

Educating the “New Normal” in American Higher Education: A Three-Pronged Approach

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To paraphrase an old advertising adage, this is not your grandfather’s college/university. Over the past 50 years, US higher education has responded to--and been transformed by--numerous significant changes. Scientific discoveries and technological innovations (including advances in transportation and communication) have prompted the transformation of curricula, of the means by which education is delivered, and of the ways in which faculty and students interact and communicate. Geopolitical changes in the U.S. and globally have stretched the faculty member’s network of colleagues and collaborators so that it spans across the nation and the world; such changes have also expanded career opportunities for college graduates.

Most pertinent for this symposium, the population of students who attend U.S. colleges and universities has seen radical growth in numbers. As reflected in the U.S. Census figures:

- The U.S. population more than doubled in size from the period 1940 (population 132,164,569) to 2012 (population 317,600,000).
- The percentage of U.S. population aged 25 or older who had earned a baccalaureate degree (or higher) jumped from 4.6% in 1940 to 29.4% in 2008 - and the number of citizens who have attended and completed some college (including earning associates degrees) has grown even more.

Beyond these numbers, the composition of the U.S. student population has changed dramatically from the stereotypical undergraduate college student of the first half of the 20th century (age 18-22 year, Caucasian, of European background, Protestant, financially secure, single, predominantly male, residential student enrolled full-time) to a wondrous diversity in terms of age, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, socio-economic status, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, and commuter students who might be part-time or full-time and often juggle other responsibilities in regard to family and employment.

Over the past 39 years as a faculty member and academic administrator, I have witnessed first-hand the transformation of the US student population and have celebrated the diversity of the heterogeneous “salad bowl” that is today’s America. I am fortunate to have benefitted from a breadth of experiences at five quite different institutions (larger and smaller, public and private, church-affiliated and secular): University of South Carolina, Ohio State University, Fairfield University, Pace University, and now Farmingdale State College of the State University of New

York. At each institution I have observed and assessed a variety of efforts by faculty, staff, and administrators to serve and educate our new undergraduate student population. From those hands-on experiences and subsequent research, I have gleaned some bits of wisdom and I have identified some “effective practices” in three important arenas that I will elaborate upon in this paper.

To educate today’s “new” undergraduate student effectively, one needs to:

- Create a supportive institutional climate;
- Engage students in active, experiential learning; and
- Implement effective and ongoing faculty development programs.

At Farmingdale State College, SUNY (with the support of a Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant from the US Department of Education), we are currently undertaking a “full-court press” to implement and refine effective practices in each of the three arenas listed above.

Farmingdale State College (FSC) is located on Long Island, 25 miles east of New York City. The College was founded in 1912 as a public agricultural institute. Today, Farmingdale is four-year comprehensive college of applied arts and sciences, enrolling 7,700 undergraduate students in Schools of Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering, and Health Sciences. 93% of the students are commuters and 70% are enrolled full-time. The majority of students are employed while also attending college, 35% are first-generation college students (e.g., neither parent has earned a 4-year degree), and 30% are minority. The student population includes large numbers of “New Americans” (i.e., they or their parents were born outside of the US). There is notable religious diversity amongst the student population. Many students have considerable financial need (with 30% receiving Pell grants).

Distinctive characteristics and special needs of the “new normal” students who attend Farmingdale (and most American institutions) are:

- They are less engaged in student activities and college life in general. As revealed in the results of the 2009 National ACT Student Opinion Survey (SOS), FSC students spent only 0.4 hours per week engaged in college-sponsored activities such as athletics, intramurals, social activities, clubs, and student government.
- They have multiple distractions and worries (finances, family, job).
- Given greater worries and less advice from parents who have not themselves attended college, first-generation college student experience significantly lower graduation rates (Chen, 2005).
- Additionally, first-generation minority students typically experience a heightened sense of isolation and alienation (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).
- New Americans are often subject to parental pressure. Parents want their children to achieve the American dream of a good life, but may not have a realistic picture of the career options available in the U.S. As a consequence, parents encourage students to make a premature commitment to easily-recognized majors and professions (MD, MBA, lawyer, engineer), only to discover later that their student fails due to a lack of aptitude, appropriate academic preparation, and/or genuine interest in the field.

- All of our students (and their parents) have little comprehension or appreciation for the ideals of a transformative “liberal arts” education. Instead, they are narrowly focused on vocation--getting a good job.

There is no simple or single remedy that will assure that our “new normal” students succeed academically and graduate from college. Instead, there are a host of actions and programs that, when perfected and sustained, can contribute to the success of our students. What follow are a few promising practices in each arena that we have undertaken at Farmingdale.

Creating a Supportive Institutional Climate

For many years, studies on retention and academic success by recognized authorities such as Vincent Tinto, John Gardner, and Terry O’Banion have informed educators that students are more likely to succeed (1) if they make personal connections at college with other students, with faculty, with student activities personnel, with mentors... with someone; (2) if they receive on-going advisement; (3) if they are engaged in college-organized activities outside of the classroom setting, and (4) if they have ready access to support services (e.g., tutoring, career guidance, counseling). In fashioning a supportive, learner-centered institutional climate at Farmingdale, one focus has been academic advisement.

Faculty generally clamor to serve as the academic advisors of their majors. As a long-time faculty member, I endorse the proposition that faculty have a responsibility to guide and mentor their majors. Too often, however, such faculty “advisement” typically translates into a short appointment each semester in which student and faculty review curriculum check lists and select courses for the next semester.

