

**Promoting Student Success:
Shared Goals, Shared Responsibilities**

**Final Report
Working Group on Student Success**

March 30, 2006

**Submitted to Dr. Terry Murphy
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INTRODUCTION

In Summer 2004, Dr. Terry Murphy, Vice President, Academic and Research, organized several campus brainstorming sessions to begin implementation of the Student Success and Satisfaction component of Saint Mary's 2002 Five-Year Academic Plan. The Working Group on Student Success was then recruited and charged with developing a comprehensive plan that would respond to the broad-based concerns raised about enhancing student learning, students' campus experience, student retention, and post-graduate placement. Committee members included

Diane Crocker (Chair)
Margaret-Anne Bennett (Office of
Instructional Development)
Paul Bernard (Arts)

Jim Cameron (Science)
Kathleen Lingley (SMUSA)
Linda Van Esch (Commerce)

From Summer 2004 to December 2005, the Committee met with a large and diverse group of stakeholders at the University (see Appendix A), examined data collected by the University, perused the relevant research literature, and studied initiatives at other post-secondary institutions.¹

Using a model identified in the literature, student success was considered in terms of the three transitions students must make:

- ❖ **Transition Into University:** "... orientation to the institution's expectations and resources; matriculation into the academic program; assimilation into the student body"
- ❖ **Transition Through University:** "... making informed decisions about academic majors, careers, values, and involvement; making progress through the college experience"
- ❖ **Transition Out Of University:** "... successful passage to graduate or professional school, post-college work, and full citizenship in their chosen communities"

(Mitchell, 1999:2-3)

This report explores student success in each of these three phases, guided by the questions that Mitchell (1999) argues should be addressed at each stage:

- What resources does the institution direct toward students who are in the midst of this transition?
- What skills must students develop to successfully complete this transition?
- What are the obstacles students must overcome during this transition?

This report focuses on the undergraduate experience, although many of the observations and conclusions could be generalized to graduate students.

¹ Thanks to Gillian Doell and Oleana Newmen who provided research assistance.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND

I. WHAT IS STUDENT SUCCESS AND HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE WE?

A. Context

Statements that “A university education is more valuable today than ever before” are often seen in reports, newspaper or journal articles, and interviews focused on higher education. The communiqué usually then provides the expected lifetime earnings of university graduates relative to high-school or college graduates. However, in an increasingly complex world, the benefits of a university degree extend far beyond earning power. Students graduating today face demands for increasingly sophisticated skills; they can expect to have many careers over their lifetimes; they will have to make difficult decisions regarding the economy, health care, education, immigration, retirement; they must cope with global climate change and an explosion in access to information through technological change and innovation. And the list goes on. While the value of a better education is indisputable – it enables us to better adjust to, take advantage of, and contribute to the rapidly changing world – ideas about just what constitutes a “better education” are also changing.

In addition to keeping pace with demands for changes in curricula and learning activities, universities are facing changes on many other fronts. At present, most Canadian universities have far more applicants each year than can be accommodated. We also face increasing expectations of accountability – to students, to parents, to business, to government; increasing competition for funds from all funding sources; the need to cultivate and build partnerships with the private sector; and, very significantly, a growing shortage of future faculty and increasing competition in recruiting new faculty and retaining the ones we have.

The lives of university students have also changed. Today’s student body is much more diverse – in terms of age, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, interests, and preparation level; most students work either full- or part-time; and most are technologically savvy. With higher-than-ever tuition fees, parents have become more involved in students’ decisions. Probably for similar reasons, students and their families now see themselves as “consumers” of university services and programs. And, with the reduced cost of travel, the availability of on-line degrees, and the blurring of the line between college and university, today’s students have more options.

To more effectively recruit and retain these very different groups of students, and to prepare them for the diverse futures they will pursue, universities’ academic programs and support services must be much more responsive. Not surprisingly, universities across Canada and the United States are increasingly adopting formal approaches to “student success”, a broad term that includes issues of student recruitment and retention, assurance of learning, and students’ and other stakeholders’ satisfaction with the university experience.

From Saint Mary’s perspective, then, the objective is first to identify the components of student success, considering the needs of all of our students, and then to assess what we are doing well and what might be improved. Throughout, the intent is neither to lessen the responsibilities of students

nor to “hold them by the hand”. Rather, the goal is to ensure a user-friendly environment in which students are responsible partners in their own learning.

B. Defining Student Success at Saint Mary’s

The Committee proposes the following over-arching definition:

At Saint Mary’s University, student success is understood as the ability of our students to make successful transitions into University, through their academic programs, and into the larger community as knowledgeable citizens of the world. Saint Mary’s success is defined by the degree to which our support systems and academic programs assist and sustain our diverse student population on their intellectual and personal journeys.

The initial brainstorming sessions, the subsequent interviews with experts on campus, and the literature all emphasized the complexity of student success. From students’ perspective, the major indicators of success are mastery of the chosen disciplines, academic and personal growth, and success in pursuing personal and professional goals. From the University’s perspective, the major indicators also include reduced attrition rates, timely completion of programs, successful placements, and strong alumni support. However, these global outcomes result from a large number of inter-related factors. An operational definition of student success includes a host of component measures, captured here under the broad and clearly inter-related categories of

- academic and intellectual competence
- growth as a person
- self-sufficiency and citizenship

assessed at the individual and the institutional level. Note that each domain of success cuts across all of the phases, the “transition into”, “transition through”, and “transition out of university”.

a. Defining Student Success: Academic and Intellectual Competencies

Quality education is the primary objective of both universities and students. Perhaps more emphasized than in the past is the importance of explicit strategies to further develop students’ skills and abilities. For instance, The Conference Board of Canada’s (1996) inventory of skills required by the Canadian workforce includes academic skills (communication, thinking, learning), personal management skills (positive attitudes and behaviors, responsibility, adaptability), and teamwork skills. Similarly, Human Resource and Development Canada (MacLeod, 2000) emphasizes the importance of “soft skills”, including essential skills (e.g., reading, writing, ability to communicate), management skills, leadership skills, and contextual skills (e.g., adapting to different settings).

To foster success in transitions that many students find difficult, students need supportive environments, early experiences of success, continuing opportunities to hone their academic and

personal skills, positive role models, exposure to multiple modes of learning and, on occasion, individual attention.

Indicators of Student Success: Academic and Intellectual Competencies

Individual Level	Institutional Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intellectual curiosity • commitment to learning • enhanced skills: information literacy, oral and written communications, analytic and critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, interpersonal and team-work skills • mastery of field of study • persistence through the academic program • timely completion of degree requirements • grades that meet or exceed expectations • successful employment in chosen career paths • successful transition to graduate studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University reputation • word-of-mouth referrals • successful recruitment of quality students • low attrition rates • timely completion of programs • high course standards with low fail/withdraw rates • many students on scholarship, Dean’s List, etc. • achievement of program learning objectives • well-used Library/services, Writing Centre • proactive identification of at-risk students and successful remedial intervention • instructional richness and diversity • high acceptance rates in graduate studies and successful placements • student, alumni, graduate, employer satisfaction

b. Defining Student Success: Growth as a Person

Research indicates that higher student success rates are associated with high levels of engagement – personal identification with the institution and a collaborative and inclusive academic and social environment (Tinto, 1993). In that environment, students become more confident to discover their talents, develop their skills, and take responsibility for their learning. Opportunities, services, and programs that contribute to students' growth as people, including psychological and health services and assistance addressing financial and other stresses, are key factors.

Indicators of Student Success: Growth as a Person

Individual Level	Institutional Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achievement of personal goals • physical and psychological well-being • acceptance of diversity* • well formed personal identity, including adaptability, confidence, integrity, self-efficacy, competence* • minimal financial and other stress <p style="text-align: right; margin-right: 50px;">* Upcraft, Lee and Gardner, John (1989)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a diverse and inclusive University community • a wide range of course offerings with different kinds of challenges • widespread use of active/experiential learning techniques • a rich array of extra-curricular activities, including opportunities to celebrate diversity • a well-supported array of student societies • awareness and use of support services • well-subscribed co-op and study-abroad programs • a safe campus (harassment, violence, anxiety) • effective academic, career, & personal counselling • opportunities for faculty-student interaction

c. Defining Student Success: Self-Sufficiency and Citizenship

In addition to developing a strong sense of belonging to the university community, students also need to develop their connections to the community at large. Kovac and Coppola (2000) outlined the goals of reintegrating a “citizenship” (including moral) dimension into post-secondary education – development of character, development of cognitive skills, development of disciplinary skills, and reintegration of knowledge. In addition to curricular offerings, providing skilled feedback, opportunities to explore personal options, and opportunities to “get involved” (informally in student societies and volunteerism and more formally in service-learning placements) can assist in developing citizenship. As students complete their studies, helping prepare them for the transition to work or graduate studies, while retaining ties to the University, is an important activity.

Indicators of Student Success: Self-Sufficiency and Citizenship

Individual Level	Institutional Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of transferable skills • awareness of own aptitudes, talents & interests • personal management skills, including accepting responsibility • personal integrity • integration of interdisciplinary knowledge & skills • engagement with campus and broader communities • development of leadership abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opportunities for collaborative learning and involvement with off-campus communities (service learning, volunteerism, competitions) • spirit of volunteerism • adequate levels of student financial support • low rates of academic fraud/misconduct • provision of campus employment opportunities • provision of opportunities for students to ‘give back’ to the University community (mentoring, student societies) • well-used employment centre • assistance selecting graduate school • good community relations • strong, active alumni

For convenience, these definitions are summarized in a single table, in Appendix B

C. Measuring Student Success

How successful are Saint Mary’s students in each of these domains and in the transitions into, through, and out of University? And, how successful is Saint Mary’s in ensuring student success? At present, there is no comprehensive, systematic process monitoring the effectiveness of the many services and programs the University provides, however, data collected by the Office of Institutional Analysis and Planning, including annual surveys of Saint Mary’s students conducted

by the Canadian Undergraduate University Consortium (CUSC)², provide initial indicators of some aspects.

a. Measuring Student Success: Academic and Intellectual Competence

The data compiled and analyzed by the Office of Institutional Research contain a number of indicators of academic and intellectual competence at the institutional level, including withdrawal rates, course completion rates, length of degree completion, and rates of academic probation. To develop a clearer picture, a tracking study of the 1998 cohort was done.³ (Most students now take more than four years to complete their degrees. The 1998 cohort is the most recent cohort for which we have six years of data.)

Several trends emerge. First, our students withdraw at alarming rates. Of the students who entered Saint Mary's in 1998, for example, 27% of the initial group had formally withdrawn by the end of the first year, 15% by the end of the second year, 5% by the end of the third year, and 3% after four years.⁴ An additional number, of course, withdrew without informing the University. A full 54% of those admitted in 1998 did not graduate within the next six years.

A high attrition rate isn't the only indicator of a mismatch between first-year students' expectations and their University experience – an alarming number of those who do remain encounter academic difficulties. By the end of the first year, fully one-quarter of the 1998 cohort were on academic probation. [The average first-year course completion rate was approximately 86% (an average of 3.8 credits were attempted and an average of 3.28 were earned).]

Student success rates vary across the Faculties, with completion rates highest in the Faculty of Science and lowest in the Faculty of Arts. For example, 39% of Arts students entering Saint

Selected Student Success Indicators by Faculty (1998 cohort)

	BA		BCOM		BSC		Total Cohort	
Total	1075	54%	664	33%	266	13%	2005	100%
Entering Average (%)	75.04		78.04		82.82		77.10	
Credits Attempted in Year 1	3.40		3.58		3.90		3.80	
Credits Earned in Year 1	2.90		3.09		3.40		3.28	
GPA at End of Year 1	1.91		1.97		2.33		2.13	
WD at End of Year 1	366	34%	184	28%	69	26%	619	31%
AP at end of Year 1	306	28%	161	24%	52	20%	519	26%
Number of Grads	414	39%	323	49%	159	60%	896	45%

Notes: WD = Withdrawal AP = Academic Probation

² The CUSC survey is conducted annually of students at participating universities across Canada. Note that data from first-year students are limited in that only students who returned to school for a second year are included in the sample.

³ Thanks to Cathy Lewis and Daphne Tucker in Institutional Analysis and Planning for this research.

⁴ It should be noted that not all of these withdrawals were caused by academic failure – an unknown number are attributable, for example, to transfers to other universities.

Mary's in 1998 completed their degrees, compared to 49% of Commerce students and 60% of Science students. These trends are mirrored by inter-faculty differences in first-year withdrawal rates, academic probation rates, and average GPA.

It is important to note that the higher withdrawal rates in Arts may be related to the fact that more students with low high-school grades are admitted to the Faculty of Arts, often with the intention of changing programs later. Controlling for other variables, it is not the program or the Faculty that predicts outcomes.

Who is at risk, then? Based on these data, the simplest answer is "first-year students, particularly if their prior academic performance is relatively weak".

b. Measuring Student Success: Growth as a Person

Several characteristics of Saint Mary's provide a base for students' personal growth and development. For example, the University is an increasingly multicultural and international community which values diversity. Numerous activities and student societies offer both programming and opportunities for social interaction. Faculty members are seen as approachable and accessible. The majority of students feel safe: approximately 90% of first-year students who responded to the CUSC survey in 2001 and 2004 said they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their personal safety on campus.

Assuming that a sense of satisfaction fosters, or is at least consistent with, a positive climate for personal growth, Saint Mary's seems to be doing well in this regard. About 90% of first-year students surveyed in 2004 were satisfied with their decision to attend Saint Mary's and about 75% said that their University experience either met or exceeded their expectations in a number of domains.

Like students at other universities, graduating students responding to the CUSC survey saw attending campus social activities and interacting with other students as key to their growth and development. A substantial proportion (30-40%) also said that activities and interactions with faculty contributed "very much" to their growth and development. In the 2003 survey, the factors rated highest for contributing to student growth and development were

- broad knowledge of major field of study
- working independently
- accepting people from different cultures
- writing, communication skills
- thinking logically and analytically
- ability to access information

We can also identify a few shortcomings. First, there was evidence of dissatisfaction with academic counselling across CUSC survey years. In 2004, for instance, only 44% of first-year respondents said they had "some" or "very much" success in getting academic advice, compared to an average of 64% at other universities offering primarily undergraduate studies.

