adjuncts who have less contact with the students, may persist in teaching ideal students “They should already know…” and resist teaching the students they actually have.
      4. Be an advisor and mentor but not a friend or buddy. I witnessed the firing of two colleagues from other departments, therefore:
      5. Always consult with other faculty and staff colleagues before carrying out an activity with students – attending an out-of-town conference, providing transportation to students for any reason, inviting students to purchase tickets and come with you to a performance/event, teaching students to drive in the campus parking lots, picking and canning fruit and vegetables at a faculty member’s home. Never embark “hoping for the best.”
6. **Finances**
   1. Research your institution for old scholarships or pots of money from defunct projects
   2. Developing Endowed Scholarships and engaging Alumni
   3. Program-level scholarship fund shared among students according to fund-raising activities they engaged in. Find local opportunities of pay for work. For example. $1,000 to collect bleacher trash at a local stadium after a professional soccer game. 10 students + 1 adjunct supervisor. Adjunct pay: $60.00 an hour (guild rates) out of the $1,000.00 (ensures good will and interest of the adjuncts by rewarding them for investing additional time/effort; protects the Program Head’s time/energy; promotes the visibility of the university and the program.) The program keeps $60.00 as its fee, which is dedicated to supporting adjuncts to attend other activities, such as summer Campus Visit Days (this protects the budget of the program while procuring assistance for the Program Head for other events). The program records and in the spring semester after registering for courses, the program will award as a program scholarship the amount the students earned.
7. **Course Design** (Addresses College Readiness and Subject Study Readiness, Medical, Facilities, Staff issues)
   1. Assume nothing.
   2. Decide what specific skills the students need to have in place and the minimum level of proficiency they need for these skills to be successful in each course
   3. Design the progression of skills and skill acquisition as a program through the progression of the levels of the degree requirements.
   4. Design courses backwards. Start with the end point list of skills/knowledge “After taking this courses, students will be able to …..” and design assignments and lectures to develop each stage of the skill/knowledge. Assume nothing regarding skills unless there is a prerequisite course that was taught by your program’s faculty.
   5. Make the assignment plottable in terms of difficulty and skill. You want to be able to understand your students’ progress through just a glance at the assignment grades.
   6. So some people find earning As on beginning assignments easy in the very early course(s) assignments. Better that than setting the bar so high that talented but under-prepared students despair and give up. Simply adjust the point values so that these first A’s weigh less than later assignments. And remind students of that
   7. Be prepared and intend to tweak the last 50-75% of the course assignments based upon the student result on the first weeks’ assignments (this is for face to face and online/hybrid courses where only 3 weeks’ worth of work is visible at a time)
   8. For general education courses, hire work study(ies) from this course who show promise as teachers/mentors, preferably not majors in your program. Train them to be tutors and offer general education course student opportunities to come work with a tutor and resubmit their assignment for regrading for the first half of the semester. After that, they are encourage to come to the tutors for assistance, but will not be able to resubmit poor work unless the instructor overrides this rules (instructor must notify the Program Head of the circumstances, name of the student, the course, and the assignment, and, if possible, the day/time the student will be coming for tutoring)
   9. Celebrate with students with learning disabilities especially their achievements regardless of whether they did well on an assignment or test. It is an achievement that they successfully completed the task of focusing for 20 minutes during a weekly test. Never mind that each answer, while correct, is very difficult to read and is sprawled over an entire page.
8. **Activities** (Addresses Imposter Syndrome, Career Path, and Community)
   1. Take undergraduate students to academic conferences held in Louisville or in driving distance. We required all majors to attend a regional conference in the Fall and a state-wide conference held in our city every spring. Students were required to attend 3 paper sessions of their choice and 2 performances or workshops of their choice. They wrote a brief report on each, including a 1 page summary according to a format we developed and a copy of their notes. The adjuncts were present at the spring conference and the program paid for their conference and parking fee as well as the conference fee for each student. This allowed students to experience many different careers and meet scholars, and even develop relationships with graduate schools. It also helped the faculty advised the student when we found something that really interested them. What surprised me every year was that ours was the only the school bringing undergraduate students to the fall regional conferences, even the host schools. Our students got a lot out of it; it was one of the highlights of their spring semester each year.
   2. We consistently raised money to fully cover paying for students’ piano accompanying needs and spring TMEA conference fees for the faculty and all majors by collecting wild pecans in the fall from certain friendly land owners and our own Sisters’ pecan grove, having them professional cracked and selling them on campus for Thanksgiving and Christmas pecan pies one dollar less than the supermarket. This activity built community. Also required investment by the students, for each hour of shelling pecans “earned” students $50.00 credit towards their accompaniment fees, which were typically $250.00 a semester. Workstudies were in charge of marketing, selling, and delivering the pecans.
