

Raider Ready: An Integrated Model for Freshman Seminar at Texas Tech University

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Student undergraduate enrollment in US colleges and universities has grown greatly over the last couple of decades. The U.S. Department of Education (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2011; 2012; 2013, as cited by the Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.) reports that while postsecondary education enrollment has fluctuated slightly as a result of the overall economic climate, enrollment rates have increased solidly by more than 48 percent. This increase reflects a greater number of non-traditional students (typically defined as age 25 and older), women, and minorities seeking higher education.

The increase in enrollment has proven both an advantage and disadvantage for schools accepting more students. First, enrollment increases typically result in more revenue for growing institutions. Second, growing enrollments may lead to national and even international attention for growing institutions. Third, larger student bodies indicate the conveyance of the importance and availability of higher education for those interested. And so on. However, regardless of how much larger enrollment contributes to the growth of American higher education, disadvantages also exist. Higher enrollment requires additional teaching and research staff, which might be difficult to acquire due to limited immediate funding. In short, plans to grow enrollments must be accompanied by plans to see these students persist and graduate. This may be best exemplified by the imbalance between enrollments and graduate rates reported by universities and colleges with open enrollment admissions policies. Additionally, enrollment growth introduces faculty and staffing needs especially when high faculty to student and staff to student ratios increase as a result of enrollment growth can limit the number of courses available to students on a timely basis. Furthermore, enrollment growth—especially at the freshman level—can create infrastructure demands on housing, student services, and other auxiliaries which affects student

engagement outside of the classroom including the changing expectations and needs of students in the way they are acclimated to college life. This mismanagement of student expectations and needs ultimately can result in higher dropout rates, thus negating the work that higher education institutions are doing to get students into their classrooms in the first place. Therefore, if student recruitment is not coupled with active student retention, enrollment rates will begin to reverse, or—worse yet—the quality of education that students receive will could lack quality. Student retention and persistence are primary concerns among leaders of American colleges and universities, primarily because institutions of all types and especially State institutions are under greater pressure to graduate more students while generating more and more of their own revenue to cover operating costs. However, these issues can be the most challenging to address, but many colleges and universities are confronting the challenge early head-on by implementing programs known do directly impact student retention, persistence and graduation.

For example, many colleges and universities have made available to students their courses online so that students may implementing first-year college programs or freshman seminars to aid in student retention (which eventually leads to better student persistence). In fact, “more than 70% of colleges and universities now offer some type of first-year program” (Cox, Schmitt, & Graham, 2005, p. 40); at least 95% of four-year schools offer these programs as well (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Of course, student retention is important at any learning stage, but as Cox, Schmitt, and Graham (2005) conclude, “the first year is the most crucial period in student retention with more than half the students who drop out doing so in their first year” (p. 40). Some of the reasons Cox, Schmitt, and Graham attribute to low retention rates include low admission standards, low grades, and unmet financial concerns. Oftentimes, these initial

concerns or low performance derive from a lack of attention to the needs of new or young students.

However, research has revealed several factors that lead to higher retention rates among students. Students who attain higher grades and a higher GPA (Cox, Schmitt, & Graham, 2005; Braunstein, Lesser, & Pescatrice, 2006), have a greater interest in learning, integrate socially (Cox, Schmitt, & Graham, 2005; Erickson & Stone, 2012), maintain some sort of goal commitment, have regular interactions with faculty and staff, possess clear academic expectations and requirements, and overall enjoy learning with their peer (Cox, Schmitt, & Graham, 2005) tend to stay enrolled longer than other students and complete their degrees or certificates. Overall, Cox, Schmitt, and Graham (2005) concur that “academic, social, and personal support” are the leading contributors for academic retention and measureable achievement (p. 42), especially when students are learning skills for success (Erickson & Stone, 2012).

Since the prevalent factors that support student retention and persistence can and should be achieved at the freshman level, the first-year programs and freshman seminars established by colleges and universities across the nation share common components and goals. Rhodes and Carifio (1999) suggest that freshman seminars first of all must be appropriate for students who attend schools of differing selectivity levels, meaning that schools that have relatively low or high admittance standards should offer freshman seminars that reflect such standards and prepare students accordingly instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, Jewler (1989) and Rhodes and Carifio (1999) maintain that effective freshman seminars help students learn about three specific things: themselves, their campuses, and the value and importance of higher education. Most importantly, though, Hunter and Linder (2005) specifically define the idea of the

freshman seminar as “a course designed to assist students in their academic and social development and in their transition to college.... In most cases, there is a strong emphasis on creating community in the classroom” (2005, pp. 275–276).