Second, first-year students' belief that Saint Mary's University cares for them as individuals appear to be somewhat out of line with the pattern shown by the typical smaller university. In 2004, 13% of Saint Mary's first-year students felt "very satisfied" (compared to an average for primarily undergraduate universities of 19%), 48% felt "satisfied" (compared to 51%), 33% felt either "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" (compared to 22%).

Finally, a sizeable minority of respondents to the 2003 CUSC survey of graduating students – approximately one in four – disagreed with the statement, "I feel as if I am part of this University."⁵ Similarly, while more than 80% of first-year students (2004 survey) reported successful personal adjustments (e.g., feeling of belonging, making new friends, time management), only 31% felt successful in becoming involved in campus activities.

This is important, given that a key theme in the research literature is that successful students tend to feel involved and embedded in the university community. Indeed, evidence suggests that this is also the case at Saint Mary's. The results of a recent study (conducted by Jim Cameron, Psychology Department, in conjunction with Student Services) indicated that one specific component of first-year students' identification with the University – the feeling of belonging and having strong ties with other students – was uniquely and positively associated with a number of outcome variables, including academic efficacy, overall physical and psychological well-being, satisfaction with the first-year experience, and global feelings of social connectedness. In short, students are better off academically and psychologically if they feel a sense of belonging to the University community.

c. Measuring Student Success: Self-Sufficiency and Citizenship

Self-sufficiency and citizenship are important indicators of success that Saint Mary's does not currently track. Some, such as "good community relations" and "identifying with the broader community", are difficult to empirically index. However, taken together, several findings from the CUSC surveys provide an incomplete but perhaps nonetheless informative picture of the self-sufficiency and preparedness of the typical Saint Mary's student.

In 2003, 77% of surveyed graduating students said they had a current résumé or CV and 42% planned to continue their education rather than look for a permanent, full-time job after graduation. Levels of satisfaction regarding knowledge of career opportunities gained in University were lower than satisfaction in other domains. For example, about 40% of Saint Mary's graduates surveyed in 2003 reported dissatisfaction with "knowledge of career options in my area of study".

There is also evidence of financial stress. Compared to other universities offering primarily undergraduate studies, Saint Mary's students appear to be somewhat more reliant on government loans/bursaries (42% in 2001; 37% in 2004), whereas relatively fewer draw upon families, personal savings, and University scholarships to finance their education. In 2004, 46% of first-year students worked off campus (compared to 37% of students at other primarily undergraduate universities), while another 24% reported that they were seeking work.

⁵ This is probably an underestimate, given the presumption that the CUSC survey sample overrepresented the more engaged students.

The typical first-year Saint Mary's respondent worked about two hours per week longer than the average for Group 1 first-year university students. In 2004, 56% felt there was at least some negative impact of employment on their academic success, with 19% reporting moderate-to-substantial hindrance.

d. General Indicators of University Success

CUSC surveys of Saint Mary's graduating classes in 2000 and 2003 asked students to identify what the University had done well. In both cohorts, the top five were

- knowledgeable, helpful, experienced professors
- educational quality and the variety of programs
- good, friendly environment and cultural awareness
- small campus, small classes
- facilities and services

Suggested areas for improvement included

- assign advisors and better/more career and peer counselling
- offer better variety of courses; better programs and study skills
- offer hands-on experience; co-op programs
- use better teaching and evaluation techniques
- have a more organized and informative administration
- lower tuition, price of textbooks, and other expenses
- improve academic advising and career counselling
- hire better/more professors
- make renovations; better facilities, parking, labs, study space

These data, while only partial, do provide strong indicators of some of the changes needed.

PART TWO: ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH

I. TRANSITION INTO UNIVERISTY

A. Context

The persistence and success of university students rests to a large extent on their first-year experience. The first year is a crucial time for developing the competence, confidence and social relationships required for later success. Attrition rates are a testament to the challenges that the first year brings: as noted earlier, and consistent with general trends (Levitz & Noel, 1989), about 30% of first-year students at Saint Mary's withdraw by the end of their first year.

Two additional observations are important when considering the first-year experience. First, Upcraft and Gardner (1989) and others argue that we have an obligation to help students succeed, even – and perhaps most of all – those who are academically weak upon entrance or who otherwise face barriers to academic success and/or social integration. This is particularly important to Saint Mary's given its mission of accessibility which provides opportunities to students whom the University can anticipate will be in “high-risk” categories. Second, scholars of educational persistence and success argue strongly that institutions play a direct role in the experience of first-year students and that institutions can take a number of steps to improve that experience.

B. Challenges in First Year

The first year of university brings a number of intersecting psychosocial, academic, and economic challenges. Many first-year students feel afraid and intimidated by the university setting. These feelings arise from their lack of knowledge about the university system and their lack of awareness of their own abilities, needs, or risk factors.

Many students face tremendous difficulties adjusting to university life. This may be particularly true for first-generation university students, for those whose first language is not English, and for those who are academically under-prepared. Other students, especially those moving to Halifax from rural regions, find the campus large and intimidating compared to high school. Differing expectations and increased freedoms and responsibilities also make the transition from high school to university very difficult. Prior to entering university, many led highly structured lives, both personally and academically.

A survey of “early leavers” conducted by the University Presidents’ Council of British Columbia (2000) found reasons for the departure of “true leavers” (i.e., those whose departure was unplanned) included

- personal (28%)
- program (16%)
- academic performance (11%)
- economic/financial (10%)
- job/career (10%)
- transferred (10%)
- course-related (7%)
- institution-related (7%)
- other (2%)

There is a general perception that many students begin their post-secondary education under-prepared and unaware of the expectations of post-secondary studies. In addition, recent first-year

students are accustomed to an appreciably different technological environment than the one most of their instructors experienced as students. As a result, there may be an “imbalance between students’ expectations of the learning environment and what they find” in their classrooms (Oblinger, 2003, p. 44).

Many incoming students, while convinced of the desirability of university degrees, are also uncertain about the meaning and usefulness of academic material and about its relevance to their lives and their futures. Many also face financial stresses and encounter difficulties trying to balance academic studies and part-time employment.

Although research shows a positive relationship between low entering grades and dropping out (e.g., Martin & Lrendal, 1992), not all students who drop out do so for academic reasons and not all of those with weak performance are intellectually unsuited to university. Indeed, attrition is typically caused by the combined influence of a number of factors that “exist below the surface” (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 67) and that often fall into the ill-defined category of “personal reasons” (University Presidents’ Council of British Columbia, 2000). Barriers to success, therefore, are often relatively invisible to instructors and administrators – and even to students themselves.

C. Overcoming the Challenges

Different models of educational persistence (e.g., Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1993) share a common emphasis on student integration and involvement. And research confirms that being involved with, and feeling connected to, the university are essential to overcoming the challenges arising in the first year. For example, persistence is related to how well students settle in, find friends, and feel connected to the school (Skahill, 2003). A large study in the U.S. showed that “institutional commitment” – defined by students’ sense of belonging (or identification with the university) and overall satisfaction – is also an important factor. The research by Jim Cameron and Student Services, described earlier, found similar patterns.

Thus, in addition to academic ability⁶, academic integration and social involvement are significant predictors of success in university (Robbins et al, 2004; Strauss & Volkwein, 2001). For instance, Robbins’ (2004) meta-analysis showed that institutional commitment, academic self-efficacy, and academic goals all predicted university success above and beyond high school GPA.

Levitz and Noel’s (1989) analysis of the first-year experience identified four key areas that contribute to first-year success

- connecting first-year students to the university environment
- making the transition to university
- working toward academic and career goals
- succeeding in the classroom

⁶ In the 1998 Saint Mary’s cohort, for example, students with higher entrance GPAs were less likely to be on Academic Probation by the end of the first year.

It follows that the majority of interventions aimed at first-year students should create and consolidate the bond between them and the institution. Successful interventions should also have positive effects within each of the domains of success (academic/intellectual competence, personal growth, self-sufficiency/citizenship). For urban, largely “commuter” universities like Saint Mary’s, and for universities with substantial proportions of out-of-province and international students, creating communities in which students feel connected is both more challenging and more urgently needed.

D. Current Resources

Saint Mary’s has tailored many programs, services, and policies to support incoming students. Resources dedicated to first-year and incoming students include:

- Recruitment Office
- Registration Advisory Unit
- Orientation Week (provided by Saint Mary’s University Student Association and the University Orientation Committee)
- Specialized orientations provided by the International Centre and Continuing Education
- Centre for New Students
- Extreme F.Y.I. (First Year Information)

Appendix C provides details of each.

Student Services in general, and the Undergraduate Student Advisors, are critical resources for this cohort. However, for ease of discussion, they are addressed in the next section as they meet the needs of students in all three phases.

Although Saint Mary’s offers a number of services and programs, almost all focus on one-time interventions: orientation or registration.

The F.Y.I. program is the only program/service offering more sustained contact and touching on diverse aspects of student success. Jim Cameron’s study of the predictors of first-year success provides some initial indications of the effectiveness of the program⁷. One of the central questions was whether the F.Y.I. program enhanced students’ integration into the Saint Mary’s community.

About half of Saint Mary’s first-year students participate in some form of orientation program – a somewhat lower proportion than at other Group 1 universities.

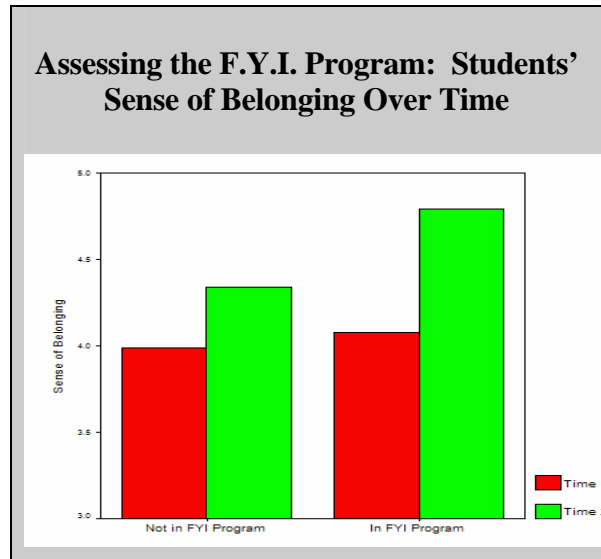
Those who participated in Orientation at Saint Mary’s said that Orientation provided information about student life, helped make the personal and social transition to University, and helped build confidence.

CUSC 2004

⁷ Questionnaires were administered to students in the Extreme F.Y.I. program and sent by mail to a random sample of other first-year students. Data collection occurred in two stages: (a) at the beginning of the first term, when students had recently entered Saint Mary’s (Time 1); and (b) at the beginning of the second term, mid-way through their first year (Time 2). Due to the low overall response rate, and the relatively small number of people who returned questionnaires at both Time 1 and Time 2, the results must be interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless, the results seem very promising.

Identification with the University and, in particular, a sense of belonging to the University community was assumed to be a key index of this integration. The findings suggested that, while there was a general tendency for students' sense of belonging to increase from September to December, this was especially true for students in the F.Y.I. program. Anecdotal evidence is found in the reports of staff members working with these students: to them, the bonding was obvious.

Such strong results from a relatively short program should encourage future efforts to maintain and/or expand these efforts.



E. Analysis of Obstacles and Resource Gaps

Service gaps, obstacles that remain unaddressed, and apparent inefficiencies were considered in three general categories: student support services, academic policies and regulations, and academic programs and instruction.

i. Services and Support

All of the stakeholders consulted identified the lack of centralization of services and support programs as a major obstacle to student success at Saint Mary's. The services provided are variously operated through the Registrar's Office, the Admissions Office, the Recruitment Office, Student Services, Continuing Education and the Dean's offices. This lack of coordination results in overlap, duplication, and mixed messages. Furthermore, not only are students confused, but others on campus often do not know where to direct students for help.

Recommendation

That services and programs be coordinated and offered from a centralized location. (This major recommendation is discussed in the next section.)

Another barrier created by the University is its communications strategy *vis-à-vis* incoming students: the volume, timing, and formal language leaves many students overwhelmed and confused. They receive too much, or even contradictory, information from many different sources. Important information is often lost in the confusion. Other information is available only to those who know that it exists and where to locate it.

Recommendation

That the University better coordinate the communications sent to incoming students so they receive (or are directed to) the information and guidance they need in a timely way, in friendly language, and with appropriate reminders but minimal duplication. Communications would obviously be better coordinated if services were centralized.

Orientation provides an extremely important function, and the first month of the first year is a particularly critical period in terms of connecting students to the university (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Saint Mary's is to be commended for having several orientation programs to address the different needs of international, mature, and graduate students. However, no orientation is available to students entering in Winter and the September Orientation is not well attended, perhaps in part because Orientation is viewed as having primarily social objectives. Both the academic content and the "introduction to services available on campus" should be expanded.

Increasingly, many parents are taking an active role, particularly in the first year, as students make the transition to university and efforts to offer orientation programming for parents is a welcome initiative.

Recommendation

That the Orientation program include strong social, support service, and academic components.

That, following research into why more students don't attend, deliberate efforts to increase participation be investigated (although, hopefully, expansion of the academic content will result in more students perceiving a benefit in participating).

That a January orientation be provided for students admitted in the Winter term.

Many universities offer diverse forms of formal orientation that are broader in coverage and deeper in effect. Saint Mary's closest approximation is the limited-enrolment, one-semester Extreme F.Y.I program. Setting aside the issue of the very small number of students able to benefit (about 25 each year), the program effectively addresses only the most basic skills – the limited format cannot provide the strong foundation or the intellectual framework of a formal seminar. Nonetheless, as described above, the program has been very well received.

Recommendation

That additional resources be allocated to expand the FYI program. (In the longer term, the program should be replaced by an academic, for-credit First-Year Seminar course.)

ii. Academic Programs and Instruction

Simply because of enrolment numbers, first-year courses tend to be the largest, contributing to the impersonal, "sink or swim" environment that many students experience. And, although the

University has many excellent instructors of first-year students, faculty tend to prefer advanced courses that they see as better matches to their specialized training and their research activities.

Consequently, too often, first-year courses are under-resourced, large-lecture, content-focused experiences which reinforce poor habits (non-attendance, poor time management and, under pressure, academic fraud). Although innovations in teaching large classes have made it possible to offer exciting courses in which students feel connected and in which they receive individual attention, it's fair to say that Saint Mary's has not been at the forefront of these changes.

