

# Encouraging College Student Success: The Instructional Challenges, Response Strategies, and Study Skills of Contemporary Undergraduates

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College students increasingly bring complex issues to campus and choose to manage their academic careers and personal lives in a variety of ways. Yet, these strategies for dealing with personal and academic challenges are the fundamental issues that colleges and universities need to explore in order to help their students succeed. This study examined the study skills college students use, the challenges they face, and how they see themselves responding or coping with these challenges. Results offer the not surprising finding that in academic areas students generally behave individually, choosing to invest their time at home and not on campus or in organized group study or tutoring environments.

Enrollment in higher education is projected to increase from approximately 15 million students in 2001 to nearly 18 million by 2012 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2002). These students are predominantly enrolled in undergraduate programs, where projections during the next decade forecast an enrollment of 15 million undergraduate students alone by 2010. These students bring an increasingly diverse set of experiences and expectations to campus, in addition to representing a much broader spectrum of diversity (Howe & Strauss, 2000). One simple indicator of these changing expectations is the increase in the number of colleges applied to by first-time freshman, with over 20% applying to five or more

different colleges. Institutions are responding with increasingly sophisticated and savvy marketing strategies that highlight a lifestyle as well academic major choice.

Institutions are responding in numerous ways to changes in student perceptions about their college experience, especially stressing the mechanisms and tools necessary to increase timely matriculation and retention. Borland (forthcoming) in particular defined the entire enrollment management movement as a reflection of the desire for colleges and universities to be more accountable to their student populations. Institutions respond to student needs by engaging in critical planning that addresses the behaviors of students, including variables such as how students study, defining computer needs, and among others, offering counseling services.

The current study was designed to examine how current undergraduate students view their own study skills, what challenges they face, and how they respond to these challenges. The purpose for conducting the current study is to profile current undergraduate student academic behaviors in the hope of developing a baseline for future predictions of barriers to academic success and enabling strategies for success. By identifying such a baseline, institutions, at

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varying levels of administration, will be able to look carefully at ways to help students succeed by designing unique programs, facilitating the interchange between and among students and faculty, and by providing the infrastructure necessary to breed academic success.

### College Student Success

There are a wide variety of issues surrounding college student success, as profiled by many authors and catalogued by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). Central to these findings are such concepts as student integration to campus and personal directedness toward specific outcomes or ends. Despite the identification of particular themes relating to college student success, variables such as gender, multi-ethnicity, and at-risk variables such as social economic status and emotional maturity can all play major roles in student retention and academic success (for example, see McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). The majority of these research studies do not offer specific solution sets to institutions on how to create a campus environment that better fosters student success.

A number of best-practice recommendations and research-based findings surrounding student success in college are related to personal attributes. These personal attributes can range from technology aptitude (Twale & Schaller, 2003) to communication or writing apprehension levels (Miller & Edmunds, 1995) or experiences and attitudes toward education (Spitzer, 2000) developed as an adolescent (Galotti & Kozberg, 1996). Generally, conventional wisdom contends that better academic preparation at the secondary school level results in a stronger likelihood of academic success (for example, Tracey & Sedlacek, 1988). The difficulty many professionals working in student affairs or specifically student success areas find is that those who come to college without the raw skills necessary for academic success never have the opportu-

nity to broadly develop and refine those skills. A self-fulfilling prophecy subsequently develops, where those who are under-prepared for college are the students who find themselves in jeopardy of non-matriculation.

The development of academic support systems has been a commonly utilized mechanism for supporting undergraduate students. Pope (1996), for example, profiled nearly 50 support services colleges and universities offer to help student athletes succeed. These same support services are often provided to traditional college students, but they are not targeted to the general population of college students. Borland (forthcoming) particularly noted that these services, such as test-taking or note-taking improvement services, study skills enhancement tutoring, and counseling and advising services all play a major role in student retention, and therefore are a major component in contemporary enrollment management programs.

An additional area that has been targeted as vital to student success is the social integration to the campus community (Belch, Gebel, & Maas, 2001). How a student is integrated into a campus community has the ability to either support a student who struggles to achieve academically, or conversely, can shut a student out of a community when support is needed (Manns, 2002). The physical and social environment can serve as a catalyst for achievement, and can also be detrimental if a student is struggling. A relatively new area to be studied is the type of technological support available on a campus, and in some instances, an overly technology-focused campus can serve to be detrimental to developing the social structures necessary for continued success (Twale & Schaller, 2003; Hidalgo & Miller, 2000).

College leaders must look not only at the attributes, integration, and systems that they put in place to help students succeed, but must also closely examine future trends among the emerging ranks of college stu-



dents. These trends can be discussed at the macro level, including the simple increasing volume of students to the increasingly racially diverse and technologically savvy college student (Zis, 2002). Zis also argued that the future generation of college students will be more team focused, more pressured and achievement oriented, and increasingly interested in personal safety, especially following the events of September 11, 2001. She concluded her comments with a call for student affairs professionals to closely examine emerging college student trends and to be active in developing a new set of solutions to problems or issues that can be projected today for the future.