At Farmingdale we are striving to create a system of academic advisement that might be called holistic or developmental. Terry O’Banion (1972) argues that academic advisement consists of much more than the student’s selection of courses for the next semester. He identifies four dimensions of developmental advising:

- Exploration of life goals (e.g., knowledge of self and ethical values, appreciation of difference, skills in human interaction, belief that all have potential);
- Exploration of vocational goals (e.g., knowledge of vocational fields, exploration of job opportunities, understanding the changing nature of work in the 21st century);
- Academic program and major choice (e.g., knowledge of available options, requirements, feedback from alumni about career preparation); and
- Course selection for the next semester (followed by actual registration)

I like to add an extra fifth dimension of advisement to O’Banion’s list: Designing a four-year plan, which normally includes: selecting complementary minor and elective courses; identifying opportunities for internship, study abroad, and research with a faculty mentor; joining student clubs and activities; and preparing for graduate school or a career.

While faculty engagement with students is essential – especially in the students’ junior and senior years, colleges should concentrate on creating additional vehicles for more holistic

advisement that focus, in particular, on new first-year and second-year students. Proven means of advisement include (1) 2-4 week summer bridge or residential programs for new students, (2) first-year experience courses, and (3) creation of an academic advisement center. At Farmingdale, last year we established a new “Academic Advisement and Information Center” (AAIC) where academic counselors are available to meet, guide, and help students all day long (and into the evening), five days a week, year-round. Already, holistic advisement appointments by first-year and new transfer students have more than doubled in just 12 months. The reader is invited to examine the AAIC website (www.farmingdale.edu/aaic) where one finds details on the AAIC personnel, services, functions, and extensive links to resources at FSC and elsewhere for students.

Engage Students in Active, Experiential Learning

As faculty and academic administrators, we tend to enshrine the faculty-student relationship as the vital core of the student’s college experience. Yet, the reality--for most students--is quite different. The National ACT Student Opinion Survey administered to Farmingdale students in 2009 revealed that they “rarely or never” had “discussions, meetings or conversations with instructors outside of class.” In addition, they did not report a “mentoring relationship” with a faculty or staff member. Clearly, colleges must find more ways to engage students in the institution and in learning--and to fashion more complete learning relationships between faculty and students.

At Farmingdale, we are working diligently to engage students with their faculty through the shift from the traditional lecture experience to various proven forms of active, experiential learning. Such active pedagogies include: (1) learning communities; (2) role playing and simulations; (3) group work on problems and research; (4) use of social media; (5) faculty-student research outside of the classroom; (6) service learning; (7) internships; (8) study abroad; and (9) shorter faculty-led trips (domestic or abroad).

Learning Communities have proven to be particularly effective in engaging new students in college. [See The National Learning Community Project: www.learningcommons.edu] At FSC, the Learning Communities that we began to create in 2011 involve two faculty from different disciplines creating a community in which a cohort of approximately 20 first-year students enrolls in a pair of courses. There is an integrating theme (e.g., family, the environment, crime). More importantly, two faculty members carefully and purposefully shift their roles from delivering content to designing a supportive learning environment and active, hands-on learning experiences (including field trips). The result is that the student’s role shifts from passive to active. The changed classroom dynamic yields connections, community, bonding, conversations, team-work, friendships amongst students, and true interaction between student and faculty mentor. We expect that such engagement will yield improvements in learning, student retention, and graduation rates.

Implement Effective and Ongoing Faculty Development Programs

If the student population has changed markedly in the US over the past 50 years, the typical graduate education and training of faculty has not. Simply put, there is a great disconnect between our training and job descriptions (which typically speak of scholarly expertise and research). Ongoing faculty development is essential if colleges and universities are to meet the challenges and needs of the new types of students who attend our institutions and to equip teachers as active learning specialists, mentors, and advisors.

There are numerous in-house and external vehicles for successful faculty development – including, of course, the Faculty Resource Network. Whatever vehicles an institution adopts, to get buy-in and participation by faculty, the president and provost of each institution must make faculty development a priority and they must provide funding for this essential activity.

At Farmingdale, we have stumbled upon what has become a very effective faculty development practice that other institutions might want to copy. One might call this “faculty development by slight of hand.” Here’s what has evolved: We wanted to create a robust and intense two-day summer orientation program for new first-year students. The goals for the summer program included, not only orienting students to college, but helping them to overcome their anxieties and build those connections and friendships that are so vital to student retention and student success. We decided that faculty involvement in the programs was essential, for certainly we wanted our new student to feel comfortable with faculty and to begin to make connections with them. During each of the past two years, we have recruited approximately ten faculty members (and given them modest stipends) to serve as Academic Orientation Leaders (AOLs). These AOLs work with the student affairs staff in the spring to design and plan the two-day programs. Then, when the summer arrives, the AOLs (partnered with upper-class student orientation leaders) actually guide the groups of new students through two days of activities and programs. The faculty design and lead the campus tour, they take students into computer classrooms and teach them how to navigate the college website by means of a clever scavenger hunt (sample website challenges: What is the academic calendar and when is spring break? Where do you find your financial aid report on line? How do you find and register for classes on-line?). The faculty AOLs also usher their students to information sessions on study abroad opportunities, student clubs and activities, the writing center and other support services. And finally, the AOLs conduct ice breakers, eat lunch with students, and engage in informal conversations. The AOLs get to know the students in their groups. But something else happens as well: The faculty AOLs learn a great deal about their own institution. For example, the AOL comes to know where the student health center is, what research the engineering students typically do, how students find their books on-line, what study abroad options are available, how a student finds an internship, where the financial aid office is (and the name of the director), what clubs and honor societies are available to students. In short, by planning and leading summer orientation, the faculty AOLs become much better faculty advisors to our students. Our orientation program, which aimed at engaging new students, has also developed our faculty AOLs into effective (i.e., holistic) faculty advisors and mentors to our new (i.e., normal) students.

References

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