In addition, faculty expectations also may be an obstacle in students' transition to university. Faculty expect students to be ready for post-secondary work and are generally not in a good position to provide the support necessary to help less prepared students meet these expectations. Many, if not most, do not see this as their role and, indeed, are not trained to take on this responsibility. There is also a widespread lack of expertise on "stage appropriate" learning and teaching. For example, first-year students may need instruction that is more directive; later in their development they are expected to be more autonomous learners.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's develop a comprehensive "first-year strategy", including

- encouraging Departments to assign full-time, experienced faculty to coordinate and teach first-year courses
- expanding support for first-year courses (tutorials, mentors, on-line resources)
- making faculty development a priority: the Office of Instructional Development should further develop and organize activities which specifically support faculty teaching first-year courses. Support should also be provided for full- and part-time faculty members interested in attending conferences or visiting sister institutions with a strong first-year focus.

A key component of any first-year strategy involves academic programs specifically developed for entering students. "First-year seminars" or "student success courses" have been offered for many years at universities throughout North America. These take the form of extended orientations, non-credit study skills courses, for-credit academic courses offered within a faculty or discipline, or generic "University 1000" courses. Regardless of structure (and ownership), "student success" courses are designed to ease students' transition and adjustment to university, help them develop essential academic skills, provide an orientation to campus resources and facilities, provide immediate points of assistance, and build a sense of community and involvement (Appendix D provides references to programs elsewhere). Most are developed and offered using a cooperative, interdisciplinary approach between all sectors of the campus: faculty, student services personnel, administrators, and senior students.

A survey of US institutions offering first-year seminar/student success courses conducted by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition⁸ in 2000 documented the outcomes of these courses as

⁸ <http://www.sc.edu/fye/research/surveyfindings/surveys/survey00.html>

- student satisfaction with the course/ instructor/institution
- increased persistence to second year
- improved academic abilities
- increased use of campus services and participation in campus activities
- increased friendships among other students and increased out-of-class interaction with faculty
- increased persistence to graduation

All of the outcomes attributed to these courses contribute to student success in the three phases identified in this report – the transition into, through, and out of university. In addition, they contribute to the three broad and inter-related categories of student success: academic and intellectual competency, growth as a person, and self-sufficiency and citizenship. Given the needs of our students and the broad-reaching outcomes of student success courses introduced in other institutions, the Committee considers introduction of a first-year student success course a priority.

Recommendation

That existing resources be coordinated to create cohesive and purposeful for-credit “student success” courses in each Faculty, modeled on the many successful programs at other institutions.

These courses will help students make the transition to university-level study by

- introducing them to the history and intellectual traditions of their Faculty
- enhancing their academic skills, including self-assessment of their work
- providing opportunities for faculty-student interaction and building personal connections to the University community
- providing opportunities to explore individual interests/aptitudes and learning-style preferences
- connecting them to appropriate on campus resources and key personnel

Because the ideal introductory student success course uses an “inquiry-based” approach teaching meta-cognitive skills (see Murray, 2005, Learning Project, 2005), academic faculty members must be involved in program development and delivery. However, the delivery format might well differ from traditional courses and involve on-line resources, Student Services staff members, a dedicated staff of teaching assistants, and senior-student mentors. Key to the success of the course will be faculty and staff, trained in issues pertinent to first-year students and dedicated to teach the course.

Although the course might combine large-lecture and small-enrolment modules, in its initial trial phase, five sections with no more than 40 students per section is recommended.

Although all first-year students are considered to be “at risk”, included in a first-year strategy is explicit attention to the needs of student groups judged to be particularly so. Students with strong risk factors should be flagged and directed to a required non-credit “Academic Enhancement Course” (see p. 24, which addresses the general early-warning system and increased support for all students at risk).

Another group especially at risk is international students with weak English language skills. At present, the unique needs of students for whom English is not a first language are not well met. Non-credit language instruction and for-credit courses taught in English are very different. Across the campus, instructors are united in concerns that, in spite of acceptable TOEFL scores or completion of language-instruction programs, many ESL students simply do not have the necessary fluency in English to complete the course requirements. International students bring invaluable new perspectives. However, lack of confidence in the English language can also marginalize them, depriving both domestic students and international students of the rich learning experiences inherent in multi-cultural interactions. In addition, there is a widespread but informal feeling that weak English language skills sometimes push students into soliciting inappropriate levels of “help” with assignments/exams. While students paying international fees understandably want to complete their degrees quickly, it is perhaps wiser in the long run to allow some time to build fluency.

There is also an ethical concern. The University has a responsibility to ensure that students have the communication skills necessary not just to succeed in their courses but also to be fully engaged members of the campus community, assuming leadership roles when they choose. However, apart from the social support provided by the International Centre, there are no dedicated academic resources to assist international students.

Recommendation

That the English-language competency requirements be revisited.

That credit courses in English as a Second Language (ESL) be re-introduced.

That students with weak English language skills be admitted to a maximum of three courses, one of which must be ESL, while they build their fluency.

Not only are some students “at risk”, it is also possible to identify “high risk” first-year courses that have consistently high failure rates. High failure rates are caused by a number of factors - including students’ skill levels - which should be addressed to improve student success rates.

Recommendation

That courses with traditionally high failure rates be identified, ways to improve the outcomes investigated, and support mechanisms provided.

iii. Academic Policies and Regulations

Two policies that particularly affect first-year students are timing of registration and late admissions. First-year registrations are processed last and often students cannot take the courses they have selected, leaving them frustrated and disappointed before even beginning their University studies. In addition, failure to accommodate students' needs places Saint Mary's at a competitive disadvantage – several competing institutions guarantee course selection for top-performing students. Obviously, accommodating the preferences of students in all program years would challenge limited University resources. However, a limited response should be sustainable.

Only 36% of SMU first-year students surveyed reported being able to register in all the courses they wanted.

In comparison, at other primarily undergraduate universities, on average 52% said they were able to register in all the courses they wanted.

CUSC 2004

Recommendation

That, to complement student recruitment strategies, first-year students with entering averages of 80% or higher be guaranteed registration in the courses they select.

A related issue is the late admissions policy, which allows students to begin a full course load having already missed up to two full weeks of classes. Particularly for new students, missing Orientation and catching up in five or even six courses that have already discussed expectations, formed study groups, and addressed the foundational material seems to pose an unfair challenge – for them, their classmates, and their instructors.

Recommendation

That, as a general rule, first-year students admitted after classes have started not be permitted to register until the subsequent academic term.

That the late-admissions policy be revisited more generally for all students.

II. TRANSITION THROUGH UNIVERSITY

A. Context

Having completed their initial year at Saint Mary's, with varying degrees of success, students are faced with a different but related set of challenges. As they make the transition into subsequent years of more independent study, they will also be required to make informed decisions about academic majors, career options, personal and professional values, degree of involvement in University and community life, along with numerous other things. Different institutional resources and support systems are needed to assist our diverse student population during this phase.

B. Challenges Faced by Students Going Through University

Students are under a great deal of pressure from many fronts. Research shows that many suffer mental health problems caused by numerous sources: self-image, stress, parental pressure, peer pressure, varying degrees of ambition and drive, and personal relationships. Others may be overwhelmed by the difficulties associated with living away from home. Left to their own devices, some cannot cope with the new freedoms and many fall into the temptation of putting their social interests above their academic ones.

Students may appear to be immature simply because they lack life experience. They may find themselves intimidated by professors who hold academic authority over them and by fellow students who appear more comfortable and secure in group settings. If social and academic integration is not fostered in the first year, many students will continue to lack the confidence to build working relationships and to seek the support they need.

In addition, many students are under considerable financial stress. Most full-time students carry a substantial debt load and are anxious about finding future employment. Many work part-time to defray the costs. Similarly, part-time students combining employment with academic studies and, often, with family responsibilities are also under considerable stress. In fact, Schmid and Abell (2003) identified full-time work and part-time enrolment as a major risk factor. Further, Szafran (2001) has shown that students taking more courses have higher GPAs, even controlling for other factors.

More than half (56%) of SMU first-year students surveyed felt that work was having some negative effect on their academic success.

CUSC 2004

Kun et al. (1994) suggest that another challenge lies in the culture clash between student and faculty expectations. Students focus on academic success, making friends, and fitting in, while faculty are focussed on curriculum content and research. This clash can result in student complaints about faculty attitudes towards them. It also fuels frustration among faculty who do not understand students' perspectives.

As in first-year courses, faculty expectations regarding students' still-developing skills can also be an impediment to student success. Although placing a very high value on development of "soft skills" (such as information literacy, analytic and critical thinking, communications, interpersonal

skills), most faculty emphasize coverage of course content and believe that the needed skills should be developed in other courses, preferably taken before theirs. Many do not provide explicit instruction, feedback, or even clearly stated expectations. And, most feel that skills development is well outside their area of expertise. Further, for the most part, students are unable to assess their own skill levels and do not know where to turn for help. Consequently, there is a general sense that many of our students are deficient in key skills.

C. Overcoming the Challenges

Student success requires a strong and comprehensive institutional commitment. Appropriate resources are needed to foster a supportive environment that inspires learning, personal growth, and well-being. In addition, universities must be proactive in removing barriers. Study of other universities shows “best practice” to mean a wide range of well-coordinated services that anticipate student needs and actively reach out to encourage student use. While Saint Mary’s provides many of the necessary services, many are significantly under-resourced and consequently cannot publicize the range of services offered, develop new programs, or even encourage increased usage of current programs. Clearly, Saint Mary’s has many “opportunities for improvement”.

Importantly, in a world of limited resources, not all service delivery requires one-on-one or face-to-face interaction during regular work hours – many can be provided through on-line resources. For instance, many student services web-pages (see the Universities of Ottawa, Calgary, and Alberta, for example) offer numerous “self-help” sites. These sites/links give students primary, first-level assistance by providing useful information on matters such as unhealthy addictions, mental health issues, personal and professional relationships, study habits, and career exploration. Some sites offer broad-based financial assistance information, including links to provincial financial aid offices, information on debt reduction, and a budget calculator.

Beyond self-help endeavors, support centers at some universities offer databases identifying in-house tutors and links to relevant services available off-campus. In our own backyard, The College of the North Atlantic’s “Access for Success” strategy won a top award⁹ for its website. At this site, applicants complete pre-enrolment inventories which enable them to assess their own strengths and needs and which allows the college to identify at-risk students and provide appropriate academic advising. Students develop personal career plans and program learning plans. Structured academic advising interviews provide guidance and direct students to resources on campus before they enroll, during registration, and just before the course-drop deadline. A “student success tracking system” monitors students’ progress and provides staff with key information. A pilot test in 2003-04 showed a retention-rate increase from 89% to 95% on one campus and from 83% to 88% on the other.

Similarly, Oklahoma State University offers an integrated approach to improve at-risk student success and retention.¹⁰ Academically under-prepared students are placed in Learning Communities – linked developmental and university-level courses that provide students with

⁹ <http://www.noellewitz.com/Papers+and+Research/Retention+Excellence+Awards/College+of+the+North+Atlantic.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.noellewitz.com/Papers+and+Research/Retention+Excellence+Awards/Oklahoma+State+University-Oklahoma+City.htm>

guidance and support and provide supplemental instruction, supported by a web-based learning and community system (the “Student Academic Gateway”). A Fall 2004 pilot test showed

- a healthy improvement in grades (in comparison with non-Learning Community students, 13% more Learning-Community students received grades of C or better)
- improved course-completion rates (11.5% higher than the control group)
- equally significantly, faculty and staff were “energized and motivated to try new initiatives”

D. Current Resources

Appendix E details the resources available at Saint Mary’s to help students progress through University. These include

- Student Services (Residence Services, Counselling Services, Financial Aid Office, International Student Office, International Student Advisor, Health Services, Student Peers, Black Student Advisor, Native Student Advisor, Conflict Resolution Officer, Chaplaincy Services)
- The Writing Centre
- The Atlantic Centre of Support for Students with Disabilities
- The Patrick Power Library
- Undergraduate Program Officers/Advisors
- The Faculty of Arts’ “Enhancing Student Success” Program
- Services provided by SMUSA

Use of Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% of Saint Mary’s graduating students had used academic advising services • 22% had seen a career counselor • 27% had seen a peer/residence advisor • 18% had received personal counselling
CUSC 2003

E. Analysis of Obstacles and Gaps

i. Services and Support

Student Services plays a critical role in student success and all of those consulted had high regard for the services and programs currently in place. However, all also commented that services and programs at Saint Mary’s lack coordination and should be more centralized. Single-destination “student success centres” where students can access all relevant services and information sources have proven very successful in other institutions. Long-established, workable models have been in place at many Canadian universities with successful new initiatives recently established at Carleton and Concordia. Community colleges are also leaders in this regard. Centralization of services was also recommended by Saint Mary’s Task Force on Student Advising in 2003.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's centralize all services to students to establish a "one-stop" centre that provides timely, efficient, year-round service. This will require a considerable restructuring of our current services, expansion of some, and cross-training of staff members. In addition, the programs/offices must be professionally managed and, for the most part, staffed by trained, permanent employees rather than temporary student employees.

(Note that, while it is important that students be able to access information and services from a single destination, there is no requirement that all staff involved in service delivery be co-located.)

A fully developed "Student Success Centre" would include academic, non-academic, and administrative services, including

- Registrar
- Recruitment Office
- Financial Services
- Orientation Programs
- Centre for New Students
- Academic Advisors
- Student Mentoring Programs
- Writing Centre
- Technology Support Services
- Peer Tutors
- Co-op Education
- Study Abroad Office
- International, Native, and Black Student Advisors
- Career Counselling
- Counselling Services
- Health Services
- Contact points for major student societies

A centralized structure would also coordinate the communication that students receive about the University, its programs, and their status, and would promote more proactive communication strategies. As Levitz and Noel (1989) argued, "academic support services may be available, but if we wait for students to come to us for assistance, attrition may be the result. Students inexperienced in the ways of college ... need to be *reached out to* with intrusive programs and services" (p. 69).

To be effective, communications to students must be more coordinated and each message timely, student-friendly, and delivered via the media students use. For instance, many institutions are beginning to use technology such as cell-phone text messaging, pod-casting, and MSN messaging to reach today's technology-savvy students. Although technology-based communication with and advising of students is currently under-utilized at Saint Mary's, this will likely be remedied as the new Banner system is fully implemented. For instance, making forms for add/drop, declaration of major, and academic appeal available on-line has made the process more student-friendly and will free personnel for more in-depth advising.

