

National On-Campus Report

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How to Learn What Students Really Think: Four Presidents' Strategies

In the new book *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, an anthropology professor in her 50s describes her experience living undercover as a nontraditional first-year student in one of her institution's residence halls.

She undertook the two-semester project to learn firsthand what students really think. But high-level administrators usually don't have that kind of time. So how do they stay tapped in to what students are thinking?

Four college presidents recently described to *National On-Campus Report* their strategies for getting candid comments about their institutions.

Doing lunch

One strategy is simply to be where the students are. Mark Collier, who is completing his sixth year as president of Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, tries to have lunch once a week in the residence halls' dining facilities. When he sees a student he hasn't met yet, he asks to sit down.

"Whenever I've got a free lunch hour, I go to the dining room and just grab a tray," Collier said. "I'll often start out the conversation with a question. One that I ask fairly often is, 'What do we need to do to make this a better place for students?'"

The discussions often prompt suggestions he wouldn't hear otherwise, he said. "I'll pass those on to the appropriate people—usually it's the student affairs staff—but without any prejudgment. I don't say, 'Go do this,' but I ask, 'Is there anything we need to know or do about this?'"

The conversations often help students process their educational experiences. Last semester, three students who had just studied abroad described to Collier what the experience was like.

"And then I asked, 'What do you think your fellow students need to know

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Students Still Bear Most of the Blame for Attrition

Despite all higher education has learned in the last 25 years about helping students stay in college, institutions still tend to blame students, not institutional factors, for dropping out, says a new national study by ACT, Inc.

Since the late 1980s, colleges and universities have made great strides in helping students reach graduation or program completion, the study says. However, the study also finds that institutions still have a way to go in making larger-scale, institution-wide changes that will improve student persistence, says Wesley R. Habley, co-author with Randy McClanahan of three reports based on

the study's findings.

The reports highlight which student success practices are in use at more than 1,000 two-year public, four-year public, and four-year private institutions. (Two-year private institutions were not included due to small sample size.) The reports also examines institutional beliefs about why students drop out.

The survey listed 44 reasons why students might leave college and asked respondents to rate how much of role each factor plays in students' decision to leave. (Respondents rated the items on a

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about the rest of the world?” Collier said. “That was a really lively discussion—they were abroad at the time of the U.S. presidential campaigns and election. They talked about how they were surprised by the way the rest of the world views our country.”

“It’s almost a selfish motive in the sense that [the conversations with students] remind me why I’m here and why I’m doing what I’m doing,” Collier said. “Being president—if you’re not real careful, you can get isolated from students and lose perspective. There’s always more paperwork to do, more phone calls to return. There’s always another meeting you can go to and always another alumni trip or fundraising visit you can make.”

Helping on move-in day

Ron Machtley, president of Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island, uses a John Deere tractor to help students and parents on move-in day. Doing so not only shows concern for parents and students, he said. It helps him reconnect with what it’s like to come to college for the first time.

“One of the things I’ve observed is that there’s a natural tension and anxiety for parents who are leaving their sons and daughters,” Machtley said. “The students are trying to act sophisticated, and yet they’re anxious, too. And I’ve watched for years that one of the most stressful moments was typically the father trying to take a computer out of a box and assemble this computer according to instructions.

“So five years ago, I said, ‘You know, I’ve watched people bringing in computers. They don’t know if it works. They don’t know if they have the right software. I bet the students and parents would appreciate it if we took that one element of stress out of their lives.’”

So the campus now distributes laptops, paid for by tuition, to new students on their second day of orientation.

Even though Bryant students no longer need to bring computers to campus, Machtley has noticed that they still arrive on campus fully equipped with stereo systems, MP3 players, and large televisions.

“They’re now able to create this incredible environment in their rooms, so some of them need a little push to get out and interact,” he said. “It’s helped make me aware that, while the technology can help students, it can interfere with their socialization on campus, too.”

Unlike earlier student generations, this generation is hungry for older adults’ guidance, Machtley said. “Students have had a lot of interaction with their parents. And they need to know that there are still adults out there who are very interested in their lives. If the president doesn’t show that, then it’s hard to imagine that the faculty and staff will.”