This essay advances the argument that freshman seminars that effectively combine academic and student affairs have higher retention and persistence rates. To support this argument, a concise review of relevant literature concerning the theoretical framework, historical roots, and typical structure of freshman seminar programs is discussed. Additionally, this essay’s rationale is proposed, bolstered by a discussion of the limitations of most current freshman seminar programs. Emphasis is placed on how the freshman seminar program at Texas Tech University (i.e., IS 1100, Raider Ready) addresses these limitations. Specifically, a review of empirical data that supports Raider Ready’s effectiveness is discussed. Thereafter, the paper will conclude with suggestions for other schools who wish to employ similar freshman programs.

Literature Review

Programs to assist students with their transitions into college academics and affairs have existed in the United States for more than 150 years. Vassar College was the first to establish any kind of preparatory program for academically underprepared students in the mid-nineteenth century (Stahl & King, 2000; Ryan & Glenn, 2004); by 1928, over 100 other schools offered transition courses for first-year college students (Fitts & Swift, 1928; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Ryan & Glenn, 2004). Many of these courses focused on specific learning outcomes, such as remedial skills. Over time, an increase in the number of non-traditional students enrolling in college urged a change in the direction for transition courses to focus on basic learning strategies

(Ryan & Glenn, 2004). Today, almost 75% of US colleges and universities offer some type of first-year seminar (Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Skipper, 2002), which may be subject- or skill-specific.

Freshman seminar courses are implemented at colleges and universities for various reasons but tend to serve the purpose of bolstering retention and persistence. The next section covers the most common theoretical frameworks upon which these courses are designed: psychological preparedness, increased support, and improved integration and transition.

Theoretical Frameworks for The Freshman Seminar Course

One of the primary reasons freshman seminars exist is to provide students with psychological preparedness for the longevity of their college careers. Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts (2006) agree that placing students into smaller learning communities and gradually exposing students to academic and social opportunities increases their confidence and willingness to persist. Students who do not participate in freshman seminar courses must navigate their first year seemingly alone and lose out on the chance to communicate directly with faculty members who have direct access to resources for success.

Psychological preparedness derives directly from support. Students enrolled in freshman seminars receive support from instructors and also from their peers, which oftentimes is more important and valuable. Research reveals that lack of “value congruence or social support” contributes to higher dropout rates among college freshmen and sophomores (Bean & Eaton, 2001–2002, p. 74; Spady, 1970). When students receive a combination of instruction and social support regarding their academic endeavors, they tend to seek guidance within the university setting, utilize available resources, and follow through with their education.

Successful integration and transition to college life is vital for some students. Making the transition from small or private high schools or home school environments to large public universities can be a shock for many students, especially when little effort was required to succeed and values remained relatively stable in previous academic settings. Oftentimes, students have a difficult time coping with the separation from family and friends or the newfound independence that college life can provide. In fact, “students leave college because they fail to separate from a previous socializing agent, fail to negotiate a transitional period, and fail to incorporate new values into their lives at a school” (Bean & Eaton, 2001–2002, p. 74). Simply, students cannot or fail to acknowledge the interpersonal growth required to succeed and persist in college.

Aside from their theory-driven frameworks, freshman seminar courses also consist of particular structures depending on the goal of the course. The following section discusses the typical structure of freshman seminars—credit hours, student enrollment, learning objectives, and models—and the value that the structure adds to student retention and persistence.

Typical Structural Framework for Freshman Seminar Course

The structure of freshman seminar courses varies among colleges and universities, but many characteristics are common. For instance, most freshman seminars last only one semester or quarter term (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006), allow no more than 25 students per class (Cox, Schmitt, & Graham, 2005), and award one-to-three semester credit hours that count toward students’ grade point averages or degree hours (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006). However, “[t]he element that is most common to first-year seminars is a regularly scheduled meeting time with a specific instructor for new students” (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006, p. 26), which

provides a sense of stability for students during a time of transition. On the other hand, variations among freshman seminars include “the frequency and duration of class meeting times; content, pedagogy, and structure; credit hours and grading; and whether the course is required or an elective” (p. 26). Moreover, courses can be structured within the university or within an academic or athletic department (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006). From an instructor’s perspective, however, variation comes from the number of courses taught and compensation (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006).