Effective internal communications are as important as communications with students. The "relevant others" on campus must be informed of mail-outs to students and given copies so that they have the exact wording, so that they can prepare for students seeking help/advice. For instance, students receiving a form letter indicating that they are in danger of being placed on or have been placed on Academic Probation often panic. They may then approach the Undergraduate

Program Advisor, the Associate Dean, a Department Chair, a Program Director, student counsellors, or SMUSA staff and are not reassured by comments like “I didn’t realize that had gone out already” or “I haven’t actually seen the letter you received.”

Ensuring that students feel connected to the University community not only promotes their feeling of belonging, but also enhances their knowledge of resources and their willingness to seek assistance. One of the most powerful methods is formal mentoring programs, often using senior-student and faculty volunteers, which have been introduced in many universities. In larger institutions, participation tends to be required only for new students or at-risk students; however, many academic departments have introduced mentoring programs for their majors. Pagan and Edwards-Wilson (2002-2003) present literature and research encouraging academic mentoring programs for at-risk students. Mentoring programs, of course, require skilled oversight and programs to train and support the mentors.

Recommendation

That a mentoring program be established at Saint Mary’s in conjunction with University 1000. Initially, participation would be mandatory for students entering with borderline grades but should be open to all students.

That a mentoring program be required for students on Academic Probation.

That Departments be encouraged to develop mentoring programs for their majors and that departmental initiatives be supported.

That mentors be drawn from faculty and senior students and provided with appropriate training and support.

With the exception of the Faculty of Arts’ limited-enrolment, “Enhancing Student Performance”, for students who successfully appeal a Required Withdrawal, no intervention strategies have been developed for the large number of students known to be at academic risk.¹¹ Even those placed on Academic Probation or Required Withdrawal are without assistance. Arguably, the University’s current “sink or swim” approach is incompatible with a mission of accessibility: admitting students known to be at risk (for any number of reasons) entails some obligation to better position them to succeed. While it is anticipated that other interventions such as University 1000 will reduce their numbers, both proactive identification of at-risk students and effective intervention strategies are needed. However, both must be careful to avoid stigmatizing such students.

For first-year students in particular, early intervention strategies would enable more students experiencing difficulties to take charge of their situation and turn it around. For many students encountering difficulties, the root causes lie in their basic skills: note-taking, planning and priority setting, organization, time management, study habits, learning strategies, and conceptual skills. Again, University 1000 should help students diagnose any skill deficits and locate sources of assistance. However, students encountering more serious difficulties need individual attention.

¹¹ Another model is provided by the University of Alberta’s “Fresh Start” Program. (<http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/freshstart/>).

Student Services currently addresses many of these needs, but cannot cope with the volume of students experiencing difficulties.

Both an “early warning system” and dedicated support are needed. (Apparently the Faculty of Commerce is the only one that contacts students after Christmas marks to warn them that they are in danger of being placed on Academic Probation or Required Withdrawal.)

Recommendation

That an “early warning system” be introduced in all Faculties. Students whose GPA in any term falls below 1.70 should be “red flagged” and contacted to direct them to appropriate support resources (e.g., the Academic Advisor, Student Services, or external resources) and to encourage them to seek assistance before their academic situation worsens. The tone should be supportive and encouraging. (Earlier dialogue would also address the relatively minor problem of the small number of students each year who should have applied for retroactive withdrawal from their courses but didn’t know that possibility existed.)

That students with declared majors who are in danger of falling below the required CGPA be contacted as early as possible.

That a fee-based, non-credit “Academic Enhancement Course” be introduced. Although open to all, the course would be required of all first-year students judged to be at risk – i.e., those whose CGPA falls below 1.70 in either semester – and all students on Academic Probation. (Successful programs are currently being offered at Acadia, Mount Saint Vincent, and numerous other universities.)

Although students encountering academic difficulties do need additional assistance, they often command most of an institution’s attention. Students who are performing well are, for the most part, ignored. Efforts to applaud excellence should be introduced/expanded. Receptions for scholarship winners, Deans’ List students, and the Sobey School’s Beta Gamma Sigma Society inductees should be complemented by other events during the year to recognize and encourage excellence.

Recommendation

That additional opportunities to encourage and applaud excellence be identified and pursued.

That top-performing students (e.g., Dean’s List students) be guaranteed registration in their chosen courses.

Feedback from the stakeholders on campus and from annual CUSC surveys shows that academic, career, and personal counselling are key service gaps at Saint Mary’s. Although the new Banner system will provide students with much of the needed hard information and guidance, to choose wisely students need more insight into the options available, their own interests and aptitudes, potential career paths, broad employment patterns, and the expectations graduate schools and future employers will have – career counselling provides the foundation for students’ academic

decisions. These insights not only help students make important decisions, they also encourage students to become more engaged and to take responsibility for their learning.

At Saint Mary's, students receive little, if any, help in choosing majors or courses. Often, students choose – or switch from – a major as a result of experience with a single course or instructor. SMUSA's "Majors Day" isn't well supported by individual departments and isn't well attended by students.

Current staffing levels in the Employment Centre and the Student Counselling Centre restrict Saint Mary's career counselling services to an absolute minimum. The University employs one career counsellor, on a nine-month contract, meaning that career counselling is only offered during the Fall and Winter academic terms. Further, Saint Mary's is one of only two schools in Canada with no campus Career Centre. (Under a contract with Dalhousie, Saint Mary's students are directed there.)

Recommendation

That career counselling services be expanded, and programming developed in collaborations between the Counselling Centre, the Employment Centre, and the Faculties. Since providing one-on-one counselling for the entire student body is clearly not possible, alternative methods of service delivery must be investigated.

That Saint Mary's University establish a Career Centre.

That academic departments that have not developed handouts or on-line resources for their majors and prospective majors be encouraged to do so.

Similarly, as student focus groups, CUSC surveys, and internal stakeholders report, academic advising is not adequately resourced. Resources dedicated solely to undergraduate program advising are urgently needed. Most students come to university not understanding the purpose, or the benefits, of a "well-rounded education", let alone how to design one for themselves. Most need to be encouraged to challenge themselves and to explore new paths. For some, choosing majors – and even electives – has the gravitas of life-altering decisions. Even those who are more confident value the opportunity to explore options with someone more knowledgeable.

Departmental advising of majors is assumed to address the needs of senior students, although there is much variability across departments in both numbers of students and depth of assistance provided and although past measures to involve faculty in providing academic counselling were not especially successful. Even more problematic, it is assumed that a single Undergraduate Program Advisor in each Faculty is able to advise all of the more complex cases plus the several hundreds of first- and second-year students. Similarly, although a large number of undergraduate students plan on completing a BEd to pursue a teaching career, there is no dedicated advising to help them understand and prepare for the certification requirements.

Recommendation

That immediate attention be given to students' need for academic advising. Additional resources must be directed to departmental advising of majors, academic advising of first- and second-year students, and advising of students planning on pursuing teaching and other forms of certification.

Resources supporting personal counselling are dangerously inadequate. The Canadian College and University Counselling Association recommends one counsellor for every 1500 students. Saint Mary's current allocation, just over two positions for 8700 students, places the University far below the six positions "best practice" would recommend. Saint Mary's has been very fortunate in not having had any serious incidents (e.g., in 2003-04, there were 27 student suicides on Canadian university campuses), but with a one-month wait to see a counsellor and no staff available to assess urgency, it is clearly more a matter of luck than responsible planning.

Recommendation

That Counselling Services be expanded to meet "best practice" levels.

Finally, although enrolment pressures decline after first year, over-subscribed courses that deny students the courses they have chosen are frustrating. A more open planning process would encourage new course offerings and restore some equity across departments. A related problem is insufficient lead-time, particularly regarding summer and evening course offerings, to enable students to plan their programs over the long-term.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's establish a more effective system of program and course planning that anticipates demand for all courses over a three-five year cycle – i.e., regular-term, summer, evening, on-line, and off-campus courses – and informs the planning process in Faculties and Departments. Proactive planning should assure students their first choice of courses and allow them to plan their programs more confidently.

ii. Academic Programs and Instruction

To many students, our academic programs seem like random groupings of courses rather than coherent programs of study. Course sequencing and progression through the levels of a program may not appear obvious. In some programs, once prerequisites are satisfied, students can cherry pick their way to a degree without necessarily knowing or appreciating the inter-connectedness of relevant disciplines. Often the relevance of the material in individual courses is not obvious. Many students – even those who are consistent top-performers – do not know "exactly what it takes" to receive high grades. Sometimes, different sections of a single course have different expectations. Further, with no clear learning outcomes at the program or the degree level, we have no systematic way of ensuring students' education and development.

Making course and program objectives and their inter-connections transparent is key to students' assuming responsibility for their own success, as is consistency in expectations and policies.

Curriculum transparency can be achieved by

- adoption of an explicit syllabus at the program level¹² which communicates, in concrete terms
 - the program objectives, including students' capabilities upon completion of each stage
 - how the objectives will be achieved
 - how the required courses contribute to overall program objectives
- providing course outlines which explicitly state the desired learning outcomes, learning activities, assessment methods (including contribution of each component to calculation of final grades), student responsibilities, course/program policies and penalties
- consistency in format of course outlines within a program
- clearly communicated and consistent expectations (within program years) of what constitutes "satisfactory", "good", and "excellent" performance
- clear linkages between individual courses and the overall program
- comparability across sections of a single course
- additional guidance for students (e.g., student handbooks)
- regularized methods of collecting and using feedback from students

All of the Faculties have made some progress towards greater "curriculum transparency". However, these efforts are not systematic nor supported institutionally and are consequently disjointed. Implicit in "curriculum transparency" is a refocusing from "teaching" to "learning". While some initiatives and a number of instructors focus on student learning, administrative leadership and support will be necessary to ensure a program-wide approach.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's formally commit to University-wide adoption of curriculum transparency/learning outcomes within five years. Task forces in each Faculty should be coordinated under the leadership of a broader steering committee. To succeed, this initiative will need to be led by Senate and the Senior Academic Administration (President, Vice-President Academic and Research, and Deans).

That, Saint Mary's introduce a "Curriculum Fellows" program of course releases and grants for faculty pursuing demanding curriculum projects, to support both this initiative and continued curriculum renewal.

A related obstacle to student success is the University's relative lack of leadership of and support for the development of enhanced teaching skills. Although numerous workshops are offered each year, faculty perceive a near exclusive focus on research productivity in assessment of their own performance. For example, the President's Report and the numerous PR communiqués highlight innovation and accomplishment in research but rarely mention teaching. A vibrant learning

¹² David Conley (2003) provides a useful model of "standards" for different disciplines, which could help Departments develop explicit and transparent syllabi.

environment requires investment of resources for training and support, encouragement and recognition of good instructors, and acknowledgement that first attempts might not always be successful. To some extent, good teaching is “its own reward”, but a deliberate strategy to promote scholarship of and innovation in teaching would be more effective.

For instance, considerable research suggests that integrating active learning into the classroom is critical to enhancing student success (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan 2000). Effective active learning techniques also promote deeper understanding, critical thinking, and learner self-sufficiency. Widespread reliance on passive learning techniques discourages student engagement in their studies and undermines their assuming responsibility for their own learning. However, many courses at Saint Mary’s still tend to rely heavily on the more passive lecture format. In large measure, faculty willingness to adopt new teaching methods depends on institutional support and encouragement and, again, on the institution’s signals regarding which activities are most valued.

Similarly, service learning, which provides opportunities for students to apply their academic study to community-service placements (providing students with real-world experience, benefiting the recipient organizations, and extending the University’s connections to the community), although increasingly common elsewhere, has not found a foothold at Saint Mary’s. (See Appendix F for sources on service learning.)

A related issue is the increased reliance on large-enrolment classes, which tend to be impersonal and can limit the range of learning activities. As a result, the quality of the learning experience and students' attachment to the University may be diminished. As it is unlikely that class numbers can be reduced, instructors will need to become better equipped to address the issues associated with large classes. For instance, active-learning techniques can be applied in large-enrolment classes.

Closely related to instruction is the issue of student feedback and assessment. Ineffective feedback/assessment methods have a dramatic effect on student success. However, in general, faculty have limited expertise in feedback/assessment, particularly in “authentic assessment” which proposes alternative methods to address differing learning objectives and learning styles.

Although instructional development is important, the intent is not to criticize faculty. Faculty begin their teaching careers with little training in the craft and most are dedicated instructors who follow closely developments in their field. Their high level of commitment is evidenced in the high levels of stress and burnout in the profession. Simply adding another burden to already over-taxed faculty will not succeed. Changed expectations surrounding teaching must be carefully developed, with strong institutional leadership and commitment of sufficient resources.

Concern about weak course evaluations also deters experimentation with new approaches – although the new course/instructor evaluation form will provide a more effective tool, faculty must believe that their efforts to develop new skills will not be penalized at promotion/tenure decisions.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's increase attention to effectiveness of instruction and feedback/assessment. Additional resources should be devoted to

- providing opportunities for reflection on and promotion of an informed philosophy of teaching and learning, development of pedagogical skills, and informal sharing of teaching tips
- attendance at conferences devoted to instructional development
- development of instructional materials

That deliberate efforts be made to include part-time instructors in faculty development initiatives, as they carry a considerable share of the instruction within our programs.

That flexibility in interpreting the standard teaching load, which would enable departments to try out innovative approaches, be explored.

That additional resources be allocated to support large-enrolment courses (e.g., tutorials, supplemental instruction, or other supports). (However, the increasing practice of using senior students as tutorial leaders, although perhaps cost-effective, is not pedagogically effective, is not well received by students, and often places tutorial leaders in conflict-of-interest situations. More appropriate would be side agreements with the Faculty Union permitting some courses to explore employing full-time course assistants, in a capacity similar to lab instructors.)

That Saint Mary's establish an "instructional expertise inventory" similar to the research expertise web-page. The inventory would enable instructors to locate an internal specialist or identify others with similar interests and would also recognize those who have invested in developing their teaching skills.

In general, most courses neglect student skills development in favor of mastery of a corpus of content. In part, this results from the continually increasing volume of material that must be covered in each course, which makes instructors understandably reluctant to give up limited class time to what they perceive as non-subject-related instruction. In part, it results from faculty lack of expertise. And, in part, it results from faculty who perceive externally mandated expectations of their courses as challenges to their academic freedom.

However, literacy and communications skills are particularly fundamental to university education – and the general perception is that too many of Saint Mary's students have weak literacy and communications skills. University-wide, there must be a much stronger focus on student literacy and written scholarship, which in turn requires that skills development be systematically integrated into the curriculum.

