

One Hundred-Eighty Degrees in the Opposite Direction: Turning Students' Lives Around and Increasing Retention

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To help students learn or improve their academic careers, Georgia Perimeter College offers a HEDS (Higher Education Seminar) course. Dr. Cary Christian, who has taught this course and others similar to it for the past seven years, recently decided to look up her students' GPAs. What she found was disturbing, for most of her students had low grade point averages. This discovery spurred her to investigate the number of students at the college who were in academic difficulty. On the Dunwoody campus of GPC, she found approximately a thousand students on warning, probation, or exclusion each year.

With this figure in mind, Dr. Christian realized that many of these students are not incapable of doing the work; they simply lack the skills and motivation to succeed in college. Knowing that these students' lives could be turned around so that they are better equipped to complete college and knowing that retention would increase as a result, Dr. Christian submitted a proposal for a HEDS-TA (Turn Around) course, which would focus on study skills, motivation, and locus of control. She suggested that students who completed the class with an A or B could remain at the college as long as they maintained a C average. After the administration approved the proposal, the next step was to select the students to take the course.

All "at risk" students on campus received a letter inviting them to participate in the program. If they were interested, they were asked to submit a written application, state on the application what they thought caused their academic difficulties and what they were doing to overcome these difficulties, and find a faculty/staff member who was willing to serve as their mentor during the semester. Based on these requirements, Dr. Christian accepted eleven students into the summer class and twelve for the spring course. (She limits the number of students to ten to fifteen). With the acceptance of the students into the program, the course was ready to begin in the summer of 1998.

The classroom part of HEDS-TA was devoted to teaching study skills and college survival. The specific study/survival skills included but were not limited to goal setting, time management, note taking, reading textbooks, memory techniques, test-taking approaches, dealing with test anxiety, using the library/labs, and wellness. For the textbook, we used John Gardner and A. Jerome Jewler's *Your College Experience*.¹

The students, on the first day, received a detailed syllabus of all assignments and test dates. The assignments included reading and outlining each chapter, journeying, and writing papers. The focus of each chapter was a component that the students needed to master in order to succeed in college. As the term passed, we discovered that the students did not know how best to read a textbook, take notes, or study. By emphasizing these areas, the students left the class better equipped to do well in their classes. However, the main area where the students needed help was motivation. They were all looking for motivation outside of themselves; they couldn't do their work because the teacher didn't like them, didn't explain the material well, or they were not interested in the course. As the class discussed internal and external locus of control, the students began to realize that they were in charge of their own academic careers. They could decide for themselves how well or how poorly they did in their classes. Then, after talking to family members, friends, bosses, and so on, the students learned that motivation had to come from within; if they wanted something badly enough they could force themselves to take the necessary steps (reading assignments, studying, getting tutored) to achieve success in their courses. From this point on in the class, the majority of the students took control of their academic careers, began to do their work, and saw immediate improvement in their attitudes and approach to college.

The course also alerted students to important campus services, in particular, disability assessment and career development. If a student thought that he or she might have a learning disability, he or she then knew whom to talk to and the assistance available. The same was true of career counseling. If a student were unsure of a major or interested in transferring, he or she learned of the services on campus that could provide answers.

As part of the class, students met at least once a week in focus groups conducted by a counselor or someone with group counseling experience. The topics of these focus groups paralleled the class discussions. These meetings helped students to determine the reasons for their underachievement, set realistic goals for the semester and beyond, deal successfully with failure and other setbacks in college, and build self-esteem. In short, the focus group sessions provided students with an opportunity to examine themselves and their academic

careers, as well as address their problems with and their concerns about college. Also, successful students spoke to the HEDS-TA class about the obstacles they had overcome and the steps they had taken to achieve success.

Evaluation of the program is based on two outcomes. One is to see if students meet the goals they set for the semester. The other focuses on whether or not the students pass the course and enroll for the next term. Students, mentors, the counselor, and the instructor each write appraisals of the class, which provide valuable insight into the success or needed changes.

The HEDS-TA course has been offered for two terms thus far, and the results have been encouraging.

Out of the eleven students who completed the first term course, eight are still in school and are maintaining a C average or above. All twelve of the second term students passed the class with an A or B and can now continue with their academic careers.

Even though the course has only run two terms, we are excited and encouraged by the results. The "at risk" students often have the abilities to succeed in college; they simply lack the skills or motivation. The HEDS-TA course can provide them with both while raising the college's retention rates. It's a win-win situation for all that are involved.

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