The effort is worth it, he said. “When you get around them, you see their attitudes. They’re nice. This is a nice generation.”

Bringing the students to you

Barbara Sirvis, president of Southern Vermont College, attracts students to her office with her dog Baileigh, a soft-coated wheaten terrier.

Sirvis’s office door opens into the hallway, with no administrative assistant acting as gatekeeper, so students often drop by to see if Baileigh is in.

“There are students who come by who like dogs, and I get to know them because they like to see Baileigh. And sometimes, they’ll sit in the doorway of the office, scratch Baileigh, and tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s one of the things that makes the president a little more human and therefore not so distant,” Sirvis said. “It’s

not always the person” who intimidates students, she said, “but the title.”

Baileigh helps Sirvis hear from reticent students who are unlikely to speak candidly with administrators.

“We all look for ways to connect with students,” she said. “This is an extra, added way to get students to talk to you, especially the shy ones.”

But none of this was planned, Sirvis said. She began bringing Baileigh to campus when she first came to SVC about nine years ago. She was living in a small apartment while she waited to move into her new home, and she didn’t want to leave the dog cooped up in a

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Campuses Both Help and Hinder Stalking Crimes

There is bad news and good news about stalking on college campuses, experts say. The services campuses provide, whether for a residential or commuter population, make committing the crime easier. But when staff members are trained appropriately, they can provide more help to student stalking victims than is often available to non-students.

Just the nature of the campus, especially a traditional residential campus, makes stalking easier—although not necessarily more common—than in another setting, said Tracy Bahm of the Stalking Resource Center (SRC) at the National Center for Victims of Crime.

At a traditional residential campus, a large number of young people live, study, work, and socialize in a relatively small geographic area. “If you were trying to follow somebody or intercept somebody, it wouldn’t be that hard to figure out their schedule,” Bahm said.

Cheryl Darisse, founder of the Boston-area stalking victim’s advocacy organization Feel Safe Again Inc., agrees. Even at a commuter campus, spending a lot of time in one physical area “makes it difficult for the victim to distinguish between coincidence and purposeful pursuit.”

In addition, sometimes it’s easy to mistake the initial stages of stalking for “normal dating practices,” Darisse said. “It’s probably happened to everyone one time or another. You’ve received attention that was flattering at first”—like getting flowers from a secret admirer—“but then it becomes too much and gets uncomfortable.”

A campus’s social life makes stalking easier, too, Darisse said. “Large peer groups offer the stalker the opportunity to find out personal information in a seemingly harmless manner: ‘Oh, do you know that person? Oh, really? Where do they live?’ That kind of thing. And people usually don’t think anything of mentioning which residence hall the person lives in.”

But socializing doesn’t create all of the risk: particular campus policies and procedures do, too, Bahm and Darisse say.

“Campuses offer so many services that a stalker can observe the victim participating in many different activities and learn the victim’s habits,” Darisse said. As a result, residential campuses offer “unlimited opportunities for a stalker to gather information about and to contact and harass the victim.”

By providing student directories, using Social Security numbers as student identification numbers, and offering faculty and staff other administrative conveniences, campuses are also giving a hand to stalkers, Bahm said. “We’ve even found some residence halls where phone numbers correspond to room numbers, so if you know the phone number, you know the room, and vice versa.”

However, these threats aren’t limited to residential campuses only. A stalker might choose a victim that simply shares a class with him or her, Darisse said. “The semester is long enough for a stalker to develop an obsession with a classmate,” she added.

The wired nature of both residential and commuter campuses make it easy for stalkers to access personal information about victims, including addresses, course schedules, and financial data, Bahm said. Online stalking—which includes e-mail harassment, assuming a victim’s identity online, and posting personal, damaging, or false information about the victim to the Internet—is increasing both on an off campus.

Not all students are careful about what they reveal about themselves online, Darisse said. Many post their phone numbers, IM names, street addresses, daily schedules, and other bits of personal data on Facebook.com or other social networking websites popular among young adults. “They do it without thinking,” Darisse said. “It’s not like they’re asking someone to follow them around, but they’re giving them the opportunity.”