In this regard, a fully developed Writing Centre is an important resource. The Centre helps entering students hone general skills such as dealing with the abundance of information and evaluating information sources as well as specific skills such as what constitutes a scholarly source, how to use electronic research tools, how to structure an argument, and how to avoid plagiarism. It

helps more senior students learn how to review and analyze the research in their field and how to develop and defend complex arguments, as well as helping them develop sophisticated skills, including the specialized oral and written communications used in different disciplines and different types of report/presentation. In addition to working directly with students, both individually and in larger groups, a Writing Centre is an invaluable resource to help faculty explore appropriate expectations, learning activities, and feedback and assessment methods. The strong demand for the services provided Saint Mary's Writing Centre, including the strong student demand for the Summer 2005 first offering of the writing course, shows that students recognize the importance of communications skills and value opportunities to develop their skills. However, the Centre's current staff levels are not adequate to the tasks the University could ask of a fully-developed Writing Centre.

Recommendation

That resources be increased to further develop the services provided for faculty and students by the Writing Centre.

Weaknesses in technological skills also undermine some students' success. While many incoming students have sophisticated computer skills, some academic programs naively assume that all students are computer-literate. And programs that do formally include computer literacy coursework tend to place it early in the program and make little/no provision for refresher training, more advanced applications or technological developments. The Centre for Academic Technology (under the Office of Instructional Development) assists faculty, but students have no corollary support.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's establish a student centre for academic technology, focused on building competence in the technologies required for academic work.

iii. Academic Policies and Regulations

Students are not generally well informed of their rights and responsibilities – from serious issues such as sexual harassment, bullying, or abuse of authority to “fair practice” issues such as instructors' changing course requirements in mid-stream. Yet, student-initiated complaint is the primary enforcement mechanism for many policies. Similarly, students are generally unaware of the regulations and provisions in the Academic Calendar.

Recommendation

That the University use a variety of vehicles, including the website, departmental handouts, and presentations during Orientation (in addition to SMUSA's booklet) to provide students at each stage in their program with relevant information on their rights and responsibilities and the policies in place to assist them.

That each Faculty prepare a guide book for students to supplement the Academic Calendar which is necessarily very detailed, legalistic, and hence “unapproachable”.

Academic fraud/misconduct is a widely shared concern and, at Saint Mary’s, the perception is that policies are not well understood nor consistently enforced. For a variety of reasons – including poor understanding of what constitutes academic fraud; poor time management; learning/assessment activities that are susceptible to cheating; cost/benefit calculations that weigh the relatively minor nature of sanctions against the probability of detection; peer pressures and, the inverse, the relative absence of social sanctions – the incidence of academic fraud is increasing on North American campuses. Many faculty members perceive that pursuing cases of plagiarism is too time-consuming and that the University will not necessarily support their decisions. Practices to deter cheating during mid-term and final exams are not consistently applied. Further, in spite of past efforts, many instructors apparently do not know the procedures to follow in dealing with suspected cases. There is also widespread concern about the University’s apparent reluctance to impose severe sanctions, the lack of transparency in the academic appeals process, and the flow of information back to all of the parties involved. Similarly, the appeal process for students who feel they have been sanctioned unfairly is not clear.

The majority of students act responsibly and are angry at a situation they, with good reason, perceive as unfair. They are angered by inconsistency in enforcing the policies and also by lack of information. (They don’t want information regarding individual cases, but rather confirmation that the guilty do not profit.)

Recommendation

That the University and SMUSA jointly lead a University-wide initiative to reduce academic fraud/misconduct, such as that recently proposed by the Quality of Teaching Sub-Committee on Academic Integrity. Although the relative incidence of academic fraud at Saint Mary’s is not atypical, every effort should be made to maintain the integrity of our programs.

That the Office of Instructional Development offer additional faculty workshops to rally support for dealing with the problem and to share information on techniques that discourage plagiarism and learning activities that make fraud difficult.

That Faculties and student societies co-host student workshops to educate students about plagiarism and help them identify other solutions

That the requirement that student ID be presented at final exams be strictly enforced and that additional invigilators be made available for students who become ill or need washroom facilities.

That information about disposition of individual cases referred to University committees (e.g., student discipline, academic appeals) be communicated back to all parties concerned and, each year, summary information circulated to the broader community.

For many students, the load of exams and major assignments during the last two weeks of classes has become unmanageable. The concern here is not term projects that students have had many weeks to work on, but assignments which seem designed to minimize instructors' exam-period commitments. Placing unreasonable demands on students during the last two weeks does not provide for fair assessment of their learning, which many then see as justification for academic "shortcuts". In addition, deliberately using high-mark activities to divert students' attention from their other courses during what is usually a crucial period for two key objectives – integrating the course material and developing connections to other topics/disciplines – is unfair to them and to other instructors. Regulation 8c should be revisited and some mechanism put in place to ensure that it is enforced.

A related problem is that, over time, the number of formal study days between end of classes and beginning of the final exam period has been sharply reduced – to its current one day, a Saturday! Although perhaps more convenient for instructors, this, exacerbated by the incursion of major assignments and substantial exams into the last two weeks of classes and the relative concentration of final exams in the first week of the exam period, has placed students in a very difficult – and unnecessarily stressful – position.

Recommendation

That Regulation 8c be revisited to tightly limit the grades that can be allocated to exams/assignments assigned to the last two weeks of class, while making provision for courses with major term projects (perhaps by requiring departures from the agreed limit to be formally approved by the Dean or the Department Chair).

That the number of formal study days before exams be increased and the count not include weekends.

That exams be more evenly spaced across the final exam period.

Each year, a large number of students, particularly in the Faculty of Arts, do not formally declare a major although they have completed ten credits. Since most academic advising is provided by Departments, third- and fourth-year students with no declared major are likely not receiving adequate guidance and are in danger of not completing their programs in a timely way. In fact, research suggests that certainty of major is an important predictor of success (Ganunke & Woosley, 2005).

Recommendation

That students who have completed 60 credit-hours but have not yet declared a major be "red flagged", directed to appropriate resources, and required to declare a major before being eligible to register in new courses.

Many students experiencing a difficult transition to university or a period of crisis or trauma caused by life's events subsequently go on to perform very well; at Saint Mary's, their grade-point-average is nonetheless permanently hobbled. Regulation 6d requires that "courses for which

grades of F or WF have been given are included in the calculation of the CGPA even if the courses are subsequently retaken and passed” (p. 28). This appears to be unnecessarily punitive and is not the practice at most institutions. In fact, a survey conducted in 2003 (Appendix G) shows that Saint Mary’s is in a minority. Further, since CGPA is calculated only on courses taken at an institution, the policy encourages students to consider transferring to other schools – i.e., the policy is also counter-productive.

A related concern is that there is no incentive for students to repeat courses they perhaps only barely passed. The opportunity to replace weak grades by repeating courses they found difficult would encourage students to consider strengthening their command of material that will be built upon in subsequent courses.

Recommendation

That Regulation 6d be revised: for courses that have been retaken, and the grade improved, only the higher grade will be retained on the transcript. Grades reflecting penalties for academic fraud (either final grades of F or grades including penalties on component exams/assignments) are exempted and the original grade will be retained.

III. TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY

A. Context

Students in transition out of the University have special needs. For most traditional students, graduation from university is the “rite of passage” signaling assumption of the full responsibilities of adulthood, employment, and citizenship. Challenges accompanying this transition bring many students clusters of problems and major frustrations. However, while many universities have programs and services aimed at easing the transition from high school to university, fewer have a coordinated or well-developed offering of academic programs and support services for graduating students. Not surprisingly, one of the findings of the major (US) National Survey on Student Engagement surveys over the years is that many senior students feel disconnected “by their graduating year”. Reviewing the literature, Gardner and Van Der Veer suggest that “seniors, as a group, are a neglected, captive, anxious audience who need to be better cultivated and supported” (1998, p.7)¹³.

Each year approximately 1500 students graduate from Saint Mary’s – roughly 550 in Arts, 450 in Commerce, 150 in Science, 150 in Graduate Programs, and 200 in the various certificate programs.

B. Challenges Faced by Senior Students

Although seniors as a group differ in many regards – gender, age, culture, life experience, years to completion, residence experience vs. commuter students – seniors as a group also share a common set of characteristics

- albeit not as “at risk” as beginning students, they are a captive audience who have invested significant time and money in their education
- they have high expectations – that graduating will be a “big deal”, a ticket to a well paying job, an immediate improvement in their living standards, an immediate means to paying off their student loans
- they have special needs unique to ending a significant phase of their lives and beginning another
- the senior year provides a “last chance” to address many of the deficiencies in behavioral and attitudinal skills and competencies, particularly including autonomous learning, that will be demanded by employers and graduate programs
- they will soon be alumni – alumni generosity has supported their education, and they have the same responsibility to invest in the education of future students
- their need for continued education and training may represent future opportunities for the University

Efforts to address the needs of graduating students require an institution to “marshal institutional resources and attention” so that, at a minimum, the senior-year experience “provides senior students with opportunities for reflection on personal growth and development, integration, and

¹³ Information in this section draws heavily from Gardner et al (1998).

closure” and “facilitates and supports holistically the graduating students’ transition to post-college life” (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p.13).

Like many others, Saint Mary’s does not offer a systematic approach to senior year programming that ensures our graduates are as fully prepared as possible for the next phase in their lives – as employee/employer, graduate student, alumni supporter, community volunteer/activist, citizen of the world. And we have no way of knowing (beyond the diploma we hand them) whether our students are ready – or feel they are ready – for these new and challenging roles.

C. Overcoming the Challenges

The literature¹⁴ identifies several themes of senior year programs, interventions, and efforts that address the needs of students moving out of the university

- capstone courses/experiences, i.e., summative curricular approaches (courses, major projects, theses, recitals or internships) synthesizing all of the content to date within a particular major and often attempting to connect that learning to the institution's basic theme of general education
- interdisciplinary courses or projects linking liberal Arts with majors and making the academic experience coherent
- leadership education opportunities that also help students explore their responsibilities to society as graduates of institutions of higher education
- a broad range of career planning initiatives to help seniors explore and decide upon options after graduation, including programs addressing the special needs of minority students who still face greater barriers to successful employment after college
- job search and transition planning activities that help prepare students for entry into professional employment, accompanied by the development of specific job and career skills
- preparation for graduate school and assistance in evaluating options, often supported by undergraduate research internships
- alumni development activities that encourage continued learning and continuing involvement in the university

¹⁴ For over twenty-five years, The Center for First Year Students and Students in Transition has been providing “opportunities for the exchange of practical, theory-based information and ideas through the convening of conferences, teleconferences, institutes, and workshops” (from the Center’s mission statement, 2005, <http://www.sc.edu/fye/center/index.html>). Much of the discussion in this section was taken from the University of South Carolina website (<http://www.sc.edu/fye/401/themes.htm>).

- development of practical life skills, such as managing credit and personal finance
- citizenship development activities which engage students in exploration of character and lifestyle issues, including what it means to be a contributing citizen to local, national and global communities

While all universities and colleges offer some academic and non-academic programs that fall into these themes, an intentional and holistic approach to programming is needed to coordinate the “senior year experience”. Not surprisingly, developing and delivering an integrated set of classroom and extra-curricular activities that will achieve the complex and perhaps ambitious senior-year objectives and maximize students’ confidence in making the upcoming transition requires deliberate planning.

D. Current Resources

Appendix H provides details on the resources available at Saint Mary’s. These include

- Student Employment Center
- Counselling Services
- Alumni Office
- Services provided by SMSUA

E. Analysis of Obstacles and Gaps

i. Services and Programs

Currently, services and programs offered across campus tend to be “individually developed and passively marketed” – information is distributed by various offices in multiple ways across campus (flyers, posters, The Journal, etc.) with the hope that students will notice and take advantage of the service being offered. A coordinated “Senior Year Program” would be more proactive –

- identifying current services and programs and working with the various offices to develop new ones
- coordinating all activities
- building liaisons between academic and non-academic programming
- providing information using on-campus and online resources
- providing liaison with off-campus and web-based resources
- identifying graduating students, providing them with the relevant information, and directing them to the appropriate services and programs

With approximately 1,500 graduates each year, this initiative would require a focused and coordinated effort.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary’s establish a “Senior-Year Program”, under the leadership of a Senior-Year Coordinator (most appropriately located in Student Services), to help graduating students manage the transitions to employment, graduate study, and engaged citizenship.

From an administrative perspective, relatively few new resources would be necessary to develop a “senior year program” for graduating students. However, while any new initiative is best served by having someone designated to take responsibility for it – unless it is someone’s specific responsibility, there will be no ‘ownership’ or ‘accountability’ – this is perhaps particularly true of the “First-Year Experience” and the “Senior-Year Experience”. Both require extensive collaboration and coordination.

ii. Academic Programs and Instruction

Similarly, but perhaps more challenging, academic programming is needed to assist senior students in making more successful transitions out of university. Arguably, senior-level courses and other activities that help students integrate their learning and connect it to broader educational objectives and, equally important, orient them to finding their place in the broader world are the most important in their academic careers.

The “capstone” experience – a senior seminar, course, thesis, or project – offers final-year students a means to synthesize their program of studies and, often, connect it to a broader context. The Commerce program includes a capstone course. Honours students in Arts or Science complete seminar courses and individual theses, although these are necessarily narrow in focus. For students completing a general Arts or Science degree, there is no capstone integrative experience.

Learning portfolios can also provide students with an opportunity to integrate their academic and personal experiences in a thoughtful manner. Learning portfolios are described by Zubizarreta (2004, p. xiv), as “a rich, convincing, adaptable method of recording intellectual growth and involving students in a critically reflective, collaborative process that augments learning as a community endeavor and refines their educational experience.” Outside the classroom, student portfolios are most often used in the career-development field to help students reflect on and document how their undergraduate academic, personal, and professional experiences have helped them develop the attitudes and skills required in the workplace (Zubizarreta, p. 212). While learning portfolios are not the exclusive domain of upper-level courses or intended for graduating students only, they do offer one mechanism that enables senior students to reflect on and articulate their learning in preparation for the next stage of their lives.

A “skills transcript” formally recognizes mastery of a specified set of transferable skills, through the simple mechanism of recording completion of courses which intentionally contribute to the development of those skills¹⁵. Although Saint Mary’s has not adopted skills transcripts in the academic stream, Residence Assistants ending their term are helped to develop a “transferable skills” résumé, and find it a valuable addition.