   3. Faculty escorted students to most of the area museums, finding some way to link the museum holdings to the subject matter, and also two professional performances a semester. The tickets were purchased at a reduced rate by the program using the pecan funds or the tickets were donated as a tax write off.
9. **Facilities & Equipment**
   1. **Old building**
      1. Took advantage of an opportunity to re-imagine an area of an unused dormitory
      2. Re-arranged the layout of classroom, faculty offices and student spaces and created a small but serviceable student lounge area with comfortable furnishings and noticeboards with lots of charging outlets.
      3. Asked for unused odds and ends of paint cans from colleagues and repainted all program spaces
      4. Asked for unused frames of all sizes from colleagues to be donated and framed and hung historical photos and memorabilia from the program’s history
      5. Asked for unused fine art prints from colleagues and hung them in all classrooms and practice rooms
      6. Identified and removed worn out and broken furnishings and replaced with better ones in the surplus warehouse, cleaning and doing minor repairs ourselves as needed. Ensured that all current furniture was cleaned and then maintained.
      7. Provided each adjunct faculty member with an office that they had to themselves during their scheduled time on campus that was secure and they were encouraged personalize as they wish; provided each office with a microwave/fridge combo, surplus from a dormitory that was being remodeled.
      8. Created a unique notice board for each ensemble and the student organization and had decorating competitions
      9. When a church was closing, asked for and received the artificial flowers and greenery they used to decorate for weddings and the sanctuary Christmas decorations to use to decorate our performance spaces for recitals. Students were responsible for creating their design specs for their requested recital decoration
   2. **Old equipment and lack of equipment**
      1. Develop a rota in which every year one area receives an extra share of funds to devote to improving equipment
      2. Develop a free seminar course in instrument maintenance and repair led by an area expert (paid an honorarium by the program using funds by selling refreshments at program events) in which program instruments and their cases in rotation would be cleaned, polished and minor repairs completed. Students had the opportunity to take a practicum exam and earn a certificate and a recommendation letter from the expert.
      3. Develop alumni connections
         1. we built an 11 seat music engineering and editing computer lab that was used by all classes to complete and submit homework as well as projects. It was open in the evening as one of the university’s general computer labs, too.
         2. We also built an 11 seat smart keyboard lab that was open to music students all day and evenings
         3. Smart televisions or project screens with laptops in all classrooms
      4. Incorporate the problems as teaching tools into classes, such as the internship classes and education classes and help students develop workaround strategies
      5. Verify with IT that all faculty equipment is up to date and working at the end of each semester/year.
      6. Encourage faculty members to first fill “must have to fulfill requirements” but also collect their “would like to have” in the context of how they would benefit the growth and prosperity of the program and develop pathways towards acquisition
      7. Be honest when it’s not going to possible to get something. Or when a plan comes to nothing.
   3. **Cleanliness & Smell**: Addressed maintenance, physical atmosphere, community, retention & reclamation
      1. Service for Compassion: – Once a semester, freshmen and transfer students who had unexcused absences before midterm exams but had maintained perfect attendance since midterms had the opportunity two weeks before final exams to clean program equipment and polish wooden doors and panels. 1.5 hours of work = 1 missed class, maximum of 3 absences. This included students who had dropped out, if we could reach them to try and reclaim them and they agreed to come back and try again; this also gave the faculty an opportunity to determine and assist with the underlying cause of the drop out/absences. This gave students an opportunity to make redress for an immature action. Students were supervised by the workstudies, who worked on the tasks with them. The faculty united in working with the older students to cultivate a positive atmosphere of encouragement “Good for you,“ “I’m proud of you.” We never had any bullying or teasing.
      2. Music Program Fun Day: Week 3 each semester: Music majors, minors, and music ensemble students signed up to volunteer 1 hours to fulfill a service hour requirement for the Student Organization. This would include repairing and filing music; learning how to and cleaning instruments and pianos, washing windows, planting flowers (these would be cut and sent to our Sisters in the convent nursing home next to the university) and our Community vegetable garden (for the food pantry) in the ground next to the building, etc. At noon there would be a grilled lunch prepared by the students for themselves and the faculty with games and prizes. Prizes would also be awarded to recognize how well tasks were completed and outstanding individual work. The students and faculty were responsible for creating games for each other (student games had to be passed by the Student Organization leadership and the faculty advisor and faculty designed games had to be passed by the Program Head).
      3. Work studies had a list of weekly cleaning chores and a list of less frequent chores to work on if they had no other projects.
      4. The problem was, especially with the ensemble classes, that the classroom desks, chairs, blackboards, equipment were continually left in disarray that the Program Head and workstudies would have to reset every evening and during any breaks during the day, while students and instructors complained during the day.