Stalking on Campus

According to *Sexual Victimization of College Women*, a 2000 U.S. Department of Justice report (available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov), 80 percent of campus stalking victims knew their stalkers. About 43 percent were current or former boyfriends, 25 percent were classmates, 6 percent were friends, and 6 percent were coworkers.

Victims reported stalking incidents to police only about 17 percent of the time. Only slightly more than 3 percent filed grievances with the campus or initiated disciplinary actions. In contrast, victims told a friend, family member, or roommate about the stalking incidents about 90 percent of the time.

Male students can be stalking victims, too. A 2000 study of 750 Rutgers University and University of Pennsylvania students found that 42 percent of the students who had experiences meeting the definition of stalking were men. ■

Other technologies can present problems, too, SRC’s Bahm said. “We don’t really have any hard data on it, but I can tell you from just talking to people in the field that we are hearing a lot more about people using global positioning systems, hidden cameras—all kinds of technology—to assist them in their stalking.”

The good news is that even though campuses sometimes make stalking easier, they also help victims resolve the problem or at least take steps to protect their safety.

“We feel that there are a lot of great resources that the public doesn’t have as

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scale of 1-5, 1 being “not a factor” and 5 being a “major factor.”)

Respondents said that of the 24 institutional factors the survey listed, only two—amount of financial aid and student-institution fit—make a moderate or high contribution to attrition.

However, the respondents said that of 20 student factors listed, 13 make moderate or high contributions to student attrition. The student factor receiving the highest rating was “lack of motivation to succeed.”

“Students do have a part to play here, but this particular survey underscores that fact that institutions are far more likely to cite student characteristics [as a reason for student departure] than they are to do any introspective look at the institutional characteristics,” Habley said.

‘What’s Working’ Recommendations

ACT’s report series “What Works in Student Retention?” makes the following general recommendations:

- Designate one visible person on campus to coordinate a campus-wide retention planning team.
- Don’t concentrate on first-to-second-year persistence only.
- Conduct a study of your students’ characteristics.
- Focus retention efforts on where student characteristics and institutional characteristics meet.
- Establish realistic short- and long-term persistence and completion goals.
- After implementing a strategy, measure its outcomes and improve it.

Recommendations specifically for two-year public, four-year public, and four-year private institutions are also available at www.act.org/path/policy/reports/retain.html. ■

“And even the institutional characteristics [that the survey respondents named] are operational, such as the amount of financial aid. They didn’t really cite many institutional characteristics that point to the need for significant revisions or reform, or modifications in their culture or approach to students.”

Improvements ahead

The next generation of student success programs should strive for whole-campus changes, Habley said.

“I think, at least from my observations, that there was a time at which institutions thought that they could appoint a coordinator of student retention, and that that person would take the responsibility for making sure students were retained,” he said. “But I think what most of those people have discovered is that no one person can do this.”

That doesn’t mean that institutions shouldn’t designate someone to head up retention efforts, but that institutions shouldn’t expect that individual to tackle the issue alone, Habley said. That person’s task should include “modifying attitudes, opinions, and the culture of the institution”—something that’s difficult to achieve without high-level support and broad-based cooperation. As a result, Habley and McClanahan recommend that institutions designate one high-visibility person to coordinate a campus-wide team. (See the adjacent article for more recommendations stemming from the study.)

“There’s more recognition that the issue is pretty complex and difficult to tackle. It also suggests that people have yet to embrace what it might take to launch that campus-wide kind of an effort,” Habley said. Persistence researcher Vincent Tinto, author of the 1993 book *Leaving College*, has pointed out that many retention efforts typically target specific, at-risk populations independently but don’t change the larger institutional culture, Habley said.

“Tinto calls it ‘layering on’ somewhat

independent programs and services without a consideration that what really needs to happen is modification in the normative structure of the campus,” Habley said.

Some successes, too

But higher education has done a lot right in the past 25 years, too, Habley said.