¹⁵ For instance, at Dalhousie, over 150 courses are currently identified as “Skills Transcript courses” – included in the courses’ learning objectives are outcomes that contribute to the development of one or more of the specified skills. For students completing these courses, included in the formal academic transcript provided by the Registrar’s Office is a “skills transcript”. http://skillstranscript.studentservices.dal.ca/career_1733.html).

Recommendation

That curriculum renewal initiatives pay explicit attention to the needs of students in the final phase of their University experience, with initiatives such as

- capstone courses, preferably interdisciplinary in nature
- opportunities to document and reflect on learning through Learning Portfolios or Skills-Transcripts Courses

While senior-year programming is primarily intended to help students connect academic work and life/career experiences, including fine-tuning skills and perspectives that encourage personal and civic responsibility, the institution benefits as well. Gardner (1998, p. 18) lists the institutional benefits of Senior Year Programs as

- improving college-business and college-state relations
- improving alumni relations
- promoting faculty development
- forging alliances between academic and student affairs
- enhancing institutional research and student outcomes assessment

To achieve this, “the successful senior experience and its outcomes require a partnership of all key campus constituencies” (Gardner, 1998, p. 20).

IV. MONITORING AND OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Without good information, it is very difficult to determine priorities or make corrective adjustments. Although the academic integrity of our academic programs is evaluated every five years, the University has only limited assessment and monitoring/feedback processes for its wide range of programs and services.

Further, the information needs of the many offices involved in programme evaluation, planning, and delivery have not been well anticipated. The information that is collected is not made available to all who would benefit. Information that is circulated is not timely for decision-makers whose planning cycle may differ from the Administration's. Much of the information that is circulated is too global for the user's needs. And the turn-around time for specific requests for information can be several weeks to months. This suggests that as much information as possible should be made available on-line. (Although the pressures for increased transparency would argue that most of the above data could be accessible to the public, the University may prefer to restrict access to some.)

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's introduce a routinized, comprehensive process to collect and disseminate information needed for assessment, monitoring, and feedback. The definition of student success, Part I, provides a potential guideline: multiple individual and institutional indicators for each transition stage.

That decision makers be involved early in the process, to determine their information needs and priorities and identify potential data sources.

Although not an exhaustive list, necessary data include

- profiles of incoming students
- withdrawal rates
- surveys of students who leave the University and exit interviews of a smaller group
- yearly Academic Probation and Required Withdrawal rates and, to evaluate intervention programs, subsequent success/fail rates
- usage data for each of the services offered on campus and, for those services like Counselling Services that cannot meet demand, the nature and extent of unmet demand
- participation in co-op and study-abroad programs
- measures of student involvement in clubs and societies
- success rates of groups globally judged to be at-risk, e.g., first-year students, ESL students, those judged at admission to be academically weak
- for each program: time to completion, failure and withdrawal rates, assessment of learning outcomes, frequency of academic fraud/plagiarism, exit surveys of a representative sample of the graduating class
- campus safety statistics
- student knowledge of and satisfaction with University programs and services¹⁶

¹⁶ To provide the specific information and the sample sizes needed to support decision-making, the more global CUSC

- alumni, employer and other stakeholders' satisfaction
- success rates in graduate studies and employment

The new Banner system will enable many users to generate the reports they need. However, new measures will be needed to capture information not currently tracked.

The University now has several years of CUSC samples (each population is studied on a three-year cycle), enabling some trend analyses. However, the sample size is insufficient to support break-downs by faculty. Although conducting a comparable survey internally might be recommended, in the short term heaving-up the CUSC sample size would enable the University to look more closely at students in each Faculty.

As an institution, how do we know what Saint Mary's student experiences are, from orientation through to graduation? Apart from CUSC studies, which primarily measure satisfaction, the University has no vehicles measuring the key success factor, student engagement, and the practices that support their engagement. Rapidly growing in Canada is participation in the (US) National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). "In 2004, 11 Canadian universities took part in the annual survey for the first time. This year, about 31 – including all 18 members of the Council of Ontario Universities – will join the hundreds of American universities and colleges to discover what works well for them, what doesn't, and how they can improve" (University Affairs, March 2006, p.29). Co-sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning, the NSSE is seen as the most comprehensive assessment of effective practices in higher education.

Recommendation

That Saint Mary's participate in the National Survey on Student Engagement (see Appendix I).

That the annual CUSC sample be "heaved up" to ensure an adequate sample size for each Faculty.

surveys should be supplemented by custom-designed surveys.

PART THREE: QUICK REFERENCE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

To provide a recap, the recommendations are summarized below. For convenience, they have been organized by primary functional area, although effective programming requires increased collaboration.

Support Services

Improve and better coordinate communications sent to incoming students p. 14

Increase the academic and support-services components of Orientation, to improve attendance and increase participation. Add a January Orientation for second-semester starters. p. 14

Expand the F.Y.I. Program. p. 14

Centralize student services to establish a “one-stop” centre to provide timely, efficient, year-round service. p. 13, 22

Established a mentoring program tied to University 1000. Open to all but required of at-risk students. p. 23

Require students on Academic Probation to participate in a mentoring program. p. 23

Support departments in developing mentoring programs for their majors. p. 23

Introduce an “early warning system” in all faculties for first-year students whose Fall- or Winter-term GPA falls below 1.70. “Red flag” and refer these to appropriate resources before their academic situation worsens. p. 24

Intervene to assist declared majors in danger of falling below the required CGPA. p. 24

Dedicate support for students encountering academic difficulties, including a required support course for students on AP. p. 24

Develop opportunities to encourage and applaud excellence. p. 24

Guarantee top-performing or Dean’s List students enrolment in their chosen courses. p. 24

Expand the Counselling Centre, Career Counselling services, and the Employment Centre to meet increasing demand. Investigate alternative means of providing basic career-counselling services to a greater number of students. p. 25

Provide (on-line or other) departmental and other resources to majors and prospective majors. p. 25

Support and expand formal departmental advising. **p. 26**

Expand Student Counselling Services to meet “best practice” levels. **p. 26**

Implement an effective, centralized system of program and course planning that anticipates demand and informs the planning process. **p. 26**

Develop coordinated senior-year programming, under the leadership of a dedicated coordinator, to assist graduating students in managing the transitions to graduate study, employment, and engaged citizenship. **p. 36**

Implement a routinized, comprehensive process to collect and disseminate information needed for assessment, monitoring, and feedback. **p. 39**

Participate annually in the National Survey on Student Engagement. **p. 40**

Academic Programs and Instruction

Develop a comprehensive “first-year strategy”:

- Assign full-time, experienced faculty to coordinate and teach first-year courses.
- Expand support for first-year courses (tutorials, mentors, on-line resources). Encourage innovations in teaching first-year courses.
- Make faculty development a priority: organize workshops to support those teaching first-year courses. Encourage attendance at conferences or visits to sister institutions with a strong first-year focus. **p. 15**

Create purposeful, inquiry-based first-year courses addressing university life and learning, which build foundational skills while introducing students to the disciplines and their history and forms of discourse. **p. 16**

Revisit the English-language competency requirements. Re-introduce credit courses in English as a Second Language (ESL). While they build language fluency, limit students with weak English language skills to a maximum of three courses, one of which must be ESL. **p. 17**

Identify courses with high failure rates and investigate ways to improve outcomes. **p. 17**

Make a formal commitment to curriculum renewal by implementing full degree-program transparency within five years, under the leadership of the President, Vice-President Academic and Research, and the Deans. **p. 27**

Introduce a “Curriculum Fellows” program of course releases and grants for faculty pursuing demanding curriculum renewal projects. **p. 27**

Increase attention on effectiveness of instruction and feedback/assessment by providing additional resources for

- reflection on and promotion of an informed philosophy of teaching and learning, developing pedagogical skills, and informal sharing of teaching tips
- attendance at conferences devoted to instructional development
- development of instructional materials **p. 29**

Include part-time instructors in faculty development initiatives. **p. 29**

Encourage innovative approaches by allowing flexibility in interpreting the standard teaching load. **p. 29**

Allocate additional resources to support large-enrolment courses (e.g., tutorials, supplemental instruction, or other supports). Explore the possibility of using full-time course assistance in lieu of senior student tutorial leaders. **p. 29**

Establish an “instructional expertise inventory” similar to the research expertise web-page to identify and recognize internal interest/expertise. **p. 29**

Increase resources to further develop the services provided for faculty and students by the Writing Centre. **p. 30**

As a corollary to the Writing Centre, create a student centre for academic technology, focused on building students’ expertise in the technologies required for academic work. **p. 30**

Pay explicit attention to the needs of students in the final phase of their University experience during curriculum renewal. **p. 38**

Encourage interdisciplinary capstone activities in each degree program to help graduating students integrate their learning and connect it to the University’s broad educational objectives. **p. 38**

As part of the curriculum renewal process, consider implementing Learning Portfolios, Skills Transcripts, or a Senior Seminar for students in their graduating year to help students reflect on and document their learning. **p. 38**

Policies

To complement student recruitment strategies, guarantee registration in the courses of their choice to those with entering averages of 80% or higher. **p. 18**

Do not permit first-year students admitted after classes have started to register until the subsequent academic term. Review the late-admissions policy. **p. 18**

Expand the communication vehicles that assist students in understanding their rights and responsibilities. Provide guide booklets for students in each faculty, written in approachable language, to supplement the detailed and legalistic Academic Calendar. **p. 30**

Adopt and enforce the proposals of the Quality of Teaching Sub-Committee on Academic Integrity. With SMUSA, create a University-wide initiative to reduce academic fraud/misconduct. Through the OID, offer workshops and share techniques that rally support for the policy. **p. 31**

Require student ID at final exams. Invigilate bathroom breaks or other disruptions in the testing process. **p. 31**

Communicate to all concerned parties information about disposition of individual cases referred to University committees (e.g., student discipline, academic appeals). Circulate summary information to the broader community each year. **p. 31**

Revisit Regulation 8c to tightly limit the weighting of grades allocated to exams/assignments during the last two weeks of class. Maintain provisions for courses using major term projects in lieu of testing. **p. 32**

Increase the number of formal study days before exams and exclude weekends. **p. 32**

Spread and space examinations evenly across the examination period. **p. 32**

Require students having completed sixty credits to declare a major before allowing them to register in new courses. **p. 32**

Revisit Regulation 6d to read that “for courses that have been retaken, and the grade improved, only the higher grade will be retained on the transcript” (except grades reflecting sanctions for academic misconduct). **p. 33**

PART FOUR: ACTION PLAN

Our consultations with the University community and our study of practices elsewhere identified many strengths but also many “opportunities for improvement”. Some can be implemented in a relatively short time frame. Some involve substantive change and will require additional consultation and planning. Some will require investment of additional resources. Some, of course, are more urgent than others. And almost all depend on increased collaboration between the academic, administration, and support-services communities.

Importantly, our consultations also found a strong consensus about the changes needed, widespread openness to change, and a wealth of expertise on campus that is under-utilized. Thus, although some of the recommended changes are substantial, none are outside Saint Mary’s reach.

Note that grouping the recommendations under the three functional areas used here (Services and Support, Academic Programs and Instruction, and Policies and Procedures) is an artificial convenience, as effectively addressing the needs of students at each stage of development requires seamlessly integrated approaches.

A. Services and Support

The primary recommendation is the establishment of a centrally located single-destination centre that represents the “face” of the University and through which the majority of services to students are coordinated and delivered.

As centralization of services was suggested by everyone consulted, it not likely to experience institutional resistance. Nonetheless, the challenges of creating the physical space and reorganizing and coordinating services historically delivered by different departments using different reporting lines suggest that full implementation may take several years.

Consequently other initiatives must proceed in parallel with establishment of the Success Centre:

- **Expansion of career and personal counselling services and of employment services is also a priority.** Although on-line resources can deliver some of the necessary services, additional personnel are urgently needed, particularly in the Counselling Centre, to meet best-practice standards.
- **Increasing the academic component of Orientation and expanding the introduction to services available on campus and in the community is also urgent, as is repeating the program for students starting in the Winter term.**

Equally important is the introduction of comprehensive, routinized data collection and dissemination to monitor institutional outcomes. Two immediate steps include

- discussions with decision makers on campus to determine information needs and identify potential data sources and data collection strategies.
- participation in the National Survey on Student Engagement

B. Academic Programs and Instruction

Broad-based curriculum renewal, with special attention to first-year students, graduating students, and at-risk students, is urgently needed.

As students' first-year experience is pivotal to all aspects of student success, but particularly to persistence, developing a comprehensive first-year strategy is a priority. Providing support for first-year students and academically at-risk students pays immediate dividends in student engagement, academic performance, and student retention. No other initiative is likely to have as strong and immediate an impact as assisting students in making the transition to University and ensuring that they feel welcomed and secure in the University community. Components include

- introduction of a for-credit University 1000 course
- in the interim, allocation of additional resources to expand the FYI program
- introduction of an early warning system to flag at-risk students and direct them to the appropriate resources
- introduction of a non-credit Academic Success course required of students on Academic Probation
- development of strategies to address high-risk courses
- re-introduction of credit courses in English as a Second Language (ESL). And, while they build language fluency, limiting students with weak English language skills to a maximum of three courses, one of which must be ESL.

A substantial initiative is needed to address a major weakness of our academic programs, the lack of curriculum transparency: explicitly stated program learning outcomes, clear articulation of each course's role and contribution, and clear expectations within courses. Although there are "faculty champions" in each of the Faculties, senior leadership will be a key success factor – to signal the University's commitment, ensure that the necessary resources are provided, and facilitate coordination across Faculties.