Solution: Classes (and their instructors) competed for an Honor Shield each semester to recognize classroom neatness and cleanliness (in what state was the classroom left after class). This was judged at random times by the Disorder Witch (myself or one of the adjuncts whom they all respected and adored, attired in doctoral hat, broom, white gloves and black cape) who would burst into class (just as the class was leaving, pre-arranged with the instructor, who would go along with the play), do a 2 minute examination of the room and storm out if everything was perfect or cackle malevolently if a problem was found – source is Chapter 1 from the children’s book *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*. It wasn’t perfect but it was much better.

* + 1. Encourage development in pride and personal investment in the physical spaces. This will help develop active alumni Listen to the students.
  1. **Air quality issues** 
     1. One space at a time dedicate program budget funds to purchase an air purifier with washable filters.
     2. Similarly purchase dehumidifiers for the rooms most affected by humidity and mold. Workstudies empty the dehumidifiers first thing when they start their shift
     3. Using containers of baking soda under desks and in closed areas, such as closets and the music libraries, and uniform wardrobes, to help reduce mold/mildew odors Replenish every month.
     4. Weekly put 2 dryer sheets under the strings in each piano in each room
     5. Note any minor cleanliness issue, and train workstudies to recognize the same and develop a culture of immediately attending to it
     6. Develop food and food trash rules for the program spaces to prevent odors and rodentia/insects. Workstudies closing out the program spaces for the day have a closeout checklist that includes addressing this area.
  2. **AC and Heating issues**
     1. Winter (San Antonio cold spells generally do not last long)
        1. All weeks: Incorporate special physical activity into the class
        2. First week: Running ugly scarf and sweater competitions when it’s so cold we have to keep outdoor things on in class
        3. Second week: Pencils with snowflakes on them or some other small token are given to students who answer questions correctly during class. Program head purchases these and distributes to faculty at the start of winter. Each faculty member has a special item/color of item to use for rewards.
     2. Summer
        1. Classes outside wherever possible
        2. Provide materials to decorate shoes and sandals in the student lounge and encourage students to enter photos of their footwear and wear them to class (Note: decorating your footwear was a fad in San Antonio that we took advantage of). Smart screens would show a 2 minute slideshow of all entries for the 2 minutes below class started. Faculty were encourage to submit entries, too, but they were not eligible for prizes.
        3. Provide, as a rare surprise, a poleta (ice pop) or frozen fresh fruit chunks break and hold an informal discussion with the students
        4. Bottles of iced water given as prizes for correct answers

**In summary:**

1. Maintain engagement on a daily basis - a single smile or a single Hello is better than nothing
2. Keep your eyes and ears open, discourage and redirect gossip and keep confidences
3. No element of a course or a Program is too small to be studied for its effectiveness in your program and tweaked.
4. Small changes followed up and revised as needed can make big changes without costing too much in energy or time.
5. Take advantage of the operational goals option within the Report Cards to propose, implement and study the effects of tweaks and changes to improve your program
6. Treat each student as an individual and modify assignments and projects to foster the individual
7. You must become an expert in the students you teach: know every major and minor’s name as soon as possible after they enter the university, know their career dreams, their strengths and how to help them apply them, etc.
8. Dedicate thinking time every week about each student, their progress, and plan your interactions with them and what you hope to achieve that week.
9. Design your program and courses and course assignments down to the last dot to serve the students you ACTUALLY have. Avoid the trap of “supposed to work” or “supposed to know.”
10. No matter how much blood, sweat, and tears have gone into an assignment or a course, if it doesn’t work, remove it. Sometimes we just get it wrong.
11. Avoid being proprietary – if what you developed works, share it with your colleagues.
12. Never cancel class. Cover each other’s classes. Erase the student’s expectations that if a faculty member isn’t there that class doesn’t happen. Help them understand in the real world that people cover other people’s absences and that the job/work is expected to continue!

**“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” – Albert Einstein**