Institutions have implemented the programs they believe to be most effective. Eighty-seven percent of all institutions surveyed offer tutoring programs, for example, and they gave such programs an average importance rating of 3.8, making it one of the strategies most highly rated for effectiveness.

Other commonly implemented and highly rated strategies include offering first-year-experience and transition programs, academic advising, and other learning support. (Habley noted that the study focuses on academic interventions more than interventions addressing social, health, or financial concerns.)

This study doesn’t offer longitudinal data on how higher education’s view of what’s effective might have changed over the years because so many strategies have emerged since the first ACT study of this type was conducted in 1980. While the first study identified only 20 retention programs or strategies, the 2005 study names more than 80.

The latest study doesn’t indicate what’s on the horizon, but it does offer some evidence that higher education is heading in the right direction, Habley said.

“The first-year-experience movement has blossomed over the last 20 years, the national advising movement and association are about 25 years old, and those appear to be the solid strategies that have been emerging and have been developing over the past 20 years,” he said.

The “What Works in Student Retention” reports are available at www.act.org/path/policy/reports/retain.html. ■

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easy of an access to as students do,” Bahm said. These include free or low-cost counseling and the opportunity to move to a new residence (from one residence hall to another, for example) without incurring any expense.

Campuses can also impose sanctions in addition to the victim pursuing criminal charges. Campus typically provide more security, too. “Some campuses have told us that if students say they’re being stalked, they’ll provide an escort,” Bahm said.

Educating students

But students can’t access these resources unless they know they’re available. Bahm said that she doesn’t have data on how well campuses are educating students about stalking, but she does note that she and other SRC staff members “have been getting more and more calls from college campuses wanting us to help

them provide training and help them create stalking awareness campaigns. So I think that along with the general public, campuses are kind of catching on that this is an issue they need to be paying more attention to.”

Darisse founded Feel Safe Again after her sister, who worked at a restaurant, was killed in 2000 by a customer who had stalked her for two years. At the time, state law allowed courts to issue restraining orders in response to domestic violence, but not in response to incidents in which the victim has never had a relationship with the stalker.

Darisse helped in getting the law expanded, and then she began to focus on education. She approached a nearby campus, Tufts University, about conducting training and held a small, informal educational session for staff and student leaders this spring.

Darisse will also speak to new students about stalking during fall orientation. It

will be incorporated into a session on sexual assault.

“I will always feel that there’s never enough information given on the subject. I can’t help but think that just because I know [about stalking], that doesn’t mean that everybody else knows,” she said.

Awareness education should go beyond just bringing up the topic, Darisse added. “When you have a group of advocates and tell them what stalking is, it doesn’t end there. You can’t just give them the definitions. You need to tell them the tools and techniques they need to help a victim.”

Resources

If campus administrators want to learn more about stalking awareness training, a good place to start is the Stalking Resource Center’s website at

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small space alone. When Sirvis’s home was ready for occupancy, she stopped bringing Baileigh to the office, but resumed the practice after students, faculty, and staff complained.

“I wouldn’t necessarily say it would work everywhere,” Sirvis said. “Baileigh happens to have the right disposition, and she’s hypoallergenic.”

Getting out for exercise

Tufts University President Lawrence Bacow is a runner, and during a matriculation ceremony at the start of each year, he invites members of the incoming class to join him on his morning jogs.

Interested students e-mail Bacow and ask when he’s planning to run during the week. Those who can make it are welcome to join him, he said, “but they have to run when I do, which is typically around 6 a.m.”

The composition and size of the running group varies. During the fall

semester, the groups are informal and smaller—maybe around four students.

In the spring, however, Bacow leads a team of about 200 Tufts students, faculty, staff, and parents in training for the Boston marathon. On some mornings before the April event, the training group can include about 40 people, Bacow said.

“When we’re out there in shorts and a T-shirt or sweats and gloves, it breaks down barriers,” he said. “We are not president and student. We’re all just runners, and it makes it easier to have conversations about all sorts of things, especially on the long runs. It’s a natural opportunity.

“We’ve talked about issues on campus. A lot of times they’re curious about my job and what it’s like to be president. But often, especially if there’s something going on about campus and I’m interested what students think, I’ll ask them. I think I get more candid responses when we’re running than in almost any other setting.”

One year, he went on a one-on-one run with the editor of a student publication that had just printed an article that “characterized other students very harshly,” Bacow said. “We talked about what his editorial responsibilities are as editor and the fact that I thought he and the publication bore some of the responsibility for the quality of debate on campus. It was a different type of conversation than if I had called him into my office and said the same thing.

“It’s rare that I would use [the run] like that, but the editor was a runner and requested it,” Bacow said. “I don’t go certain places in conversations unless the students want to go there. I’ll say, ‘What do you think?’ and if they take it up, we’ll talk about it, and if not, we’ll talk about something else.

“But every now and then, there’ll be somebody who will try and bend my ear in a way that gets in the way of the run with everybody else. When that’s the case, I just run faster.” ■



Public Schools Step Back from Affirmative Action

In the last decade, many institutions, particularly public schools, have “stepped back” from considering race in admissions, even though they have not been required to do so, say two University of California-Davis sociologists.

Assistant professor of sociology Eric Grodsky and sociology graduate student Demetra Kalogrides analyzed data the College Board gathered between 1986 and 2003 through an annual survey of institutional practices.

The proportion of public four-year institutions reporting that they use affirmative action in admissions decreased to 35 percent in 2003 from more than 60 percent in 1986. Among private four-year institutions, the drop was not as drastic, but it still occurred—to 45 percent from 57 percent.

Most of the decrease occurred after 1995, when federal court rulings and state laws began prohibiting public institutions from considering race in admissions. For instance, California voters passed Proposition 209, which bars the state from considering race in hiring or admissions, in 1996. In the same year, a Fifth Circuit Appeals Court ruling banned affirmative action in *Hopwood v. Texas*.

However, changes in legal climate, rather than changes in the law, might be behind the decrease in affirmative action policies, Grodsky said.

“We speculate—and I emphasize the word speculate—that schools are more cautious about affirmative action than they used to be not because they have to ... but because they may feel like, ‘Well, we haven’t had to litigate this yet, but if we continue engaging in affirmative action, it could come our way.’”

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund has released a report (*Closing the Gap*, available at www.naacpldf.org) making a similar charge—that anti-affirmative action

groups and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) have scared institutions away from using race-conscious policies in admissions and other student-related decisions.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled two years ago that race-conscious policies are legal, anti-affirmative action groups such as the Center for Equal

Authors of a new study speculate that schools are dropping affirmative action not because they have to, but because they are afraid of litigation.

Opportunity have filed several complaints against institutions using affirmative action. Because the OCR must investigate each complaint it receives, some institutions find doing away with the policy easier than defending it, the NAACP report argues.

Grodsky said that alternatives to considering race in admissions, such as Texas’s Top Ten Percent Law “probably don’t have as much of an effect on [race-ethnicity differences] as a race-based policy would.”

Studies that run simulations of different types of admissions policies based on real applicant demographics have shown that “while you may get more racial and ethnic diversity than without [the alternative policies], they are not really adequate substitutes for affirmative action,” Grodsky said.

Study shortcoming

Although Grodsky and Kalogrides’s work, which they are preparing for publication, shows a decline in the proportion of institutions that report considering

race in admissions, it can’t comment on the extent to which they enact these policies.

In addition, it can count only the number of institutions that say they consider race. It does not necessarily include the number of institutions that are barred by state legislation or case law from using affirmative action policies but that still might notice applicants’ racial or ethnic backgrounds privately, Grodsky said.

“I’m not saying that’s necessarily the case, but it’s one of the shortcomings of the study,” he said. “We can only evaluate [in this study] what schools say they do.” ■

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www.ncvc.org/src, Bahm said. Victims can call the SRC helpline at (800) FYI-CALL.

More information is also available through Feel Safe Again’s online resource page at www.feelsafeagain.org/links.html.

Information about preventing or responding to online stalking is available through Working to Halt Online Abuse (WHOA) at www.haltabuse.org. ■

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