For the 1500 students who graduate each year and for their employers and graduate programs, **senior-year programming that helps students reflect on and integrate their learning, make the transition to employment or professional/graduate school, and build a continuing relationship with the University is very important** and, at Saint Mary's, long neglected. Components include

- coordination and proactive promotion of existing services and programs
- expanded career counselling and employment services
- capstone courses
- learning portfolios or skills transcripts

To support this curriculum renewal, **increased institutional support will be needed**, in the form of

- course- and time-releases for the course developers
- travel support to study proven programs at sister institutions
- faculty-development resources to engage mid-career faculty and to encourage increased use of active learning techniques, "authentic feedback and assessment", and innovation in instructional techniques and materials

- expanded support resources: dedicated support for large-enrolment courses, expanded Writing Centre, Student Centre for Academic Technology, Curriculum Fellows Program, and “instructional expertise inventory”
- preparation of instructional materials

C. Policies and Procedures

Changes to several academic regulations have been recommended and several new policies proposed:

- guaranteed course selection for high-achieving incoming and continuing students
- restriction of registration for those admitted after classes begin
- reconsideration of the late admissions policy
- revisiting of the English-language competency requirements
- pro-active identification of at-risk students and completion of mandatory support programs
- clear, well-understood and transparent policies and processes regarding academic dishonesty, including enforcement of existing policies designed to prevent cheating during exams
- revisiting of Regulation 8c, limiting the weighting of exams/major assignments during the last two weeks of class
- increased number of designated study days before final exam period begins and more even spacing of exams across the final exam period
- reconsideration of treatment of repeated courses in calculation of CGPA
- enforcement of policies regarding timely declaration of major
- reconsideration of Regulation 6d, retaining only the higher grades when courses have been repeated

D. Conclusion

Our research and our consultations with stakeholders showed that, while Saint Mary’s does many things well, enjoys a good reputation, and offers an historically proven “product”, we are surely falling behind in some areas. There is room to significantly improve both the educational experience of Saint Mary’s students and the numbers of successful students.

Throughout our deliberations, the Committee applied one fundamental criterion: “What is the benefit to our students?” Creating a more supportive environment that fosters learning, personal growth, and the nurturing of responsible citizens of the world is not an easy task. Enhancing student success requires a strong and comprehensive institutional commitment. However, given the vision and the resolve, Saint Mary’s has the potential to dramatically improve student success (and, in turn, student retention, alumni involvement, and referrals of future students).

One University. One World. Yours!

GLOSSARY

Authentic assessment is a form of **alternative assessment** (known also as formative, integrative, holistic, and on-going assessment) that stands in direct contrast to traditional, achievement or summative assessment. Traditional tests are a monitoring instrument given at particular points in time to sample student learning and to measure variance among students. Authentic assessment is an ongoing strategy that uses active demonstrations in real life or authentic contexts in order to measure actual performance.

Alternative assessment involves students in choosing other, non-traditional avenues as indicators of active learning. Researchers argue that a greater quality of learning can be ensured by putting the control over learning in the place where the learning is occurring, namely in the mind of the learner. Alternative assessment helps students become independent thinkers and autonomous learners.

- Allwright, R. (1988). Autonomy and individuation in whole class instruction. In Brooks, A. & Grundy, P., (Eds.), "Individuation and autonomy in language learning," p35-44. British Council.
- Hancock, C.R. (Ed.). (1994). "Teaching, testing, and assessing: Making the connection. Northeast Conference Reports." Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.
- Drake, Frederick D (1997). Using Alternative Assessments To Improve the Teaching and Learning of History. 5 January 2006. <http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-1/history.htm>
- Hancock, Charles R.(1994)Alternative Assessment and Second Language Study: What and Why? 5 January 2006. <http://www.ericdigests.org/1995-2/language.htm>

Portfolio assessment is an ongoing process involving the student and teacher in selecting samples of student work for inclusion in a collection, the main purpose of which is to show the student's progress

- Brown, Bettina Lankard (1997). Portfolio Assessment: Missing Link in Student Evaluation. Trends and Issues Alerts. 20 February 2006. <http://ericae.net/scripts/seget2.asp?db=ericft&want=http://ericae.net/ericdb/ED414447.htm>

Capstone Course or Senior-Year Program refers to a culminating experience in university education prior to entry into the workplace, graduate or professional school. Understood as a transitional phase, the capstone course offers seniors the chance to synthesize knowledge and skills acquired in previous courses, and construct some sort of meaningful, integrated whole of their university experience that would better prepare them for success in the next phase of their lives.

- [Gardner, John N.](#); [Van der Veer, Gretchen](#) (1998). The Senior Year Experience: Facilitating Integration, Reflection, Closure, and Transition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- [Heinemann, Robert L.](#) (1997) "The Senior Capstone, Dome or Spire?" Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication, Chicago, November 19-23, 1997. 16 March 2006. http://www.eric.ed.gov/sitemap/html_0900000b8012fdd2.html

Collaborative learning was proposed in response to traditional curriculum-driven education. In collaborative/cooperative learning environments, students interact in structured groups to support each other in the pursuit of specified learning outcomes. It is believed that because of group diversity in knowledge and experience, students perform at a higher intellectual level and are more prone to retain their knowledge.

- Gokhale, Anuradha (1995). "Collaborative Learning Enhances Critical Thinking" 22 December 2005. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/jte-v7n1/gokhale.jte-v7n1.html>
- Beckman, M. (1990, Fall). Collaborative learning: Preparation for the workplace and democracy? *College Teaching*, 38(4), 128-133.
- Cooper, J. (1990, May). Cooperative learning and college teaching: Tips from the trenches. *Teaching Professor*, 4, 1-2.

Curriculum (or Curricular) Transparency was developed in Europe as a means to encourage student mobility and to facilitate credit recognition in transnational education. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) measures and compares learning achievement and its relevance to the degree at member institutions. In this report, the term refers to a systematic approach to establish at home coherent programs and degrees that share visible learning outcomes, consistent and thorough syllabi, and meaningful linkages and sequencing among courses.

- ECTS. 6 September 2005. <http://www.fcsch.unl.pt/cursos/ects.asp>
- ECTS. 6 September 2005 http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/glossary/glossar_eng.htm

Differentiated learning or differentiated instruction refers to a teaching style that incorporates a variety of instructional strategies that address diverse student strengths. It places students at the center of teaching and learning and student needs as opposed to teacher preferences drive instructional planning. An example is that students may be grouped by interest with tasks set at different levels of complexity, which results in a product differentiated by different learning preferences. The concept generally incorporates principles inherent in the multiple intelligences paradigm.

- Hall, T. (2002). *Differentiated instruction*. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum. 23 January 2006 http://www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_diffinstruc.html
- Enhanced Learning with Technology : Strategies for differentiating. 23 January 2006 <http://members.shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/differentiatingstrategies.html>

Experiential education (or "learning by doing") is the process of actively engaging students in authentic or direct experiences that will have benefits and consequences. Students participate in a real activity with real consequences for the purpose of meeting learning objectives. They make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves instead of hearing or reading about the experiences of others. Students also reflect on their experiences, thus developing new skills, new attitudes, and ways of thinking (Kraft & Sakofs, 1988). Experiential education is related to the constructivist learning theory, whose key idea involves engaging students in active roles for the purpose of learning.

- Kraft, D., & Sakofs, M. (Eds.). (1988). The Theory of Experiential Education. Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.
- Lempert, D. et. al.(1996). Escape from the Ivory Tower: Student adventures in democratic experiential education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cantor, Jeffrey A. (1997). Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community. ERIC Digest. 24 February 2006
<http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-4/higher.htm>
- Experiential Learning & Experiential Education: Philosophy, Theory, Practice and Resources. 24 February 2006 <http://www.wilderdom.com/experiential/>
- Rogers, C. (nd) Experiential Learning. 24 February 2006
<http://tip.psychology.org/rogers.html>

Learning- (or Student-) Centered Classrooms refer to instructional approaches that deviate from the traditional lecture model. A learner-centered classroom creates a social learning experience wherein student groups construct knowledge in various ways and learn from each others' models of successful learning. The concept also implies the use of authentic contexts in curricula, student flexibility in playing to their strengths (see Multiple Intelligences), and varying expectations regarding performance.

- Stage, Francis (1998). Creating Learning Centered Classrooms. What Does Learning Theory Have To Say? 9 March 2006 <http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-2/theory.htm>
- Barr, Robert B., and John Tagg (1995). "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." Change 27(6): 12-25.

Multiple Intelligences (Learning Styles) is an educational concept based on the belief that although we all possess at least nine different intelligences through which we are able to learn, we are unique in the degree in which we possess them. According to its founder Dr. Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard University, how we learn or how we are smart distinguishes us from other individuals much like our fingerprints do. According to the theory, since learning is both a neurobiological and a cultural phenomena dependent upon a varied interplay of synaptic connections in the brain, each learner is unique in different ways. The challenge for educators then is not to teach and assess by a single measure of intelligence but to address a broader range of talents. The Multiple Intelligences are: Musical/Rhythmic, Visual/Spatial, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Verbal/Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Naturalist, and Existential.

- Gardner, Howard (1993). Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice. New York: Basic. 15 February 2006.<http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-1/multiple.htm>
- 15 February 2006. http://snow.utoronto.ca/prof_dev/tht/multint/content/mi.html
- 15 February 2006.http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr054.shtml
- 15 February 2006.
<http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.MI.htm#is%20Multiple%20Intelligence>

Outcome-based education (OBE) or competency-based education is an educational philosophy focused on producing demonstrable educational outcomes that are curriculum-based and/or life-

based. An outcome is understood as an actual demonstration of learning in an authentic, performance context. Unique in this approach is the “working backwards” design that is driven by the desired exit outcomes, i.e., what is determined to be essential for students to be able to do successfully upon completion of a program of study. The exit outcomes determine the courses offered and their content, the teaching methods and strategies, and the assessment procedures.

- Spady, William G.; (1994) Outcome-Based Education: Critical Issues and Answers. Arlington, VA .American Association of School Administrators
- 17 February 2006. <http://www.ntu.edu.au/education/ntier/newsletter/OBE.html>
- 17 February 2006. <http://www.weac.org/resource/may96/obe.htm>
- 17 February 2006. <http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest085.html>

Service learning is a method of experiential teaching, learning and reflecting that combines academic classroom curriculum with meaningful community service. This approach is aimed at enriching the learning experience, teaching civic responsibility and strengthening communities.

- The National Service Learning Clearinghouse provides the world's largest database of Service Learning materials, electronic resources, and job listings. 19 February 2006. <http://www.servicelearning.org/>
- Engineering Projects in Community Service (EPICS) is a unique program in which teams of undergraduates design, build, and deploy real systems to solve engineering-based problems for local community service and education organizations. EPICS was founded at Purdue University in Fall 1995. 19 February 2006. <http://epics.ecn.purdue.edu/about/overview.php>

Skills Transcript. Dalhousie University’s website provides the following useful description: *A class in which opportunities are provided for the development of transferable skills (skills that can be developed in one context and applied in another) along with mastery of discipline content. Students earning a minimum final grade of B qualify for a Skills Transcript, issued by the Registrar's Office...The Skills Transcript Program is part of the Dalhousie Career Portfolio. The skills developed in Skills Transcript classes include Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking, Written Communication, Oral Communication, Numerical/Statistical, Information Technology/Computer Literacy, Teamwork, Planning and Organization, Second Language, Laboratory and Field Work, Research Skills and Methods, Social and Cultural Awareness, Other (specified in Skills Statement).*

- 19 February 2006. http://www.registrar.dal.ca/fyac/02_sel_codes.html

Transferable Skills include the following: verbal communication skills, written communication skills, problem-solving skills, numeracy skills, computer-literacy skills, teamwork skills and self-management skills. Transferable skills are therefore generic capabilities, which enable people to succeed in a wide range of different tasks and jobs. (See Skills Transcript)

APPENDIX A

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

We would like to thank the following people for sharing their expertise with our committee – their knowledge and experience form the basis of this report.

- E. Chard, Registrar
- J. Collins, Health Services
- S. Dore, Student Advisor, Faculty of Science
- J. Dunn, Assistant Director, Admissions
- E. Enns, Dean, Faculty of Arts
- G. Ferguson, Director, Admissions
- M. Fougere, Financial Aid
- C. Fowlse, Residence Services
- S. French, Student Advisor, Faculty of Arts
- C. Harrigan, Reference Librarian, Patrick Power Library
- D. Jeffrey, Counselling Services
- K. Kilfoil, Residence
- M. Lelievre, Atlantic Centre
- C. Mulvihill, Chaplaincy Services
- D. Naulls, Associate Dean of Arts
- K. Nicholls, First Year Advisor, Student Services
- A. Robb, International Student Advisor
- J-A. Stodolny, Director, Writing Centre
- L. Wasteneys, Student Advisor, Faculty of Commerce
- M. Wood, Recruitment Officer

Appendix B

INDICATORS OF STUDENT SUCCESS

A. Academic and Intellectual Competence

Individual Level	Institutional Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intellectual curiosity • commitment to learning • enhanced skills: information literacy, oral and written communications, analytic and critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, interpersonal and team-work skills • mastery of field of study • persistence through the academic program • timely completion of degree requirements • grades that meet or exceed expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong reputation • successful recruitment of quality students • word-of-mouth referrals • low attrition rates • most students completing programs in a timely way • proactive identification of at-risk students and successful remedial intervention • instructional richness and diversity, including widespread use of active/experiential learning techniques • high course standards with low fail/withdraw rates • well-used Library, Library services, Writing Centre • student, alumni, graduate, employer satisfaction • achievement of program learning objectives • high acceptance rates for those pursuing graduate studies • successful employment in chosen career paths

B. Growth as a Person

Individual Level	Institutional Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achievement of personal goals • physical and psychological well-being • acceptance of diversity* • well formed personal identity, including adaptability, confidence, integrity, self-efficacy, competence* • minimal financial and other stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a diverse and accepting University community • a wide range of course offerings with different kinds of challenges • a rich array of events & extra-curricular activities, including opportunities to celebrate diversity • broad, well-supported array of student societies • high awareness and use of support services • well-subscribed co-op and study abroad programs • safe campus (low level of harassment, violence, anxiety) • successful student counselling

C. Self-Sufficiency and Citizenship

Individual Level	Institutional Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of transferable skills • awareness of own aptitudes, talents & interests • personal management skills, including accepting responsibility • personal integrity • integration of interdisciplinary knowledge & skills • engagement with campus and broader communities • development of leadership abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opportunities for collaborative learning and involvement with off-campus communities (service learning, volunteerism, competitions) • high level of volunteerism • adequate levels of financial support for students • low rates of academic fraud/misconduct • provision of campus employment opportunities • provision of opportunities for students to 'give back' to the U. community (mentoring, student societies) • well-used employment centre • assistance selecting graduate school • good community relations • strong, active alumni

APPENDIX C

RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT SAINT MARY'S FOR STUDENTS ENTERING THE UNIVERSITY

The **Extreme F.Y.I. program**, a non-credit offering by Student Services, is primarily an information program to orient new students to the University. The eight-week program provides support, mentors and role models; encourages student participation; explores academic programs; empowers students as learners; informs students about the system/infrastructure at SMU; and increases students' understanding of higher education. At present the program is offered on a limited basis only (approximately 80 students in 2004).