#### Research Methods

The current study was conducted using a convenience sample of college students enrolled in undergraduate courses at a major, urban research university in the western United States. The data collection made use of Pope's (Pope & Miller, 2003) survey originally designed for use with community college students, and as adapted, was assumed to be reliable and valid for use with college students enrolled in four-year rather than two-year college settings. The instrument consisted of five sections: an introductory section on demographic information, a section of 13 questions related to study skills, a section of 14 statements on the challenges of being a college student, and a section of 13 statements about how the respondent copes with the challenges.

Data were collected in the Spring 2003 semester using college students enrolled in undergraduate courses in education. Participants completed the survey voluntarily with the assurance that their anonymity would be protected and that only group data would be reported.

#### Findings

##### *Demographic Profile*

Eighty-eight subjects, 70 females and

18 males, participated in this study. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the students, 72 (82%) were from three ethnic groups: largest was 49 (55.7%) White non-Hispanic, 12 (13.6%) were Hispanic students, and 11 (12.5%) were students of Asian/Pacific Islander ethnicity. Students also represented three other ethnic groups: 8 from multi-ethnic backgrounds, 5 Black non-Hispanic students, and one student was a Native American.

Almost three-quarters (74%) of the students were over the age of 25. The largest group consisted of 40 students ranging in age between 26 and 40 years old. This is followed by 23 students with an age range of 41 to 60 years old. The remaining quarter of the respondents (26%) were 25 years old or younger.

Table 1 also provides a summary of the information regarding the students' self-reported grade and employment. The majority of the students (92%) reported an average overall grade within the range of 3.00 to 4.00 on a 4.0 ("A") grading scale. Regarding employment, 81 (92%) reported that they worked outside of the home at the time of the survey.

##### *Study Skills*

Fourteen questions were used to explore students' opinions about study skills. Each student was instructed to answer each question by using a 6-point Likert-type rating scale in which a score of "1" indicates "never," and a score of "6" indicates "always." Table 2 provides a summary of these 14 survey questions in mean, standard deviation, and range. Students were found to study primarily at home (mean score of 5.19) and study alone (mean of 5.09). Students sometimes work on a group project in or out-of-class (mean of 3.82), and once in a while, these students use study resources on a computer (mean of 2.82), visit college library (2.58), study in a small group (2.45), meet instructor out of class (2.43), and miss

Table 1  
Respondent Demographic Profile

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	70	79%
Male	18	20
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian/Pacific Islander	11	12
Native American	1	1
Hispanic	12	14
Multi-Ethnic	8	9
Black, Non-Hispanic	5	6
White, Non-Hispanic	49	55
<b>Age at last birthday</b>		
18-19	0	0
20-21	5	6
22-25	18	20
26-40	40	45
41-60	23	26
61 or older	2	2
<b>Self-report overall grade point average (or equivalent on a 4.0 grading scale)</b>		
0.00-0.99	0	0
1.00-1.99	0	0
2.00-2.99	7	8
3.00-3.99	81	92
<b>Employment outside of the home</b>		
Yes	81	92
No	7	8

a class due to work (2.23). These students seldom complete a course by independent study (1.96), study at the college (1.93), use study assistance away from the college (1.90), make use of a college skill center (1.32), use of a peer tutor (1.28), and use of other tutors (1.17).

#### *College Student Challenges*

Fourteen statements were used to investigate each student's opinions about the challenges of being a college student. Each

student was instructed to rate each statement by using a 6-point rating scale in which a score of "1" indicates "minimal challenge," and a score of "6" indicates "major challenge." Table 3 shows the response summary of these 14 statements in mean, standard deviation, and range. The three major challenges for students in this study were balancing academic and personal life (mean of 4.32), paying for college (4.01), and academic success (3.30). Five statements received a mean challenge score between 2.0

Table 2  
College Student Study Skills

Study Skill	Mean	SD	Range
Study at home	5.19	.91	2-6
Study alone	5.09	1.05	1-6
Worked on a group project in or out-of-class	3.82	1.35	1-6
Use study resources on a computer (software or hardware)	2.82	1.77	1-6
Visit your college library	2.58	1.43	1-6
Study in a small group	2.45	1.14	1-5
Meet your instructor(s) out of class	2.43	1.03	1-6
Missed a class due to work	2.23	1.35	1-6
Completed a course by independent study	1.96	1.25	1-6
Study at the college	1.93	1.10	1-6
Use study assistance away from the college	1.90	1.53	1-6
Make use of a college skill center (such as a writing or testing center)	1.32	.69	1-5
Make use of a peer tutor	1.28	.79	1-5
Make use of other tutors	1.17	.46	1-4

to 3.0. They are statements regarding thinking about the future, making lifestyle choices, finding personal direction, finding career direction, and making choices about health issues. Six statements received a mean challenge score below 2.0, suggesting minimal challenges: finding spiritual direction, finding support for attending college from family, making choices about campus involvement, finding support for attending college from friends, being accepted on campus, and finding transportation to campus.

### *Coping with Challenges*

Thirteen questions were used to study subjects' opinions about how they cope with the challenges. Each participant was instructed to rate each statement by using the same a 6-point rating scale with a score of "1" indicating "never" and a score of "6" indicating "always." Table 3 provides a summary the responses of these 13 survey questions in mean, standard deviation, and range. The four most popular methods that the subjects used to cope with their chal-

lenges are participate in physical exercise (4.07), consult with a family member (3.78), participate in prayer or meditation (3.61), and consult with a current college instructor (3.02). Students in the study rated four statements with a mean score between 2.0 to 3.0. They are statements about use of college academic advising, use of college financial aid services, consult with a former instructor, and decrease credit hour course load. Students rated five statements with a mean score below 2.0. They include statements regarding consulting with friends from high school, consulting with high school teachers or administrators, taking a semester off, using college counseling services, and using library resources for resolving personal issues.

### Discussion

A combination of the data and the background literature illustrate the complexity surrounding service to college students. From one perspective, college students are more group centered and willing to work collaboratively, indeed, embracing the ideas



Table 3  
*College Student Challenges and Response Strategies*

Challenge/Response	Mean	SD	Range
To what extent is this a personal challenge for you?			
Balancing academic and personal life	4.32	1.33	1-6
Paying for college	4.01	1.67	1-5
Academic success	3.30	1.55	1-6
Thinking about the future	2.73	1.33	1-6
Making lifestyle choices	2.45	1.28	1-6
Finding personal direction	2.43	1.38	1-6
Finding career direction	2.39	1.33	2-6
Making choices about health issues	2.14	1.33	1-6
Finding spiritual direction	1.97	1.28	1-4
Finding support for attending college from family	1.97	1.51	1-5
Making choices about campus involvement	1.86	1.38	1-6
Finding support for attending college from friends	1.69	1.08	1-5
Being accepted on campus	1.41	.88	1-6
Finding transportation to campus	1.41	1.10	1-6
To cope with these challenges how often do you...			
Participate in physical exercise	4.07	1.51	1-6
Consult with a family member	3.78	1.68	1-6
Participate in prayer or meditation	3.61	1.91	1-6
Consult with a current college instructor	3.02	1.02	1-6
Use college academic advising	2.61	1.38	1-6
Use college financial aid services	2.57	1.88	1-6
Consult with a former instructor	2.14	1.29	1-6
Decrease credit hour courseload	2.13	1.38	1-6
Consult with friends from high school	1.95	1.37	1-6
Consult with high school teachers or administrators	1.72	1.38	1-6
Take a semester off	1.71	1.21	1-5
Use college counseling services	1.69	1.11	1-6
Use library resources for resolving personal issues	1.54	1.02	1-6

of collaboration in service learning, for example. Yet, college students at the case study institution still made the decision to leave campus and study alone. This could be simply the illustration of one case institution, or it could be a larger reflection that the historical one-size-fits-all mentality about serving college students is no longer applicable.

Although students worked on group projects outside of class, they seldom visited

the library or made use of college skill centers. There is an increasing attention to academic support activities such as skill centers (writing center, note taking center, etc.), yet the reported lack of interest in using the campus library is particularly interesting. What is the future role of the university library? How does the increase in internet and technology use, for example, impact the reliance of a campus on library resources and space? Certainly, the historical role of

the library has and continues to change as the intellectual focus of the campus community shifts. But, the symbolic turning away from the library to other resources may also signal a changing conception of a knowledgeable or educated person. The temporary, fast-paced changing resources available on the internet certainly require less commitment on the part of the modern university, but those committed to academic excellence and growth must also question and contend with how these symbolic changes are internalized among contemporary students.

Current students also reported some concern about balancing personal and professional lives and the continuous question of how to pay for college. The finding life balance suggests that college is less of an immersion type experience, a finding that would be consistent with the older student population surveyed in this study. Despite the age and perhaps broad expectations of the college experience, this lack of immersion does suggest that those of different ages and life stages approach the notion of 'going to college' radically differently. As such, the ability to build programs that support students generally is difficult, at best.

These findings broadly reflect a population of students who do differ from previous generations, yet they still seem to have some of the same concerns and approaches to problem solving that previous generations have had. College administrators, though, must use this opportunity to embrace their campus communities in meaningful and significant dialogue not only about how to serve these students well, but in defining what the purpose of higher education is and how that purpose is conveyed and lived among undergraduates today.

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