The most prevalent differences among these courses is the pedagogical model upon which they are based. Three models make up the majority of freshman seminar structures: learning strategies, academic socialization, and discipline-based models (Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Braunstein, Lesser, & Pescatrice, 2006). The learning strategies and academic socialization models typically are administered at the college- or university-level, whereas the discipline-based model is administered at the department or degree level and are less common for freshmen. Therefore, details about the learning strategies and academic socialization models only are discussed in the following sections.

Learning Strategies Model

The learning strategies model for the freshman seminar is based on academic learning approaches to success and consists of practice in active learning, note taking, time management, and the like. Since many freshman or transition seminars were established in direct response to helping underprepared students perform better in college, teaching strategies for test taking and reading were considered fundamental and transferable skills. As time passed, a select few social issues became part of the strategy curriculum and included topics such as financial responsibility, drug and alcohol safety, and interpersonal relationships (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). However, the

focus remains on active and engaged learning within the academic setting with the end goal of personal success and achievement.

Proponents of the learning strategies model argue that students should learn as early as possible “to become active agents in their academic integration and persistence” (Ryan & Glenn, 2004, p. 7). In other words, students must acknowledge their own learning styles and what strategies work best for them. In order to do so, students must be presented with options. Many students who sailed through high school may find that their previous approach to studying and test-taking is insufficient in college, or students who are returning to college after many years may have no strategy at all. Freshman seminars based on the learning strategies model introduce students to different but appropriate skills, but more importantly, they teach students that success may rely on the adaptability of strategies in different classes or subjects.

Academic Socialization Model

As an alternative model to learning strategies, the academic socialization model of the freshman seminar also incorporates learning strategies into its paradigm but emphasizes social integration. In some cases, this model is seen as “the extended orientation model” (Ryan & Glenn, 2004, p. 7) in that students are “integrated into the culture of the university” (p. 7). The academic transition into a college or university setting can be difficult for some students, and it can be made even more difficult by the inability to integrate socially. Hesitation to talk to instructors, utilize available resources, or participate in campus activities contributes to higher dropout rates among college freshman. Therefore, schools that utilize the academic socialization model acknowledge students’ needs for support inside and outside the classroom.

While many believe that learning should trump socialization—especially when the cost of higher education is skyrocketing, schools that acknowledge the importance of integrating

these two aspects of college life beginning at the freshman level tend to retain and graduate more students. As a result, many of the most successful freshman seminar courses offer a combination of insights to college success, meshing academic and student affairs. Students may excel in academic endeavors, so courses that stress classroom or study skills may accomplish little for these students. On the other hand, socially active students may have no trouble fitting into university life but may struggle to adapt to new academic expectations; however, courses that emphasize social engagement may do little to retain these students. Seminars that highlight equally academic affairs and student affairs have a better chance of increasing student retention and persistence because they promote work and life balance.

Case Study: IS 1100—Raider Ready

Texas Tech University, a large four-year university in West Texas, offers a one-semester credit hour interdisciplinary freshman seminar course during the fall and spring semesters. IS 1100, Raider Ready, is structured for new students of the university to acclimate them to college life and academics. Unlike many impersonal freshman courses that are large-lecture format and can seat as many as 400 students, Raider Ready is available in several small-capacity sections. This design allows students to have direct access to university faculty and staff and provides an environment where students in the same stage of learning can share academic and social experiences with one another. Instructors include faculty and staff from various academic backgrounds, from campus administrators to adjunct instructors.

At the beginning of each semester, students enrolled in Raider Ready are required to attend New Student Convocation, a social gathering for new students and faculty. Convocation is an opportunity to meet other new students, faculty and staff, and administrators from across

campus. During the event, students are exposed to music, activities, and traditions of the university, which enables students to grow comfortable with the social aspect of their new learning environment. Students especially receive a glimpse into what types of activities in which they can participate and discover the social opportunities in store for them throughout the academic year.

Raider Ready's typical format consists of a combination of online and classroom learning that encompasses writing, reading, critical thinking, and communication skills. Students meet in assigned classrooms during the first week of classes where they are introduced to the course, to their instructors, and to their classmates. Students also are advised of the mixed format where classroom meetings occur every other week. During class meetings, students discuss assigned readings or campus activities they attended. Specifically, topics such as academic integrity, professionalism, time management and study skills, academic advising, critical thinking, and cultural literacy are explored since these will prove fundamental for students as they persist through college.

During the weeks that classes do not meet, students must stay engaged via online discussions through Blackboard, the course's content management system. Instructors post questions about assigned readings to which students respond with original ideas and takeaways. Students also must respond thoughtfully to at least two of their classmates' postings, thereby dialoguing about relevant course topics and questions. Additionally, students are required to attend at least one campus engagement event during the weeks that classes do not meet in person. These events include a variety of activities: social gatherings, sporting events, academic fairs, local art exhibits, lecture series, and more. The purpose of having students attend these social events is to encourage them to engage with the campus community and their classmates

outside of the classroom setting. Social engagement is important for all first-year students, especially for those who live on campus, because it provides an opportunity for students to develop social skills and create lasting relationships with others.

One of the more important assignments students complete early in the semester is a MAP-Works assessment. MAP-Works is an online student retention platform that queries students about their activities, motivations, impressions, and plans and produces a report of factors that might impact student attrition. Results of the MAP-Works questionnaires are available immediately to students and instructors so that specific risk factors can be addressed, thereby aiding each student to be more successful in college. Ultimately, students use their MAP-Works reports to write a two- to three-page final paper titled “Make the First Year Count.” The essay requires students to reflect upon their academic preferences and interpersonal college experiences. Specifically, students respond to three overarching questions: 1) *How will you meet your own expectations as a student?* 2) *How can you be more successful in college?* and 3) *What campus resources might you use to improve your likelihood of success?* More importantly, however, students’ MAP-Works results provide instructors with an early alert about whether or not specific intervention is required. For instance, if students indicate that their study habits might not produce the academic goals they have set for themselves, instructors can use that information to teach students about different yet beneficial study habits that more accurately match their desired outcomes. Further, instructors might also be able to assist students who normally are hesitant to engage in social activities or even to speak to instructors about important course issues. Overall, MAP-Works is a constructive tool for students in that it provides them an opportunity to see firsthand how their goals compare to their strategies, but it provides much

more constructive insight for instructors who can intervene to help students revise their strategies to reach academic and social success.

Through Raider Ready, students also are introduced to group work, as a group project and end-of-semester presentation is assigned. Projects are intended to spark creative engagement about a relevant topic, and students are expected to produce a final product that represents particular concepts associated with the course. Students are not assigned to groups; rather, they are responsible for choosing their own groups, which provides an opportunity to discover how group communication and dynamics evolve over a semester. Students work on these projects outside of class, thus requiring them to organize the project and manage their time accordingly.

Ultimately, Raider Ready's goal is to expose students to fundamental skills for college success, including social and academic engagement. However, Raider Ready is part of a larger push for student retention and persistence across the university, and its aim thus far has been successful due entirely to its adoption of and alignment with current research on the collaboration between academic and student affairs. The exposure students receive to basic academic skills—such as study habits, college and personal finances, and culture and diversity—bolster an ideology that they can succeed in an atmosphere that often is daunting and intimidating; but the exposure they receive to social skills—becoming part of a community and tradition of something larger than they have ever been a part of—compliments the academic side of higher education, hence creating a desire to continue their education beyond their freshman year.

The freshman seminar course at Texas Tech University constantly is striving to incorporate strategies for student success, and the next phase of this endeavor is peer mentoring. Peer mentoring has the potential to facilitate more active engagement in the classroom and in

social events, simply because new freshmen are paired with other students who may share similar goals, experiences, and expectations. In the meantime, however, overlapping academic and social affairs for new students is proving effective for the university and ultimately for the students who attend and graduate. Other colleges and universities that currently offer a freshman seminar course or first-year program might consider revising their approach to encompass a blend of academic and social affairs that students deem important and necessary for survival in higher education, but as stated previously, the approach must be appropriate for the institution. Schools that implement the wrong type of freshman seminar or program for their students will fail to accomplish the goal of higher retention and persistence and, instead, will promote higher dropout rates among individuals who simply set out to receive higher education.

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