Saint Mary's new **Recruitment Office**, charged with achievement of enrolment goals ("strategic enrolment management"), is deeply concerned about student success, since successful recruitment rests on the "product" offered, including documentation that stated outcomes are in fact achieved. Though its links to high schools, the Recruitment Office also provides opportunities to prepare prospective students for University life.

Successful recruitment requires attention to individual student needs and backgrounds (e.g., their status as first-generation university students, their preparation in terms of career planning and financial planning, their learning styles, language difficulties, life experiences). Students and their families are informed about the University through presentations, Open House and informal campus visits, and visits to the website.

The University Orientation Committee, which reports to the AVP and has a broad-based membership of about 20 people from across campus, organizes an annual general **family and student orientation**. Last year, for the first time, there was a full-time Orientation coordinator.

Various other offices, including **Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research**, the **International Student Centre** and **Continuing Education**, offer orientation to the particular groups they serve.

Saint Mary's University Student Association (SMUSA) runs an extensive orientation in September for incoming students. SMUSA is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for students at Saint Mary's and this commitment begins with its week-long Orientation Week activities. SMUSA's orientation is primarily focused on introducing students to the campus, to Halifax, and to student life. They do this by providing an array of "dry" activities, including Turfburn (where first-year students meet their fellow students through games on the turf), big ticket concerts, and casino night. SMUSA also hosts a society expo where students can learn about the various cultural, political, and social societies run by students. All the events are coordinated by the Orientation Coordinator and volunteer leaders.

The **Centre for New Students** is run through the Admissions Office, under the auspices of the Vice-President Academic and Research. It provides pre-admission advising, assists first-year students with selection of courses, provides referrals to other support services, and answers

questions about the University community. The Centre doesn't offer academic advice, and is focused on helping students to better understand university systems and policies. The Centre works intensively with several hundred students a year but does not keep detailed statistics.

The Registration Advisory Unit (RAU) is run through the Registrar's Office and began as a pilot project four years ago. "Front-line staff" in the Registrar's Office "take students by the hand", showing them where to find answers, helping them choose courses, and generally "demystifying" the registration process. The trained student staff of the RAU represent different Faculties and disciplines. The Unit operates from the time the Registration Booklets become available (mid-July) until after classes begin (mid-September), from 10:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. daily.

The **Centre for New Students** is run by the Admissions Office, under the auspices of the Vice-President Academic and Research. The Centre provides pre-admission advising, helps first-year students select courses, provides referrals to other support services, and answers general questions about the University community. Again, the Office doesn't provide academic advising, and is focused on helping students to better understand University systems and policies. The Centre works intensively with several hundred students a year but does not keep detailed statistics.

APPENDIX D

PROGRAMS FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Canadian Examples

University of Alberta . “MUGS” <http://www.su.ualberta.ca/csd/mugs/>.

- Led by students
- Helps provide orientation to the university
- Mentoring program

University of Saskatchewan: <http://www.students.usask.ca/new/ul101/>

- Weekly sessions on skills and information on the university systems
- Led by senior-student "coaches"
- Voluntary, not-for-credit
- Some faculty involvement

University of New Brunswick (Ahern 2005)

- Four days during Orientation Week
- Free
- Optional for second-year students

University of Calgary – U of C 101 <http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/students/101>

- Students run the program, but opportunities to meet their professors
- General skills and information
- All first year students are automatically registered

University of Ottawa – University 101 <http://www.sass.uottawa.ca/en/main>

University of Prince Edward Island – University 100

<http://www.upei.ca/extension/services.html>
http://www.upei.ca/registrar/university_100.pdf

University of Waterloo – Student Life 101

<http://www.newsrelease.uwaterloo.ca/archive/news.php?id=1474>
<http://www.newsrelease.uwaterloo.ca/archive/news.php?id=1264>

U.S. Examples

California State University, Fullerton – New Student Orientation

<http://www.fullerton.edu/orientation/>

Clemson University (South Carolina) – ESP (Early Success Program)
http://www.clemson.edu/asc/textOnly/tesp_description.html

Duquesne University (Pittsburgh) – University 101 & 102
<http://www.lsc.duq.edu/programs/clprg015.html>
<http://www.lsc.duq.edu/programs/clprg016.html>
<http://www.lsc.duq.edu/programs/studySkills.html>

Louisiana State University in Shreveport – Student Success Series
<http://www.lsus.edu/sdcc/documents/sss20042005.pdf>

Northern Kentucky University – University 101
<http://www.nku.edu/~firstyear/unv.htm>

Purdue University, Calumet – PUC 101
<http://www.calumet.purdue.edu/cclld/puc101/index.html>

South Carolina State University – Student Success and Retention Program
<http://www.scsu.edu/SSRP/sols.htm>
<http://www.scsu.edu/SSRP/univ101.htm>

University at Buffalo – UB 101 Student Information & University Experience
<http://www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/nsp/ub101topics.shtml>

University of Kansas – Student Success <http://www.vpss.ku.edu/ssdirectory.shtml>

University of Maryland – University 100 & 101
http://www.orientation.umd.edu/univ/univ_1_welcome.html

University of Nevada – EPY 101
<http://www.unlv.edu/studentlife/transition/epy101.html>

University of Michigan. Office of New Student Programs.
http://www.onsp.umich.edu/parents_family/orientation.html

San Francisco State University. “Student Orientation Implementation Plan”
<http://www.sfsu.edu/~acadplan/crisp13.html>

Northern Kentucky University. Office of First-Year Programs.
http://www.nku.edu/~firstyear/unv_301.htm

Central Washington University Website
<http://www.cwu.edu/~acadadv/u101.html>

APPENDIX E

RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT SAINT MARY'S TO HELP STUDENTS IN THE TRANSITION THROUGH UNIVERISTY

Student Services provides the bulk of support services that aim to enhance retention, including Counselling Services, the Financial Aid Office, the International Student Advisor, Health Services, Chaplaincy Service, and Residence Services.

Residence Services arranges room placements, promotes and maintains high standards for appropriate behaviour, facilitates mediation between roommates via trained Residence Assistants, refers students to counselling services, and provides its own security service. Residence Services are often the first level of response and/or intervention in a number of areas (e.g., sexual assault, mental illness). The training and mentoring provided for Residence Assistants also represents an excellent opportunity for interested students.

Given the amount of support offered through Residence Services, it is not surprising that the research literature suggests that students living in residence tend to be more successful in both academic and social domains, and that students who withdraw do so for reasons removed from the residence context (Skahill, 2002-2003).

Counselling Services deal with 1000 to 1200 students annually. They provide personal and career counselling; run workshops focused on issues such as anxiety, study skills, personal crisis, and eating disorders; and coordinate the student peer program. The waiting period for personal counselling is one to four weeks; for career counselling it is 2 to 2.5 weeks. These services are dramatically understaffed and unable to adequately respond to students' needs.

The **Financial Aid Office** offers a “package of support” that includes: scholarship programs (including contact with donors), bursaries based on financial need (at both undergraduate and graduate levels), advice on student loans (including advocacy on students' behalf), the student employment experience program (SEEP). They also provide basic practical information on economical shopping and cooking. SMUSA provides some of the funding.

The **International Student Advisor** supports approximately 1100 international students and 250 TESL students. This office provides a welcome program, an orientation, and workshops finding employment.

Health Services sees about 1300 students each month, including many with serious physical and mental health problems. Some of these can be referred to Counselling Services. Others require the attention of a psychiatrist, now available part-time.

Student Services also offers a **Student Peers** service, a **Black Student Advisor**, and a **Native Student Advisor**. There is also a **Conflict Resolution Officer** available to both students and staff.

Chaplaincy Services provide a diverse array of services, including a food bank that receives about 80 visits annually, personal counselling and guidance with spiritual direction, and retreats focusing

on issues of personal direction. They also run a Roman Catholic liturgy, and conduct fundraising (often with the aim of modeling concern for other areas of the world). They maintain links with various student groups (e.g., Muslim student society).

Other services not under the administrative umbrella of Student Services. They include the Writing Centre, the Atlantic Centre and the Library.

The **Writing Centre** offers one-on-one sessions for undergraduate or graduate students. The sessions are offered by specially trained writing assistants who help them with specific assignments. The Writing Centre also offers in-class workshops that faculty can arrange for their classes. The aim is to improve general students' writing skills. The tutors do not proof-read or edit student papers.

The **Atlantic Centre** offers services to students with physical or learning disabilities. They provide a vast array of assistance including academic counselling and support; help in classrooms with, for example, note taking; advocacy; and adaptive technology, among many other things. An innovator in the field, the Centre also serves as a resource for schools and other Universities. As well, the Centre has commented that it is seeing more and more students with learning disabilities.

The **Library** provides much more than a collection of books and journals. Library staff provides many services for students. They offer assistance in developing search strategies and aim to increase students' information literacy, and provide information pamphlets on writing papers, and theses.

Individual faculties offer other programs and services. Arts, Science and Commerce have specially appointed **Undergraduate Program Officers/Advisors** who provide guidance for students in choosing courses and ensuring that they meet requirements laid out in the Academic Calendar. They meet with students one-on-one throughout the course of their program. The advising services at SMU have improved in recent years. They offer invaluable support and help to alleviate some of this responsibility from the individual Departments throughout the school.

There are other special programs such as the **Dean of Arts' "Enhancing Student Performance" Program** for students on special academic probation. Students who were required to withdraw appeal to the Dean and may be assigned a faculty mentor. The Dean also decides on other requirements, such as course load. Faculty mentors each supervise 6-10 students and receive a course release.

It is important to note that several departments have tailored student advising for their particular majors. In Psychology, for example, the Department funds graduate students through the Student Employment and Experience Program to provide advising. The Department of Sociology and Criminology has a dedicated part-time staff person responsible for advising. Modern Languages has one faculty member who advises all students interested in a teaching career.

Saint Mary's University Student Association also provides support for students, mainly through its Vice-President, Academic. This is a relatively new position offering academic support and informing students about academic policies and services on campus services to students. As a part

of this effort, the VP Academic organizes the SMUSA Academic Fair each fall. The position is in its formative stages – in April 2006, it will have been in existence for five terms.

SMUSA's VP Academic also maintains and revises the Student Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. This document, created in 2004, was developed as a pocket guide to the policies and practices of the University, as outlined in the Academic Calendar, the Community Standards Statement, the "Residence Life Handbook", and Academic Senate or other documents.

APPENDIX F

SERVICE-LEARNING RESOURCES

Eyler, J. S. (2000). What Do We Most Need to Know About the Impact of Service-Learning on Student Learning? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Special Issue 2000. Viewed on April 28, 2005. <http://www.umich.edu/~mjcsl/>

Glaser, Hollis F. & A. J. Radliff. (2000). Integrating Service Learning into the Communication Capstone Course. Online resource, viewed April 28, 2005, 1-31.

Hutchison, P. (2001). Service Learning: Challenges and Opportunities. Viewed April 28, 2005. <http://www.newfoundations.com/OrgTheory/Hutchinson721.html>

The National Service Learning Clearinghouse is also a good source of information.

APPENDIX G

**COMPARISON OF INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES REGARDING
TREATMENT OF REPEATED COURSES
IN CALCULATION OF CGPA FOR GRADUATION
(as of March, 2003)**

UNIVERSITIES	In calculating Cumulative QPA for graduation, when courses have been repeated, use:			Recorded on Transcript	
	All Attempts	Most Recent Grade	Higher Grade	Y	N
Acadia		√		√	
Bishops		√		√	
Brock		√		√	
Calgary			√	√	
Carleton		√		√	
Concordia	√ (most faculties)				
Dalhousie	√			√	
Lethbridge		√		√	
Manitoba	√			√	
McMaster	√ ?			√	
Memorial			√		
Mount Allison			√	√	
Northern BC		√		√	
Ottawa		√		√	
Ryerson		√		√	
Saint Thomas		√		√	
Saskatchewan			√		
Simon Fraser			√		
Trent		√		√	
U. of Victoria					
UBC	√			√	
UCCB			√	√	
UNB - Fredericton	√			√	
UNBC		√		√	
UPEI		√			
Western Ontario		√		√	
Wilfrid Laurier		√		√	
Windsor (Engg)	√			√	
Winnipeg				√	
York (restricts repeats)	√			√	
No data on:					
Guelph					
Lakehead					
Laurentian					
Mount St Vincent					
Queens					
St. Francis Xavier					
Toronto					
Waterloo					

APPENDIX H

RESOURCES AT SAINT MARY'S TO HELP STUDENTS MAKE THE TRANSITION FROM THE UNIVERSITY

Student Employment Center: In cooperation with Dalhousie and Mount Saint Vincent, Saint Mary's Student Employment Center holds a Career Fair each year in late September. However, this is open to all students and does not specifically target graduating students.

In addition to the Career Fair, Mary Ellen MacEachern, Manager, Student Employment Center, liaises with the Grad Class to assist with Grad Class elections and to plan Convocation activities. She has also given 1 ½ hour workshops at the request of Societies or individual faculty. For example, she presented a session on careers in Geology at the request of the professor.

Counselling Services: Offers one-on-one career counselling sessions to any student who requests it, but again, graduating students are not specifically targeted. Many students book appointments in their final semester and are stressed out because they have not had, or not taken advantage of, the service opportunities available to them before this late date.

Other Student Service Offices: Financial Aid, Atlantic Center, International Student Office, Residence, etc., as well as those mentioned above, all offer a variety of support services and programs which help students adjust to campus life and successfully complete their degrees but, again, these are, for the most part, individual activities and programs without a "senior year" focus

Alumni Office: Saint Mary's Alumni Office organizes several activities that attempt to reach students in their final year of study. Shawn Cleary, Director, Alumni Office, works with the Grad Class in the Winter semester. For the past two years, the Office has sponsored a Grad Class event (boat cruise and dinner during Convocation Week) at which the Director addressed graduating students. The President of the Alumni Association speaks at Convocation and the Association supplies alumni pins to graduating students.

During the 2005 academic year, the Alumni Office also offered two workshops for senior students – Introduction to Financial Planning and Advanced Financial Planning. In addition, the Alumni Office has developed a Career Network – a database of alumni willing to talk to senior students. However, two related issues have hampered the success of this program – lack of promotion and not knowing where grad students look for information.

SMUSA

The Student's Union supports the activities of the Grad Class related to Convocation Week activities, but has no specific programs or activities for students throughout their senior/graduating year.

APPENDIX I
NATIONAL SURVEY ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT